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THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE A MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART ON TUESDAY, 3 SEPTEMBER 2024

INQUIRY INTO DISCRIMINATION AND BULLYING IN TASMANIAN SCHOOLS

CHAIR - Welcome everybody to today's hearing of the Government Administration Committee A's inquiry into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools. I want to thank you both very much for your organisation's submissions to our committee and for presenting to us this morning. Could each of you please state your name and the capacity in which you're appearing before the committee, please?

Mr BOSKER - I'm Adrian Bosker. I'm the state executive officer of Christian Education National in Tasmania.

CHAIR - Great. Thank you.

DR CARLING - I'm Dr Rachel Carling and I'm here as the executive officer of government relations and advocacy for Christian Schools Australia, replacing Mark Spencer, who was a last-minute drop-out.

CHAIR - Can I please confirm that both of you have received and read the guide that's been sent to you by the committee secretary?

Mr BOSKER - Yes.

DR CARLING - Yes. Thank you.

CHAIR - This hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, which you may or may not be aware of, which allows individuals to speak with freedom without fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place out of parliament. This protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred by you outside the parliamentary proceedings. This hearing is public. The public and the media may be present. We don't have anyone with us yet this morning, but we may do throughout the course of our deliberations. Should you wish aspects of your evidence to be heard in private, you must make this request to our committee at the time.

I'd like to introduce the members of our committee. I'm Anita Dow. I'll be chairing this committee meeting today. I am the member for Braddon up in the north west of Tasmania. Online, we've got Rob Fairs, who's member for Bass, and Mark Shelton who's member for Lyons. We've got Josh Willie, member for Clark, Miriam Beswick, my fellow member for Braddon in the north west, Vica Bayley, member for Clark, and Kristie Johnston, member for Clark.

Mr ADRIAN BOSKER, TAS STATE EXECUTIVE OFFICER, CHRISTIAN EDUCATION NATIONAL, AND **Dr RACHEL CARLING**, EXECUTIVE OFFICER, GOVERNMENT RELATIONS AND ADVOCACY, CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA, WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

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CHAIR - Thank you. I think it's important at this point in proceedings just to acknowledge that during these hearings we might be discussing sensitive matters that have deeply impacted the lives of many Tasmanians. That may be a trigger for some individuals listening to or participating in these proceedings. I encourage anyone impacted by the content matter during this hearing to contact services and support such as Lifeline Tasmania on 1800 984 434, Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800, or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636. That brings us to the beginning of your hearing and I offer you the opportunity to make an opening statement.

Mr BOSKER - Sure. As I said, my name's Adrian Bosker and I'm currently the state executive officer for Christian Education National. I think it's relevant, also the previous principal at Launceston Christian School for seven years, the principal at Calvin Primary School for 10 years prior to that and a teacher at Scotch Oakburn College in the junior school for 10 years prior to that. When I added that up, it was sort of quarter of a century, which makes it sound like a really long time, but it brings relevance to being able to submit some thoughts and ideas to this committee. Thanks for the opportunity to speak to the committee. Thank you. Do I address you as chair, Madam Chair? I'm not exactly sure -

CHAIR - Chair's fine, thank you.

Mr BOSKER - Chair, okay, for accepting the joint submission to this important inquiry that looks at how to provide environments, structures and practices that encourage the young people of Tasmania - our future - to learn, grow and flourish. I'm sure the committee has been provided with many submissions that reflect the pluralistic society, which is one of the strengths of Australian life today. From the perspective of Christian education, we strive to honour God and what the Bible teaches about honour, respect, integrity, loving God and loving our neighbour. Interestingly, as you walk in there's a banner that has those as the values of this House.

Independent schools across our nation make an important contribution to the complex fabric of multicultural Australia. They represent the diversity of beliefs, values, faith, positions, ideas and opinions that strive to coexist. Organisational integrity is one of the foundations that contribute to this way of living together in harmony with each other. Respect and kindness are key components that should be evident in how members act and respond to each other. From a Christian understanding of how to do this well, the values taught in the Bible are the focus that guide us. An authentic Christian school will believe that teaching, practising, adhering to and promoting these biblical principles is the best foundation to understand values about humanity.

Christian schools exist primarily to make an education available to any parent who agrees with the organisational integrity of that school and agrees to partner with them in providing that type of education for their kids. It's incumbent on the school to hold itself and, by association, its community accountable to the charter of that particular school. From the perspective of this inquiry, committing to and ensuring a safe and supportive school environment to its members is an outcome worth striving for. Some parents make this choice of a Christian school in the belief that this is the right school for their family because of the safe and supportive school environment that that school promotes and strives to provide.

An intended but not always recognised outcome is the capacity to know the differences and views of others and still walk together in peace, respect and understanding. We want to

assist our young people to listen well, to know what they believe and why, respect those with a different view and meet any challenges, knowing and understanding that one individual doesn't have all the answers to everything and that we can learn from each other if we listen well. It's my experience that the vast majority of Australian schools strive diligently to do these things to the best of their ability. We have good people doing good things, trying hard to invest in the young people in their care and in their spheres of influence. A truly pluralistic society is one such structure to flourish and advance the common good. Martin Luther King said it this way:

We must learn to live together as brothers, or we will perish together as fools.

CHAIR - Thank you for your opening statement. I should have indicated at the beginning of proceedings that we've allocated till 9:45 a.m. to hear from you this morning. I have a question that I'm going to start with as Chair, or do you have an opening statement as well?

Dr CARLING - Would you mind if I made an opening statement? Is that okay?

CHAIR - No, that's fine, go for it. I assumed you were making it on behalf of both parties.

Dr CARLING - While he does absolutely speak on behalf of Christian schools, I'd like to make a brief statement as well, with your indulgence, and to thank you for allowing me to sub in for Mark Spencer, who is a co-author on this paper.

Christian Schools Australia are a national body representing over 86,000 students and over 13,000 staff at 200 locations across Australia. In Tasmania, to give you an idea, we have five schools with over 1000 students. Mr Bosker, I believe, has 10 schools with over 3000 students, and the Adventist schools which also are represented in our paper have two schools with over 300 students, just to give you an idea of the breadth of what we're representing today.

One tenet we have in common with the bodies represented in our joint submission, as has been clearly stated, all our schools hold religious formation as a core to the way we provide holistic, Christ-centred education in the service of the common good. Our staff make a deliberate decision to work within a Christian school. Our parents make a deliberate decision to place their children in our care. And our students come from different backgrounds, different faiths and no faith, different beliefs, different abilities, different struggles. What they all find in common is the Christian love and care at the centre of our student wellbeing policies and practices.

We've conducted a number of surveys to capture what is really happening in our schools and one of those was incorporated in our submission, the Christian Schools Community Profile Survey. It was a national survey of over 8500 parents. Results included a clear and direct evidence of the efficacy of the measures put in place by Christian schools to ensure the safety of our students, with over 80 per cent of respondents saying they are extremely or very satisfied with the safety and supportiveness of their Christian school. It also showed evidence that while parents do not necessarily share our Christian values, they believe these values are extremely or very important, and clear evidence that parents find their Christian school to be highly responsive to their concerns, and that the school has built strong systems of communication and relationships, noting that these are all key preventative factors when considering the theme of this inquiry.

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Alongside the data which supports Christian schools is a positive environment which nurtures and protects students and provides a safe place for staff to share and live their values. We have collected a number of stories which you'll find in our submission. I also hope that we have the opportunity to share some of that direct evidence during the question time today. I know that you've just heard Mr Bosker's 25 years of service in Christian schooling. He has many stories he can share with us to highlight that today.

As I bring my opening statement to a close, I just want to refer the committee to our six recommendations in the summary. First, to respect the strong evidence of the safe and supportive environment that we provide. Second, an acknowledgement that Christian schools are an important expression of free practice of religion as protected in the Tasmanian Constitution and international law. Third, the recognition of the evidence of the efforts made within Christian schools to ensure a highly responsive and supportive school culture. Fourth, the incorporation of the evidence from staff of the low incidence of discrimination and harassment and the commitment to the creation of a loving and caring school environment. Fifth, the notation of the efforts being made to address discrimination, bullying and harassment through school policies and a range of other activities, and for further evidence on that I would refer the committee to the submission of Mrs Popowski, principal of Circular Head Christian School, I was very impressed with her very practical submission on this point. Finally, the adoption of some recommended changes to the *Anti-Discrimination Act* that will strengthen protections and better define discrimination.

To be honest, we just want to concentrate on our role of education and not be caught up in unnecessary litigation, which we fear could be a result of amendments that would not be thought out well. No-one is perfect, no system is perfect, no school is perfect, but Jesus taught us this and it humbles us and guides us as we seek to create this environment which nurtures, encourages and promotes the flourishing of our students, families and staff. As you consider our submission and witness statements over the course of your inquiry and you look at Christian schools as a significant subset of Tasmanian schools, I want to state clearly that our schools take their role of educating and protecting our students very, very seriously.

CHAIR - Thank you very much, Dr Carling. Your submission focuses a lot on discrimination and the experiences of staff, students and families over time, but it doesn't talk a lot about the policies or things that you have in place around bullying across your school communities. I wondered if you could provide some examples of things that you have in place that provide a supportive learning environment and how you address bullying across school communities.

Mr BOSKER - All the schools have strong anti-bullying policies. There is zero tolerance for bullying in every school that I represent and I'm pretty sure there's the language of zero tolerance for bullying but it's how that's practised in the playground, because that's where it actually makes a difference.

I know from my experience, but I also know from the accounts of others, that bullying is taken seriously. For anti-bullying policies to be effective, taking steps early is the most important part. That means knowing what your what your policy says, knowing that you are teaching kids about relationships, about respect, about how to be kind to each other, and when that doesn't happen because kids are kids and people have differences, sometimes they take that out, and in a school setting it's complicated because kids come to school with a whole lot of disadvantages or situations that we don't necessarily know about and sometimes they have

no control over. It's hard for kids to be able to relate well to each other when you've just walked out the door after seeing mum and dad having a fight or you haven't had a decent meal last night or you've had a lousy night's sleep. There's a whole lot of things that come into that.

At the schools I've been to, there's intention about understanding how kids come to school. Some kids have that happen pretty much every day and for them to have a network of support for them to go to at the start of their day so that there's regulation and settledness so that the reactions are part of it and it's not an unexpected thing, and then you respond to that with putting them in a safe place, calming them and sometimes giving them food so they can actually then operate.

That's one practical prevention strategy. Sometimes it's good to bring kids together and sometimes it's not, because necessarily facing someone who has bullied you and expecting them to then have the maturity to reconcile that, that can be putting kids into risky situations and we don't want to see that. We want to see resolution, but we want to be able to see that done in an effective way and often that means having a guided conciliation meeting.

I could give you an example. There was serious bullying of one kid, it was targeted and it fitted the proper definition of bullying. Two kids having an argument about whether the ball was in or out and having a bit of fisticuffs about it is not bullying, but it's different when it's targeted and this was, so we walked through that with these two boys and it had some effectiveness, but it ended up in exclusion and that stops the bullying but doesn't actually fix the problem. We got the parents together to talk through and make some real commitments on how they can have their boys get on with each other and be kind to each other. One of the outcomes of that was these two dads, both of their boys played basketball and they're both fairly good and the dads agreed that they would co-coach the team to show their boys that, 'We're okay with each other, we know how to get on with each other, let's demonstrate that so that our boys can see that that can happen', and that's been a really successful partnership.

It's about dealing with it early, being authentic in how you deal with it, not just stay away from each other, because that might stop the bullying but doesn't fix the problem. We want to change kids' hearts and attitudes and their examples of following through on a policy that says, 'Let's take this step-by-step approach'. Sometimes the first step is effective, sometimes it's not, and we need to proceed until we get to a resolution that works and sometimes that takes time, but it's worth it.

Dr CARLING - Yes, we do provide great resources to our schools to make sure that we have that early intervention and zero tolerance; we would share that and we would also be very happy to provide more evidence. We put in our submission in the early round, so we're very happy to provide more evidence and examples of policies from our school if that would be of assistance to the committee.

CHAIR - We would appreciate that.

