

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**REVIEW OF THE FUNCTIONS EXERCISED BY THE
COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 13 JUNE 2018**

SESSION ONE

Members

**Hon Dr Sally Talbot, MLC (Chair)
Mr K.M. O'Donnell, MLA (Deputy Chair)
Hon Donna Faragher, MLC
Mrs J.M.C. Stojkovski, MLA**

Hearing commenced at 10.07 am

Ms JENNIFER MARGARET BLAIR

Acting President, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, examined:

Ms ALEX O'NEIL

Communications and Research Officer, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, examined:

The CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for agreeing to appear today to assist the committee in its review of the exercise of the functions of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. I think you have met each of us now; you know who we are. The purpose of this morning's hearing is to discuss the "School and Learning Consultation: Technical Report" produced by the Commissioner for Children and Young People in January this year. It is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, this privilege does not apply to anything that you might say outside of today's proceedings. Today is a public hearing. Hansard will be making a transcript, which, in due course, will be published on the committee's webpage. If during the hearing you feel that the evidence you are about to give us should be given confidentially, please let us know so that we can respond appropriately.

Have you got any questions about your attendance here today?

The WITNESSES: No.

The CHAIR: As I mentioned earlier, we have a series of questions for you today, but before we proceed to them, would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms BLAIR: We have prepared an opening statement, thank you.

The CHAIR: That is great.

Ms BLAIR: The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, henceforth to be referred to as WACSSO, is pleased to be invited to give evidence to the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People. When the "Speaking Out About School and Learning" report was released in January 2018, WACSSO welcomed the finding that families who are involved and interested was a foundational factor to success for students. The finding did not come as a surprise to us, as our membership are families who are involved in their local schools and they know the value of being actively engaged in their local school community, and we know this positive impact is felt by the school, the child and the community.

WACSSO is the peak body representing families of public school students in Western Australia. We provide services and representations at a state and national level to more than 660 P&C—parents and citizens—associations in Western Australia. Our affiliates are supported by our secretariat and are represented by a network of state councillors. Whilst the commissioner's report speaks across school sectors, WACSSO solely represents the government school sector, but we believe many of our comments are relevant to all schools. However, the focus of our comments is on government schools. When WACSSO refers to "parents" we are not only referring to biological parents, but any individuals who have responsibility for the care, welfare and development of children.

[10.10 am]

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that one of the key findings of the “Speaking Out About School and Learning” report is that most children are served well by our schools and are having positive experiences and making good progress. However, any student feeling unsafe, unstimulated and disengaged in our schools is a cause for concern. The commissioner’s report shows us that there are many students struggling with a range of issues, such as bullying, behaviour management, pedagogy and curriculum. It is unacceptable to us that Aboriginal children and young people, children and young people with long-term health problems or disability, and males in regional schools, are so much more likely to experience bad outcomes.

WACSSO is not in the business of pointing a finger at schools or teachers. We aim to participate in improving outcomes for children and their families. We offer our thoughts and suggestions in the spirit of partnership with schools. There are few situations that are genuinely win-win, but increasing the engagement of parents in their children’s schooling is such a situation. For the most part, increased parent engagement is not a case of teachers needing to work harder—rather, working smarter. Time invested in building relationships with parents is time not spent fighting fires later. Time spent building the capacity of parents to better support their child’s learning journey is an investment in developing the learning support that families can provide. This effectively reduces teacher stress and workload, and sees greater levels of engagement in learning and school life generally.

The “Speaking Out About School and Learning” report makes a series of findings and recommendations. WACSSO welcomes the report’s acknowledgement that creating the optimal learning environment for children and young people is the shared responsibility of students, families, teachers, school staff, education administrators, governing authorities and academics. WACSSO believes all the findings are reasonable and encourages the government and the education department to ensure that the recommendations are fully considered and implemented. In particular, WACSSO finds finding 1 as a reminder to those of us working to improve educational outcomes for students. It is a tragedy that students’ voices are so often silent in these conversations, and we must consult children and young people and give careful and respectful consideration to what they are telling us in order to effect change.

