

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Tuesday, 25 August 2020

*(via videoconference)*

#### MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallenge



**WITNESSES**

Mr James Merlino, MP, Deputy Premier and Minister for the Coordination of Education and Training:  
COVID-19,

Ms Jenny Atta, Secretary,

Mr David Howes, Deputy Secretary, Schools and Regional Services,

Mr Anthony Bates, PSM, Associate Secretary and Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services,

Mr Chris Keating, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority,

Ms Lee Watts, Assistant Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills, and

Ms Susan McDonald, Acting Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education, Department of Education and Training;

Mr John Batho, Acting Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria; and

Ms Elly Patira, Executive Director, Aboriginal Affairs Policy, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting, and we pay our respects to them; their culture; their elders past, present and future; and elders from other communities who may in some way be joining us today.

Welcome to the second series of public hearings—the second week of this series—for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We ask that you note that members are attending remotely from home and from their electorate offices and that members are not required to wear a face covering if they are working by themselves in an office under the stay-at-home directions, 6 August, part 2, section 7(i). We also ask that you note that all evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee’s website as soon as possible.

Welcome, the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education. We invite you to make a brief opening statement of no more than 8 minutes. We ask that for the Hansard record you state your name, your position and your organisation represented, and this will be followed by questions from our committee members. Thank you, Deputy Premier.

**Visual presentation.**

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you very much, Chair, and good morning, everyone. Can I also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to all elders past, present and emerging.

Thank you to the committee for an opportunity to speak again and answer questions on our response to COVID-19 in the education portfolio. First I want to pay tribute to our educators, support staff and leadership teams across the education sector for their dedication and commitment to students and their families. Victoria is facing the greatest health challenge in over 100 years and an economic challenge not seen since the 1930s. Throughout all of this they have provided care and support to children, young people and families as well as providing training options for those who have lost their jobs.

In the second slide, in everything we have done we have followed the Chief Health Officer's expert advice. None of these decisions—and you can see on the screen a number of them—have been taken lightly. We have sought to minimise the impact on our students and their families throughout. We kept schools open for as long as we could and made sure vulnerable students got the support that they needed. Deciding to move back to remote and flexible learning was tough but necessary. The advice on schools and early childhood education has not changed. These tough decisions were made not because these places were unsafe but due to the need to stop the movement of more than 1 million students and their families across the state. However, even as we move to tougher restrictions, we have done everything we could to keep on-site schooling for vulnerable children and those with a disability.

In terms of the next slide, we recognise the great impact this global pandemic is having on the wellbeing of children and young people. We are providing \$28.5 million to ensure students get more mental health support, and to support the mental health and wellbeing of our teachers we have tailored the existing \$51 million employee wellbeing and operational policy reforms to the current COVID-19 situation.

It has also been a particularly challenging time for students with a disability and their families. We have ensured that more students with a disability can access the onsite education that they need, and I want to pay particular respect to and acknowledge the fantastic work of our specialist school teachers, who have shown great innovation and dedication in supporting their students.

In terms of VCE, every single VCE student will be individually assessed and any adverse impacts of COVID-19 will be reflected in their ATAR ranking. We will look at school closures, long absences and increases in family responsibilities. We will consider the mental health and wellbeing of students. Students will know their final scores and their ATAR ranking will be a fair reflection of the year. We are working closely with the Department of Health and Human Services to ensure all VCE exams and assessments can take place safely, with hygiene controls based on the Victorian Chief Health Officer's advice.

Working with the profession, we put our experience of remote and flexible learning to good use in this term, term 3. Thanks to this work, students, educators and families are feeling more confident about remote learning from home. We are seeing innovative use of technology to plan lessons and engage students in their learning. Frankston Special Developmental School, for example, has made 50 videos this year to support students learning from home through the department's FUSE portal. It is thanks to this hard work that we have been able to better support students with a disability and their families. We have worked to ensure that no student is left behind.

For those that are on site, students and staff are adhering to safety requirements by wearing face coverings, using hand sanitiser and planning their activities in COVID-safe ways. Thanks to an up to \$45 million investment in enhanced cleaning in government schools, we are making sure high-touch points are disinfected throughout the day. We are giving schools the personal protective equipment they need, with hand sanitiser, gloves, gowns, goggles and masks, including almost 3 million free re-usable masks. Where schools and early childhood providers are impacted by a positive case, a dedicated team is working closely with these communities to keep them informed.

In moving to stage 4 restrictions, probably the most difficult decision was remote and flexible learning for our youngest learners in early childhood education. As with schools, this is not because services are unsafe, but we simply could not have so many families moving around the community. We have ensured that access to early childhood services is maintained for vulnerable children and for permitted workers. We have worked hard to protect the viability of the sector and keep kinder teachers and educators employed, and I note the contribution of the commonwealth government to this end as well. We are investing up to \$45 million in addition to our existing kindergarten subsidies and payments to keep services open and workers employed beyond the present restrictions. This includes funding free sessional kinder for term 3. We have boosted school readiness funding to help the sector support learning from home, with almost 96 per cent of funded kinder services providing this. We are supporting the health and safety of early childhood teachers and educators. Services unable to source infra-red thermometers and masks are being provided with supplies. Additional funding is available for services required to undertake an infectious clean as a result of a confirmed case of coronavirus. This sector has a bright future, and it will be playing a strong role in our recovery from this pandemic in shaping the education of our young children and setting them up for the future. Even through this pandemic we have continued rolling out our \$5 billion investment to deliver universal three-year-old kinder.

Our higher education and skills sector is training the workers our state needs to respond to the pandemic. As with our schools, the sector is showing great innovation in responding to remote learning. For example, GOTAFE Shepparton has moved 90 per cent of its courses to remote delivery. TAFEs have supported students by providing laptops and hard-copy materials where possible and conducting welfare checks on disadvantaged and international students. TAFEs are also playing a key role in helping Victorians who have lost their jobs gain new skills. We have partnered with Bendigo Kangan Institute to rapidly offer 25 free online courses that jobseekers can complete in a day. These short courses were selected to meet immediate jobs and skills needs in response to the pandemic. This includes cleaning and sanitation, health, logistics and call centre operations.

For those apprentices who have lost their job as a result of the pandemic, Victoria has established the retrenched apprentices and trainees program. This matches unemployed apprentices and trainees to job vacancies and helps them stay connected to training while they look for work. We are also supporting universities, with \$350 million for capital works and to support research partnerships.

As we look to the future, our higher education and training sector is playing a vital role skilling up workers and connecting them with new opportunities that will contribute to our state's recovery. Chair, I cannot speak highly enough of our teachers, trainers, educators, leaders and support staff, and I know that all Victorians are grateful for their incredible work. This year has been extremely challenging, and we have not always got it right, but we have learned along the way and we are all doing our best to support Victorian students and give them the future they deserve. Thank you, Chair. I am very happy to answer the committee's questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. I will hand to the Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you for your attendance this morning, Minister. Deputy Premier, do you agree with the Premier's statements yesterday where he said there is a zero chance of lifting restrictions if the Parliament does not agree to a 12-month extension of the state of emergency?

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, the extension of the state of emergency is required, Mr Riordan. Unlike other states and territories, where their emergency arrangements can be extended without limit, we need to ensure that there is an extension to the state of emergency in Victoria. Without a vaccine this pandemic is far from over. These legislative changes will mean we continue to have the right protections in place until it is. From face coverings to density limits, these measures are fundamentally about keeping every Victorian safe. Some of the key public health protections required to manage this pandemic are only available when a state of emergency has been declared under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Let us not read the Premier's statement. I just asked whether you agree whether they could be lifted. I will put it another way: if the government does not get its 12-month extension, does that mean that students, for example, will not be going back to school?

**Mr MERLINO:** Without an extension of the state of emergency, Mr Riordan, we will not be able to ensure the delivery of the decisions of the Chief Health Officer, and that goes from the wearing of face coverings, requiring workplaces to have a COVID-safe—

**Mr RIORDAN:** It was just a question on schools.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, could you allow the Deputy Premier to answer the question, please.

**Mr MERLINO:** Mandatory face coverings, workplaces having a COVID-safe plan, current and past restrictions—they cannot be enforced; they cannot be delivered unless there is a state of emergency, Mr Riordan.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. But you did not answer the question. The question was: if you do not get your extension to the state of emergency, will students not be able to go back to school?

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, that is a ridiculous question.

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, it is not.

**Mr MERLINO:** Students will return back to face-to-face teaching, and from my perspective—I am sure from every member of this committee—the sooner that happens, the better. That will be done based on the

advice of the Chief Health Officer, but you simply cannot have a workplace without a COVID-safe plan unless you have a state of emergency in which that can be delivered. Now, every other state and territory has those emergency arrangements, and they can be extended indefinitely without any sort of limitation. Under our Act we are limited to a six-month period. We are required to go back to Parliament and get an extension of the state of emergency so those normal arrangements and the ability to implement the decisions of the Chief Health Officer can be delivered, Mr Riordan.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. So, Minister, at the moment there is still a lot of confusion in the community about who can access schools—for essential workers and so on. One of the guidelines that your principals are using is the school operations guidelines.

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Why are they secret and not available to the public?

**Mr MERLINO:** The ops guides are delivered by the Department of Education and Training to all of our schools, Mr Riordan.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes, so why are those guidelines that determine who the department considers essential and not essential—why are they not public documents? Why are they, as quoted by the department, ‘not for public dissemination’?