Dr CARLING - We'll take that one on notice to give you some examples of policies.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you very much for your detailed submission. I really appreciate the lengths you went to describe the survey results, in particular, that you've received.

Given that Tasmania's *Anti-Discrimination Act* and education regulations make it very clear that faith-based schools - or any school for that matter - have an obligation not to discriminate against particularly the LGBTQIA+ community, and that we know there are LGBTQIA+ staff and students in faith-based schools, can you perhaps give me some examples of what policies, programs or practices you have in place specifically to encourage an inclusive environment for the LGBTQIA+ community?

Mr BOSKER - Can I clarify the question?

Ms JOHNSTON - What programs, policies or practices do you have in place to ensure an inclusive environment for the LGBTQIA+ community that we know must be in faith-based schools?

Mr BOSKER - In the employment processes they have - like any job that you are applying for - there are criteria that you need to meet to be able to work in a particular working environment. Christian schools have a set of beliefs and values that are important to a particular school community, just like an employment place would have beliefs and values that are important to that, and then it welcomes applications from people. They would go through that process of application and work through that process. If your question is asking about what the employment processes in place are, schools would have those available on their websites as to what the process for is applying for a position at the school.

Ms JOHNSTON - And for students? What kind of programs and policies? I know you said you'd provide some examples of programs of bullying, but do you have any off the top of your head in place for the LGBTQIA+ community?

Dr CARLING - We would have a number of students in our schools in Tasmania who identify as LGBTQIA+, and we are very inclusive in welcoming all students. All students are expected to follow our codes of conduct, just as in any school, and there is an example in the submission on page 7 where a teacher talks about the school being welcoming of a non-Christian student who was struggling with their gender identity and allowing them the freedom to try out different identities.

I'm sure Mr Bosker has other examples within his schools of where we do provide that loving Christian environment which is nurturing and protecting and allowing children to have their freedom of expression. We would treat all children in a Christ-like way. Just as Christ looks at all of us, we look at our students, and we don't have a discrimination policy against students with different identities.

Mr BOSKER - I can give you a story if that's helpful.

Ms JOHNSTON - I think that'd be great.

Mr BOSKER - I finished my term of principal two years ago. These journeys are usually long journeys of children understanding their identity and working that out for themselves. Evelyn was a kid who you could see there were some things that she was uncertain about, and she came to her parents, and her parents weren't sure how to deal with the fact that she would want to identify as a boy rather than a girl. That led to some conversations in pastoral care and student wellbeing units who then walk that journey with Evelyn. There are ways to help and support kids through that.

One of the big things for Evelyn was just to be recognised and, 'I want to be named Kai because I identify as a boy. I'm not sure if I really want to be a boy, but if it would help me cope with life if people would just accept that I'm Kai and not Evelyn.' Well, that's an accommodation that can be made. Then you need to walk through that with their peers because some of their peers would say, 'That's stupid. You're a girl. How can you be a boy?' You need to walk the other kids through that. It's not just the individual child, it's that whole community to accept that person and to walk with them through that.

I'm no longer at the school, but Kai was one of the lead roles in the production that the school has just put on, and I coach a basketball team and I see kids in the playground. I went up to Kai and I said, 'Gee, you did a great job in that lead role.' I said, 'So, what are you doing for year 11 and 12?', because that's a good question to ask kids. She said, 'Oh, look, some of my friends who are a bit like me have been asking me to come along to Launceston College for year 11 and 12, but I don't want to because I know that I'm cared for and loved as I walk through my gender confusion.' She's questioning, and we ought to support kids through that. We shouldn't be bringing a particular sledgehammer approach to something that's a really delicate thing, and we want to walk with kids through that.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you for that example.

Mr BAYLEY - Can I ask you a follow-up on that? That's a really positive example, thank you very much. Do the schools have that approach written in protocol and articulated, and staff trained in that? Is it systemic and across the organisation and the school, or was that positive example based on your experience and your capacity to guide them through? Do you have systems in place that ensure that every child, if they're going through that situation, is treated in an appropriate way such as you have explained?

Mr BOSKER - Thanks for the question. When that process was starting, particularly with Kai and working through that, we wanted to make sure that we have a structural approach to that, not just an ad-hoc approach. I sat down with a social worker, a GP, a paediatrician and a legal person and we worked together on a gender policy - how are we going to approach this so that there's clarity and certainty about how we need to train and teach our teachers? That gender policy was drafted and then sent to lawyers to make sure that it was doing the right things.

I then called a series of staff meetings to introduce that policy to our staff so that they were clear on that. People have different opinions on those things. There were some interesting questions that I needed to field in that. I said in the end that we need to be together so that our kids understand that we're on the same page on how we approach that, so that there is certainty for parents and for kids in how we journey together in that. We're doing that with Kai and her parents. They're really appreciative that there's clarity and guidelines in how we're working through this.

Mr BAYLEY - Is that rolled out beyond that school, across the network of schools?

Mr BOSKER - It's shared with the other CEN schools. We had a national conference last month, and I was chatting with a guy from New Zealand who was dealing with similar types of challenges, and I said to him, 'I'm really happy to share that with you'. We're in the process of de-identifying that, and then forwarding it to their school so that they can use it.

Mr BAYLEY - Is that a policy you can share with the committee, once you de-identify it?

Mr BOSKER - Yes. It's being de-identified now.

Mr WILLIE - I am interested in what data is collected around some of these issues like bullying. In the state system they collect comprehensive data around incidents and suspensions. You have expulsions in your system. The second part to that is: what accountability is there? I understand there is no public reporting for each school. Does that data go to school boards? How is that monitored?

Mr BOSKER - Do you want to answer that? I'm happy to give the examples of the ones that I'm aware of.

Dr CARLING - To be honest, I'm four weeks into this role, so that's a very good question on data. As a researcher myself, I will take that on notice and find that out so that I'm not just talking off the top of my head. Thank you, Mr Willie. I appreciate it.

Mr BOSKER - Anecdotally, there are very few exclusions from school as a result of bullying. If that's what your question's aiming at, what the data about -

Mr WILLIE - I'm just interested in how you monitor each school ecosystem, and what accountability there is for that.

Dr CARLING - Our schools are independent.

Mr WILLIE - You do receive public funding, though.

Dr CARLING - They are responsible to a board. I do take your point, absolutely. It would be the individual boards that would monitor that. My understanding would be that they would be receiving that data, but I would like to confirm that so I give you the true and correct answer.

Mr BOSKER - There are pastoral care programs in the Tasmanian CEN schools that have systems in place that collect data on every student and those - it doesn't happen every board meeting, but one board meeting is particularly focused on pastoral care and student wellbeing. The statistics of the data that's collected in how many incidences of bullying as they're - it's generalised and then if it's required, you can dig down much deeper into that data. It relies on the teachers using the pastoral care system that's in place, which is another one of those administrative workloads that make teaching harder than it used to be.

Mr WILLIE - Yes, I know.

Mr BOSKER - Yes, but the systems - yeah, I noticed that you are a primary school teacher.

Mr WILLIE - Former teacher, yes.

Mr BOSKER - Those systems are designed to make that data collection fairly simple. It is a little bit of drop-down box and click, but it's collecting that data and then that data can be accumulated. Yes, the data is definitely collected and then independent schools come under - the Non-Government Schools Registration Board have an audit that they place on schools, depending on the length of their registration. Some schools are registered for two years before they are re-audited. The maximum is five years, so at least every five-year period, the Non-Government Schools Registration Board will come and do an audit of the school. And they're the sorts of questions, along with policy and governance, that are asked and then that's a submission that's usually, you know, this big and then that's interrogated by the inspectors, I suppose is the right name for that.

Mr WILLIE - Okay, so you'll take on notice the types of data that is collected in schools and the process around how boards provide accountability?

Dr CARLING - Yes, I can do that. The types of data collected?

Mr WILLIE - Yes.

Dr CARLING - Board accountability, board governance of those issues?

Mr WILLIE - Yes.

Dr CARLING - Yes. I can do that. Absolutely.

Mr WILLIE - Thank you. And we should ask maybe the Non-Government Schools Board to maybe attend. We can discuss that.

CHAIR - Dr Carling, in your opening statement you talked about how, obviously, the network and your schools want to focus on education and not be caught up in unnecessary litigation. In your submission you've referenced some suggestions and proposed redrafting of the *Anti-Discrimination Act*, and some issues and suggestions you've put forward there. Can you give us an example perhaps of where the current Tasmanian *Anti-Discrimination Act* has prevented you from doing something or causing issue for schools in your network?

Dr CARLING - I can't give you a specific example. I guess our fear is, with the way some of the laws are going, that we don't want things to be made harder for us. We actually really appreciate the Tasmanian Constitution as it stands at the moment and the right that is enshrined for religious freedom. We want that protected. We want to continue to operate according to the international laws that we are signatories to here in Australia. While it's a continuation of what I guess the status quo in a lot of ways here in Tasmania, but if you are considering looking deeper and putting in amendments, then we have our suggestions on that.

CHAIR - The concerns, if I understand correctly, is based on a fear of what might happen under our current legislative framework, but there's been no issues that you're aware of that have come up that has tested that?

Dr CARLING - No, no, I didn't say, I don't have a fear of what's in the current framework.

CHAIR - Okay.

Dr CARLING - And to be honest, I didn't draft this submission. If you would like me to get clarity on the proposed drafting, I can do that.

CHAIR - Yes.

Dr CARLING - And, perhaps, Mr Bosker can provide examples of how the legislation has been working for our independent Christian schools.

Mr BOSKER - Yeah, the term 'discrimination', and I think the addition or the annexing of that alternative definition of discrimination that aligns a little more closely with the United Nations Human Rights Committee, the general comment 18. Not every differentiation of treatment necessarily constitutes discrimination and I think 'discrimination' has become sometimes a bit of a weaponised word when there's a difference of opinion and we see things differently, and because you don't see it the same way as I do, you're discriminating against me. I understand that tension but we need to be honest and fair and because I'm a Christian, my first place is going to be, 'How can I love the person in front of me? That's going to be my first response'. If there's a difference of opinion, my question is not going to be, 'Oh, you're discriminating against me'; my question is going to be, 'How can I understand this person in front of me and how can I love them?' I think if we come with that approach to things when we don't agree, we'll have much better outcomes than finding points of difference rather than finding points of where we can work together.

It's a bit of a floppy answer, but it can be the tight definition of discrimination sometimes doesn't help us.

Ms JOHNSTON - To understand, the reason, I suppose, behind the drafted wording that's provided in your submission, if that was adopted, what would that allow schools to be able to do, practically?

Mr BOSKER - I don't think it would make any difference.

Dr CARLING - I think it would be business as usual for our schools. It would just provide us with that protection and clarification.

Mr BOSKER - Yes, it would bring clarity around what discrimination is and what it isn't.

Ms JOHNSTON - But if I understand you correctly, the current legislation you haven't had an issue with it that has been requiring clarity? Is that right?

Mr BOSKER - I think you're right because there have been very few allegations of discrimination brought forward to a tribunal. Sometimes the tension or the disagreement has gone through to a conciliation process and have been able to work through that because people have been prepared to listen to each other. But I don't think there have been many that have sat before a tribunal. But I could be wrong in that, Kristie -

Ms JOHNSTON - Kristie's fine.

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Dr CARLING - I believe this part of our submission was more if the committee is going to propose, we would like to see some clarity. But we're not asking for you to propose any amendments to the act.

CHAIR- Thanks, that's clarified.

Mr BAYLEY - You have some really compelling data in here from the surveys of staff and parents and note statements such as, 'Christian schools are highly responsive to parents and their concerns'. Obviously, the student is the primary individual when it comes to the bullying concerns. Do you have an approach in terms of surveying students in terms of their attitudes, and approaches and perspectives on the school's policies and procedures when it comes to a whole range of different things, including bullying and identity, and so forth?

Dr CARLING - Yes. Currently we are conducting some research into human flourishing within students. And that's a study done in conjunction with Harvard University. It's not ready for publication yet, we're still at the end of that data collection period. If that concludes before your inquiry concludes, we'll be very happy to provide that. I'm sure there's a lot of anecdotal evidence that Mr Bosker could also fill in.

