

Written questions on notice provided by the Hon. James Merlino

1.

Portfolio:	Education
Witness:	Hon. James Merlino
Committee member:	Ms Bridget Vallence
Page of transcript:	p.22-23

Written question:

- Have there been any reports from students in school?
- Have there been any reports from any schools around any changes to mental health or suicide, particularly, or attempted suicide?

Answer:

- The Department of Education and Training (the Department) is continuing to provide principals, teachers and school staff with resources to support their students' mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- The pandemic is likely to have a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of some of our students and the wider community. Mental health and wellbeing support to students is critical given the impact physical distancing and isolation is likely to have on some students during the pandemic and longer term.
- Principals, teachers and health and wellbeing support staff are continuing to support the mental health and wellbeing of students.
- It is challenging to compare reporting in schools while students have mostly been learning from home, with reports from schools at the same time last year. Some students' mental health and wellbeing issues may not have been initially visible while students have been learning from home.
- Reports from schools between weeks 1 to 5 of Term 2 of mental stress have dropped by almost 25 per cent from 613 to 460 compared to the same time last year. This data may be explained by the reduction of operational incidents due to the low numbers of students attending school onsite during this time.
- The Coroner's Court of Victoria holds the data for suicide in Victoria.

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Portfolio:	Education
Witness:	Hon. James Merlino
Committee member:	Mr Sam Hibbins
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Written question:

Mr HIBBINS: You have given some data in terms of onsite learning across the entire state. I guess I am interested in the range of onsite learning. I guess, without necessarily identifying schools, can you give an indication of the range of percentage of students that attended on site?

Response:

The schools that attract the highest maximum on-site attendance rates across all school types tend to have smaller enrolments (less than 60). A small number of schools (150) had no students on-site.

With an average of 5.8% on-site attendance, special schools had a range of 0%-50.7%. Primary schools, with an average of 4.7% on-site attendance, had a range of 0%-56.8%. Secondary schools, with an average of 0.6% on-site attendance, had a range of 0%-21.1%.

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Committee member:	Ms Bridget Vallence
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Written question:

Ms VALLENCE: Yes. I think from a learning perspective learning in the classroom is by far better than around the kitchen table. So just to move on, you mentioned earlier to one of the other Committee members the process if any staff or anyone in a school was found to have coronavirus, and you described the process where DET would seek advice from DHHS, who would then determine whether the school is to close and be cleaned and so forth. So you have already described that process. Can you describe if the process as described by DHHS to you for schools is different to that of businesses?

Mr MERLINO: I might ask the Secretary. I mean, our engagement between the Department of Education and Training and DHHS is, you know, 'What are the protocols in place? What do we need to do?'. And they are very clear protocols: deep cleaning, contact tracing and all the things that need to happen to the point at which the Chief Health Officer will say a school can resume. That usually takes, you know, three, four or five days to go through that process, and we have done that about 10 times. In terms of differences with advice for businesses, I can take that on notice. I am not sure if Secretary Atta or anyone else has anything to add.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes. I am interested to know whether the advice is different, because of course we know that with the Cedar Meats case that business was not named and there was a period before the public, from a public health perspective, were aware of that cluster, and that very growing cluster—in fact it is the biggest cluster in Victoria—at Cedar Meats. Yet with Meadowglen Primary School that school was named publicly immediately. So what I am keen—I think for the Committee's benefit—to know is whether there is a different process advised by DHHS for schools as opposed to business or any other organisation.

Mr MERLINO: What I can do is outline the clear processes with the department. If there is anything further that we can add, we will. And in terms of those decisions—naming sites, for example—they are made by the public health officials. They are not made by the department. Secretary Atta, do you have anything to add?

Ms VALLENCE: All right. We can take that on notice perhaps.

Answer:

The Department of Education and Training (DET) response to confirmed or suspected cases in education settings is guided by the advice of the Chief Health Officer and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

In the event of a confirmed or suspected COVID-19 case that has had direct exposure to an educational setting, DET seeks advice from the DHHS Public Health Team to determine whether the educational setting needs to temporarily close while further investigation and contact tracing takes place.

All identified close contacts are contacted directly by DHHS and are required to self-isolate.

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DHHS may advise hygienic cleaning of the educational setting prior to reopening if there has been exposure to the site.

If DHHS directs the closure of an educational setting, communications are sent out to the school/education community to inform staff, students and families of the closure.

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Portfolio:	Education
Witness:	The Hon. James Merlino
Committee member:	Mr Richard Riordan, MP
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Written question:

Mr RIORDAN: Are you aware of how inaccessible that testing is for many rural and regional teachers? And what can your department do to ensure teachers, who are expected to be teaching during the day and only have daytime slots, in some cases many hours from their home—can you improve that, and why has that not been thought about to make sure that country teachers have the same access to COVID testing as their city counterparts?

[MINISTER RESPONDS]

Mr RIORDAN: Well, we will take that on notice, but it would be good to supply to the Committee what you are doing there.

Answer:

The majority of school staff will be able to attend a clinic within a reasonable distance from where they live or should be able to arrange a test with their local health providers.

School staff can access information on where to get tested across Victoria, by visiting the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) website or by calling the 24-hour DHHS coronavirus hotline on 1800 675 398.

In rural and remote areas, staff may have issues accessing testing if there are no local clinics within reasonable travel times. If individuals in rural and remote areas are unable to identify an appropriate way to access testing they can contact DHHS, which will assist with additional information and advice about how to access testing. In some instances, local solutions have been developed within communities to provide school staff with convenient access to testing. DHHS will monitor these solutions and provide relevant information to any school staff who get in touch.

DET is meeting regularly with DHHS to review progress of the testing scheme to ensure DET can address access issues for school staff in rural areas.