**Mr MERLINO:** This is distributed to every one of our 1500 government schools. These are ops guides for our schools. I do not understand the point of the question. That is hardly secret, Mr Riordan.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Well, it is a secret, because I have got parents who have tried and I have tried myself to find out why a parent might be given a letter from NDIS that they are an essential worker but the school determines that they do not believe they are an essential worker despite the fact they have letterhead, and the school quotes the school operations guidelines, which they then will not provide to the parents because they are not for public dissemination. So why are the rules that schools operate under so secret?

**Mr MERLINO:** They are not, Mr Riordan. The rules are really clear. If you are a permitted worker and there is no-one else at home that can take care of your school-aged child, then that child is able to learn remotely on site at the school. It is very clear.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So an essential worker that is home by themselves and has to work from home because their NDIS office is closed must also try and conduct their very important work with their children at home with them?

**Mr MERLINO:** So the way it works, Mr Riordan, is that if you are permitted worker and there is no-one else at home that can take care of your child, then that child is able to learn on site at school.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So you are quite clear that if you are a person at home by yourself, a worker, an essential worker with the NDIS who has a letter clearly outlining they you should have access to school, they should have access to school.

**Mr MERLINO:** If you are a permitted worker. I might throw over to Deputy Secretary David Howes to explain how this works at a school level, but if you are a permitted worker and you cannot provide care for your child at home, then that child is able to learn on site at school. But I might throw it to—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Sorry, Deputy Premier, just to clarify that. If you are a single parent at home, a worker in an essential job with the NDIS, for example, and you have to work at home because your office is now closed and you are in a home by yourself with your two young primary school children, do you have access to send your children to a school?

**Mr MERLINO:** If you are a permitted worker that is working outside of your home and there is no-one else to take care—

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, you are working at your home because your office is closed.

**Mr MERLINO:** I might ask Mr Howes to explain further the ops guides and the advice given to schools for children of permitted workers.

**Mr HOWES:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. I will quote from the operations guide for the committee:

On-site supervision is available for students in the following categories, based on revised criteria:

- children whose parents and carers are permitted workers who cannot work from home and where no other arrangements can be made.
  - o Where there are two parents/carers, both must be permitted workers, working outside the home in order for their children to be eligible for on-site provision.
  - o For single parents/carers, the permitted worker must be working outside the home in order for their children to be eligible for on-site provision.
- vulnerable children, including:
  - o children in out-of-home care
  - o children deemed vulnerable by a government agency, funded family or family violence service, and is assessed as requiring education and care outside the family home;
  - o children identified by a school as vulnerable (including via referral from a government agency, or funded family or family violence service, homeless or youth justice service or mental health or other health service);
  - o children with a disability and the family is experiencing severe stress.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thank you. My next question is to Secretary Atta. Secretary, to date according to information posted on the DET website, 'Closures, remote learning and relocations', over 240 schools have been closed since early July for a COVID-related matter while deep cleaning and contact tracing has taken place. Once a matter is detected, who does the principal speak to?

**Ms ATTA:** Thanks, Mr Riordan. Once it is clear that there is a positive case or the principal understands that a student or staff member or other person who has been on site is a positive case, they would notify the Department of Health and Human Services. They would also talk to the Department of Education and Training. If there was any delay in DHHS being able to verify that positive case, then the Department of Education and Training takes a very precautionary approach and we will instruct that school to close for a 24-hour period initially to await the DHHS work to verify the positive case and to provide further advice and instruction to the school.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Secretary, how long would a school expect to wait to hear from DHHS? So presumably if a parent does not notify the school, which may be the case, how long would a school expect to wait to hear from DHHS that there was a positive case at their school?

**Ms ATTA:** Mr Riordan, DHHS and the contact tracing outbreak management staff there, the teams there, will contact a school as soon as possible once they have verification of a positive case. So there is no target time period. It is as soon as they have verification they will be in touch with that school. If the principal or other staff at the school are concerned or have information—and sometimes they will get that first, that there is a positive case—they will get in touch with DHHS. They are also asked to talk with the Department of Education and Training, and as I said, we have got that capacity to take that precautionary step to minimise any risk and close that school awaiting verification.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So the fact that DHHS get positive results before the patient or client does, does it concern you that there is not a protocol in place whereby DHHS instantly notify the school? There are certainly many cases, and in my own home town here in Colac, where schools had students in there for days before DHHS contacted them. Do you think there could be improvement in this area? Do you think that a school waiting four or five days before DHHS contact them is not good enough?

**Ms ATTA:** So clearly the intent is to have that advice to the school and start to enact the necessary procedures as soon as possible. In some cases obviously the individual or the family will have that result back from laboratory testing before the Department of Health and Human Services has that advice—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt you there, Secretary, but the member's time has expired, and I will hand the call to Mr Gary Maas, MP.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Deputy Premier, and thank you to you and to your team for your presentation this morning and for your appearance before the committee today. Deputy Premier, if I could just take you to the topic of VCE. We all know that 2020 has been particularly tough on our year 12 students, and I would like to focus on that for the minute. Would you be able to explain how the changes to the VCE end-of-year assessment, as announced by the government on 7 August, will impact on the ATAR ranking and assist Victorian year 12 students?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Mr Maas, and I am very pleased to provide the committee with information about this really significant announcement. I think over the course of 2020 this may prove to be the most significant reform in terms of our response to the challenges presented by the pandemic for our Victorian students. That is saying something in particular, as we have been a whole system that has moved to remote learning, back to face-to-face and then back again to remote learning. But for Victorian students, and especially our students in their final years of school as well as their parents, carers, families and teachers, it has been a year unlike any other. All Victorian kids are doing it tough to different degrees, but for students who have been building towards their year 12 for so long, being knocked sideways by the pandemic was beyond anyone's prediction or control. This is their last year of school, and it is not going to plan. So over the year I have been listening carefully to voices of VCE and VCAL students and their families, their teachers and their schools about the adverse effects the pandemic was having on their learning and their studies.

Our senior students are resilient and resourceful, but as the year has progressed, and particularly since we have been forced to switch back to remote learning again, it has become very apparent that something must be done to address the growing and varying impact that coronavirus has had on senior secondary and in particular our year 12 cohort. That is why we announced that every Victorian student will be individually assessed and any adverse impacts of coronavirus will be reflected in ATAR rankings as part of a wideranging process to ensure fair and accurate results in this unprecedented year of school. And this is quite different to what usually happens. Every year there is a process of special consideration. If a year 12 student has had a car accident on their way to an exam or if they have been laid up at home for a long period of time through an illness, there is this individual special consideration. What we are doing is expanding that across the whole cohort of VCE students. Our hope is that this will take a huge mental load off students and their families as we head towards exams, and certainly the feedback we have received since the announcement suggests that this has hit the mark. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority will introduce a consideration of education disadvantage process to calculate VCE scores taking into account disruptions to learning caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The new process will mean the only thing affected students need to focus on is their exams and doing their best. These reforms will reach every year 12 VCE student in the state, ensuring that their experiences of the class of 2020 are factored into their results.

The VCAA will consider a range of data alongside exam results, including a student's expected achievement levels before the impact of coronavirus, school assessments completed prior to remote and flexible learning, the general achievement test and a range of statistical analyses to calculate the final results. This may include assessing the individual impact of coronavirus on each student—including school closures, direct impacts on the health of a student, students dealing with substantial extra family responsibilities, ongoing issues with remote learning and mental health challenges. This will then be used to calculate a student's final VCE results and ATAR rank, ensuring that our kids' final results take into account not only their performance in an exam but their courage and commitment in the face of huge adversity. This adds to the steps already taken by the VCAA, such as reducing the content for unit 4, rescheduling the GAT and extending term 4 for VCE students, with exams to be held a bit later in the year than they would have been normally. The ATARs received by Victorian students will be equivalent to those received by students in other states. Thanks, Mr Maas.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. You have spoken a bit about what the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority will be taking into account. I am just hoping you will be able to take us into a bit more detail about what it will be considering when it looks at the impact that the pandemic has had on each individual year 12 student and if you would be able to describe for us how this would actually work in practice.

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. Thanks, Mr Maas. So the individual assessment will take into account factors such as the number and the duration of any school closures, circumstances such as coronavirus isolation and the impact of remote learning, and it is important to note that every student will still achieve a scored result for each exam that they sit. Those results will then be subject to a process of standardisation, which is normal.

The results this year will also be the subject of the new consideration of educational disadvantage to calculate those VCE scores, and the final result we will receive for each of those students and their final ATAR will be the outcome of all of that process. Schools will be asked to provide information about the impact of school closures where this has occurred. Schools will also be able to provide information about extended periods of absence experienced by a particular student as a result of the pandemic and a range of other factors such as ongoing issues while remote learning—for example, the unavailability of a suitable device or a place to study. It is unprecedented that consideration of disadvantage be applied to so many students, but we are in unprecedented time.

And to go to your question, Mr Maas, I think it is best if I give you a practical example of how this will work. So let us take student X, whose school was closed twice for a week each time. In addition she was required to self-isolate for another 14 days when her father tested positive for coronavirus. Her school observed that during the period of remote and flexible learning she continued to submit her work but also discussed dropping out a number of times because she felt she had missed out on so much class time. The staff supported and encouraged her to persevere, because in both her English and her mathematics classes she was ranked the second-top student and had been expected to achieve close to straight As in her exams. Her school-based assessment completed in term 1—so this is before the remote learning—placed her in the top three students for maths, but in a school-based assessment task she completed in term 3 she had slipped to the middle of the class and received only a C for that assessment. The school expected that without the specific impact on this student of the COVID-19 pandemic her rank in the class would have been second and she would have achieved an A result.

