

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Monday, 18 May 2020

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

Ms Felicity Bellingham, President, and

Ms Helen Hatherly, Vice-President, Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter (*via videoconference*).

The CHAIR: We welcome you to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Committee is 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.

Mobile telephones should now be turned to silent. 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 aside 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, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. The hearings may be rebroadcast in compliance with standing order 234. We ask that photographers and camerapersons follow the established media guidelines and the instructions of the secretariat.

We invite you to make a brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes, please, and we ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes. This will then be followed by questions from the Committee relative to their representation at the table. So, welcome to the Australian Association of Special Education, Victorian Chapter. Over to you.

Ms BELLINGHAM: Thank you. My name is Felicity Bellingham, and I am the President of the Victorian Chapter of the Australian Association of Special Education.

Ms HATHERLY: And I am Helen Hatherly, and I am the Vice President of the Victorian Chapter of the Australian Association of Special Education.

Ms BELLINGHAM: AASE is represented by chapters in each state and territory across Australia and is managed by the national council comprising of representatives of each state and territory. AASE aims to advocate on behalf of people with special education needs to ensure provision of and access to quality education services. AASE aims to provide a range of quality services to members and the wider community. Any person interested in these aims may be a member of AASE. Our members include teachers, educational leaders, allied health workers, academics and community members. Our members are from across the government, independent and Catholic education sectors. AASE's goals are to provide a strong and informed national and state voice for the special education community, to enhance access by students with special education needs to quality educational programs, to promote professional standards of a high order, to foster equitable and effective resourcing support for students with special education needs and to support research that informs the delivery of special education in the Australian context. AASE publishes the *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education* four times a year. Our national AASE Research Award is awarded annually. This was established to provide an opportunity for research which can support evidence-based practice in the education of students with special needs, and it is funded from contributions by our members. Each year AASE organises a very successful and informative national conference. The 2020 conference was due to occur in September; however, due to the pandemic it will now go ahead in 2021 in Adelaide, South Australia. Our national conference provides an opportunity for educators, academics, professional support staff, families, community members and key stakeholders to come together and to collaborate, share knowledge, network and learn together.

In line with our aims and goals the Victorian Chapter facilitates a number of local opportunities for professional collaboration, development and professional learning of high quality. The Victorian Chapter offers access to educational grants, including assisting graduate teachers to attend the AASE National Conference each year. In January 2021 we will be hosting our first AASE Victoria Special Education Symposium at the state library, which aims to provide a smorgasbord of practical professional learning that will positively inform our classroom practice.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic we have recently hosted a very successful online teach-meet specifically on the topic of remote learning. The participants were only too willing to share their experiences and learning with each other towards the goal of best practice. We have received a variety of feedback from our members during this period. Our members have voiced that this has been a challenging period of an unprecedented nature for our students, teachers and other professionals who choose to work in schools. A common thread has been that our members, including teachers and school leadership and allied health professionals, have been going above and beyond to think and plan innovatively about how they can support their students' learning and, equally as importantly, their wellbeing by keeping in regular contact with their families while they learn safely from home. Our members in leadership positions have expressed disappointment at the lack of guidance on how to implement remote learning for their students. Our members have spoken about how this pandemic has highlighted the significant number of families experiencing poverty, with little access to technology or learning options at home—some unable to afford basic necessities like petrol—and have spoken about how they have continued to support their most vulnerable students who are unable to learn from home.

Members have reported that food hampers have been delivered to families in their school communities. This has highlighted a need for more support for some families after the pandemic who struggle with intergenerational health challenges or intergenerational disability. Our members have spoken about how much they miss seeing their students in the classroom environment; however, they have also expressed their concerns for protecting the health of our students, who are some of the most vulnerable students in our schools. Our members have expressed disappointment and frustration with the lack of notice given to principals about the return-to-school plans. Our members have also expressed concern that specialist schools have been excluded from a staggered return to onsite learning. This has placed enormous pressure on teachers at short notice to consolidate whole-school plans. Our members who are in leadership positions have emphasised that the resilience and innovation of the staff in special schools has been impressive and should be recognised. The capacity of schools to innovate and initiate alternative teaching and learning at home shows resilience, creativity and imagination. They have also emphasised how important it is to students that facilities and funding are provided as promised and in a timely fashion. All members have expressed that schools are continuing to provide education to all students. This is reliant on the goodwill of the staff and a determination that the learning needs of all students will be met throughout the pandemic.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Sorry to interrupt you, but I might just stop you there. The 5 minutes has expired.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Felicity and Helen, for your opening presentation and for the work that you are doing with the more than 100 specialist and specialist development schools that you represent in Victoria and engaging internationally as well. It goes without saying that remote learning has been a difficult challenge for our education sector, but our specialist and SD schools do a phenomenal job in communities. This has been exponentially harder and more pressurised on our families and our communities. I am just wondering if you could take us through the experience so far—it seems just a little while ago, but it is now coming up to two months ago—since we transitioned to learning from home. What has been the experience for our specialist and SD schools, and what are you hearing from teachers, support staff and families?