We heartily endorse finding 3, that teachers need to be skilled beyond their subject matter. We believe teachers must have the capacity to build positive and constructive relationships with students and parents. We welcome a review of current resourcing in this space and remind the relevant bodies that we are available to support this process. WACSSO has continually been calling for pre-service teacher training to capacity build in this space and recognises recommendation 6 as a necessary step towards a future where the education systems are able to capitalise on the value of engagement and relationship building. Finding 4 confirms what we have always known, which is that students value their parents being involved in their education and that students who do not have supportive families need extra assistance through school. However, it is not the sole responsibility of schools to fill this gap, and we call for collaboration of community services to meet these students’ needs.

In WA, our parents already support their schools in many ways: some via high-level governance on councils or boards, some through supporting classroom activities such as reading and excursions, others through fundraising activities for school services and community events. Many other activities which support teachers’ efforts occur in the home; nightly reading practice and supervising homework are such things. In relation to these activities, the term “parent engagement” is often used. At WACSSO we find it important to distinguish between parent involvement and engagement. Many schools are quite good at offering parents a chance to be involved at a surface level and in ways defined by the school. However, genuinely engaging parents as partners in their children’s

education and actively hearing their voices is quite a different matter. This is the area where WACSSO believes the greatest benefit would be felt for children and by school communities if this was taken seriously by all stakeholders in education.

To truly take advantage of the benefits that come from fully engaging with parents, schools and education systems will need to change. Our affiliates continually report to us a multitude of actions and behaviours that occur in schools which only serve to push parents away and effectively disenfranchise them in the school environment. In many cases, these are not deliberate actions; rather, they come from schools failing to realise that for many parents, capable and otherwise, schools are alien environments. Culturally and linguistically diverse communities have no experience with Australian schools and their norms and expectations. Many parents have their own negative schooling experiences to overcome, and, to be honest, schools are quite weird environments. Unfortunately, we hear regularly from people with the power to change school cultures that there are “parents who will never engage”. It is our contention that educators who come to their work with parents through this lens will have their belief fulfilled.

Parents need to step up too. WACSSO policy is very clear that parents and carers have the primary responsibility for their children’s wellbeing. However, we know that all parents need support at some time, and a subset of parents need significant and ongoing support to fulfil their parenting responsibilities.

Students from year 3 to 12 who say their parents are involved and interested are more likely to be at school. They have a greater sense of belonging, attend more often and have higher levels of achievement. The good news is that 76 per cent of year 7 to 12 students say it is important to their families that they go to school each day, but this also means that a quarter of our high school students do not believe that their families think it is important that they are at school. One child said if they do not come to school events or talk about what you are doing at school, it can be quite hurtful and you feel like they do not care about your education. Parents need to hear this message and engage, and schools need to ensure that they are genuinely welcoming spaces where parents are made to feel comfortable, respected and valued.

Some teachers are very successful in their efforts to engage with parents. Some, probably instinctively, knew the importance of this when they started teaching, while some others have learnt the skills over time through trial and error or by becoming parents themselves. We ask how much more efficient and beneficial it would be for the outcomes for all students if our pre-service training ensured that teachers graduated with these skills. As mentioned, WACSSO strongly supports recommendation 5 and recommendation 6 that speak to strengthening selection and training for teachers.

Following this, teachers who become school leaders need a refined version of this skill set. These individuals—school leaders—are the ones working with parents and members of school communities on councils and boards. Many of our affiliates report their experience on boards as being one of just being asked to rubberstamp plans. They report being sent agendas and reports only a day before meetings, or even being asked to sign off on complex documentation that they have received on arriving at the meeting. This approach neither respects the parents nor allows them to truly value-add to the process. The education system needs to expect more of school leaders and support them to be able to work in genuinely collaborative ways.