This information was then provided to the VCAA. She sat her exams and she achieved a low B for maths, which was the third-top score achieved in her class. When her exam result was analysed together with the information provided by the school, including her initial and expected results, and moderated across all students and all schools, her score was adjusted to a low A. So that gives you a real-life example, and there will be many, many examples very similar to this that schools will identify and the VCAA will assess that show you how this will work. That is probably the best way that I could answer that question, Mr Maas.

**Mr MAAS:** Thanks for that very clear and practical example, Deputy Premier. Integrity, of course, is also important. What measures are in place to ensure the integrity of the system?

**Mr MERLINO:** That is a good question, Mr Maas. It is important to note that schools and teachers have always made assessments of student work as part of the VCE process. They are always checked and moderated using a range of methodologies, including audits. The VCAA will use a range of statistical methodologies to identify any anomalies in information provided by teachers or schools that would suggest any bias against or favouritism towards particular students. This system of assessment within the VCE has regularly been shown to have the highest level of integrity through the entire process of exam preparation to exam security and the processing of results. Students and their families and carers can have the utmost confidence that the new process will be managed with the same high level of integrity. We have always had those systems of integrity in place. With this additional information—and this is a huge task, and we are going to make sure that our year 12 teachers have the time to do this—the fact that we are covering every student across every school in every corner of the state means that we will be able to moderate and audit to make sure that there are no anomalies in the assessments that the school makes.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. And I think finally from me: what factors will be considered when calculating the consideration of educational disadvantage?

**Mr MERLINO:** The consideration of educational disadvantage process when calculating VCE scores will require schools to provide the VCAA with additional information on students and school circumstances to calculate their study scores. This will include information about the circumstances and impact of the disruption on students as well as additional data, such as estimated assessment scores. To ensure the fairness of final results the VCAA will consider all available information, including the general achievement test and appropriate comparisons of performance across all assessments and schools. So based on this analysis, where disadvantage has been identified it will be factored into students' final scores, which will then contribute to the study score calculation. This approach will ensure that Victorian students are not disadvantaged in comparison to international students in the calculation of their individual ATAR. Thank you.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Maas, and I will hand the call to Mr Sam Hibbins MP.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister and secretaries, for appearing before the inquiry today. You will remember from our previous hearing I asked about the 50 000-odd laptops and devices that have been loaned to students to enable them to learn from home and just what would actually happen to those devices after the pandemic was over and whether those disadvantaged students would be able to keep those devices. Now, in answer to a question on notice you responded saying:

Additional devices provided by the Department of Education and Training to schools to assist in supporting loans during this period will remain within the school system but may be reallocated within the system if required.

Can you just provide some clarity on just what actually that means?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Mr Hibbins. This is a really important question that you asked at the last hearing and is something that is front of mind for me. I want to make sure that for students that have been supported—

And we are now up to 71 000 computers and devices and 28 000 devices to provide internet access, so it has been quite significant. It has been a combination of direct support from devices held within the department to devices at a particular school loaned out to students in other schools. It has been an extraordinary effort of the education system as a whole.

What we have advised our schools and our students and families with these devices is that throughout the course of this year—so right through this term and term 4—students will retain those devices. I am giving a lot of thought, Mr Hibbins, as to what should be the permanent solution to ensure those kids do not go backwards. I am not making any announcements today, but it is an important question that you asked, and I want to make sure that those students do not lose access to the technology that has supported them so well through the course of remote learning and during this pandemic. I will have more to say probably a bit later in the year.

I am just working out the how, if you like. Do we provide those devices back to their original schools and provide new devices to those children? I am just working through those issues, but we have got some time to resolve this. Those families and those children will keep those devices right through to the end of the year, and I will provide some long-term certainty for those kids before we get to the end of the year.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Okay. Great. So plans have not been finalised?

**Mr MERLINO:** No. We are working on the options.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Can I ask then about the broader question and the fact that there were so many students out there without access to devices and internet regardless, prior to the pandemic anyway. It is good to hear that you are looking at making sure that those students that have been provided with devices now do not go backwards, but then looking forward to the future and ensuring that all students, once the pandemic is over, are still able to have access to the internet and devices at home. Can I ask: has there been any thinking to looking at the long term and making sure that there is not in the future ever tens of thousands of students out there without access to the internet or a computer or a device?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. Thanks, Mr Hibbins, for your question. It is a good example of some significant learning out of this pandemic. The way we dealt with this issue in terms of equity and access to technology previously—very early on in my time as Minister for Education we changed the policy in terms of devices. Every school in our state has a variety of ways that they deal with technology. For example, you might have one school that has a ‘bring your own device to school’ policy. You might have another school where they use their own budget to provide students with devices that are either class sets or devices that kids can take home. So every school approaches technology differently. But we made a change a few years ago now where we made it clear that it must be explicit in the policy of every school that they must have a hardship policy—that no children should be disadvantaged at school if a parent is not able to purchase a BYO device, for example. So we made sure that it was universal that every school must have a hardship policy. But you are right to ask the question about—well, this pandemic has shown that there are significant numbers of children and families who are lacking technology at home, and that is exactly why we are working on a long-term solution to this.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Right, thanks, Minister. Obviously we have heard evidence at our previous hearings that just the provision of a laptop has meant that some students who previously refused school are actually attending school. But there is also the flip side: there are some students that have actually, because of the challenges of remote learning, fallen behind. I am just wondering what thought has been given to actually supporting those students who have fallen behind during the pandemic to catch up in their learning so it is not a permanent loss to their education?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Hibbins. This is something that is front of mind for us. As you say and as I have mentioned to the committee earlier, there are students who have thrived under remote and flexible learning and there are students that have struggled immensely, whether that is struggling with their mental health or struggling academically. Schools are doing a number of things now, so if I could talk about the things that we are doing in our schools now, what we have got planned for term 4 and for 2021, and it is both, Mr Hibbins, academic intervention as well as wellbeing intervention.

Schools are currently able to assess student learning progress through a range of online assessments, and schools have been provided with advice on the use of online assessments by the department for use in both terms 2 and 3. Schools have been supported to draw on a range of different data—so formative assessments, attendance, teacher observations—to understand the impact of COVID-19 on student achievement, to identify students who may need additional supports and then to prioritise targeted strategies to students most in need. Teachers are being encouraged to work with their school improvement staff such as learning specialists, literacy and numeracy leaders and improvement teachers to determine the strategies most appropriate for individual students. To help disadvantaged students who need extra help to catch up the department is also providing schools with further advice on effective interventions. And this will be, I think, Mr Hibbins, a feature not only for term 4 as we return to face-to-face teaching but particularly in 2021. It may include small group tutoring in which students whose learning is at a similar level work in groups of four or five with a trained tutor for periods of 30 to 40 minutes, three times a week over a term—

**Mr HIBBINS:** And will there be extra funding to support that advice?

**Mr MERLINO:** There has been significant funding provided to our schools, Mr Hibbins, over the last several years. As you would know, \$13 billion additional over the last five or six years. We have also got the commitment from the Andrews government as part of the bilateral schools funding agreement to get to 75 per cent of the SRS over the next 10 years, so—

**Mr HIBBINS:** We will be the second-last state to do that, unfortunately, out of all the states—

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, this is a massive—to put it in some perspective, between 2019 and 2023 this commitment by the state government to get to 75 per cent of the SRS will mean an additional \$7 billion.

**Mr HIBBINS:** I was not here to debate the school funding, but we are coming off a very low base as the lowest rate of funding of any state in Australia for recurrent school funding. But I am sure we are not here to debate that right now. It is more if any extra funding is going to be provided to schools to support the catch-up learning of students.

**Mr MERLINO:** We have had a 37 per cent increase in funding since 2014–15. We have got a commitment, Mr Hibbins, of an additional \$7 billion as part of the funding agreement between 2019 and 2023. Equity funding—so this is needs-based funding—the biggest increase ever, a 70 per cent increase in needs-based funding, which is an investment of \$2.07 billion today. So we have invested a lot of money, and between now and 2023 there are going to be significant additional resources provided to schools, so schools will be using that additional funding to particularly focus on students who require that catch up.

So whether it is that small group tutoring, whether it is individual tutoring in which an individual student works with a teacher or aide on specific literacy and/or numeracy skills or, in secondary schools, literacy and numeracy across the curriculum programs, where individual students receive explicit support from subject teachers in developing their literacy and numeracy skills in the context of different subjects like history and physical education, there will be a lot of additional focus through the course of term 4 and 2021 to support students who require catch-up academically.

Importantly, Mr Hibbins, there is also significant additional funding to support students in terms of their mental health. As I mentioned in my presentation, we recently announced \$28.5 million to support students' mental health and wellbeing. We are going to increase the capacity of the Navigator program by a third—so a big increase to Navigator. This is about identifying and engaging with students at risk of disengaging, and this is particularly important because the students that are most impacted by COVID-19 have struggled to engage with school during this period of remote learning. By this additional funding to Navigator and additional funding to our LOOKOUT program, which is for students in out-of-home care, we are going to pick up those kids and re-engage them into education as we return to face-to-face teaching. We are also—

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry to cut you off there, Deputy Premier, but the member's time has expired. I will give the call to Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Deputy Premier.

**Mr MERLINO:** Good morning, Mr O'Brien.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** As Deputy Premier and a member of the Crisis Council of Cabinet, are you able to tell us which minister was actually in charge of the hotel quarantine program?

**Mr MERLINO:** Mr O'Brien, these matters have been canvassed in earlier PAEC hearings. I do not intend to add any more commentary to that. There is the—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** They have been canvassed, but they have not been answered. That is why I am asking you.