Ms BELLINGHAM: Our members have been talking about the huge amount of creativity they have needed in moving our students' learning to a remote environment, but I think they have been very creative and innovative in doing that. A lot of our students thrive on hands-on learning in the classroom, particularly if they have preliteracy skills. We concentrate on a lot of communication, speaking language in the classroom. We learn maths and English often through hands-on learning tasks and authentic experience-based activities. So to move that into a remote environment has been challenging, but I think they have managed quite well. But it has been a lot of work for them to manage to do that.

Ms HATHERLY: And many of the activities are open ended, so that has put a lot of pressure on families to be that teacher at home and change the relationship from parent-to-child to teacher-to-child, and I think for many of our families it may have been an awakening for them of how challenging learning is for their children.

Ms BELLINGHAM: And how much supervision they have needed to complete learning tasks.

Mr RICHARDSON: I think that is a really important point around the ratios at various specialist and SD schools and then the changing dynamic in a home environment. What has been the interaction with support

staff, with specialist educators? What has been that engagement and how has that played out in the home environment, and what learnings could we take forward from this learning-from-home situation that we have been in?

Ms BELLINGHAM: We have heard teachers talk about how they have been in regular contact with families through phone calls, through videoconferencing via appropriate means, through interactive video classrooms, all sorts of—

Ms HATHERLY: I think whenever contact is made with a parent there are some levels of conversation that usually follow. There is usually a frustration that comes out and that they wish it was all over, but they understand they need to keep everybody safe. But then it is, ‘How do I teach my child to do this when I don’t know how to?’.

Mr RICHARDSON: So there has been a lot of engagement, and that has been really important engagement, between teachers and parents. In addition to what our specialist educators already experience on a day-to-day basis, what has been the change in their workload and that interaction and experience?

Ms HATHERLY: Some of our member schools have also had children on site as well, so for some teachers that have been volunteering to come and work on site they have also been working on developing home learning programs as well. So that has been an issue for some of our schools. I think the thing about this is that there is always a lot of goodwill when you are teaching children with special needs, and many teachers go out of their way on a daily basis, so many teachers have gone out of their way throughout this process to ensure that the learning needs of the students have been met. Would you say that?

Ms BELLINGHAM: Yes, there are teachers who are managing to come in to school to supervise students who need to be on site at the same time as preparing home learning packs and home learning experiences for students at home, on top of communicating and keeping in contact with the families who are at home.

Mr RICHARDSON: Our specialist and SDS schools are individual and unique in their own circumstances and the needs of each student at their various schools. What has been the information flow to parents, to teachers and the community around supporting the health and wellbeing needs of students while they have been away and in that learning environment from home?

Ms BELLINGHAM: The feedback we have received from our members has been that schools have been providing a lot of wellbeing activities and a lot of wellbeing support; that they are seeing it as equally as important as the learning and education to keep our students’ health and wellbeing at home going well, including physical education, physical activities, but also wellbeing activities.

Ms HATHERLY: I think the other thing to note is that many of our teachers have been having daily parent-teacher interviews with their parents, and parent-teacher meetings are often surrounded by stress and anxiety. We have had a lot of our graduate teachers from our member schools reporting that the graduates are now very good at having these meetings, but they have had to upskill very quickly, and I think that came out in our online TeachMeet that we ran.

Ms BELLINGHAM: Where you might have had meetings with parents with multiple people present, there are more one-on-one phone calls and one-on-one contacts with families happening for all teachers, but like Helen said, for graduate teachers that is a skill that they really needed to upskill very quickly in.