We do have a survey here that was just published yesterday, the Foundations of Faith survey. The survey published in our submission was about parents. This is one where we surveyed staff. But you're specifically asking about students.

Mr BAYLEY - Students, yes.

Dr CARLING - Yes, we are conducting that, but it's not ready yet for rolling out.

Mr BOSKER - One of the processes that school management systems have - and there's a thing you can buy which is an add-on program which is a daily check-in. In those daily check-ins, there are simple questions. 'Do you feel safe at school?', that's the first question. And then the design of that program will, I don't know how the data works - but it will send people down into a particular thread about the answers to the really key questions. The students don't have to fill that out but part of pastoral care is, 'Let's do your daily check-in', and then that data is then forwarded to the wellbeing units in the schools. If a student is saying, 'No, I don't feel safe', an alert is sent to the student wellbeing unit that the student needs to be checked-in within the next hour. It's that sort of looking out for kids.

If a kid doesn't fill in the survey or that daily check-in, you won't know that way, but you may know other ways by just observing what's going on in the kid's life. Teachers have a lot of things on their plate, and one of them is to look out for the wellbeing of the students. The actual standard one is to know your students and how they learn. That's one of those standards that's an expectation of our staff.

Mr BAYLEY - Anecdotally, in your experience, have you had situations - I'm sure you have, because parents are equally challenged by the decisions and challenges of their children and struggle to cope with it. I mean, it's great to hear that you're surveying students and doing that regularly, as well as at a high level. In your experience, do you often see different responses about a student - their perspectives - on how safe they are, how secure they are, or how supportive the school is compared to their parents? Just because they're related doesn't mean they're on a unity ticket, I'm sure.

Mr BOSKER - Can I clarify that there's a discrepancy between the student's wellbeing and how the parents think the student's wellbeing is going?

Mr BAYLEY - Exactly right.

Mr BOSKER - Not often. I suppose there's a partnership that is formed when a student enrolls at the school, and there are certain guidelines and criteria that are expected from parents to partner with the school. One of them is to let the school know how their child is going. If a child's dog has just died, that's traumatic for a little kid. It might have been the dog that came into the family when they were born. If that's not communicated and a kid is really struggling at school and you have no knowledge of that, it's incumbent on the parent to let the school know what's going on in the lives of their kids.

I could give you so many stories about parents who have decided to inquire at the schools I've been at - because I'm intimately involved with those decisions they make - and the differences that parents and kids have brought to me to say, 'I'm so glad that I'm at this school now.' I jotted some down and then started to remember, 'Oh, what about that one? What about that one?'

Kynan was a guy who was at another school where he was not flourishing at all. Primary school was great but he moved to a large secondary school and just got lost. He started to withdraw, went to his bedroom and started gaming, started communicating with kids online - they might not have been kids, how do we know? He started to become angry, withdrawn. The mum and dad came and asked if he could be enrolled at Launceston Christian School. I said, 'Well, let's walk through that process with you.'

Kynan was struggling. Over time, he started to build some really good friendships amongst his peers. He stopped gaming and started to play his guitar again. His dad came to me and he said, 'I just want to thank you for giving us our son back.' He's now coaching one of the junior basketball teams. He's a lovely kid, but he was on the road to just getting completely lost. Does that mean that Launceston Christian School is the best school in the world? No, it's not the best school in the world, but taking things seriously and walking that journey with kids, and loving them through that makes a difference.

Kynan is a pretty shy kid, but he's very talented, and that was getting lost. His mum and dad are just so thankful that they've got their son back.

CHAIR - Thank you very much. I'm conscious of time. I'm sure you've got lots of stories and are impassioned to share them with us, but I am conscious of time.

Mr BOSKER - Yes, hundreds of them.

CHAIR - I wanted to offer the opportunity for those members that are online to ask any questions, because we haven't heard from them yet.

Mr FAIRS - No, I'm all good.

CHAIR - Thank you. Were there any other outstanding questions from members of the committee prior to us completing today's hearing?

PUBLIC

Thank you both very much for your willingness to share some of those experiences with our committee, also your willingness to provide further information to us at a later date, which we will be appreciative of and look forward to receiving.

What you've said to us here today is protected by parliamentary privilege, and once you leave the table, you need to be aware that that privilege does not attach to comments that you make to anyone, including the media post this meeting, even if you're just repeating what you said to us. I hope that you both are clear about that and have a good understanding of that.

Thank you both very much. That concludes our time with you this morning. Enjoy the rest of your day.

Dr CARLING - Thank you very much. I appreciate that. Through the Chair, can I hand over the results of the survey?

CHAIR - Yes, please. Thank you.

The witnesses withdrew.

The Committee suspended at 9.50 a.m.

PUBLIC

The Committee resumed at 10.02 a.m.

CHAIR - Welcome, everyone, to today's hearing of Government Administration Committee A's inquiry into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools. Thank you for being with us this morning and representing Headspace, and for representing from interstate as well, Kristen. Thank you very much for your comprehensive submission that you presented to the committee. Could each of you who are with us here at the table state your name and the capacity in which you are appearing before our committee?

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - My name is Reede Adams-Beckett and I'm part of Headspace's Youth National Reference Group.

Ms THAIN - I'm Caroline Thain, a manager of clinical advice and governance with the clinical practice team with Headspace National. I also come with lived experience of having children engaged in the system, in primary and secondary school.

Ms DOUGLAS - I am Kristen Douglas, head of Schools and Communities, which is a large division nationally located all over Australia, working with schools, communities, teachers, principals, et cetera.

CHAIR - Can I confirm that each of you have received and read the guide that was sent to you by the committee secretary? This hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, allowing individuals to speak with freedom without fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place outside of parliament. This protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to by you outside the parliamentary proceedings. This hearing is public. The public and the media may be present. We don't have anyone with us this morning, but they may join during the proceedings of your hearing. Should you wish aspects of your evidence to be heard in private, you must make this request to the committee at the time.

I'd like to introduce myself. I'm the chair of this committee, Anita Dow, and I'm a member for Braddon from the north-west of Tasmania. Online we have Mark Shelton, who's a member for Lyons in the north of the state; Rob Fairs, who's a member for Bass in the north of the state; Josh Willie, who's a member for Clark in Hobart; Miriam Beswick, who represents Braddon alongside me in the north-west of the state; Vica Bayley from the electorate of Clark; and Kristie Johnston from the electorate of Clark here Hobart as well. Thank you to my fellow committee members, and thank you for joining us today.

Mr REEDE ADAMS-BECKETT, MEMBER OF HEADSPACE YOUTH NATIONAL ADVISORY GROUP, AND **Ms CAROLINE THAIN**, MANAGER OF CLINICAL ADVICE AND GOVERNANCE, WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR - Thank you very much. Kristen, because you're joining us from interstate we don't require you to make a statutory declaration. Would any of you like to make an opening statement to the committee?

Ms DOUGLAS - I will, thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee members for allowing Headspace to address the inquiry. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land which I'm sitting upon today, the people of the Wiradjuri nation, and pay my respects to elders

past, present and emerging, and also acknowledge the land that you're on today with the inquiry.

Thank you to the committee for holding an opportunity to speak to such an important topic. We're representing Headspace National, as you would know. We support thousands of young people all over Australia, aged predominantly 12 to 25, and their families, but more importantly, the communities and the schools that wrap around these young people. As you know, we have three representatives here today, Reede, who represents our youth and young people's voice, Caroline from a clinical perspective. As an ex-school principal, I'm representing an education perspective.

Our work has given us a national perspective into every state and territory, every sector. We've worked with, I would say, almost all schools in Australia of the 9500. Addressing bullying is a highly critical thing that we need to understand. We understand that there's very complex facets to bullying and cyber-bullying - we work closely with e-safety - the issues around and the impact of bullying, school refusal, anxiety, depression, suicide, and working around the earlier age and stage risks that we now see in primary schools and not just in secondary schools. With the increase of disability, neurodiversity, gay, trans and non-binary, inclusion is more important than ever. Addressing behaviour management through respectful relationships requires us to consider parent engagement, but also how we support teachers and additional workforces in schools.

In saying all that, I note that the number-one thing I would like to highlight for the committee is the pressure on schools in 2024 to, I guess, assist in many of the issues and social issues, friendship issues and relational issues that play out in families and communities. Often, they play out in schools, and the complex nature of schools in this day and age means there's more pressure on workforces, families and parents, and it's one of many complex issues that schools are addressing. I'll hand over to Reede to make some opening statements as well.

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to attend today. As a young person with many experiences of bullying and discrimination during my years attending high school, I believe this inquiry is of high importance.

I would like to give a brief introduction to my experiences in high school. I began year seven in 2016 and faced bullying and discrimination almost immediately. As a 13-year-old, I was not aware this was happening to me or the effects that this would have in my life. In 2017 I realised what was really happening. I was later told that this was 'boys just being boys'. This was not that. I was punched, kicked, spat at and verbally abused almost every day for five years. What made the situation worse was that this was my friends. I felt trapped and embarrassed. I was made the laughing stock of an entire grade.

In year 10, I had my lowest year. I thought about suicide for the first time, I lost all confidence, I didn't want to attend school anymore and I even fell out of love with my hobbies. You see, bullying and discrimination has impacted every aspect of my life, from my home life, personal relationships, my education, my connection to culture and, crucially, how I view myself. I was forced into becoming someone I didn't want to be as a protective mechanism. As a result, I still struggle with anxiety, I'm still reminded of the events of high school and I find it hard to trust the people in my life.

During the years since, I've had the time to reflect on what has helped and what I wished I had when I was still in school. I believe that support from a clinician, whether that be Headspace or another organisation, was my turning point. I was able to speak to someone outside my family for the first time. For the first time I felt I could talk to someone without my family being worried about me.

Although I believe there is more that needs to be done for young people, I feel teachers may not be adequately trained to support a young person in this delicate situation. I'm certain many teachers want to assist but are scared to make the problem worse by taking action.

I feel very honoured to speak on this topic today, although there was a time I didn't think I would make it here. If there's anything I want you to take away from what I've just said, it's that bullying and discrimination ruins the lives of young people and it's time our young people and our teachers are supported properly. Thank you.

Ms THAIN - Like Kristen said before, my role is a clinician and I'm here today to support Reede. Thank you, Reede. I certainly think lived experience stories are incredibly powerful.

I guess in my representing for Headspace, we want to be able to do more for schools. We have centres across the state that you'd be aware of, in Launceston and Devonport, Burnie and Hobart, and we think there's a lot more that we can do to support young people in schools.

Similar to what Kristen said, I think it's time we built wellbeing teams in schools and finance and staff them properly. Only a couple of weeks ago I was talking to an assistant principal in the north and he was joking and saying you're only allowed to have a mental health crisis on a Tuesday when we have a social worker. While he was using humour as a way of coping, when I think back to my experiences when I was at school, they were low numbers then. That was in the '90s and I don't think they've progressed particularly much. We see incidents of mental health increasing and yet we're not doing anything to support them within the schools.

I think our teachers do an amazing job with what they have and certainly Headspace sees and recognises that, but we want to be able to do more. Similar to what Kristen said before, it takes a village to raise a young person and we want to be able to use whole-of-community approaches to tackle these issues. It can't just be on the shoulders of schools. We need to think about how we can bolster peer support, family support, community support and school supports. In my mind it's a bigger issue and you have to think about mental health more holistically and bullying as being a symptom of mental health, which can make it feel like it's a tricky thing to tackle and to know where to start. They're the things I wanted to raise.

CHAIR - Thank you very much, Caroline. Thank you, all of you. I just wanted to state before we begin our questions that as a committee, we recognise that during these hearings we may discuss highly sensitive matters that have deeply impacted the lives of Tasmanians - I think we've heard that from you today, Reede. This may be a trigger for individuals listening to this broadcast or participating in the proceedings.

I encourage anyone that's impacted by the content of what we discussed today to contact services and support such as Lifeline Tasmania on 1800 984 434, Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800, or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

You've spoken about the importance of mental health services, working closely with school communities and the fact that there are significant shortages of mental health practitioners, psychologists, social workers, peer support programs across Tasmanian schools. What role are you actively playing as an organisation with Tasmanian schools currently?