**Mr MERLINO:** There is the inquiry, Mr O'Brien, which is happening as we speak, and that is particularly important, so I do not intend to add any commentary to previous evidence provided to this committee or to the inquiry on matters relating to hotel quarantine.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Deputy Premier, there has not been any evidence presented to this inquiry about who was responsible. We do not need a \$3 million inquiry for a member of the Crisis Council of Cabinet to give us a simple answer: which minister was ultimately responsible for the hotel quarantine program? Can you just answer that? That has not been answered by any previous ministers in these hearings.

**Mr MERLINO:** Mr O'Brien, I am not going to provide any further commentary beyond what has already been provided to this committee. As has been presented to the inquiry, the response to hotel quarantine was a multiagency response. There is an inquiry. We should allow that inquiry to do its work and to make its findings and recommendations.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Can I move back to the Secretary. Secretary, can I just confirm: was it DHHS that took the lead with respect to notifying and then recommending schools be closed in the case of a case being detected at school?

**Ms ATTA:** Yes, Mr O'Brien. The department through me and the Deputy Secretary have delegated responsibility and authority to close the schools, but we do it on the advice from DHHS with regard to verification of a positive case who has been on site at the school. The one exception is where the school itself feels it does have information about a positive case and, as I said earlier, we take the precautionary step to close the school for at least 24 hours while we work with DHHS. Once they are able to verify, then they are authorising the continued closure of the school and the necessary steps in order for it to reopen again.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Are you able to give us an idea—there are 240 schools so far that have been closed—how many of those would have been where you took that step as DET ahead of DHHS getting involved?

**Ms ATTA:** I cannot tell you offhand. I can see if I can get that while the hearings are continuing.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** That would be great, but would it be a couple, half a dozen or hundreds?

**Ms ATTA:** It would be in the minority, Mr O'Brien. The majority of our school closures will have been authorised from the outset by DHHS.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. We have had a lot of feedback from schools that they were effectively left to their own devices; they had a lot of trouble getting answers out of DHHS and DET. Does that surprise you and do you accept that?

**Ms ATTA:** I think that the Department of Education and Training has completely prioritised trying to have up-to-date, current and accurate information available to our schools at all times. I think we certainly were aware of the frustrations of some schools probably earlier in July, when we were all seeing community transmissions start to increase. Of course that was having an impact on schools along with all other sectors of the community, and there were some delays that we started to see at that point in terms of the advice DHHS were able to get to the schools and slightly longer periods in some instances to be able to complete contact tracing et cetera.

We worked closely with DHHS throughout and by the end of July worked with them to support the establishment of a dedicated team within their contact tracing and outbreak management area. We have supported that team with education staff. We saw a complete turnaround of those time frames at that point, with that team providing direct communication to school leaders. We were able to have a case manager for each school where closure was required.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Was this around the end of July? Is that correct?

**Ms ATTA:** That is correct; that team was up and running at the end of July at DHHS.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Sorry, can I just move on perhaps. Minister, given these concerns and the fact that it took a month from the early cases of schools having to close, did you raise any of your concerns about DHHS contact tracing with respect to schools with Minister Mikakos?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr O'Brien, for your question. It is fair to say that whether it is DET talking to DHHS or conversations that I have with my colleagues, these are matters discussed every single day during this pandemic and as—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Did you have concerns though, Minister, that you raised then with Minister Mikakos that things were not working well enough?

**Mr MERLINO:** As Secretary Atta has outlined, if you go to the first period of the pandemic, throughout this process we have had really clear protocols about what DET is responsible for and what DHHS is responsible for in terms of contact tracing. So in the first few months you would have deep cleaning of a school conducted by the Victorian School Building Authority. At the same time DHHS would be conducting their contact tracing. Within three days the deep cleaning would be done—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay, I do not need full process—

**Mr MERLINO:** No, I need to answer—

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, if you are interested in the question, you will be interested in the answer. If you could allow the Deputy Premier to answer the question, please.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Excuse me, Chair, I have asked a question. The minister has now gone off on a totally different tangent. I am just trying to get him back to it, given the limited time.

**The CHAIR:** I think you will find the Deputy Premier is trying to answer your question if you will allow him to do so.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr O'Brien. So within that period of time DHHS would have conducted the contact tracing and the schools would reopen. As Secretary Atta has spoken about, as the case numbers increased, the time frame for that contact tracing expanded, and this was acknowledged by the Chief Health Officer on 7 July when he stated:

It does become more and more challenging the greater the number of cases that you have, to get all of those close contacts.

So this was happening not just in the context of schools, Mr O'Brien; this was right across the community, as we had those significant increases in numbers, the massive team at DHHS doing the contact tracing, the additional resources being put in from other departments, from other states and territories and from the commonwealth to get on top of the contact tracing—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Minister, you have answered the question now. Can I move on. Has there been any evidence of cross-contamination in schools via cleaners working across a number of different sites?

**Mr MERLINO:** I am just looking at my screen—whether Secretary Atta or Mr Keating would like to answer that question. The cleaning of our schools has been conducted through the VSBA, so in the first instance I might pass over to Mr Keating. Thank you.

**Mr KEATING:** We have had a small number of cleaners that have had identifying cases of COVID, but we have had no known cases of transmission in a school environment.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Thank you. Can I just ask about Al-Taqwa College, which has been closed I think for more than eight weeks now. Why is the contact tracing there taking so long to get that one under control and see what is happening?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Just give me one moment. Al-Taqwa—if you look at all of our schools, there are some outliers in terms of numbers. The outbreak at Al-Taqwa College has resulted in 208 cases, so it is very reflective of the community transmission in that part of Melbourne. I can take you through, Mr O'Brien, the response at Al-Taqwa. It is an independent school as you would know—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Is it in far and above any other school?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes, it is. In terms of the numbers you have got Al-Taqwa at 208, you have got Albanvale Primary School—who can help me, Jenny or David, in terms of the numbers there?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Rather than getting all this now, could we have on notice some of those figures for the schools, but also, Secretary, if we could, the number of secondary students who have tested positive as well as primary students at specialist or specialist developmental schools, talking about child care or kindergarten, if you have that information and then likewise the same data for teachers at all of the above. If that is available on notice, that would be welcome, if possible, please.

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. Thanks, Mr O'Brien. I am happy to take that on notice. For the most part across all of our schools it is one or two cases, deep clean, contact tracing. As I said, you had a couple of outliers, Al-Taqwa being one of those at 208. You have got Albanvale Primary School—there were 15 cases identified at that school—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Righto, so it is dramatically different; I understand that.

**Mr MERLINO:** Dramatically different. Most of the other schools, Mr O'Brien, are very, very small numbers—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Can I just quickly move on. I have only got a little bit of time left, Deputy Premier. When Melbourne and Mitchell shire went back to remote learning, schools got an extra five student-free days, so there was effectively a week for schools to prepare. When rural and regional went back to remote learning they got one student-free day. Why was there not more time given for rural and regional schools and teachers and principals to prepare for remote learning again?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr O'Brien, for that question. It is reflective of the learning of all of our schools, of the department, through the course of the pandemic. So if we take you back prior to that decision for Melbourne and Mitchell shire and those five pupil-free days, there was a likelihood of a movement to remote and flexible learning, but it was not a certainty, so we provided that time for schools to prepare for the possibility of moving to remote and flexible learning.

When we made the most recent decision in terms of stage 3 for rural and regional Victoria and providing that one day of pupil-free time to prepare it was on the back of significant learning across the whole of the education system—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** It wasn't really a fair comparison—

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry to cut you off there, Mr O'Brien, but your time has expired, and I will hand the call to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Deputy Premier, and to your officials for appearing today. Of course I cannot help but take the opportunity to thank the educators and ancillary staff and parents and students for their hard work this year. I am just going to take you back, perhaps, to some of the evidence you were providing to Mr Maas before and unpack a little bit more detail. I am interested in understanding how we will calculate the VCAA scores this year.

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes, thank you, Ms Richards. To calculate the scores the VCAA will consider a range of data provided by schools together with each student's exam results. So the data will include the ranked order of students prior to and following the impact of coronavirus. The ranking of students is something that teachers and schools do every single year. What we are asking them to do this year is rank them prior to COVID and post-COVID. The data will also include a student's indicative grades prior to and following the impact of coronavirus; all school-based assessments, including those completed prior to remote and flexible learning; the general achievement test; and a range of statistical analysis used to calculate the final results.

The information schools will be asked to consider will include the direct impact on the health and wellbeing of the student and/or their immediate family; long-term or multiple school closures and significant gaps in continuity of learning; ongoing issues while learning remotely—did they have internet connectivity issues, unavailability of a suitable device; students dealing with substantial extra family responsibilities, for example increased caring responsibilities for other siblings, so if you have a single parent or parents who are sick; ongoing mental health challenges; financial stress; family violence; a family member losing their job; or a student needing to extend their hours of employment or gain employment to support the family. So there is a range of both data and individual assessment of the circumstances of that student that will be taken into account and provided to the VCAA.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. So will students get their results this year?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes, come hell or high water. The critical thing for me and the critical thing for year 12 students and their parents and carers is that they want this year done. They want this year done so they can spend summer thinking about their next massive step in their life: further education, getting a job, travel—hopefully. So every decision we have made has been around: how can we do this and provide students with their certificate—their VCE or VCAL certificate—and if they are a VCE student their ATAR ranking, before the end of the year? So students will receive their results on 30 December and they will not be disadvantaged by the later-than-usual reporting of VCE results and the ATAR, and students will have access to offer rounds from universities across Australia. So year 12 students in Victoria will not be disadvantaged in any way. At the Education Council we agreed on a two-week window in which the ATAR will be provided to students; 30 December is within that two-week window, so Victorian kids will be just the same as any other student in any other part of the country. A student with an ATAR of 85 in Victoria is in exactly the same situation and opportunity as a student with an ATAR of 85 in New South Wales.