Mr RICHARDSON: You mentioned before that students have been attending school as well at our specialist schools. Do you have a sense of how many students have been attending our more than 100 specialist schools? Have you got a bit of a breakdown of how that looks across the sector?

Ms BELLINGHAM: Sorry, I do not have the numbers on that, no.

Mr RICHARDSON: And how has the engagement been, or the collaboration between our specialist and SDS schools? Obviously it is a fantastic community with a lot of support. How has the interaction gone while they have been off site? How has that engagement gone with the network, and how have you been supporting your members during that time?

Ms BELLINGHAM: Our association has obviously been providing professional collaboration opportunities, as I mentioned, but there is also PASS—the Principals’ Association of Specialist Schools Victoria—and they regularly collaborated before the pandemic and they have continued to do so through.

Mr RICHARDSON: So you interact with Cameron Peverett and his team at PASS as well?

Ms BELLINGHAM: Yes.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. So going forward, obviously this has been a substantial change that was very sudden for the specialist sector. What are some of the learnings through this journey over the last couple of months as people got ready for learning from home over that school holiday period? There was not probably a break for anyone in the sector. What are some of the things that have evolved and what would you take away going forward, and anything that you could see as best practice to implement going forward?

Ms BELLINGHAM: I mean, there is the obvious one that teachers have, I think in all schools, regardless of which students they are teaching, developed themselves professionally in using a lot of programs and technologies that they were not necessarily as familiar with before. That would be a positive.

Ms HATHERLY: I think also the reason probably that it has been such a successful move or transition is that it was health related, so there was not a choice with this. It was, ‘This is how we’re going to deliver it to keep everybody safe’. That was a message that was clearly out there on all media, so in order to keep everybody safe this is what we have to do. It is not a new pedagogy, and it is certainly not a pedagogy that we would choose, but it is the way that we had to run to keep everybody safe and healthy. I do not know whether we would be able to institute a change as big as this just by saying that it was research-backed.

Ms BELLINGHAM: I think a lot of our members are certain that their students will be happy to go back to hands-on learning and experience-based learning in the classroom.

Mr RICHARDSON: You mentioned the transition date back to onsite learning. Certainly in my community Yarrabah School is one of my specialist schools. There have been parents who have expressed a little bit of concern around physical distancing and health and safety on site, and obviously the health and safety of our students is absolutely critical—especially with students that have pre-existing health issues. What is some of the advice that you have received on that transition back, and what advice are you providing to your members to assure the community in this transition back to onsite learning?

Ms BELLINGHAM: Well, our members are talking about how much effort they are putting into preparing and educating students about social distancing and physical distancing. There is no lack of preparation of students within the boundaries of what we can do.

Ms HATHERLY: But they do not actually need it once they go back to school.

Ms BELLINGHAM: No.

Ms HATHERLY: So it is the adults that we have to be mindful of on our return. But there has been some discussion around, ‘Well, we’ll still teach social distancing because that’s what they’ll need on the weekend when they’re out with Mum and Dad if they go to the shops’. So we will need to teach it but not expect the children to practice it while we are at school. But it will be the adults who will model it throughout the school day.

Mr RICHARDSON: And have you seen any cohorts or year levels—the demographics of our specialist schools—that have managed better or coped better with the learning-from-home environment? Have there been any best practices that you have seen that you can share with the Committee or learnings taken from some of the experiences across the sector? You can talk about Ashwood if you want as well.

Ms BELLINGHAM: So through our TeachMeet, for instance, there were a few schools or members from schools who shared their style of remote learning. We have seen some really interesting remote learning with websites delivering videos, being able to deliver activities and delivering face-to-face learning through videoconferencing with students. We have heard of members doing Webex conferences with their students, which has provided the opportunities for students to feel connected to their community and to remain connected to their classroom community and with their teacher. That has been very heartening.

Ms HATHERLY: I think at some of the special developmental schools, though, the students and families have been very challenged by the remote learning because it is very difficult to engage a child who is having trouble just on eye gazing and then to expect them to do virtual learning at home. So they have said it has been very challenging and probably spent most of their time talking with parents and conferencing with parents about the need just to keep everybody happy at home during this time.

Mr RICHARDSON: Absolutely, and what engagement have you had with the Department of Education and Training? Obviously you have collaborated with PASS and Cameron Peverett, who leads up the Principals' Association of Specialist Schools. What has been your engagement with the department, and what do you need further in ongoing engagement as we transition back to onsite learning?