Dr Karen Mapp of the Harvard Graduate School notes that little has been done to build capacity in one of the key stakeholders. There has been some work and resources for parents to help them better engage, but, historically, very little has been done with the education system. She speaks of

“random acts of parent engagement”, noting that without a goal for quality engagement, it will not happen.

The Canadian researcher Dr Debbie Pushor speaks of parent knowledge and teacher knowledge. By definition, only parents can have parent knowledge of their child. These two types and sources of knowledge are not in conflict; rather, they complement each other. Schools that really recognise the value of parent knowledge will have engaged parents. Any student who has both of these sources of knowledge informing their educational journey will have better outcomes.

For all of us seeking to improve the experience and outcomes of our schooling system, the “Speaking Out About School and Learning” report gives us precious access to the voices of children. It is too easy for all of us working in education to overlook the very people we are supposed to be working for and/or to believe that we know better and forget to listen. The Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People keeps their voices at the front and centre. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is a very powerful and comprehensive statement. I think we could probably be here for the next week or so just talking about the points you have raised there. It is very much appreciated.

Can I just open our discussion by acknowledging what you have said about the value of this particular report: you know that it is unprecedented in terms of its scope and its content. It is pretty massive. You have said that you think it is of value. Are there some weaknesses with it? Are there areas where—when you were going through the report, did you think, “Oh, this is something we need to do more of” or, “This needs follow-up work” or, “There are gaps here”?

[10.20 am]

Ms BLAIR: I do not know that we have come to the report looking to find its weaknesses. We, as I have noted, are greatly affirmed by the way in which it speaks strongly to parent engagement. That is our scope of practice and we tend to contain ourselves to that. I do not think we would be commenting on the report in that way.

The CHAIR: I should explain a bit about the background to my question. Obviously, we are interested in this work being done on the basis that it is constantly updated. It is one of the commissioner’s interests to see how often we can do this kind of work, how we can keep it current and at the front of people’s minds. One of the things that the commissioner has shared with us, you will see this is all on the public record as evidence, is that there are some areas that have been now shown to be needing more work done—children with disabilities, for example.

Ms BLAIR: The opting in and out of the student sample is obviously an issue for the researchers, not for WACSSO, to solve. But the fact is that we are very aware that the opt-in means that you are only hearing a particular voice. I think that is something for the researchers to solve.

The CHAIR: I am glad you have raised that because that was going to be the committee’s second question—your views about that. So WACSSO would be supportive of an opt-out rather than an opt-in?

Ms BLAIR: Within, obviously, the appropriate ethical constraints and all the rest of it. We were having this discussion earlier. When you are only capturing part of a student voice and part of a parent voice, you are much more likely to be—your data becomes skewed. It is likely, I would say, that that data becomes skewed, in fact, to the more capable, engaged families and schools, so one suspects it is possible that the data would be grim reading if we were in a situation of opt-out data. So yes, it would be very interesting and very informative to all of us working in the space to make sure that we are hearing the voice across the sector—not just those schools—families and children themselves who feel empowered to opt in.

The CHAIR: That is certainly the view of the committee and we are progressing that in discussions with the minister, so we are hopeful of a good outcome there. You know, of course, that the commissioner's main objective is to help people hear the voices of children. I am interested in teasing out—when you talk about the voice of parents and the views of parents, can you talk about the connection between the voices of parents and the voices of children? When you are acting to empower parents to speak out, how is that informed by the voices of children?