**Ms RICHARDS:** That is terrific news. What a relief. So what other changes have you introduced to support our senior secondary students during this extraordinary year?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Ms Richards. So all VCE and VCAL students have benefited from supports introduced in response to the specific challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This year all VCE studies have been adjusted in recognition of the disruption to learning as we all help slow the spread of coronavirus. I want to thank the team at the VCAA for the work that they have done in this space. The VCAA undertook a review of the unit 4 component of every study design with a focus on reducing school-based assessment tasks where possible to relieve some pressure on students and to acknowledge the move to remote and flexible learning arrangements.

A review of and a reasonable adjustment in content and assessment study, study by study, has ensured genuine relief for students while maintaining the integrity of the individual study design and the certificate. Early in the year we also rescheduled the GAT to October as well as adjusting the timing of VCE examinations to start in early November and to be completed by 2 December. This again goes to the goal of ensuring that students

receive their certificates by the end of the year. These changes to the timing provided more time for students and their teachers to complete their studies while ensuring results are delivered this year.

Our VCAL students have also benefited from the adjustments that we have made, supported by an extension of the school year for VCAL students. As is the case for VCE students, teachers have been asked to make decisions about their learning program based on their context and the cohort of students. This includes, for example, scaling down planned projects so that they remain achievable within the changed circumstances, planning to use the extended school year to complete learning and assessments.

More recently, under the stay-at-home directions, we have made sure that all our VCE and VCAL students are able to attend onsite at their school to complete essential assessments with appropriate health controls. This was a critical decision that we made to ensure that those assessments can be conducted in a safe way. Students and teachers have appreciated this adjustment, seeing this as a recognition of the challenging year for these students and our collective support for both our students and teachers. Together these responses give certainty to thousands of students whose studies have been interrupted by coronavirus. Thanks, Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. I would like to now perhaps take you to the other end of your responsibilities, to our youngest Victorians. Can you outline the approach that has been taken to early childhood education and care services during the pandemic and the support that has been provided by the Victorian government?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Ms Richards. As Minister for Education, the health, wellbeing and safety of Victoria's young children, students and school staff is my greatest responsibility. Our approach to early childhood education and care services during this pandemic has been guided every step of the way, as I said at our last hearing, by the advice of Victoria's Chief Health Officer and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee. We will continue to follow this advice so that we keep our early childhood services, our schools and our communities safe. The continued advice from Victoria's CHO and the AHPPC is that the early childhood education and care services are low-risk environments that are safe for staff and for children. This advice has not changed.

The decision to restrict access to early childhood education and care services in metropolitan Melbourne under stage 4 is not because they are unsafe. The decision to restrict access to early childhood education and care services was made significantly—again, similar to our decisions with school—to reduce the movement of children and their families across metropolitan Melbourne to help to slow the spread of coronavirus. Like schools, early childhood education and care services in metropolitan Melbourne are currently restricted to children of permitted workers and vulnerable children. Access to early childhood services is critical to enable workers in permitted industries to be able to continue performing these vital roles for our community.

But there are some differences between accessing early childhood and accessing schools. For early childhood, at least one adult in the household is required to be an employee in a permitted industry, either working onsite or from home with no alternative care or supervision available. To access schools and outside-school-hours care, both adults in the household must be permitted workers who are working onsite or prescribed students who are studying onsite. The different approach for early childhood reflects that the children under school age require more intensive care and supervision by an adult than school-aged children for their development, wellbeing and safety. It is also very important that vulnerable children continue to be supported both by schools and early childhood services and that those children maintain their attendance wherever possible.

In regional areas, under stage 3, early childhood education remains open to all families who wish that their children continue to attend. Attendance levels in regional areas are far higher, as you would expect, than in metropolitan Melbourne, with many services reporting levels around 80 per cent of normal. This indicates that stage 4 restrictions for early childhood services are having the intended effect of reducing the movement of children and families, while in regional areas most children are still physically attending their early childhood service.

Throughout this pandemic the Department of Education and Training has worked with DHHS to provide detailed practice guidance on risk mitigation in early childhood settings. This has been continually reviewed and updated throughout the pandemic, taking into account the advice of Victoria's Chief Health Officer and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee. There is a range of risk mitigations in place, including of

course that staff, children or parents exhibiting any potential symptoms of coronavirus should not attend. Early childhood settings have also been strongly encouraged to adopt strategies to support physical distancing where possible and good hygiene practices to reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission within the practical limitations of an early learning environment.

I recognise that these have been challenging times for the Victorian community, particularly for families with preschool and school-age children. The government remains committed to supporting the sector and supporting the delivery of our reforms in early childhood education and care, particularly, as I said at the outset, the rollout of universal three-year-old kinder, to ensure that children can be supported to have the best start in life. I am proud that this government guaranteed that 100 per cent of the usual kindergarten funding would continue to flow to all kindergarten programs, and this is based on enrolments in term 1, prior to the impact of the pandemic. In addition, our government was the first state to announce that it would offer sessional kindergarten services significant extra funding—up to \$45 million in extra funding. This is helping to ensure Victorian children continue to get an early childhood education during this difficult period without parents having to worry about paying for fees. It is also helping local kindergarten teachers—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt you there, Deputy Premier, but the member's time has expired. I will hand the call to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your presentation. I would like to just reiterate and clarify something that you have mentioned a number of times: the objective of the home learning. Now, I think you stated in your presentation that the schools were never unsafe and that the objective of having children learn from home is to prevent activity within the community and not to protect the children themselves. Is that correct, that statement?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. The public health advice and the reasoning, Mr Limbrick, has always been about limiting the movement of people in the community. Schools, early childhood settings, TAFEs, universities—they remain safe places. But the overarching advice and the reason behind the advice—the stage 3 restrictions in regional Victoria, stage 4 in metro Melbourne—has always been about reducing the movement. When you think about schools, we are talking over a million students and students' parents and carers. Limiting the movement has been the reason why we have introduced remote and flexible learning in our school system.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Understood, yes. I think we are on the same page with our understanding there. But it brings us to a very deep moral and philosophical question here, doesn't it? What the government has chosen to do in this situation—children are in the situation where they have not seen their friends for months. One of the important things about schools is learning social skills. Those social skills are being interrupted. Many students are struggling with their learning. I have heard many cases of self-harm, and maybe you can elaborate on that a bit more. It used to be that we limited children's screen time and now all time is screen time. I have got children of my own. I have seen seven-year-olds attend an online birthday party, a Zoom meeting. Normally birthday parties are a happy event. At this birthday party I saw half of the children—this is seven-year-olds—burst into tears and say that they did not ever want to go to one of these things again. I mean, the government has made a moral calculation here to sacrifice the wellbeing of our children in order to prevent, you know, the spread of this pandemic. I want to know: what are the calculations of the long-term harms that the government has taken to justify this, and at what point will you challenge the CHO and say, 'Maybe the harms of what you are doing outweigh the good'?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Limbrick. There are a number of things that you raised in your question, and these are important matters. You know, I am a father of three school-aged children, and I see it in my own kids: there are good days and bad days. There are days where my kids are missing their friends desperately.

You know, we made an announcement last year, implemented day one, term 1 this year, of banning mobile phone use during school time. I understand absolutely the challenge around trying to limit screen time and then, during this period of remote learning, obviously via technology, screen time is the way that kids are engaging with their teachers, with their schools and with their classmates. I understand absolutely the impact that this is having, both good and bad. There are kids who may have high anxiety at school who are thriving, for example,

under remote and flexible learning and there are students that are struggling, and struggling deeply, with their mental health and wellbeing.

But I just want to pick you up on a point that you made. These are not decisions that the government has made in isolation. These are decisions that we have made based on expert health advice, both from the Victorian Chief Health Officer and through the AHPPC at a national cabinet level. Every decision that I have made and every implementation that we have made at a school level has been made based on expert health advice, and—

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Have you challenged any of that advice?

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, Mr Limbrick, it is not a case of challenging the advice. Both at the Crisis Council of Cabinet with my ministerial colleagues at a state level or the Premier at the national cabinet with first ministers and the Prime Minister it is about looking at all of the data, reflecting on the expert health advice and then making decisions, and these are hard decisions. And I understand that for some students, both academically and in terms of their wellbeing, there will be immense work that is happening right now in term 4 when we return to face-to-face teaching, and next year, to get these kids back on track. There is a mountain of work to do, but we are talking about the biggest health crisis that we have faced in 100 years, and we have got to make these sacrifices—and I understand the impact that this is having.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Well, you know, you talk about: ‘We have to make these sacrifices.’. It is possible that you are creating a generation of children with psychological damage. It is outrageous what the government is doing here. I mean, where is the calculation of the long-term harms that you believe will be happening to the children, and where is the justification of that? You say you have got this expert advice. Show us the data. Like, where are the long-term harms that you have calculated that you think are worth it here? I have been asking about these harms ever since this inquiry started. I have not seen anything. Obviously there is recognition that there is some harm, because you are throwing all of this money at mental health and children to catch up with things. Where is the evidence here?