Ms THAIN - Currently, as I said before, we have the Centre Services Network that allows young people to access free mental health support between the ages of 12 and 25. We also have community engagement or community awareness officer positions who actually go out into the community and promote mental health and provide that mental health promotion within broader community, and sometimes that can sit in schools. We also have our mental health education program that actually sits with Kristen's division, and they are mental health education programs that are on offer free to any school in Tasmania. We have an education consultant who runs those workshops for schools that are available to all schools, whether it be state, individual or Catholic-based schools across the state.

I guess a good way to think about it is that we have clinical services within our Headspace centres, and then we have preventative mental health education workshops with our mental health education program. Am I missing anything, Kristen?

Ms DOUGLAS - We have really close relationships with the Tasmanian Principals Association, the department and the Catholic sector.

CHAIR - That's great. It's excellent to hear. The last thing I wanted to ask you was about the wellbeing teams that you mentioned. What would that model look like in a school and what would those wellbeing teams be comprised of in your ideal world?

Ms THAIN - In an ideal world - gosh, that would be amazing - I think they would be multidisciplinary, so you'd have access to occupational therapy, speech therapy, social work and also peer work. I know Reede is an amazing example of someone who is an advocate for his peers. I think often when young people, particularly in secondary schools, are struggling, they really want to hear from another young person. They don't necessarily want to access formal support, so I think there should be more peer work - that peer model of sitting alongside and intersecting with.

At the moment, because of their low numbers, they are very much doing a lot of crisis work and, as I understand, there's no room to do the preventative work. I think as well, wellbeing and trauma-informed practices should be really embedded across the curriculum. I know that's really tricky when you're under-resourced to be able to do that consistently and effectively.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you, Reede, for sharing your lived experience, and I know how hard that must be and I think it's impactful that we as a committee hear about that. We've heard about the difference that a wellbeing team might make. Can you speak to how you feel a wellbeing team would have impacted your experience and what difference it would have made to your life if you'd had that wellbeing team to support you during your high school years?

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - I think for me, I got that after I left with Headspace. I'd come into my role as a youth advocate last year, and prior to that, I actually hadn't kind of gotten over anything that had happened to me in high school at all. As soon as I moved into the program,

I was able to come to events like this and speak on my experiences. Since then, it's become more of a comfortable topic and it's something that I can speak about more and advocate more. I think if I had something like this in school, it would have been amazing.

I didn't really, and in general in Tasmania, there are a lot less opportunities like this and they're also really hard to find. As a young person, you see lots of your stuff on social media. I've gotten jobs off social media and all that, and I haven't really found any advocacy roles like that. Whether it's advertisement, I'm not sure, but yes.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you. Caroline, you talked a bit about how at the moment there seems to be a crisis response - if I understood you correctly - and how you'd like to see a shift from a crisis response to a preventative model as well. Can you expand on that a bit more about what that would mean in terms of the school environment? I think you talked about that person who said that people need to have their crises on Tuesdays. That's obviously a crisis model. What would a preventative model look like?

Ms THAIN - I think they would be involved in actually talking to young people from primary school right through about things like self-regulation, coping skills, understanding, and giving young people mental health literacy so they've got language to talk about how they're feeling. I think we've got a bit of a stereotype of what bullying is, and actually when we think about bullying as being about somebody who often has more complex issues - for somebody who is bullying, it's often a symptom of a broader mental health picture.

I think the wellbeing teams would be used, as I said before, as a way to embed wellbeing curriculum across, so it's not just when you hit your lowest ebb in your mental health that you access that support, but that actually you're given the tools to be able to function more in your life and cope with life. They're coping skills. Again, it's really hard for educators to do that in their day-to-day classrooms because there's so many demands upon them already.

Mr WILLIE - What states are doing as well - I'm aware Victoria's got a drop-down menu and schools can access different services and programs depending on their needs. Is that a good model or are there other states that are - and I think Headspace is involved in that heavily in Victoria?

Ms DOUGLAS - We're funded by the Commonwealth Government to support every school in Australia through an initiative called Be You, which is a mental health literacy platform and wellbeing for every school in terms of training, language skills, knowledge, competence. We've rolled that out in every state. States like Victoria in particular have invested heavily in the school mental health menu, which is what you're talking about. They've also invested in packages like Respectful Relationships, and this is where schools can pick a subsidised program off a menu and free of charge put it into their school.

Some of those are mental health programs; some are bullying; some are trauma-informed practice; some are around self-harm. It creates easier and better access to funded training packages that have been selected and evaluated, but it's a very costly strategy from Victoria. I know that there are great differences in terms of resourcing and sometimes between education departments.

Mr WILLIE - Is that a standout, Victoria, across the country?

Ms DOUGLAS - I would say there's components in all states and territories of things that are doing well. New South Wales also has a drop-down menu of subsidised programs and packages. I think one of the quickest and easiest things I could say to the committee is that our funded Commonwealth initiative, Be You - if we had better and easier access to Tasmanian schools - that is, free of charge - we could come in and do much deeper mental health literacy. I would also encourage what Caroline was talking about - a trauma-informed approach, which requires schools to think about all of their audiences, from parents to students to staff. If we're going to solve relational issues or bullying issues and inclusion issues, it has to be a component of how we're supporting parents, how we're supporting the students and how we're supporting teachers and educators.

Mr WILLIE - What are the barriers to access if you're saying that getting access to schools is hard?

Ms DOUGLAS - They're highly in demand. There is a huge number of not-for-profit programs trying to come into schools and work with education. I think many people see schools as the universal platform for solving many social issues, so of course they come to schools and they want to do preventative work. I think for the government to partner with Beyond Blue, Headspace and Early Childhood Australia would be a huge step in the right direction. It endorses schools to pick up this initiative, which has been funded by the Commonwealth, and, I guess, in a more sophisticated way embed this across the whole school approach.

Mr WILLIE - It makes sense, particularly if the federal government's funding it.

A member - How effective is it?

Ms DOUGLAS - At the moment we have been, it's an amalgamation of a number of packages from a few years ago. KidsMatter and Mind Matters became Be You. Some of you might remember those two brands.

We're at the point where we've saturated almost 7500, 8000 schools out of 9500, but it's a lot of settings, you can imagine. We don't have a huge amount of staff, neither does Early Childhood Australia or Beyond Blue. We're slowly making our way to try and deepen the engagement. At the moment we're a mile wide and an inch deep. But when it comes to settings like Tasmania, ACT, South Australia, they're smaller settings. We can have a much more targeted approach if the government supported, endorsed and encouraged schools to lean into it.

Mr FAIRS - Kristen, thanks for coming on today and talking to us, as well as Reede and Caroline. My, question is, and you did bring it up: parents. It's in my space and yours as well with disadvantaged youth. You well know that breaking generational change, the parents and the kids, a lot of it, in fact, most of it starts from home, as you well know. This is a wonderful model for free in schools, but a lot of kids I come across and deal with, as I'm sure you do, don't have computer skills and they don't have the confidence to talk to anyone when this is going on.

What suggestions do you have, because a lot of kids fall through the cracks no matter what we do? And, obviously, we've got to try and close those cracks to reduce it to the bare minimum that fall through. But we need to, obviously, have the parents come along for the journey, and you and I both know that's not an easy task. Obviously, community engagement

is very important with this as well with parents and things like that, with their kids possibly, but again, there's no guarantee. Any ideas on how we can? I know it's very hard.

Ms DOUGLAS - It's a good question, Rob. I think the earlier age and stage that we can start working with families, obviously early maternal child health. Our partners in delivering Be You are Early Childhood Australia, so kindergartens engaging parents.

I think part of the complexity is when schools do try to address things about bullying or violence or discrimination, sometimes you bring the parent into the school community and there is a reluctance to support the school in that process. And there is a divide between what the parent thinks of their child versus what the school's trying to address and support.

I think these days parents have less adequate supports than they did a number of decades ago. We know when we see economic downturn, we see increased rates of family separation and violence. We've got lots of issues with violence all over the country. Youth crime. It is a very complex thing. It must be done at a community level. It must be done early age and stage. I think we need to create better ways for parents to be engaged, but also for them to have mental health training and trauma-informed practice, capacity and confidence built. Maybe it's a question for Reede about, you know, what role does this family play?

We have a number of young people watching this play out, these violent acts, these bullying acts, these discriminative acts, and some young people are filming them, putting them online and they go viral. In some ways, it gives tacit approval or endorsement that another child could do that. They're very complex things.

The Commonwealth Government and some state governments have also heavily invested in parent programs like Triple P and many others. Again, it's more about creating less confusion for schools and making it very simple. Do this, choose this one, choose that - they're overwhelmed with the choice, to be fair. I think we need to make it much more simple and much more sophisticated for schools to be able to choose what is good and what is easy to access and lean into.

Mr FAIRS - Thank you, Kristen, I appreciate that.

My other question, you did mention that with Reede. What family role did they play with you when you were going through it all?

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - For me, I think it was a bit of a unique situation. I had hidden everything that was happening to me quite well. My family didn't know anything that had happened to me until I probably turned about 20, until I'd moved into Headspace's programs. I think it's something that's happening with a lot of young people, where young people are going and hiding that. Personally, I know a few other young people that did the same thing.

It can be a hard thing to speak to parents about. For me, I was most concerned that my parents would think less of me. Obviously, I knew that was not going to be the case, but as a young person that's not experienced in the world, I was worried about that constantly and was thinking, 'If my mum and my dad, are they going to think that I'm just some loser? Is that what they're going to think?' And I never spoke about it.

Once I had spoken about it, my parents have encouraged me so often to go seek the right support and talk to psychologists, talk to counsellors, and they've been great after it. It was just that I'd kept it hidden. How do you solve that? I think that's down to young people. It's a really delicate issue, yeah.

Mr FAIRS - Yes, I think you're a great role model to have, and I think if this program is rolled out across schools, or suggestions, you'd be perfect to go around to schools and talk to the youngsters, to share your experiences and inspire them to come forward, speak up. I'm very proud of you, mate.

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - Thank you, and that's a great idea.

Mr BAYLEY - Thanks for sharing your story and for all the work you do. We're just about to hear from Sam. They're a student from 2015 who came out in a Catholic school in north-west Tasmania. In their submission, they have articulated some of the challenges they felt with the system that they were in, publishing in that case the *Don't Mess with Marriage* booklet. And more recently in Tasmania, we've had the archdiocese publish the *We Are the Salt of the Earth* document, then sent that out to parents, used the system to distribute that.

We'll hear from Sam directly when they come in, but you've got visibility of things across the nation, obviously, and how these kind of interventions from schools may play out. How do they play out when it comes to students and the services they demand from you? Did you see a spike in demand for services in the wake of the *Don't Mess with Marriage* booklet or the one in Tasmania? Acknowledging that you work within the Catholic system, is this a challenge that is exacerbating some of the problems that you explain and describe?

Ms THAIN - Yeah, that's a good question. I mean, I can certainly speak on behalf of Headspace in that we are inclusive of all young people and families, regardless of how they identify. We are equally concerned when we hear about faith-based groups marginalising young people and making them feel unsafe, that they can't come out and feel like they are connected to school. We know that schools are a place that, when run well, offer connection and a place that can set you up for the rest of your life in terms of your wellbeing and mental health. But we've also heard from Reede, when things are hidden, or overt in this case, it can actually make young people feel more alienated and can have very detrimental aspects on their mental health, which of course we're concerned about.

I can't answer whether we had - I don't have those stats in front of me about whether we saw an increase in young people accessing mental health services or Headspace services. But it is not, I can say that we do in centres in Tasmania, I think it was one in 10 young people from 2023 to 2024 accessed Headspace and had at least one occasion of service relating to bullying and discrimination. But, yeah, it is concerning.

Mr BAYLEY - It is concerning. Do you do any work with the systems with faith-based schools in relation to that information coming out from those schools? Do you advise them around it, or is there a live conversation about it?