Ms BLAIR: Instinctively, I think, parents speak sometimes for their children. Sometimes that is speaking for their children what they think their children think. Parents do not always listen terribly well either. But parents in a school context have agency that lets them raise things that are of concern to the children. Sometimes they are a direct conduit. A conversation occurs over a dinner table at home. Children say things that they feel are occurring for them with their schooling, whether that is with their peers or whether it is subject selection available to them or any number of other things—outrage that the canteen has closed—it is at all sorts of levels. But where you have parents engaging in conversation with their children, parents can be a very great source of information back to the school system about what children are thinking and feeling. Sometimes, of course, for children it manifests as an acting out or a shutting down because they are very frustrated. Schools who put in place mechanisms at any number of levels to allow parents to bring that information benefit enormously from that. That may, to our eye, look like a parents and citizens committee where parents can come and say anything from, “Is the school aware that there is an after ball party being planned that does not feel to us like a very good idea?” through to “We and our children did not feel sufficiently informed about the significance of a pending set of exams in terms of impact on what you are going to be allowed to choose for year 11 and 12 subjects.” Sometimes it is in that sort of formal sense. Parents who are involved in boards and councils may, in fact, be able to feed that directly into strategic planning for the school, but I think that schools that are genuinely welcoming of parents, and it is where you see very effective, particularly primary school teacher and parent interactions—it is literally at the door or in passing: “They are not well. They are not happy. They are feeling anxious about this or that.” The teacher is being directly given that piece of information; the child might be unprepared to give that piece of information directly, or the child may just not be able to clearly enunciate that for themselves. But open and simple lines of communication where sometimes, as I say, a parent is speaking on behalf of a child—they have captured the information, they have processed it and the parent, hopefully, has a sense of the school system and they know where to take it as well.

The CHAIR: I think you quoted somebody talking about random acts of parent inclusion. You would see across the state—there are more than 600 schools, are there not?—examples of that working better than others. Can you just take us through a situation where you would commend the school on going beyond the random acts and having more of a systematic approach to parent engagement?

Ms BLAIR: Certainly speaking linked to P&Cs—where principals and school administrators take the opportunity on a once or twice a term basis to come and sit and have open and honest discussion with that group of parents, I think that benefits both parties enormously. In our senior high schools it is one of the main reasons that people choose to be involved in P&Cs—to get access to and the chance to input into quite high level things about schools. We are aware principals come and share business plans—things that often would probably sit more with a council or a board—they will bring those, they will report against the school goals, part of the next three-year plan and so forth. They would bring that into that less formal environment and share that and hear. They are situations where we would say it is worth doing and it adds significant value. I would also say that at a less formal level where you see things like teachers—it might be an individual thing rather than a school thing—who consciously come along to things like school discos. They are there in the social life of

the school and in that way are building relationships with parents, schools where it is sports day and the parents are having picnics and where they are able to, noting it is a very busy day for them, wander amongst the parents and speak to parents. Those things yield enormous dividends. They open lines of communication in very simple but inherently human kind of ways. They stop the teacher being the teacher and the parent being the parent. A lot of what happens in schools has, as I noted, a weirdness about that. For the record, I say that as an ex-schoolteacher and the child of two schoolteachers. I was a high school teacher. I have worked in area schools, so I have worked with younger children and older children. I am not a teacher any longer within the school system, but I reflect on much of my early teaching career in some ways with shame about the very strange and odd things we did, thinking that that would engage parents.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: I have a further question on parent engagement. With an increasing digital footprint in all of our lives, how do you view digital apps or things that teachers can use to engage with parents for information, but also for sharing the work of students and making sure that parents understand what it is that they are doing in the classroom?

[10.30 am]