**Mr MERLINO:** Where is the evidence that we need to provide that support so students can catch up?

**Mr LIMBRICK:** No, where is the evidence that the benefits that you are getting from causing these harms outweigh the harms themselves. I mean, there are methods that people have, that experts have, to calculate these harms. You can calculate in quality-adjusted life years and all this other stuff. We have heard this from other witnesses. Where are these calculations that you have done to say, ‘Okay, we know that we’re causing these harms to our children, but it’s worth it because of X, Y, and Z’? There is no justification that has been presented to the public.

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, the justification and the reasoning, Mr Limbrick, is to deal with the pandemic before us. What is the alternative? Do we pick and choose the expert health advice? I think that would be extraordinary—if I as minister said to the CHO, ‘I agree with that bit of advice and I’ll take that on board and implement that, but I won’t agree with this expert health advice’. Or what is the alternative, Mr Limbrick—that we have a health experiment in our nation and we have herd immunity?

**Mr LIMBRICK:** We are having a health experiment right now, and we are experimenting on the children. I mean, we have never done this before. You have said this. We have never done this before. There are serious harms here, and I do not feel like the government really has a good handle on the harm that it is causing. I am not convinced, and many people are not convinced, that the harm that you are all causing is not worse than other actions that the government could be taking to address this pandemic and the response to the pandemic.

**Mr MERLINO:** It is just something that we are going to have to disagree on, Mr Limbrick. The expert health advice is that to combat this pandemic, to reduce community transmission and to get those positive cases down you need to have a system of restrictions: restrictions of movement, face coverings, ensuring businesses have COVID-safe plans and ensuring that at schools and early childhood settings, for those kids that are learning on site—vulnerable children and children of permitted workers—there is risk mitigation and there are safety measures ensured that are taking place at a school level. I mean, these are the things that we need to do as a community to get these cases down so we can start to progressively reduce the restrictions in place. We do not have the luxury of just ignoring the pandemic and ignoring the advice from public health experts.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** I am not saying that we should ignore the pandemic—

**Mr MERLINO:** No, but you are saying that.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** All right. Let us look at the most serious harm here—like self-harm. Have you got any information on children self-harming during this lockdown period? What are the numbers on this?

**Mr MERLINO:** In terms of mental health we are seeing term 2 data on referrals—we are seeing evidence and data, Mr Limbrick, in terms of the impact on students' mental health and wellbeing, and I will give you a couple of examples. We are seeing term 2 data on referrals for Headspace counselling, which indicates an average of over 1000 appointments per month.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** And how does that compare to prior periods, to non-pandemic periods?

**The CHAIR:** Mr Limbrick, could you allow the Deputy Premier to answer the question, please?

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Well, we need a comparison. Otherwise the data is no good.

**The CHAIR:** Well, you have not allowed him to finish answering the question to establish that.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Okay.

**Mr MERLINO:** I will give you a few examples of data points that we are receiving, Mr Limbrick. In terms of Headspace counselling, appointment numbers were slightly lower than this same time last year but service uptake increased from April to June due to an increasing uptake of telehealth delivery modes—so the ability for students to engage virtually, if you like. Mental health experts are warning of a surge in the need for mental health care due to COVID-19. Demand across—

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Due to the government's response to COVID-19.

**Mr MERLINO:** Mr Limbrick, if I can continue—demand across Kids Helpline services in Victoria increased by 8 per cent in July from the previous month compared with a 2 per cent national increase over the same period. Lifeline has reported a 22 per cent increase in calls in Victoria in July, and over the month of July approximately 64 per cent of calls and web chats to the Beyond Blue coronavirus mental health wellbeing support came from people in Victoria. That is exactly why we made the recent decision of investing a further \$28.5 million over the next two years that will increase workforce capacity. We will train a further 1500 staff in mental health and wellbeing, expanding existing services and introducing new support to respond to increased student mental health issues and disengagement from education.

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry to cut you off there, Deputy Premier, but the member's time has expired. I will pass the call to Ms Ingrid Stitt, MLC.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you.

**Ms STITT:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Deputy Premier. I mean, obviously the safety of young students and staff is a significant consideration. Can you take us through, in the area of early childhood education, what risk mitigation strategies the government have put in place to ensure the health and safety of staff, children and families?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Ms Stitt. I am very pleased to answer the question. Throughout this pandemic we have carefully followed the advice and recommendations of the Victorian Chief Health Officer every step of the way. The AHPPC's practice advice to early childhood education and care services was issued on 6 April and includes advice on risk mitigation strategies. My department has also worked with DHHS to provide detailed guidance about physical distancing and transmission reduction in early childhood settings. This guidance was prepared to make it easier for services and staff to practically embed recommended practices and also to make sure the advice is easily understood for their specific contexts. At all times this guidance has been informed by the AHPPC and Victoria's CHO and has been updated over time to reflect the relative risks of coronavirus and the relevant medical evidence.

The key elements of the latest advice include that all staff and children who are unwell must remain at home; hand hygiene, cough etiquette and environmental cleaning and disinfection are the most effective ways to reduce transmission of coronavirus; services are strongly encouraged to conduct temperature screening of

children; and parents and carers of children with complex medical needs should seek medical advice from the child's medical practitioner to support risk assessment and inform decision-making regarding the suitability of continuing education and care at this time.

Detailed operational guidance is also being provided to services to ensure they continue to provide safe environments for children and staff where they are operating. This guidance outlines actions that can be taken to reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission within the practical limitations of an early learning environment, including hygiene practices, arrival and departure protocols, managing teacher and learning environments, ensuring offices and staff facilities remain safe, cleaning and facilities management, routine care and first aid and management of unwell children or staff. My department has also set up an early childhood hotline so services and our educators can quickly get the information they need.

We know that services are under increased pressure in working to ensure high standards of cleaning and hygiene, and that is why I am pleased our government has made available \$5.2 million in cleaning grants for all services delivering a funded kindergarten program in term 2 and in term 3. This includes grants of \$900 to services with under 50 enrolments and grants of \$1500 to those with 50 or more enrolments to enable services to pay for additional cleaning hours and assist with buying hygiene products such as hand sanitiser and soap. It also includes further funding for services required to close because of a confirmed coronavirus case to help with the cost of an infectious clean before reopening.

In relation to the health of the early childhood workforce, the health advice is that some people are likely to be at higher risk of serious illness if they are infected by the virus. The advice is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 50 years and older with one or more chronic medical conditions, people 65 years and older with chronic medical conditions, people 70 years and older, and people with compromised immune systems. For our early childhood workers that are considered at high risk, the risk needs to be assessed and mitigated with consideration of the characteristics of the worker, the early childhood setting and the work. Where risk cannot be appropriately mitigated, employers and employees should consider alternate arrangements to accommodate a workplace absence. As always, our priority is ensuring the health and safety of the Victorian community, and that is why all of our advice and decisions have been guided by expert health advice. Thanks, Ms Stitt.

**Ms STITT:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. Could you explain what support the government has provided for early childhood services to remain viable, particularly in relation to supporting the workforce?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Ms Stitt. I want to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to and deep appreciation for the extraordinary efforts of our early childhood educators—teachers, staff and services—at this unprecedented time. The role of our early childhood workforce is always vitally important. That has never been clearer than it is now, and I am proud that we have been able to support this sector throughout the pandemic.

We guarantee that 100 per cent of the usual kindergarten funding will continue to flow to all kindergarten programs, and this is based, as I said, on term 1 enrolments. In addition, our state was the first to provide the additional support package of up to \$45 million, and this extra funding is doing a lot of things. It is helping to provide certainty for our early childhood workers and keep them in their jobs, so it is about viability of the sector, protection of employment and the continuation of early childhood education.

It is enabling eligible not-for-profit sessional kindergarten services across Victoria to offer a free 15-hour program to all children in terms 2 and 3. It is helping to ensure that Victorian children continue to receive an early childhood education during this time. It is saving families hundreds of dollars. This funding provided \$498 for each fee-paying enrolment in an eligible kindergarten program during term 2 and \$460 during term 3, because it is a shorter term.

I am pleased to report that the Victorian government provided more than \$10.5 million to approximately 700 funded kindergarten services to cover parent fees for over 21 000 enrolments in term 2. It is expected that over 20 000 children at around 720 services across Victoria will access a free kindergarten program during term 3 through this funding, and that is in addition to approximately 20 000 children already accessing a free kindergarten program through the kindergarten fee subsidy.

Eligible services are also being provided with financial support for three-year-old kindergarten programs that are not yet government funded. This funding is offsetting the fees not being paid by families who choose to

keep their children at home and is helping to keep teachers and educators in their jobs. Approximately \$1.5 million has been already provided to more than 300 kindergarten services to offset lost parent fees for over 4000 enrolments in term 2. A \$400-per-child subsidy will be available for each child not attending and not paying fees in eligible unfunded programs in term 3. As part of our state responsibilities for kindergarten we have also made available over \$5.2 million in cleaning and hygiene grants.

And finally, we are supporting learning from home. While having early childhood services available for families to attend is important, we know that through this pandemic many families have chosen to keep their kids at home. Our message to early childhood services and our excellent workforce has been that for children who are not attending services there should be reasonable efforts to support home learning, and about 96 per cent have provided that home learning opportunity for parents of children who have chosen to keep their kids at home, which is an extraordinary effort. Thank you.

**Ms STITT:** Yes, thank you, Deputy Premier. In relation to early childhood support, can you take the committee through what support there is for engaging vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families in this space?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Ms Stitt. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic we know that children, families and carers who were already experiencing vulnerability are under or may be under increased pressure. We also know that for many families experiencing vulnerability having their children continue to attend early childhood services will be the best way to support their continued learning and development. My department has requested services work proactively in maintaining contact with these families to encourage their attendance at service, and where they choose not to attend, has been supporting services to engage them in learning from home.