Ms THAIN - No, but it's a good question. I think I can speak personally as a parent now and I have spoken to Headspace that I might do that and they're happy for me to do so. I think it's a challenge in that some faith-based organisations promote that they are loving and caring of all people, then send a confusing message that you have to look a certain way or identify a

certain way, whether that be through your gender or sexuality. I think that's confusing and personally as a parent think that's harmful and I don't think that's okay. Again, we are accepting it from a Headspace organisation of young people who identify in many different faiths and we want young people to find places of connection and belonging in community more broadly. Certainly, I want for my young people in my family to not be afraid in Tasmania to put their hand up if my young people identify in a certain way as they grow up. I want them to feel safe enough to say, 'This is who I am, mum', and not feel that they don't belong in their community in Tasmania.

Mr BAYLEY - Do you find any resistance to that message in faith-based schools in terms of Headspace's work there and collaborations with faith-based schools?

Ms THAIN - No. Again, I can't speak on behalf of the individual centres, but it certainly hasn't been raised to my attention that they're not accepting of Headspace because of our inclusive nature. I think what Kristen was talking about before was that sometimes in schools, one of the things our Be You program does is offer wraparound support following an adverse event. That might be a death by suicide or another adverse event and schools sometimes lean in and we provide that wraparound support and offer coordination of services in the community. Sometimes schools find it hard to lean into us then because they're very inwardly focused and very worried and they're impacted, so sometimes we find that. I'd need to go away and check that but certainly I haven't heard of schools overtly saying they are not accepting of our service because of our inclusive nature.

Mr BAYLEY - It just confuses and presumably diminishes some of the message?

Ms THAIN - Sorry?

Mr BAYLEY - Presumably it just diminishes some of the message that Headspace - it just makes things more confusing?

Ms THAIN - Sorry?

Mr BAYLEY - To have conflicting messages - one from Headspace, for example, and one from faith-based schools - creates a confusing environment.

Ms THAIN - Maybe Reede can answer this but I think young people choose where to get their support from. It's a shame that they have to maybe weigh those things up. We would want all schools to be inclusive, like what you're saying, but maybe Reede can answer that for young people, whether that's tricky.

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - It's difficult for me to speak on behalf of young people, especially on a topic like this where I don't actually have the experience, although from my experience within the college I had kind of seen within a multiple kind of events that the school had run that Headspace was quite welcome. Young people were encouraged to go to Headspace. It wasn't something that was kind of kept to the side. It was a priority to speak about mental health. That's my experience of going through the schooling system and that was pretty recently.

Mr WILLIE - State system?

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - Private.

Mr SHELTON - What we haven't talked about - and Headspace of course would be right into it - is the headspace of young people in dealing with social media and those issues that are coming from social media like bullying and other particular issues. Every parent wants their child to be safe and therefore contactable and so forth, but it introduces them to what we all know does all sorts of things. How do we now somehow reverse this attitude about everybody needs to be looking at their phone every five minutes? I don't know, but does Headspace have any ideas about that?

Ms THAIN - Thanks for the question. Reede and I were talking about this earlier, that bullying and discrimination has occurred for the longest time, however with online platforms like social media, unfortunately we see with young people like Reede experiencing bullying and discrimination and that experience then continues not just on the school ground, but follows them online. That is why it's so much more intense and has more detrimental effects on young people's mental health, like it did to Reede. I hear what you're saying, that social media plays a big role, unfortunately in bullying and discrimination, but young people find it hard to switch off and it can follow them outside of a physical environment and into an online environment.

Headspace talk a lot about it. It's a complex problem and it's not helpful to have simple answers like, 'We'll just cut that', 'We'll just ban', or 'We'll just increase the age'. We also understand and see for young people the huge benefit the online world can have in terms of healthy connection and in terms of engagement. Our view is that it's actually about helping young people manage those platforms. I also come back to what you were saying, Rob, about parenting and also advising our families about how they can support their young person to manage these platforms. It's a complex thing and it's not going away. It's a part of our social network and young people's social network and it's a really important piece, but I think it's about helping young people and parents and guiding them in ways to manage that. What do you think, Reede?

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - I think there's both sides to it, isn't there. With my experience, I had a few instances where I was added into group chats and people were targeting me within these group chats, although there is the positive part of social media, where you can go on, say, TikTok or Instagram and you can find creators who talk about their experiences. For me, that was my only way of actually getting connection with anyone else who'd had that same experience. I'd hidden myself so far away from people but I'd found someone on Instagram who had spoken about bullying and discrimination within their school setting, and it was one of the only things I was able to hold onto and go, 'There is hope. There is a way for me to move on in life. This is not how it ends'. There are always the negatives to it, but with the negatives I really think we shouldn't forget the positives of social media.

CHAIR - That's a very good point, Reede, thank you.

Mr BAYLEY - Who was that, out of interest? Is that easy to share?

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - I honestly cannot remember. It's been so long since I've seen it. I probably should go look and find it again, because it did really help.

Mr BAYLEY - If you had any capacity, I'd be very interested.

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - I can't remember off the top of my head, though, sorry.

CHAIR - Any other questions from the committee?

Ms BESWICK - A couple of the submissions that we've received have had some young people commenting on knowing where to get help - even if they didn't access it, they knew that the school was supportive, because they knew how to get help. Is that the experience you had?

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - Not quite. I honestly wasn't aware of any mental health services, but I think it was less down to the services not advertising, it was more down to me being a young man with this stigma that young men still have, where mental health is not something to be talked about. I wasn't actually looking for any help because I didn't think I needed help, because I thought I was the problem, not the emotions. I had basically been forced to go to a clinician after a different traumatic event, and then from there I actually realised that this was quite life-changing and continued from there. I can't really speak on other peers. I'm not quite sure.

Ms BESWICK - As a whole - and obviously Headspace is a great organisation to have here today - where do you find the highest levels of need? Is it demographical? Is it school-based? Where are you finding that there are higher issues? Are there more issues in certain schools? What do you find there?

Ms THAIN - Good question. I don't have those details with me in terms of Tasmania, the stats around where we're getting the most referrals, but I can certainly find that out for you and give that to you if that's helpful.

CHAIR - It would be great if you could send that. We would really appreciate that.

Ms THAIN - Yes, sure.

Ms DOUGLAS - Just for the committee, we have just over 170 Headspace centres across the country. Of course, some of those are in populous areas, some are in regional, rural or remote areas, but not every community, not every family is in close access to a Headspace centre. Obviously we're trying to work with Commonwealth to ensure that we've got equity and coverage across the country.

In previous years we had older age young people walking in and presenting with distress. That age has lowered, so the 12 to 14 age group has certainly increased all over the country in terms of presentations and access to services, but we've also got a range of digital mental health services where young people can access support if they don't have a Headspace centre in their community.

We know that travelling expense, waitlists, all of these things are barriers to young people walking in the door, let alone stigma. Creating help-seeking skills in young people, but also how do we support their parents and their families to appreciate early intervention and not wait till we're in crisis as a family or a young person before we go and talk to a therapeutic counsellor, which is why having access to schools, to bring up mental health wellbeing teams into schools is the safest way to build that help-seeking skill and muscle for families.

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People aren't frightened to send their child to a school, but sometimes they're frightened to send their child to a service. I think if the service is in the school and the school can do outreach and vice versa, service can do in-reach, it's much more helpful.

CHAIR - That's a great point. Thank you. Reede, as we draw the committee hearing to a close - you've obviously got the ear of the Tasmanian parliament, so is there one thing that you could leave with us about what you think is the most important thing for us to know? We would really appreciate it.

Mr ADAMS-BECKETT - Wow, huge question. I think it's probably on supporting teachers. In my experience, I'd spoken out multiple times, once in year 7 and once in year 9, and both times I had been listened to and then nothing had happened. I don't put that down to the teachers at all. I actually put that down to the situation.

If you put yourself in that perspective, it's a scary place to be, being a teacher and having a young person come to you and talk about the issues they're having with other students. The only thing that I would think of is, 'Oh, we need to punish this student', but I don't actually think that's the case. I think that actually makes it worse. In my experience, that did make it worse. I'd spoken out in year 7, and I had a teacher actually say to the four boys that were doing that to me to apologise, and said they needed to write a 'sorry' letter to me. They argued back to the teacher and eventually the teacher said, 'No, you don't have to do any of this'.

That kind of gave me enough proof to say it's less about the teachers not caring, it's more about the teachers being scared of taking action because of what happens to the young person afterwards. After that moment, my treatment got way worse.

I spoke out one more time. Nothing happened, and after that I never spoke again. Year 10 came around and I started to have suicidal thoughts, and I think we could have solved that earlier. I think it comes down to supporting teachers.

CHAIR - A very important point. Thank you very much. Thank you, Kristen. Thank you, Caroline, and thank you very much, Reede. We've enjoyed immensely hearing from you and you've brought forward some really important information for the work of this committee. Thank you, and thank you for the work that you're doing across our communities.

What you've said here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the table, you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to those comments you may make to anyone, including the media outside of these walls, even if you are just repeating what you said to us. I just wanted to make that clear and make sure that you got a good understanding of that. With that, I thank you again.

The Committee suspended at 10.45 a.m.

The committee resumed at 11.00 a.m.

CHAIR - Welcome to today's hearing of the Government Administration Committee A's inquiry into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools. Thank you, Sam, for joining us this morning and thank you very much for your submission. We acknowledge it would've taken a lot of courage to make that submission to our committee, so we're looking forward to hearing from you today. If you could please state your name and the capacity in which you are appearing before our committee.

Mr WATSON - Samuel Watson, appearing as a former Tasmanian school student.

CHAIR - Thank you. Can I confirm, Sam, that you've received and read the guide sent to you by the committee secretary?

Mr WATSON - I have, correct.

CHAIR - This hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, allowing individuals to speak with freedom, without fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place outside of parliament. This protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to by you outside the parliamentary proceedings. This hearing is public. The public and media may be present. We don't have anyone present with us here in the room at the moment, but they may join us during your hearing. Should you wish aspects of your evidence to be heard in private, you must make this request to our committee at that time.

I want to introduce you to the members of our committee, Sam. Online we have Mark Shelton, member for Lyons. In the north Rob Fairs, member for Bass; Josh Willie in the Lower House for Clark in the Tasmanian parliament; Miriam Beswick, member for Braddon alongside me in Braddon; and Kristie Johnston, a member for Clark in Hobart, and Vica Bayley. I'm Anita Dow and I'm chairing the meeting today.

I wanted to offer you the opportunity, Sam, to provide us with an opening statement.

Mr WATSON - Thanks for that, Anita. As I said, I'm a former Tasmanian school student from the north-west coast. I came out at about age 14 or 15 in year 9 at a Catholic school in the north west. Whilst most staff and students were supportive, I experienced a number of comments and other actions that simply wouldn't have occurred for non-LGBTIQA+ students. Shortly after I came out, the Archdiocese circulated the *Don't Mess With Marriage* booklet, not just around Tasmania, but around Australia as a whole. This made it clear to me as a young student who had been questioning my sexuality that my school system didn't want my rights to be equal. It was quite a sad thing to have reinforced at the time, having just gone through that struggle.

This booklet was not dissimilar to the letter that's just been circulated, *We are Salt to the Earth*, which actually says that if a student comes to terms with their sexuality or gender identity and hence finds their beliefs at variance with those of the Catholic faith, they should seek alternative educational institutions. This is really quite a sad thing to hear, given that perhaps one of the hardest things a person can do is come to terms with their sexuality or gender identity, and this often coincides with many other challenges of being in high school and being a teenager, puberty, et cetera.

The reason I wanted to appear before the committee was to speak a little bit about and share my experience of both the school that made it very clear to me that my rights weren't supported and they didn't want my rights to be equal, then counter to that, a school that did the opposite and shared a letter in support of things like marriage equality, and helped us set up support groups for LGBTIQA+ students, et cetera. Obviously, my statement details this more thoroughly, but I'll leave that as my opening remarks and I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

CHAIR - Thank you. Sam. I just want to state on behalf of the committee as well, that we recognise that during these hearings we may discuss highly sensitive matters that have deeply impacted the lives of Tasmanians, and that this may be a trigger for some individuals listening to, or participating in, these proceedings. As Chair, I'd encourage anyone impacted by the content matter during this hearing to contact services and supports such as A Tasmanian Lifeline on 1800 98 44 34, the Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800 or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

I just wanted to begin with a question, Sam, about what you think would have made your experience different? I know you have talked a little about that in your submission and how you wanted to set up that supportive group in your school community, but I wanted you to elaborate on that for the committee, please.

