

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

**Round 3 Hearings – Inquiry into the Victorian Government’s Response to COVID-19 Pandemic - 2
December 2020 12:45 – 2:45**

Responses to questions on notice

C1.

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| Portfolio: | Coordination of Education and Training |
| Witness: | Hon. James Merlino |
| Committee member: | Mr Richard Riordan MP |
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Mr RIORDAN: Okay, can you give us a breakdown by areas that have high disadvantage? So, for example, when I look in my electorate—which is predominately all single state secondary school, smaller disadvantaged country towns, for example—the disengagement and non-attendance rate is much higher. I am picturing that that is not just unique to my area, that it is probably consistent across. So if you take out, you know, schools with really good internet connection availability and more engaged families, what does that statistic look like?

Response:

Student absences in areas with higher levels of disadvantage are generally higher than in areas with lower levels of disadvantage. This has been a consistent pattern across years, including 2020.

| Region | DET Area (listed by highest proportion of disadvantaged students to lowest) | TERM 3, 2020 |
|------------------------|--|---------------------|
| North-Western Victoria | Mallee | 13.20% |
| South-Western Victoria | Brimbank Melton | 9.00% |
| South-Eastern Victoria | Outer Gippsland | 8.40% |
| North-Eastern Victoria | Goulburn | 11.80% |
| South-Western Victoria | Wimmera South West | 12.30% |
| South-Eastern Victoria | Southern Melbourne | 8.00% |
| South-Eastern Victoria | Inner Gippsland | 11.60% |
| North-Western Victoria | Hume Moreland | 8.60% |
| South-Western Victoria | Central Highlands | 9.30% |
| North-Eastern Victoria | Ovens Murray | 11.80% |
| North-Western Victoria | Loddon | 14.70% |
| South-Western Victoria | Barwon | 12.70% |
| South-Western Victoria | Western Melbourne | 7.40% |
| North-Western Victoria | North Eastern Melbourne | 6.00% |
| North-Eastern Victoria | Outer Eastern Melbourne | 4.50% |
| South-Eastern Victoria | Bayside Peninsula | 6.40% |
| North-Eastern Victoria | Inner Eastern Melbourne | 4.30% |

Note: data extracted as at 04/12/2020.

C2.

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| Portfolio: | Coordination of Education and Training |
| Witness: | Hon. James Merlino |
| Committee member: | Mr Richard Riordan MP |
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Mr RIORDAN: can you tell us or can the department tell us the number of students enrolled in years 11 and 12 at the enrolment point in February, and then what that figure is compared with when they started back in term 4?

Response:

DET enrolment data collected in the February and August 2020 census indicates enrolments for Year 11 and Year 12 students have dropped by 3.5% and 4.4% respectively.

DET Census enrolments – February/ August 2019, 2020

| Year Level | 2019 | | | 2020 | | |
|------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | Feb-19 | Aug-19 | Change | Feb-20 | Aug-20 | Change |
| 11 | 38,697 | 37,530 | -3.0% | 39,937 | 38,532 | -3.5% |
| 12 | 32,607 | 31,211 | -4.3% | 33,562 | 32,093 | -4.4% |

Note: Government school data only, as non-government enrolment figures for August not yet finalised.

C3.

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| Portfolio: | Coordination of Education and Training |
| Witness: | Hon. James Merlino |
| Committee member: | Mr Danny O'Brien MP |
| Page of transcript: | p.10 |

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I just want to go along the same lines for just a moment. On 11 September Adam Carey in the *Age* had a report on a report, an independent report, on the experience of students from the state's first wave, and it showed 10 per cent of students from disadvantaged schools were absent during the first wave and just 4 per cent from advantaged schools. Is there a similar report for the second wave that has been produced as yet, and if so, what did it find?

Response:

There is no equivalent report available for the second return to remote and flexible learning.

C4.

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| Portfolio: | Coordination of Education and Training |
| Witness: | Hon. James Merlino |
| Committee member: | Mr Danny O'Brien |
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Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, okay. Can I just go back to a question Mr Riordan asked earlier to the Secretary about Operation Soteria and legal costs? Were there actually any DET staff at all seconded to Operation Soteria?

Response:

Twelve employees on DET's payroll were seconded to DHHS and DJCS as part of hotel quarantine and work/ed with hotel quarantine since the first call out for volunteers in April 2020. Four of those employees are still currently on secondment working in hotel quarantine.

C5.

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| Portfolio: | Coordination of Education and Training |
| Witness: | Hon. James Merlino |
| Committee member: | Mr Sam Hibbins |
| Page of transcript: | p.16 |

Mr HIBBINS: Are there any statistics or data on students who may not have made that transition to online learning—students that may have dropped out or otherwise disengaged from their course?

Mr MERLINO: In regard to TAFE, Mr Hibbins?

Mr HIBBINS: Yes.

Ms WATTS: There is, and I would be happy to provide that, because it differs across the different stages of the restrictions—so, very happy to provide that by area of restriction, restrictions 3 and 4, metropolitan and regional—and also equally it differs according to qualifications, as I have indicated.

Response:

Full year training data for 2020 is not yet available. As providers have up to 60 days to submit their data to the Department of Education and Training, it is expected that final data for the 2020 training year will be available in early-2021.