It goes in some way to the previous questioning from Mr Limbrick in terms of that at every stage we have really focused on our most vulnerable children and families either to continue onsite learning opportunities, either at early childhood or at schools, or to provide additional support with them at home. I am proud to say that early childhood education and care services right from the start put in place proactive and innovative arrangements to support vulnerable children and families. The department has coordinated with numerous partners to ensure that ongoing support is available to services in their work with vulnerable children and families, including if a child is in out-of-home care. Local Lookout education support centres can support attendance and engage families and carers with learning-from-home opportunities.

For children with additional needs preschool field officers can be contacted to support access and participation. Additional support for engaging with children and families from a refugee background can be obtained via contacting Foundation House to seek tailored advice. Telephone support is available to educators and services from FKA Children's Services in continuing to maintain strong connections and engagement with multilingual families. Services can also use school readiness funding to support outreach engagement with children and families experiencing vulnerability. In addition our government has provided clear and practical advice to services and the workforce specifically about working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families.

This advice has been delivered through a range of avenues, including departmental emails, fact sheets, phone line supports and webinars. Our advice has emphasised that it is important to prioritise reaching out to families experiencing vulnerability and working with parents and carers to agree on the best way to keep in contact. While our focus has been on ensuring the health and safety of all Victorians, we know that the impact of the pandemic will be more acute for some members of our community, and that is why we have put in extra effort to support our most vulnerable and disadvantaged young children and their families. We know that maintaining their connection and engagement with early learning will help them through this challenging time and will deliver benefits long into their futures. Thank you.

**Ms STITT:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. Can I ask now about the second transition to remote and flexible learning. During term 3, on the advice of the Chief Health Officer, it was necessary to move to respond to the changing dynamic of this pandemic. Can you take us through the major lessons learned from the first round of remote learning and flexible learning and how that informed the current stage, when we moved back to remote learning for the second time?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes, thank you, Ms Stitt. We know that the pandemic has already had a significant impact on the way we provide schooling in 2020, but as minister I remain committed to delivering the best possible education to Victorian students. We maintained a strong focus on student and staff health and wellbeing, excellence and equity—

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry to cut you off there, Deputy Premier, but the member's time has expired, and I will hand the call to Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Deputy Premier, for appearing today. Deputy Premier, it was announced yesterday that the government will seek to extend Victoria's state of emergency for 12 months, which will force the limitation of movement, force businesses to keep their doors closed and only allow a select few to attend and farewell their loved ones. Deputy Premier, specifically, has the government received any independent advice recommending the imposition of these extraordinary measures on Victoria?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Ms Vallence, for your question in terms of the state of emergency. As I mentioned at the outset, this extension is required to ensure that we can deliver on the directions and the decisions of our health experts. Without the provisions within the state of emergency, without the legislation passing the Parliament, then those decisions and advice of the CHO simply would not be able to be enacted, delivered and enforced in our community. And that is simple things such as face coverings, to places of work having COVID-safe plans. Without this extension those things cannot be delivered.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Okay. Deputy Premier, specifically on what advice is the government relying to introduce these measures on Victorians?

**Mr MERLINO:** It is called the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*, Ms Vallence, and unlike other states and territories where they have got the ability to have unlimited extensions to those emergency arrangements, under our legislation in Victoria there is a limit of six months. So—

**Ms VALLENCE:** I appreciate it is the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act*. I appreciate it is under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act* and that the provisions are provided for there, but specifically what advice? Has the Chief Health Officer provided any advice to the government that the 12-month extension of the state of emergency is required?

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, it is the legal framework to ensure that the decisions of the CHO, the advice of the CHO, can be delivered. So, Ms Vallence, you get to the end of this current period of the state of emergency and you think that the day that that finishes there is no advice, there is no continuing. It does not matter whether it is stage 4, stage 3, stage 2 or stage 1, there is going to be a period of time which the Premier and others have described as 'COVID normal'. There are things that will need to be in place. We will need businesses to have COVID-safe plans. I imagine—

**Ms VALLENCE:** I appreciate all of that—

**Mr MERLINO:** If I can finish—

**Ms VALLENCE:** I appreciate all—

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallence, could you allow the minister to answer the questions, please?

**Ms VALLENCE:** I appreciate all of that, Deputy Premier, that the virus is still around and some of those restrictions—

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, if you appreciate it, Ms Vallence, you will support the legislation next week. If you truly appreciate it, rather than the Liberal Party flip-flopping on their position as they have done for the last six months—

**Ms VALLENCE:** On behalf of Victorians—

**Mr MERLINO:** If you appreciate it, you will support the legislation.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Has the Chief Health Officer provided advice to extend the state of emergency for 12 months?

**Mr MERLINO:** It is clear, Ms Vallence, that we would be unable to continue to give effect to the decisions and the advice of our public health experts if we do not have an extension to the state of emergency.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Has that advice been independently provided or provided by the Chief Health Officer to extend for 12 months?

**Mr MERLINO:** It is required, Ms Vallence. And if you put this question to the Chief Health Officer, if you put this question to any other health expert, it is required to extend the state of emergency so we can continue to combat this pandemic.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Can you provide that advice from the Chief Health Officer on notice to the committee?

**Mr MERLINO:** I am happy to come back with advice to support this, but you only need to read the legislation, Ms Vallence. You only need to read it.

**Ms VALLENCE:** The question, Deputy Premier, is the advice—

**Mr MERLINO:** And if you are suggesting—

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallence, could you allow the Deputy Premier to answer your questions, please?

**Ms VALLENCE:** Chair, I think—

**Mr MERLINO:** If you are suggesting—

**Ms VALLENCE:** Deputy Premier, the question is—

**Mr MERLINO:** I have not finished, Ms Vallence.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallence, could you allow the Deputy Premier to answer the questions, please?

**Mr MERLINO:** Ms Vallence, if you are suggesting that it is appropriate to not extend the state of emergency, you are putting the public health of Victorians at risk. It is incredibly reckless for the Liberal Party to suggest that come the end of this state of emergency period—

**Ms VALLENCE:** I am not—

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallence, you are not allowing the minister to answer the questions.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Deputy Premier, I think you are verballing the Liberal Party. The question is: what advice are you relying on—

**Mr MERLINO:** The question is: who is actually the spokesperson for the Liberal Party?

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallence, could we have some order, please? Can you ask the question and then allow the minister to answer it? That is how questions and answers work. Thank you.

**Ms VALLENCE:** I respectfully request you ask the witness to answer the questions.

**The CHAIR:** Well, he is attempting to but you continue to speak over the top of him, which then makes it very difficult for him to answer your questions. The Deputy Premier will now answer your question if you will give him a moment to do so.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms Vallence. The state of emergency simply needs to be extended so we can continue to respond to this public health emergency—the greatest health challenge that our state has faced in 100 years. If anyone is suggesting that it is a good decision to not pass this legislation and to have an end to the state of emergency, you are saying that every decision and advice from the Chief Health Officer cannot then be enacted in the state of Victoria. It is reckless, and it will be putting lives in danger.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Deputy Premier, that is not what I am saying. I am not saying anything. I am asking you a question.

**Mr MERLINO:** Perhaps that is what Mr Smith or Mr Newbury is saying. I do not know who speaks for the Liberal Party.

**Ms VALLENCE:** What advice is the government relying on to extend the state of emergency by 12 months? What advice from the Chief Health Officer have you received on that, and can you make it available to the committee?

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, I am not going to speak for the Chief Health Officer. That would be entirely inappropriate. What I can provide—

**Ms VALLENCE:** Deputy Premier—

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallenge, you are wasting your own time in not allowing the Deputy Premier to answer your questions.

**Ms VALLENCE:** As the Deputy Premier you are in a very unique position to be able to provide this information to the committee now, if you could provide advice on what the Chief Health Officer has advised—what advice the government is relying on—to extend the state of emergency by 12 months.

**Mr MERLINO:** Let me put it quite simply for you, Ms Vallenge. It would simply be impossible if the state of emergency was not extended—it would simply be impossible—to require a person who is positive to COVID-19 to self-isolate. It would be impossible to require that person to self-isolate. That is why the legislation is coming before the Parliament next week and that is why every member of Parliament, if they are truly, truly considering the public health of the Victorian people, would support that legislation.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Deputy Premier, in terms of schools operating under the proposed further 12 months of the state of emergency, what can children and parents and teachers expect from the educational experience? Will schools need to stay closed, and will there be a requirement for an extension of online learning? And will parents be expected to continue home learning even if they are a permitted worker but working from home?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Ms Vallenge. The situation in schools will be determined based on the advice of Victoria's Chief Health Officer. I am confident that our schools will return to face-to-face teaching in term 4—exactly when will depend on the advice of the CHO. We have got the current stage 4 restrictions. We are, as everyone is, looking at the data every single day and looking at the trend in terms of positive cases and community transmission. We will make decisions over the course of the next days and weeks as we head towards school holidays and then the resumption of term 4 in terms of what that means for our children and our education workforce. But that will be based, as it has always been throughout the course of the year, on the expert health advice that we receive.