Mr WATSON - Yes. One of the challenges I felt, even quite recently - I came out less than 10 years ago - there wasn't really any visibility of anyone LGBTIQA+. I was 14, 15, I didn't really know what it meant to be gay and I certainly didn't see anyone around me who was. I think the key thing that would've made a difference for me at the time would just have been seeing that other people are around and that's okay and that's accepted. That is something that, when I did come out, I really wanted to do at my school originally. I tried quite hard just to set up a little group that people could know about, that they could go to, that they'd know that if they came there they'd feel safe and supported and they had a place to belong.

Unfortunately, despite support from a number of staff and students, and a whole range of different considerations of how we might get that over the line, it seemed simply impossible to create a group that would just sit there and provide a supportive environment and visibility so people knew that there was somewhere they could go where they belonged and would be supported.

CHAIR - Were there any other questions from the committee. Josh?

Mr WILLIE - Sam, you obviously had your experience at your Catholic school, and the Archdiocese views have been in the public domain. You referenced a document, *We are Salt to the Earth*. I am aware that some schools were refusing to distribute that, so do you think it is a widespread system issue, or is it particular schools, or direction from the Archdiocese?

Mr WATSON - This is an interesting question and you'll note that in my submission I make it very clear that there were a number of very supportive students and staff who were supportive of me as a person, who supported me to try and create a support group. It was when we came up against the more senior leadership and the directions from, for example, the Archdiocese, that the clear roadblock came to creating support groups, creating visibility, et cetera.

I think it's clear, even by that demonstration that some schools aren't going to send it out, that it's perhaps not individual school leaders and teachers that are the challenge, but it's the messaging being sent from the top. That messaging does have an effect of trickling down to staff, to leadership staff, to staff, then to students, because essentially the leadership is saying, 'We won't let you have a support group, we won't let you do this'. Then you end up having staff who otherwise would provide great levels of support, would go out of their way, who felt hamstrung by the fact that they were risking their job - their livelihood - if they went out on a whim and provided support to a student who was very vulnerable.

Mr WILLIE - Do you think this is a challenge not only for students, but potentially the staff, at different schools? I know that more broadly within the Catholic Church there is a group that's been set up, a reform group for the Catholic Church. Do you think this is something that the institution is grappling with, and the people within it?

Mr WATSON Absolutely, and it's not the case that every Catholic does not support LGBTIQ+ people, that's absolutely not the case. Many people hold faith and support of queer people in both hands. It is something that the institution is grappling with, and unfortunately, the top-down message that I experienced as a young person made it very clear that the institution from the top wouldn't support me. That had the negative effect of impacting people who would otherwise have supported me and removing their ability to do so, to express their support, just because they feared repercussions. That's something that I saw. I have a number of staff who were in the system, who are no longer in the system, who are no longer in the system, who supported me personally, who supported other people and faced the consequences of doing so.

Mr FAIRS - Do you think the archdiocese and all that were scared?

Mr WATSON - Scared of?

Mr FAIRS - In your situation, you scared them? Do you think that's why there was so much opposition to you? Was it the lack of education from the highest level?

Mr WATSON - In my experience, it was, I came out, I realised that the one thing that would have helped me was knowing that there were other people like me and that when I came out, that I'd be okay. And I think I was lucky to have a very supportive family. Many people don't have that good fortune, so having a supportive group at school and in other forums is really important.

I think, I'm not sure if 'scared' is the right way - I would say perhaps the staff were scared, not so much the archdiocese. I don't understand why someone would or wouldn't be fearful of someone for being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, et cetera. I can't understand why someone would be scared of that. I think what I experienced was that staff were scared of expressing their support and of speaking out of turn, per se, with the doctrine that had been circulated, the *Don't Mess with Marriage* booklet, et cetera. Yeah, that's the level of 'scared' I think I felt, was staff didn't want to show their true colours and their level of support, or felt that they needed to do it covertly because they would fear repercussions for simply providing support to a student at a tough time.

Mr BAYLEY - Thanks for your submission and your appearance today. It's really helpful to read and hear such a firsthand experience of this. You write a lot in the submission

about how the *Don't Mess with Marriage* booklet made you feel in terms of your rights not being equal. And you've spoken just now about how you think it may have impacted on teachers, precluding them being able to support you the way that they should and that you need. You also write that it's about how students and staff act and feel.

We're looking at bullying as well in this context and, obviously, north-west Tasmania, a relatively conservative community. I'm interested to see whether you experienced peer-to-peer bullying as a result of you coming out, and whether that worsened when the booklet came out, whether that kind of gave permission to discriminate, bully, treat you in a different way by your peers.

Mr WATSON - Yeah, I would say I was lucky that I didn't experience a large amount of bullying. I'm quite a loud and confident character, so perhaps less subject to attacks or bullying in that sense. But I would say it definitely felt - that being said, there were a number of comments and other things that, you know, would be called bullying and I just sort of brushed them off. But, I would say they did feel - I'm not certain if you've dropped out, can you still hear me?

Mr BAYLEY - We can hear you, yes.

Mr WATSON - Perfect. I would say it did feel like there was a level of almost permission that was being communicated, that our rights didn't have to be equal because here's this document that's been circulated, not just to every school in Tasmania - or every Catholic school in Tasmania, but around the nation. That that's sort of a level of permission.

On the counter, I would say I heard stories, for example on the mainland, of people taking these books and protesting, like, students taking these books and protesting. So, it had the impact of, in some areas, giving permission and, in other areas, galvanising people against this sort of messaging from a senior body. This is the leadership of, I think there's almost a million students in Catholic schools across Australia, and it really galvanised people to say, 'Actually, we love our Catholic schools, we love and espouse a lot of the Catholic values', but, frankly, it's not okay to tell students that because of who they love, they don't deserve the rights to be equal, and you have a duty of care over those students and you shouldn't be saying these things."

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you for your submission. You talked a bit earlier in your evidence today and in your submission about how you felt that it was more of an institutional discrimination, in terms of coming from the leadership of the archdiocese, rather than instances of discrimination one-on-one between staff and students, and that kind of thing. Can you talk to how that impacted on your educational experience? You're at school, you're there to learn. How did that impact, then, the change you felt when you moved to Friends' School and they were supportive and that institutional discrimination wasn't there?

Mr WATSON - I think the biggest impact was that it became very clear to me and my parents at the time, if I wanted to continue speaking out about the need to have supportive schools, and the need for marriage equality and equal rights, that I simply couldn't do it at my school. My school at the time was not comfortable. I was going against the school that I was at. I think the biggest impact it had on me was the fact that I had to leave my friends, my family, my teachers that I knew, and relocate to somewhere that would facilitate that. And that is a huge impact on anyone. I would say this is even reflected in the recent letter, *We Are Salt to the Earth*, where it says:

If they come to terms with their sexuality or gender identity, et cetera, whilst attending a Catholic school and find their beliefs at variance with those of the Catholic faith, then they should seek alternative educational institutions.

I made a comment about this in my opening statement. It is really scary to think that a leading institution that is responsible for educating thousands of students is telling students when they're teenagers, when they're coming to terms with one of the hardest things that they might grapple with - their sexuality, gender identity, et cetera - on top of grappling with all of that, telling their family, perhaps risking ostracisation from their family or friends and community, that, on top of that, they should actually consider moving schools and leaving the teachers they know, the support networks they have. I think that's a huge impact. That is seriously concerning that that's the message that is being sent to thousands of students across Tasmania. And I'm sure all of you understand moving schools, especially when you're getting towards your TCE years, can have a huge impact. You've built up relationships with teachers, students, et cetera.

CHAIR - Can you still hear us, Sam?

Mr WATSON - Yes, I can still hear you. I'm not sure what's going on with the internet.

Ms JOHNSTON - You also spoke in your evidence about how diverse the Catholic community is in terms of this particular issue, particularly about the treatment of the LGBTQIA+ community. We've heard, for instance, from concerned Catholics that they are incredibly supportive and they came out and denounced the *We are Salt to the Earth* letter that the archdiocese sent out. In your experience, how did you find that difference in view across the Catholic Church and the impact that that might have had on discrimination?

Clearly, we're not suggesting that it's a broad position of the Catholic Church to discriminate against LGBTQI+, but how do you find the difference between that and then what the archdiocese had sent out in the first brochure, *Don't Mess with Marriage*, and the second one?

Mr WATSON - Yeah, it's interesting. The Catholic Church is a broad church and the fact that it's responsible for educating thousands of Tasmanian students means that there are a number of students who do identify and don't identify, and there's people who, like me, would identify with many of the values of the Catholic Church. Things like service to others, treating your neighbour how you'd like to be treated, those sort of very common-ground values that underpin many religions.

I think I just have to go back to the remarks I made earlier. There are a number of people, hundreds if not thousands of people, who hold their religion and their support of people irrespective of their sexuality, gender identity, et cetera, in both hands and are willing to treat others as they wish to be treated and are willing to love people unconditionally.

I think the challenge that I found in my experience was that whilst you've got all of these people who want to do that, if they're employed by an institution that is saying, 'Actually if you take an active step to speak out of turn to support these people to highlight this issue, you will be reprimanded, punished or dealt with in some other way', it has the impact of dulling the level of support that is in the community, despite the fact that it exists.

It just becomes invisible. It becomes secretive and it becomes pushed down, which I would add is very sad to see when there is a number of very supportive people and supportive schools, for example, the ones that have pushed back on sending out this booklet. It's sad to see that occur because having people who support you is really important at that time of vulnerability.

CHAIR - You mentioned in your submission about the sadness that you felt when you learnt of Lexi Rockliffe's story that was bravely shared recently. I wanted to ask you what your advice would be to students who may find themselves in a similar situation to what you did at your school, and what your words of advice would be about how, if they weren't able to leave that school community, they would get on and survive, and how they could provide advocacy amongst their fellow students.

Mr WATSON - Yeah, I think I read of Lexi's article and I had heard about Lexi's story before the article, and it made me quite sad to think that we're in 2024 now. I left the Catholic school system in 2016, 8 years ago, and it sounds like things are just as bad or perhaps worse, especially for gender-diverse people.

As for advice for school students, I think it follows the line that I've talked about, it is that you do belong and that there are people who support you. It's just that you will have to work a whole lot harder to find them because you are going to school in an institution that has tried actively to cover that up to hide the people who will support you, to quell their support by making them scared, as Mr Fairs said.

I think that's my advice to anyone coming out: that you are loved, you belong, there are people who will support you. You just have to, unfortunately, take the time to go and find those people, and that can be an incredibly difficult thing in a conservative environment. That is why it's so important to have schools that have support groups, that have visibility, so people, if they start coming to terms with their sexuality or gender identity, they know where they can go, they can see that. Unfortunately, it sounds like that still doesn't exist eight years later and quite possibly is not going to for some time yet.

Mr BAYLEY - Thank you, Sam. You've gone a little bit toward my question. We've just heard from Headspace, who are a national organisation providing some incredible services into schools and around schools to support students. My questions go beyond your submission, and I don't expect you to speak personally unless you're comfortable, but as someone who has dealt with these challenges by changing school and acknowledging you had a very supportive family, what are the kind of services external to the school?

Put the school completely to the side and what they do or don't do. What are the kind of services that would have helped you or could have helped you, and did you at the time know that they were available? Is it a matter of better advertising and better communication within your cohort at the time that they were available? I'm sure you're probably quite wise to some of these services these days in particular.

Mr WATSON - I suspect when I came out, Working It Out was very much around and doing some of the great work that they're doing. I think the number-one service in Tasmania for school-aged or teen and young people who are queer is definitely Working It out, without a doubt. As for knowing about them, it is incredibly hard at the age when you're a teenager and

your life is school. You play sports for your school, you go to school however many hours a day, your friends are from school. Most channels through which you get information are related to your school - your school assembly, your school newsletter, et cetera.