Ms BLAIR: I have no personal experience, but I have heard talk of apps that teachers are using where they quite simply photograph something a child has done or the child actually doing that thing, and it is shared, basically, immediately with parents. The opportunity for parents is then to be informed, to have a conversation with their children at the end of the day about what they are doing. A number of those apps, as I understand it, have the capacity to capture child voice as well—whether it is audio or whether the child types in or the teacher types in—“This is what I am doing. This is why I am doing it.” I think there is enormous potential for those to be extremely effective and also, again, it is one of those things where it is about working differently. Waiting for the report to come home in June to tell you how your child is going is not necessarily serving anybody terribly well. There needs to be good reporting to parents but it could look very different and I see those sorts of tools, particularly when we have increasing numbers of parents who are not at the school door or the school gate and able to go in—assuming the teacher lets them, and some do not, but assuming that they are welcome in the classroom—they are not able to be present in the classroom and have the learning in that way. I think there are definitely tools out there that could really serve to engage parents in a way that is effective of immediacy, I suppose I am saying. You know that day what has been going on.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: I just want to pick up on, both with respect to the report, but your comments at the beginning with respect to pre-service training and trainee teachers getting a better understanding with respect to interpersonal skills and all those sorts of things. That is both through interaction with the students themselves, but you would like that to also involve parents in a two-way process. Can you elaborate a little bit more in terms of how you think that would be of benefit and if there are particular areas that you think could be focused on as part of that training?

Ms BLAIR: The focus still seems to be, in all our discussion in this space, about the individual teacher having a better skill set and we would certainly support that. My personal experience is that we set our teachers up for failure if they are not good at interacting with human beings, because children are instinctively and inherently human beings. Through this report we hear the voice of children saying that sometimes they do not think their teachers like them very much. That is on a hiding to nothing. There is obviously work to be done around people having the right personal attributes and supporting people to develop them. I think in pre-service training—and I think it is also across the system—it is also the system stepping up and saying this is important. It is all well and good to have a group of people that we are training to be teachers who have a great skill set, but if they are not

told as an instruction and as an expectation and if they are not taught of the value of parent engagement in a bigger picture, they will continue to do the things that teachers have always done. I suppose that when we speak of heart knowledge and head knowledge, I feel that about the school system. I have been in it. I instinctively wish to defend it. However, I also instinctively wish to give it a good shaking. That is probably a personal statement and not an organisational one. Very good teachers with the right set of attributes will come into the system and repeat what the system does. An example I recall in the goldfields when I taught there is we ran a parent–teacher night and we had every teacher in the school sitting there for three hours. I was an English teacher so I saw more parents than most and five people came. We all walked away. We had done our duty. We had run a parent–teacher night and they did not come!

The CHAIR: Whose problem is this?

Ms BLAIR: The problem was “them”, not “us”, and schools continue to do those things¹. They also are adapting and doing all sorts of great things. The apps are an example. I am aware that a number of schools are talking about changing parent–teacher interviews to open-house situations where the children come and speak about their learning and the teachers are there also but not as the expert. Personal attributes of the teacher, obviously, will be really important in selection and developing those as we go along, but teachers graduating expecting, as part of the things that are core to their business, to be working with parents in a whole range of ways, and they will be personal in part—good teachers work in different ways. It is not a cookie-cutter kind of scenario. The messaging in their training has to be around the fact that this is inherently the work of a teacher—to engage with parents—and it being presented as a really positive thing; that is, your life will be easier and your teaching will be more effective, which is what our teachers want it to be, if you do these things. But they also then have to graduate and work in a system that does not give them the message, either directly or indirectly, that is not how we do it.

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: Could it be said that the system needs to be retrained?

Ms BLAIR: Absolutely. We would certainly hold to that. We put more and more onto our schools, but sometimes we do not step back and remember the core business. I think engagement with parents is seen as an extra in our school system. It would be something further and it does require a different skill set, but I think the dividends it would yield would be absolutely enormous and, in fact, make everybody’s lives an awful lot better. I think teachers would enjoy coming to work more if they had that sense of being part of something rather than pushing against something.

The CHAIR: Do P&Cs encourage teachers to join the P&C?

Ms BLAIR: That would be mixed. I am unaware of any P&Cs that would be unhappy to have teachers on P&Cs.

The CHAIR: Do you have any programs or initiatives that try to draw teachers in—wearing either their teacher hat or their citizen hat—into P&Cs?