**Ms VALLENCE:** What expert health advice have you received? What has the Chief Health Officer provided to you in terms of advice to you or the department, or what criteria has been set under the proposed 12-month extension of the state of emergency and for a return to on-site classroom learning? If you can provide advice to the committee, perhaps, on those items—

**Mr MERLINO:** So every decision we have made—and if you go back to the slide deck, Ms Vallenge, you can see every single step: the first stage of remote learning, then Melbourne and Mitchell shire, then we moved to stage 4 for Melbourne and stage 3 for rural and regional Victoria—

**Ms VALLENCE:** Not in the past—

**Mr MERLINO:** All of those decisions, Ms Vallenge, have been based on the advice of Victoria's Chief Health Officer and engagement between the department of education and DHHS. No decision that I have made in regard to schools or early childhood has been made other than via the expert health advice, and that will continue to be the course of action that this government will take.

**Ms VALLENCE:** So on that, you said you are anticipating potentially returning to the classroom in term 4. What advice has the Chief Health Officer provided and what criteria has been set—could you make that available to the members of the committee—for the resumption of on-site classroom learning?

**Mr MERLINO:** I am confident, based on—

**Ms VALLENCE:** What is the criteria?

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallenge, could you allow the Deputy Premier to answer the questions.

**Mr MERLINO:** the continuing downward trend in community transmission and the positive cases in our community. As has been agreed at national cabinet, Ms Vallenge, our approach both in Victoria and across this country has been suppression. How can we suppress COVID-19 enough that we do not need to be in stage 4—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, to interrupt you, Deputy Premier, but the member's time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Tim Richardson, MP.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thanks, Chair. I will just take you, Deputy Premier, back to questions that you were to go through about flexible learning. But before we do, it is greatly concerning to hear some of the comments—especially for those families and those school communities with kids in our specialist school settings—that there is a notion of ending the state of emergency and just letting this rip. We have seen what devastating consequences that would have around the world, and I just cannot believe that that is a position of major parties. But I just want to take you back to the remote and flexible learning that you just started on in your answer, because I think some of those major learnings in that first round have underpinned that future work and development of what we have learned now. I am just wondering if you could take the committee back through that.

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. Thank you, Mr Richardson, for that question. I want to acknowledge and thank you for the work that you have done as parliamentary secretary, particularly looking at that first period of remote and flexible learning—the things that worked and the things that were very, very challenging for school communities and for individual students and their families. So I directed the department to assess the experience of students, schools and parents of remote and flexible learning in term 2, and this work is playing an important role through this term, term 3, and the return to remote and flexible learning for most Victorian schools. I will step you through, if you like, Mr Richardson, attendance, student experience and learning impacts, which have helped inform our adaptations for round 2 of remote and flexible learning.

In terms of attendance, the average absence rate for government school students learning remotely during term 2 was 6 per cent—4.4 per cent among primary schools and 8.4 per cent among secondary schools—and absence rates tended to be lower than for the same period last year, so that is a positive. Absences did vary by socio-economic status, from 4.3 per cent among high SES to 10.8 per cent among low SES. Absence rates also varied among key vulnerable populations. For example, 18.8 per cent of secondary ATSI students—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander—18.8 per cent of secondary out-of-home care and 8.6 per cent of students with a disability were absent in term 2. Reassuringly, proportionally more vulnerable students continued to attend school onsite during term 2, and that was precisely our aim. For example, while 5.3 per cent of primary school-age students across the state attended school onsite, the rates were higher for certain cohorts—10 per cent of primary school-age ATSI, 26.5 per cent of primary school-age children in out-of-home care and 7 per cent of primary school-age disability students.

In terms of student experience, schools made enormous efforts to transition their students as quickly and smoothly as possible to remote and flexible learning in term 2. We have found that the student experience of term 2 flexible and remote learning was mixed, as you found as well through your work, Mr Richardson. Some students thrive during remote learning, particularly self-motivated and self-directed students or older students, including some high-functioning students with ASD or those who experience social anxiety in a classroom environment. Others did not do so well. Factors that may have affected students' experience of flexible and remote learning include their particular learning needs, such as those that arise from a learning disability, and their ability to access educational supports at home; the ability of their parents and carers to support them,

particularly among younger students; level of proficiency with English; availability of devices, such as laptops, iPads, internet dongles; and their ability to connect.

Finally, in terms of learning impacts, as you would be aware, NAPLAN, the main system-wide measure of student achievement, was cancelled for 2020 across the country due to the pandemic. A DET survey of government school principals at the end of term 2 asked their opinion based on teacher staff assessment of how much progress students made during this period. About half of the schools that responded said the majority of students made about the expected or greater than expected progress, one-quarter said the majority of students made less than expected progress and one-quarter said that they are still examining and working through the impact on their students. We know that at least some students will have fallen behind relative to where they would have been otherwise. This is most likely to include students with poor levels of English, students with poor home learning environments, students already at risk of disengaging from schools, students enrolled in applied programs and students who need educational health and wellbeing supports at school but were unable to access them from home. So we took this information and we used it to improve any future periods of remote learning, including the one we are in. Thanks, Mr Richardson.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Minister. Obviously we have seen a significant amount of effort, resilience and adaptability from our teachers and from our students. I am wondering as well, going to some of the points that you have made about wellbeing and how critical that is, if you could elaborate a bit more on how we are supporting our student and staff wellbeing during this time.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Richardson; this also goes to the line of questioning from Mr Limbrick. As I mentioned in my presentation, in addition to our existing programs and resources, we have also committed an extra \$28.5 million in funding for student mental health and wellbeing support—and I will go into further detail about that shortly. The department is also providing schools with advice on prioritising support to students, using a three-tiered model for needs-based support, and direct access to health and wellbeing key contacts who provide assertive outreach to identify issues and support students. We have expanded, as I said, programs such as Lookout and Navigator, particularly for highly vulnerable and at risk of disengaging.

For school staff we have ensured that online and phone-based supports for wellbeing are available to all staff across Victoria. All health and safety supports and services have been tailored to the current COVID-19 context, with a strong focus on mental health and wellbeing, to better support and ensure safety at work for school staff. Our dedicated principal health and wellbeing strategy continues to provide several well-used services to support principals as wellbeing leaders of their school. A number of these supports have been expanded and tailored in the current COVID-19 context, including providing a 1-hour session on leading for wellbeing in times of uncertainty for principals at area principal forums in term 3. Thank you.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Minister. Obviously the focus around the Education State is on equity and excellence. What have been your views and your feedback on the focus on excellence during this time?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Richardson. I was really conscious that 2020 is not a lost year. It is why at the very beginning of this PAEC discussion I talked about the things that we have done to make sure that that is the case for our year 12 students. The Education State is about equity and excellence in equal measure. I have been really working with the department to make sure that even though for a big chunk of this year our kids have been learning remotely, what can we do to stretch and engage and to have that pursuit of excellence front of mind for teachers and students? Our transition to remote and flexible learning has not prevented schools from focusing on students achieving their full potential. We are supporting schools to implement effective assessment practices to identify student learning progress during term 3. This will include supporting students who thrived in remote and flexible learning and those who need to catch up on lost learning.

For our high-ability students we have continued to develop and progress the Student Excellence Program, working with leading academics and teachers to create the Victorian High-Ability Program. We were going to roll it out in our schools in term 3, but we are rolling it out in a different way this year. On 28 July a Victorian challenge and enrichment series channel was launched on Arc to provide a virtual learning experience to high-ability students. These resources form one element of our \$60.2 million Student Excellence Program. When fully launched, the high-ability program will provide an enriching learning experience to challenge and extend our high-ability students in English or mathematics over a 10-week course by offering them the opportunity to engage with like-minded peers. The program will also support their confidence and wellbeing. I

am pleased that whilst teaching and learning is different and we have had to amend the way that we deliver this new high-ability program we are delivering it nonetheless. Thanks, Mr Richardson.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Deputy Premier. can I take you then to the targeted support for our vulnerable students? Obviously there were a lot of learnings during the first stage of restrictions. Could you take us through what the government and what your department are doing to support our students who are in vulnerable cohorts?

**Mr MERLINO:** The first and most important way that we have provided support to vulnerable students is being really clear to schools and to families that learning onsite—remote and flexible learning but onsite at school—is available to you. That has been probably the first and most important thing that we have done. We are also drawing on routine reporting of student attendance and school incidents to identify emerging areas of risk for students, schools and the system. We are working with agencies across government to provide targeted support to vulnerable students, including students in out-of-home care, students with additional needs, Koori students and students in years 7 to 10 at higher risk of disengaging from education. We are providing devices and internet access to vulnerable students who need those to learn from home. As I have mentioned before, Navigator and other programs to support students at risk of disengaging—the new funding of \$28.5 million. And we are continuing to deliver a range of programs that support vulnerable learners locally. For example, breakfast clubs have been set up at 861 of the state’s most disadvantaged government schools and are continuing to run during the pandemic in partnership with Foodbank. This investment of \$58 million will expand the program to reach a total of 1000 schools by the end of 2020.

What our schools are doing with the support and partnership with Foodbank is just brilliant. Whether it is ensuring pick-up of food items or even delivery of food items to homes that the schools have identified, they are just doing a brilliant job. So we have made sure that the breakfast clubs program, the breakfast-lunch program, has been able to continue, again in a different way. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to cut you off there, but the time for questions has expired. If the discussion today has raised any issues for anyone, the Lifeline number is 13 11 14. The Kids Helpline number is 1800 551 800 and the Beyond Blue number is 1300 096 269.

Thank you, Deputy Premier, and your team for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing and responses will be required within five working days of the committee’s request. The committee will now take a short break before beginning consideration of its next witness. We thank you for your time today.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you to the PAEC team. Good to see you all.

**Witnesses withdrew.**