If your school is gatekeeping or blocking information about support services, it is hard to see that someone like me at age 15 or 16 would have known about services like Working It Out, whereas there are a number of schools that actively bring in services like Working It Out so that students do know that they're available, and where to go for support.

I think that's the key thing - schools have a really important role. Schools are responsible for doing a whole range of outreach activities, from vaccinations to sexual health, et cetera. Why is it that because people don't support or believe or whatever in queer people, that for some reason we're letting government-funded schools obfuscate the responsibility of providing that visibility and support, when they're responsible for doing it in a whole range of other important causes?

Mr BAYLEY - In effect, you're saying that it has a bit of a double-whammy effect. On the one hand, the messages coming from the school are really discriminatory, and at the same time, they're gatekeeping and possibly blocking the solutions.

Mr WATSON - Absolutely. I would say that schools are the source of so much that students get - not just your academic education. You get your vaccinations from the school, you get taught about puberty, et cetera, from a school. It is where you find and get most information as a young person, and where parents get most information relating to young people. It does have this double-whammy effect where not only is the messaging quite discriminatory and concerning, on top of that they're blocking the counter-messaging, or they're not letting the counter-messaging get through.

Then you're left to rely on vulnerable young students going and finding it themselves, or trying to find it for themselves. That's not always easy if you can't see that it exists or that it's visible, and you're still coming to terms with your sexuality or gender identity, et cetera.

Mrs BESWICK - This is a little bit off topic, but I was wondering what other bullying or discrimination you saw or witnessed throughout your time in school.

Mr WATSON - That is a bit of a throwback, I will say. I think high school is a tough time for anyone. I'm sure you can all cast your eyes back to the days of year 9 or year 8, where people are picked on for various different reasons, whether they look different or they act different, or, in my case, they love someone different. Normally, unfortunately, bullying stems from perhaps an insecurity in someone about the differences that someone else has, and that results in bullying.

I think it's fair to say a whole range of bullying for the different characteristics that people have is what I saw in primary school and in high school. I have to say I suspect that hasn't changed. That was confirmed when I read the experience of Lexi Rockcliffe, who talked about being physically assaulted for being different - but perfect, nonetheless.

Ms JOHNSTON - Just following on from the Chair's question earlier about advice to students, what advice would you give to staff who are currently in the Catholic education

system who may feel challenged by the direction of the Catholic Education Office and want to support young people within their schools?

Mr WATSON - I would say hold in there because it is the presence of these staff that ultimately will make the system better and will provide the support that students like me needed. Unfortunately, I've seen it in staff who were super-supportive but had a whole range of issues and have now left the system. I think if they're successful in driving out every staff member who's willing to speak out and support students, that is a very sad outcome for vulnerable students who will no longer have someone to turn to and someone to support them. I think one would be holding on and understanding to support vulnerable students. The primary goal of teaching is to make people feel comfortable and bring them up. I think beyond just telling them to hold on, I would say to seek out other people like them. I have engaged with concerned Catholics in a whole range of different instances and there are hundreds of people across Tasmania who, as I said, hold their faith and their support of people in both hands. I would say just go and seek those people out and do what you can to support vulnerable students where you can.

CHAIR - Further to this, I might just ask a question, Mr Bayley, and then throw it to you if that's okay. You mentioned in your submission the teachers you felt very well supported by and who did try to support you around some of the cultural barriers and discrimination you experienced in your school community. Are you aware if those teachers were well supported in doing that by the school or is that something that they took on themselves?

Mr WATSON - Not at all supported. Even when we went to the effort of supporting me to try to do things like set up a support group, we got very creative in trying to think about how we could label what I think perhaps back in the day was called a queer/straight alliance or a GSA or something, basically a support group, how we could label a group whose sole purpose was providing a space for people who wanted to know that they could come and that people would support them. We got very creative in trying to create different names that would not alert the Archdiocese, not have people lose their jobs, and despite that level of creativity the staff and I engaged in, it became very clear from the senior leadership that it just wasn't going to happen, no matter how creative we wanted to be. To answer the question more to the point, no support is the answer. Actively non-supportive perhaps is a better way to put it.

Mr BAYLEY - I think this extends on that question a little bit as well. To me, this approach where the Archdiocese is sort of narrowing the acceptance of people is in some ways self-defeating at a time when faith is increasingly questioned by many people and participation in faith and so forth. This is a very personal question. Please don't answer it if you feel uncomfortable, but did your experience in a faith-based school affect your faith? Did you have a strong alliance with faith in the Catholic teachings and so forth prior to your experience and how has your experience in the school impacted you and your commitment to that faith, if it was there?

Mr WATSON - I was christened Church of England when I was born in the UK and it's fair to say I would never have described myself as a devout Catholic, but I would always have described myself as being sympathetic to many of the values of Catholicism and many of the teachings of the Bible, things like treat people as you want to be treated, caring for those more vulnerable. There was a whole range of programs I was involved in at my Catholic school, things like Caritas that are focused on supporting vulnerable people, so whilst I was not a deeply religious person, it really did make me question why is it that this institution is willing

to draw the line at a certain level of difference or vulnerability? They are saying it's okay to support people who are financially disadvantaged, whether it's through Caritas et cetera, it's okay to support people who face other challenges, but when it comes to questions of sexuality and gender diversity, et cetera, that's where we draw the line. We're not going to let that be visible and we're not going to provide support services. I think that made me really question why it is that we apply these beliefs of treating people as you want to be treated and caring for others as sacred, but only to a certain extent, and that really made me question my belief.

Mr SHELTON - Sam, this morning we heard from Adrian Bosker, talking on behalf of the Christian Education National, about policies that they have in place of support and so forth for anybody who is coming out and the wraparound services and the inclusion that they have. There are some positive signs within Christian education for this, although you have suggested that eight years is a long time and you don't see anything happening. From outside of the Catholic church, in your view, are there any changes happening? You seem to be a very articulate, well-grounded person involved in society. There is the access to the internet and even though you said the Catholics were restricting your information, in today's society it is basically impossible to restrict information to young tech-savvy kids. Where do you see it going from here, I guess is the question?

Mr WATSON - It is a good question and if there are efforts to increase support in religious schools, whether they be Catholic or Christian or whatever, I'm very glad to hear that. I think there was the Edmund Rice Centre that had safe and inclusive learning communities or something back when I was around, and this was sort of the Catholic equivalent guide for that support. It was very clear that that was a subset of a Victorian group of schools that wanted to be supportive and were doing so and it was not something that would be rolled out across broader Catholic schools, but I think it should. It was sort of leading at the time and it's something that perhaps should be implemented more broadly.

To your question about the access to information, obviously we are all online, we all get information from a range of sources. The comment I would make on that is whilst information is widespread and it is hard to sort of hold information away, you have to put yourself in the experience of a student who lives in a conservative family and is coming to terms with the fact they might love, in my case, another man or start developing feelings for other men, and they're holding that in their mind and at the same time they have parents who might make comments when things come up on the news or might, you know, actively disparage things they see on social media, et cetera, and it makes it very clear to them that they should not be looking into those things online, they should not be going and seeking those pieces of information out.

I think the society we should be aiming for is one where we're all open and accepting. I don't think that is a scary proposition, but I would just reaffirm the point that whilst there is easy access to information for so many people, it's not always the case that people who are vulnerable, who have parents and perhaps friends who are less open to it, can just hop online and find those services, especially if you're in a rural and remote part of Tasmania where the services just aren't quite as accessible. That is where it goes back to the point I made earlier, that there really is an important role for schools setting the standard for, 'This is where you can come to be safe and learn', and that's ultimately what a school should be: a place that you can go to be safe and to learn and be accepted.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you, Sam. Just following on from that, you talked about the importance of safe spaces. I note that you said that you were trying to set up a support group

where people could go - a safe space where they felt they could be safe - and that wasn't something that was possible in your time at your Catholic school. Did that mean that you felt unsafe in that environment at that time, and are you concerned that following the *We Are Salt to the Earth* letter that it is potentially a situation where some Catholic schools are unsafe for the LGBTQIA+ community, or that students might feel unsafe?

Mr WATSON - It's quite possible that students will feel unsafe, because there is nowhere clear, there's clearly no staff member that they can go to report these issues to. There are no other students that they know. What ends up happening is there become informal networks - there might be one person who speaks out and who's a bit more visible, someone like me, who then has to take that on, and that is certainly not best practice for supporting and creating a safe space to go and learn.

We need a place that people know that when they go there and when they talk, they will be supported, loved, and they'll feel like they belong. That's something that I experienced when I moved schools to Hobart. They had a group of like-minded people who were facing similar challenges. You knew that you could go there on whichever day it was held and that people would support you. If people came because they were just curious and they weren't quite sure whether they were, gay, bi, gender diverse, that was a space that they could come and be vulnerable and know that whether they were or weren't, they were accepted. They belonged.

I think, absolutely, the fact that there isn't that place to question and explore your sexuality, gender diversity, et cetera, does mean that people often might get pushed onto online forums that aren't always great, into other places that aren't always safe. Yes, absolutely, it can have the impact of making students less safe.

Mr BAYLEY - You're obviously in Melbourne now, Sam. There are plenty of young people that leave Tasmania to other areas, but did any of this experience and your sexuality help you make the decision that you needed to move?

Mr WATSON - Move to the mainland?

Mr BAYLEY - To the mainland, yes.

Mr WATSON - No, I wouldn't say it was my sexuality that drove that choice. I think even the difference that I experienced between the two schools that I attended for high school, it went from it being a big issue to it being a non-issue. It went from a place that I thought I couldn't fully share myself and I wasn't supported, to somewhere I was supported and welcomed for who I was and that wasn't an issue.

No, I don't think that was the driver of why I left Tasmania, I think that was for work reasons that I came to Canberra to study and then to Melbourne to work.

Mr BAYLEY - Thank you.

CHAIR - Thank you, Sam, and thank you very much for your presentation to us this morning. Are there any last words that you would like to leave with this parliamentary committee about your experience and the change that you'd like to see?

PUBLIC

Mr WATSON - I think I would just say, I know that there's been a level of scepticism about this committee being stood up and whatever its purpose is. I think there really should not be any scepticism of the idea that we want schools to be a safe, inclusive and supportive environment for students to go to, and that we should really be living the idea that we will do whatever it takes to make sure that happens, to find out where discrimination is occurring, to find out where bullying is occurring and try and address it.

Whatever that means we have to do, whatever feathers have to be ruffled, I think we just have to remember the ultimate goal of this committee and of society as a whole is that we want to be an accepting, supportive, inclusive place. That's the role of schools and that's the role of this committee. As you do work on your report, I think if there's anything that you hold in your heads when you write the committee report, it is, 'What is the goal of schooling?' The goal of schooling is to provide a safe, supportive environment where students can learn, and how do we get there?

CHAIR - Thank you very much, Sam. What you said to us here today is protected by parliamentary privilege, and once you leave the tele hook-up, rather than the table, you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to the comments that you make to anyone, including the media, even if you're just repeating what you've said to us. Is that clear and you have a good understanding of that?

Mr WATSON - Understood, yeah. Thank you.

CHAIR - Great. Thank you once again for your time, and I'm sure I speak on behalf of all on the committee when I say that we've learned a great deal through speaking with you today and we thank you for your contribution to our committee's work. Enjoy the rest of your day.

Mr WATSON - Thank you. All the best with your inquiry.

The witness withdrew.

The committee suspended at 11.44 a.m.

PUBLIC

The committee resumed at 1.30 p.m.

CHAIR - Welcome to today's hearing of the Government Administration Committee A's inquiry into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools. Mitchell, I'd like to thank you very much for your submission that you've provided to our committee. If you could please state your name and the capacity in which you are appearing before our committee, please.

Mr SPRAGUE - Sure. My name is Mitchell Sprague and I'm appearing as the executive director of the Australian Council for Student Voice.

CHAIR - And can I confirm that you've also received and read the guides that were sent to you by our secretary?

Mr SPRAGUE - Yes.