Ms BLAIR: P&Cs are inherently reluctant to start telling staff what they should do. I know that is only half of your question, but I think P&Cs would be reluctant to say, “We expect teachers to be part of our group.” Teachers, understandably, need to maintain some sense of a line. In our smaller schools we would have many parents who are also teachers in that school community who come onto P&Cs. I think that is encouraged and it is welcomed. I think P&Cs really appreciate staff coming to P&C meetings and they recognise that they have given up their out-of-hours’ time to do that. I think that great damage can be done where P&Cs feel greatly disrespected when information is conducted to

¹ A letter of clarification about this part of the transcript can be accessed on the committee webpage.

them, in particular in the area of if staff wish to have money from the P&C, but they do not show up and take questions about that. Principals are ex officio on all our committees. There is obviously a governance-level engagement between P&Cs and staff, but a less formal, more real-life human interaction benefits P&Cs.

The CHAIR: You would say generally that teachers are only on P&Cs in their role as a parent, if they are a parent at that school.

Ms BLAIR: I think it is hard to generalise, but, broadly speaking, the majority of school staff who are on P&Cs, unless they are there in a governance capacity as the principal or representing the principal, tend to be there in a parent role.

[10.40 am]

The CHAIR: I guess the other side of that question is whether you are aware of any incidence, or whether you think it would be a good idea, for schools to involve the P&C in the teacher development programs?

Ms BLAIR: I think that would be an excellent idea.

The CHAIR: Does it happen?

Ms BLAIR: Not that I am aware.

The CHAIR: That might be another opportunity, might it not?

Ms BLAIR: Yes. There is huge expertise and obviously lived experience in parent groups and I suppose if that feeds in earlier, rather than later. One of the things that we have been—in preparation for this and just through our general work—conscious of is parents are often consulted but they are consulted once the plan is sort of set in stone. You get to come along and say, “Yes, that plan is okay”, but actually being consulted at the point the policy and various other things are being drafted, often sort of the horse has bolted.

The CHAIR: Let us go, if we can, to the issue of children feeling safe. I mean, that was the aspect of the report that for obvious reasons grabbed the headlines. I guess that my feeling is that there is a sense that we were not reading anything in the report that greatly shocked us; anecdotally, we hear that there are some children who do not feel safe in school for obvious reasons. Perhaps the dimension, particularly in the light of the fact that this was an opt-in, rather than an opt-out sort of database, is a bit disturbing. But I wondered whether you would like to make some comments on the specific measures that might be put in place. Do P&Cs have a view, either represented through WACSSO or anecdotally, about the way that things could be improved at school to give students a greater sense of security? I know it is an enormous question.

Ms BLAIR: It is an enormous question.

The CHAIR: It covers so many different areas.

Ms BLAIR: Our members certainly tell us very clearly, and it is probably one of the things they are keen to speak on most often, how unsafe their children sometimes feel at school. It often manifests as personal anecdote and, recently, as part of our working with the minister in regard to violence in schools, we asked our members to sort of give us some sense of that. Some of that was really difficult to read, what came in from our members. So, they certainly at an individual and parent level are feeling that lack of safety on behalf of their own children. I think some of our parents do not feel safe in schools either. I do not mean physically unsafe, but they find school such an alien and strange environment that they are very reluctant to come onto the school ground, because they do not know where to go, how to dress, where you can go and cannot go. Schools seem to have so many

rules and regulations around them that that is a real barrier. I am not sure that any of that answers the question that you asked.

The CHAIR: No, it does. I mean, one of the complexities of this, and I am sure you have had experience both as a teacher and now in your role with WACSSO, is that many of those parents would be living out their own fears with schools and teachers when they are interacting as a parent.

Ms BLAIR: It is remarkable how anxious extremely capable parents who in their working life hold very high level positions and have all the advantages of English as a first language, wearing the right thing, using the right language, they have all those tools available, yet sometimes to go and talk to a teacher about something or, even worse, the school administration, really it is almost more than they can do. When you then start thinking about what that means for parents whose own schooling history has been one of feeling disenfranchised or they do not have English as their first language or they do not quite—often you go to a school and particularly in the new world of fences all around schools, you cannot even work out how to get in. You cannot work out how to get in; you have to have local knowledge of where the office is.