C6.

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| Portfolio: | Coordination of Education and Training |
| Witness: | Hon. James Merlino |
| Committee member: | Mr Sam Hibbins |
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Mr HIBBINS: Terrific. Thank you. And just finally, are we able to get—this is in terms of free kinder being funded for I think this year and next year—a breakdown in funding? Because it obviously covers four-year-old funded, three-year-old funded, three-year-old unfunded. Are we actually able to get a breakdown of the figure for each sector or each part?

Response:

In 2020, a total of \$48.7 million was allocated for free kindergarten for funded three and four-year-old enrolments in eligible sessional programs. This covered Terms 2, 3 and 4 and was additional to funding already provided to children eligible for a free program through the Kindergarten Fee Subsidy. This does not include other supports to funded kindergarten services provided in response to COVID-19 including cleaning grants, learning from home grants and supports for transition to school.

A total of \$11.8 million was allocated across Terms 2, 3 and 4 to support services providing unfunded sessional three-year-old programs.

In 2021, up to \$169.6 million has been allocated to the Free Kinder initiative. The vast majority of the funding will be for funded four-year old kindergarten, followed by unfunded three-year-old enrolments and then funded three-year-old enrolments (given that this initiative goes state-wide in 2022). Indicatively, up to 85% of the funding is available for funded kindergarten programs – 80% for four-year-olds and 5% for three-year-olds – with the remaining 15% available for unfunded three-year-old programs. As noted, these figures are indicative only and subject to the 2021 demand profile.

Note also that this is additional to recurrent funding for the Kindergarten Fee Subsidy. The 2021 allocations are higher because the funding applies to the whole of the kindergarten year, funded kindergarten programs in long day care services are in scope and the per child allocations are higher.

C7.

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| Portfolio: | Coordination of Education and Training |
| Witness: | Hon. James Merlino |
| Committee member: | Ms Bridget Vallence |
| Page of transcript: | p.19 |

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much. Just to pick up on some of the questions that were just asked then about the mental health—and again, this is a very challenging area, particularly for our young students—at any time, Minister, did you seek or obtain advice to the extent that mental health issues were impacting any primary or secondary school students, and can this advice and the recommendations be made available to this committee?

Response:

My Department provided me with regular qualitative reports in relation to student mental health based on periodic surveys of principals and schools and data reported through the internal incident reporting system.

In addition, my Department also received advice from the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (MCRI) regarding a number of health issues related to children and adolescents during the pandemic, including mental health issues. This advice is set out in the MCRI’s [COVID-19 in Victorian ECEC and Schools report](#).

In response to advice about student mental health and wellbeing, I announced a two-year \$28.5 million package to support students’ mental health and engagement, with a focus on the needs of some of our most vulnerable students, including:

- Extending Mental Health Practitioners to Specialist Schools
- Continuing the Mental Health in Primary Schools Pilot and expanding to 25 schools in 2021
- Expanding the headspace mental health training programs for staff to support all students through SAFEMinds and Suicide Risk Continuum Training
- Boosting response capacity of the Navigator Program and building the mental health capacity of Navigator providers
- Expanding LOOKOUT to increase support for the educational needs of students in Out of Home Care
- Creating Local Wellbeing Networks (DHHS led) bringing together mental health services, government and non-government school sectors, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, local governments and community sport.

C8.

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| Portfolio: | Coordination of Education and Training |
| Witness: | Hon. James Merlino |
| Committee member: | Ms Bridget Vallence |
| Page of transcript: | p.21 |

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. Thank you. Secretary, a question for you. Can you just please confirm: was there any recruitment from within DET for Operation Soteria in hotel quarantine?

Ms ATTA: Ms Vallence, as I said earlier, we had a small number of staff across the department seconded to the whole-of-government effort across some different operations. I just do not know—I have not got the detail in front of me about whether that included Operation Soteria, but I have indicated that I am happy to follow that up.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you. On 5 April an email was sent to around 50 DET staff regarding expressly working in hotel quarantine coordinating returned travellers. Did any DET staff on the DET payroll take up this offer to work in hotel quarantine?

Ms ATTA: That is exactly the detail that I will follow up to find out if any staff did take up that opportunity.

Ms VALLENCE: And if so, any of those staff that took up that opportunity, were their interests represented in the Coate inquiry?

Ms ATTA: The department made no representations to the inquiry and have been asked no questions through the inquiry.

Ms VALLENCE: So were any DET staff—and perhaps you might need to take this on notice, Secretary—exposed to COVID while they were working on secondment in Operation Soteria, hotel quarantine?

Ms ATTA: Again, I will take it on notice to see if there were any DET staff working on that operation and can follow up that question.

Ms VALLENCE: And did the CPSU make any representations to you about DET staff working in hotel quarantine?

Response:

In response to the email sent on 5 April, 10 staff were seconded to DHHS and DJCS. Two additional DET employees were seconded to DHHS for hotel quarantine work that were not a direct result of the email sent.

The Department is aware that one employee contracted the COVID-19 virus.

The CPSU made representations to DET in relation to individual issues on behalf of two staff who were seconded to the hotel quarantine program.