CHAIR - Great, thank you. This hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, allowing individuals to speak with freedom without fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place out of parliament. This protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to by you outside the parliamentary proceedings.

This hearing is public, and the public and the media may be present. We've got a media camera behind you. Should you wish aspects of your evidence to be heard in private, you must make this request to the committee at the time.

My name is Anita Dow, I am the chair of the committee and the member for Braddon in the north west of Tasmania. Online, we've got Rob Fairs, who's a member for Bass. We have Mark Shelton, who's the member for Lyons in the north of the state as well. Josh Willie is a member for Clark in Hobart, Miriam Beswick, who's a member for Braddon, Vica Bayley, who's a member for Clark, and Kristie Johnson, who is a member for Clark.

Would you like to make a statement to the committee?

Mr SPRAGUE - If I may. On behalf of the Australian Council for Student Voice (ACSV), I would like to thank you all for first of all recognising this issue and for the opportunity to be here today, and to make our submission to the inquiry. First and foremost, we believe that educational institutions should be places where students feel valued, they're free to express their true selves and that they are protected from discrimination. Schools must be environments where individuals can reach their full potential and they can develop diverse perspectives, acceptance and understanding.

I'm here today on behalf of the ACSV, and we bring together leaders and learners who are passionate about student voice and agency, and partnerships. We strive for the continual sharing of knowledge and the development of leading practices towards an education system where student voice thrives. In preparing our submission, we have consulted with our community. Our discussions have highlighted that there are many disparities across schools across the state and across the country in addressing discrimination and bullying. Now, while some schools have implemented robust policies and proactive measures, others lag very far behind.

As we outlined in our submission, we advocate for the adoption of initiatives that have seen success elsewhere, such as peer support programs, on-site mental health practitioners and greater access to support to address the issue. I would like to emphasise that students, teachers and school staff should play a central role in crafting the solutions and, by integrating their perspectives into decision-making and promoting these initiatives, schools can be safe and empowering environments. I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to appear today and hope I can answer any of your questions.

CHAIR - Thank you. Just in front of you there, Mitchell, you've got a statutory declaration that we'll just ask you to put on the record as well, please.

Mr MITCHELL SPRAGUE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR STUDENT VOICE, WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

CHAIR - Thank you very much. I just want to recognise, too, that as a committee, during these hearings we understand that we may discuss highly sensitive matters that have deeply impacted the lives of Tasmanians, and that this may trigger for individuals listening to or participating in these proceedings. I'd encourage anyone impacted by the content matter during this hearing to contact services and support such as Lifeline Tasmania on 1800 984 434, Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800 or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

Thank you very much for presenting to our committee today. I'm going to go to my fellow committee members to see if there are some questions.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you very much for coming along to present to us today and your submission. Can I just perhaps get you to expand on some of the great examples that you've provided in your submission of where things are being done very well, and what makes those particularly successful programs?

Mr SPRAGUE - The one that stood out to me the most was the peer support programs. I know we heard from, I think the example I put there was a school in WA, but we also heard from some up in Queensland who had some really robust programs and I think the key element was that they were student-led. It wasn't this top-down decision that's come through, it was students saying we need greater help, we need greater support, talking with our mates is going to be more comfortable peer to peer rather than peer to teacher. Having the students take that initiative and lead the conversation and the discussion, that example really stood out as something that in those anecdotal conversations helped to address many of the issues they were facing.

Ms JOHNSTON - Does that mean that each particular program for each school is bespoke because it's student-led in terms of what the needs of that student cohort might be? Is there a sort of overarching framework which guides student students in developing that particular program for that school?

Mr SPRAGUE - Based on the discussions we had, I didn't get the impression that there was an overarching framework, but I think in terms of a solution that may work, there is potential for that which may be useful. Have some sort of guiding principles that step out what a program could look like, some sort of a framework that's crafted in collaboration with

students and teachers and school staff, and then you can give that to them and allow them to shape it into their own program and go from there.

Mr WILLIE - Can you tell us a bit about your organisation and your footprint in Tasmania and how you went about consulting to get that feedback from different schools and what they're doing?

Mr SPRAGUE - I will admit it is a tiny little footprint in Tasmania because we're very new. We only started up last year. We're trying our hardest to get kicking, but in terms of our organisation, we have a group of 50 members at the moment across the country and five of those come from Tasmania, so when we consulted we put the call out and we heard back from a few of our members in Tasmania, but mainly from other states and territories, just because that's where our members are. We also put the call out to our broader community and that makes up about 750 folks in schools mainly; we mainly reach educators, and teacher educators are our second bases that we speak to.

Mr WILLIE - Do you get involved with school councils and things like that, student representative bodies?

Mr SPRAGUE - We try to. It's just very hard to get into schools, particularly when you're new and no-one really knows what you're doing. We're trying, but for this specific submission the information has come mainly from our members who have referred us to these programs.

Mr WILLIE - Thank you for the clarification.

Mr BAYLEY - You've tabled here in your submission some great examples of various programs that are around the place. You haven't really articulated anything in the submission here about some of the challenges and problems in Tasmania in particular, which is what we're looking into. It's fair to say you're sort of largely focused on these solutions that you've seen work in other jurisdictions. Are you aware of what of these are in action here in the state? Are you aware of any of these or whether these programs are being implemented here?

Mr SPRAGUE - I believe from our conversations that there were peer support programs in a school. I don't remember off the top of my head which school it was. I've also listed mental health practitioners in schools, from my recollection. I don't recall discussing that being implemented in Tasmania but it is implemented in Victoria.

Mr FAIRS - Mitch, you mentioned the peer program that you highlighted before. Is that a possibility for a framework that can be duplicated in other schools across Tasmania, for example, implemented here in Tasmania?

Mr SPRAGUE - I think there definitely is potential for that. I know for that school over in Western Australia, it worked quite well for them, and the folks up in Queensland. I think there are definitely some learnings that can be taken from that and looking at the process and what has worked. I think you would need to speak to the schools. I can't speak to the effectiveness of the program in that specific school, but I'm sure they could provide some guidance as to whether it has worked. That may, hopefully, inform what happens in schools in Tassie.

PUBLIC

Mr FAIRS - Okay, so the Australian Council for Student Voice doesn't speak for students? Is that what you're saying there?

Mr SPRAGUE - I'm saying I don't speak for that specific school. I haven't had a chat with them. I've just been pointed in their direction and thought to share it with you.

Mr FAIRS - Yes. Thank you.

CHAIR - Mr Shelton, did you have anything you wanted to ask?

Mr SHELTON - No.

CHAIR - I wanted to ask you, of those five members that you have in Tasmania, where are they located? In regional areas or city areas?

Mr SPRAGUE - Off the top of my head, I don't have that information, but I can get back to you.

CHAIR - That would be good to understand. The other question I have is about the initiative that you describe in your submission about inclusive decision making and getting students as part of decision-making processes in schools. Could you elaborate on that a little from that example you provided, and how that practically works in a school community? Some examples of that.

Mr SPRAGUE - The example that comes to mind for me, because I've come from Victoria, is students being on school councils in Victoria. They're on the governing bodies there. In terms of being involved in decision making, there are aspects all throughout the school where students can be engaged and involved, from making decisions in the classroom about what they're going to be learning and how they're going to be learning it, through to school-wide decisions being on council. Even if it's a consultative mechanism some schools have set up - their student leadership team, their SRC - that body, whatever you want to call it - the principal or the leader in the school coming in and talking with the students, taking their feedback and actioning it, rather than just listening and not doing anything with it.

CHAIR - There's another question I wanted to ask before I hand over to others. Obviously you've felt the need to establish this association and you're passionate about improving not only the school environment, but learning experiences for students and teachers alike across our education systems across the country. You've talked a little bit about the importance of taking action on bullying, but do you have specific examples that have led to your establishing this association? Or things or experiences that you can draw on that would be useful for the committee to understand, around your experiences?

Mr SPRAGUE - In terms of bullying specifically, not really. We started out of the need for greater connection around student voice and sharing knowledge. For example, we had a conference in 2019 that happened and then it didn't really go anywhere. All that knowledge sort of sat there, so we set up this organisation to share that knowledge and to put our resources and communications into and all that. In terms of bullying, unfortunately, I don't have any specific examples that led to our set-up.

CHAIR - Okay, thank you, Mitchell.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you, Chair. You talked about the importance of student voices in decision making. This committee is looking into, obviously, discrimination and bullying within Tasmanian schools. How important is it to have that student voice in the decision making and the development of policies and programs relating to discrimination and bullying? I'm thinking around our legislation, in particular, we have a number of attributes that you can be discriminated against - LGBTQI+ status, age, race, disability, all those kinds of things. How important is to have that student voice in the decision-making forums when it comes to policies in schools?

Mr SPRAGUE - I would say it's absolutely essential. That's probably a predictable answer from myself, but it really just enables them to have greater agency over the solution. If you're setting this policy that students haven't had a chance to shape and have feedback on, it's not going to feel like something that they own. I believe, in terms of addressing this issue, it's essential to have that ownership over the solution, so they can see that it's something that their peers want in building that.

Ms JOHNSTON - And, by extension, their lived experience, obviously, would inform. That's another important reason.

Mr SPRAGUE - Absolutely.

CHAIR - Mr Bayley?

Mr BAYLEY - A further question on that line is, in your experience, is there good take-up from students in wanting to engage in those decisions? I know schools are complex places. Students and young people are sometimes intimidated in that space and possibly, particularly the cohort of people we're talking about and interested in in this context, you know, people being bullied or discriminated against. They have many good reasons not to step up and engage. How do you overcome that? How do you give voice to those people that need to have voice and agency in this really complicated, mentally challenging and, in some ways, quite debilitating space?

Mr SPRAGUE - I think it is definitely a challenge. I know if I think back to my experience being a year 10 student, if I had someone come down and engage with me about a solution to bullying, I think I would tell them to find their way out of the room. In terms of giving voice to the people you want to hear from, the people - the students - who are experiencing this bullying and this discrimination, I think meeting them where they're at is probably what I have found to be the best solution. Not wanting them to come to you, but going into their classrooms, and even spaces beyond schools where they do hang out and where they engage. Be that at the shops or be that online, meeting them where they're at will give you greater exposure. Then I think it's just up to time. You know, engaging with them once-off isn't going to be as successful as engaging with them over time to craft that solution.

Mr BAYLEY - That works when it comes to consultation or, you know, informing them of programs or opportunities and so forth. I guess I'm hearing you advocate for sort of formal structures within the school system that brings people in to assist with making decisions, brings students in to help assist with making decisions. I'm just interested in your experience of that and any challenges or opportunities that presents.

PUBLIC

Mr SPRAGUE - I believe formal structures are always going to present a challenge. There do need to be informal structures as well that do engage with them. What was the rest of your question?

Mr BAYLEY - I guess I'm trying to get to the point of making decisions, and the school making decisions that affect students. That's a formal process that can't be done in the town square or skate park or anything. It's sort of a formal process, whether it's SRC - the challenge I would anticipate is, how do you get this quite vulnerable cohort of students engaged in that kind of process? How do you harness their voice?

Mr SPRAGUE - I would then challenge you back on that. Does it have to be a formal process? I know these school councils have hundreds of decisions to make that do have to be formal, but in terms of engaging with students, it doesn't have to be in a boardroom like this and engaging with them.

Mr BAYLEY - Fair enough. I accept that.

CHAIR - Thank you. Are there any other questions from the committee members? Mr Fairs? Mr Shelton? No? Okay. I think that concludes our hearing with you today, Mitchell.

Mr SPRAGUE - No worries. Thank you for having me.

CHAIR - Thank you very much for presenting. Good luck with the work that you're doing and in garnering additional membership and support for the work that you're trying to do across education across the country. It's been great to meet you. I just want you to know that what you've said here today is protected by parliamentary privilege and that once you leave this table, you will need to be aware that privilege does not attach to comments that you make to anyone, including the media, even if you're just repeating what you've said to us here with parliamentary privilege. Do you have a good understanding of that?

Mr SPRAGUE - All clear, yes. Thank you.

CHAIR - Good on you. Thank you very much and all the very best.

The witness withdrew.

The Committee adjourned at 1.50 p.m.