The CHAIR: You are talking to four members of Parliament here who probably between us go to 1 000 graduations a year and I can certainly attest to the fact that it is a long walk around the block if you cannot find the entrance.

Ms BLAIR: Yes, and you are going for a particular purpose, obviously, and you have been welcomed and invited. If you are going with trepidation, the second corner you have to go around, you think: this is too hard. I think that is what I was talking about earlier—that low-level way in which schools just do not take a tiny step back from themselves to say, “What are all the things that we are doing?” I remember being in a P&C meeting. You have a group of parents, they are known to be parents, and the principal, in frustration—prompted by funding and staffing cuts, so that is the context—said to the parents, “We logged 70 parent interruptions to our front office the other day.” Us coming in, interacting with your organisation, through your front office is an interruption. An interruption to what, I would ask. Then it was the result of frustration and anxiety, but the language in which the hard-to-engage parents, the parents who will never engage, they do not feel safe and their children are likely to be the ones that do not feel safe either or are the ones making other children feel unsafe—we certainly, in any context, are always calling for a sort of joined up and linked up response, but we believe if parents are in that response, everyone feels safe in that context, including our teachers.

It is completely unacceptable to us that teachers in our schools do not feel safe either. I was making the comment to someone that I was coming here to talk about this report. I said, “You will know it because it was the one where it hit the front pages because kids do not feel safe”, and their immediate reaction, as the spouse of a teacher was, “Well, teachers do not feel safe either.” It struck me yet again that it is not a win for one is a loss for another. When teachers do not feel safe, children do not feel safe, parents do not feel safe in that space either, then we have got to do something differently because everyone is entitled to feel safe.

The CHAIR: The report talks about feeling safe at school. It also talks about help with personal problems that might be seen to go beyond the curriculum to do with disability or disadvantage, and also talks about the children who just do not feel they have a voice in the school environment. Again, can I ask you: We know what the problems are, referring again to your comments about random acts, are you aware in those sort of areas about how children’s voices are stifled of initiatives or policies or programs that actually do work? Are there things that you would like to draw the committee’s attention to that you have observed where you say, “This actually works; if only everybody could do this”?

Ms BLAIR: I do not think we hear from our affiliates of any individual things in sufficient quantity to be in the place of advising on that question. We certainly know that they speak highly of individual teachers, and it is about relationship. The thing that we also hear constantly from our affiliates, but particularly our regional and remote affiliates, is how long you wait for specialist services to come and the lack of those, so that if you are looking at a child or a family who requires support, it can be weeks between visits from various professionals, allied health support and so forth. We very much accept that schools are a logical place to be the physical site of service provision. That should not be going on to teachers, but specialist service provision in schools—occupational therapists, speech pathologists, psychologists, social workers and so forth. But particularly, our regional affiliates talk about—and, obviously, the further away from centres that you get, it is literally weeks and weeks and weeks before the next visit from a particular specialist and they are there for a morning and then they are gone again. While that is not particular programs, specialist support with the school as the physical side of that is something we hear about constantly and call for there to be more of it and for it to be responsive.

[10.50 am]

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: Around feeling safe, I recently went on a ride along with the police and one of the things they were saying to me is that they get quite a few call-outs to schools for assaults, whether it is student-on-student assault or student-on-teacher assault. We started talking about the prevalence of filming this type of activity. Are there any schools that you talk to that have a really good way of dealing with this? I know the minister and parliamentary secretary are doing some work around bullying in our schools and how we are putting together a toolkit—I guess, is the best way—and they are asking us: are there any schools in particular that do this really well that lessons can be learnt from?

Ms BLAIR: Right now off the top of my head I cannot think of a particular example that we wish to cite, and WACSSO are working with the minister and so we will be hopefully better placed to answer that question at some point in the future when we have heard more from our affiliates on that matter. But at this very moment I cannot think of an example to cite for you.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: That is okay, thanks.

The CHAIR: I just want to ask you a couple of questions. We are going to have to wrap up fairly soon, because obviously we have got another hearing to go to. The comments you just made about safety and engagement obviously segues into asking the specific question about Aboriginal children. Within your organisation, do you provide any particular assistance or guidance to schools where there is a high enrolment of Aboriginal children? What sorts of disadvantages do you see occurring in the system specifically because of the fact that you have a high enrolment of Aboriginal children?

Ms BLAIR: In the broad sense, WACSSO supports its affiliates to engage, as well as they can, school communities that they are in, and so that would include Aboriginal, and the other area for us is parents from culturally and linguistic diverse, sort of, migrant families. However, as an organisation we are extremely conscious that many schools with high Aboriginal populations either do not have P&Cs or if they do, those families are not engaged with our organisation. That is a body of work that we are also seeking to improve our own performance in. I do not feel placed, really in a lot of ways to —

The CHAIR: That is interesting in itself.

Ms BLAIR: We are very aware, when we look at something like our annual conference, that the diversity that is in our school system is not in our room. It does not mean that we do not have some P&Cs probably who are doing this really well, and I represent a metropolitan area, so, if you had one of our more remote councillors present, they may be able to give you some specific examples. But,

broadly speaking, I would say that schools are not alone in that issue of engaging those families; as P&Cs, we have that issue too.

The CHAIR: Okay, thanks for those comments.

I just wanted to ask you just perhaps away from the report, are you engaged with the commissioner and the commissioner's office and the work of the commissioner as part of your ongoing activities?

Ms BLAIR: Yes.

The CHAIR: What is the nature of that engagement?

Ms BLAIR: I believe the commissioner is coming this year to our conference and I believe he has attended the last two conferences. He comes and speaks to our gathered affiliates about his work. I will say that our delegates absolutely love his presentation every year, and many of our delegates come to conference thinking they want information about how to run their canteen better, how to be a secretary better, fairly hands on, grassroots, and some of our more theoretical speakers do not engage our affiliates as well, but the commissioner absolutely manages to have every person really engaged in his presentation and is able to talk about things, sort of actual research as well as the stories and the anecdotes that involve people. WACSSO has certainly has been invited by his office for launches of things such as the report and so forth, so we are seen as a stakeholder. I suppose we are on the guest list. Then we would also have a number of organisations we engage with that he is engaging with, so while it might not be a direct engagement, say, Telethon Kids Institute as an example, would be working with his office to look at his research and we may well be working with them, so sometimes it is not a direct thing. But in terms of all stakeholders in the space, we certainly do have an ongoing working relationship with the commissioner's office and one that we value.

The CHAIR: Any other questions from the committee?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: That was going to be my question, so that has quickened that process, but do you see that there are other opportunities for you to have a more direct relationship with the commissioner in terms of him proactively contacting you on particular areas; and, if so, where would you see those areas would be of most benefit, I suppose, in terms of hearing the voice of parents in the work that he does?

Ms BLAIR: The commissioner's office, of course, by definition is about children and young people and were they to lose their focus and become about all the peripheral, I think that would be a real shame; the strength of the office, as far as I can see, is that it constantly puts that voice there. However, were the commissioner's office looking as part of further survey work to access parent groups and networks, we would be a logical partner in that. If the researchers are looking for designing what it is they would like to hear from parents, we would be able to work with them on that as well. We stand ready to work and I suppose also if, in terms of implementation of things like this report, parent expertise of what parent engagement looks like with educators, we could be a partner in that work as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, I just have a closing statement to read to you. Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections, and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. But should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary document for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you so much, it has been really informative, I really appreciate your time.

Hearing concluded at 10.57 am