Ms BELLINGHAM: We do not have direct engagement with the department of education.

Mr RICHARDSON: So it is more through your teachers?

Ms BELLINGHAM: Yes, it is more through our members. We organise professional development opportunities for our members and networking, and we talk to our members about what they are doing and get feedback from them.

Mr RICHARDSON: So taking that further, obviously you are a national representative body as well. Is there any collaboration or learning or things that you have seen from other states and territories in their response that could inform Victoria going forward? And obviously in your local school as well—Ashwood School—is there anything that you have seen that is working or that Victoria is leading in on that national scene as well?

Ms BELLINGHAM: Well, I suppose it has not been a long time. It has been two months, and part of that was school holidays. So we have not had any major national conferences or anything in that time; we have mostly held Victorian-based conferences. But we as the Victorian Chapter are very active on social media. So we connect a lot with our other chapters, with our members in Victoria and with our members across Australia on social media, sharing ideas and learning.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Well, in the few seconds I have left can I thank you for your representation and the amazing work that our educators and support staff do in specialist schools, and we really thank you for your contribution to our Inquiry today.

Ms HATHERLY: Thank you.

Ms BELLINGHAM: Thank you for listening.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you for appearing today. I was looking at the national organisation's media release that was released last month, and I was wondering if you could clarify something for you because it might be useful. It said that the:

AASE supports:

That schools are given licenses by their respective sectors to access on-line resources that use evidence-based curriculum resources, and that can be shared with families.

What licences are you referring to there?

Ms BELLINGHAM: That was written by Peter Walker, who is the national president of AASE. To ask specifically about which licences, you would probably have to contact him. But I think it says at the bottom of the media release to contact him for more details on that specific national list.

Mr LIMBRICK: Are you having access issues with licensing to access online resources, or is this not something that you are seeing?

Ms BELLINGHAM: We have not heard anything specifically on this topic, no.

Ms HATHERLY: Not in Victoria. I think we are very fortunate in Victoria that the Department of Education and Training have a very good system that many members are using. We know we are really good in curriculum in Victoria. So perhaps it is the other chapters that are not—having those difficulties.

Mr LIMBRICK: One thing that I thought contained an insight in here which was interesting was it talks about how a regular routine is really important for a lot of the students with special needs and that holidays for families can be a stressful time for families because that routine is interrupted. I would guess that the current home learning situation would be even worse than that because not only are the students home and their routine is being interrupted but they also have to try and adapt to this new way of learning. What sorts of effects do you think this would have on the families, and how they are coping with these situations? And what sort of support do you think that families need that they are not getting?

Ms BELLINGHAM: I am actually not sure I agree with the preface that it is worse at the moment, because in school holidays they are not receiving the regular contact with school or the home learning activities to do. So I think it would be more routine and more contact with schools when we have gone back to term after school holidays, because what we are hearing from feedback from our members is that they are having a lot of contact with families, a lot of contact with students and they are providing a lot of activities in varying levels of structure towards the home routines, keeping in mind that most of these parents are trying to work their own jobs at the same time. So I think schools have been quite mindful to make sure that parents can structure it a little bit around their own work.

Mr LIMBRICK: So the level of involvement from parents to be able to communicate these activities and things like that, you think would be much higher than with students in other schools, for example—

Ms BELLINGHAM: Yes.

Mr LIMBRICK: where students can be assigned themselves—because I know for younger students they sometimes have trouble engaging with the online materials, and I imagine in this case as well it might be—

Ms BELLINGHAM: To log in to computers, to log in to programs on computers, to sit and do an activity that is written on a worksheet, all of these things would need much more significant supervision from an adult, and that is now falling to the parents, yes.

Ms HATHERLY: And I think that is where we were talking before about the struggle and challenges it has been for the parents, that they also have other children in their family who are quite capable of doing some online learning, and all they need to do is to ensure they have the equipment there. But for many of the students in our member schools, those students are the ones that need help. So at the start it was about comparisons between the mainstream school and the specialist school and then it was about comparisons about how the children learn and then it was about comparisons about, ‘I’m going to be doing this for how many more weeks?’. So then we have parents going through a grieving process yet again when they are reminded on a daily basis now that there is a stark difference between sibling number one and sibling number two and sibling number three in the family.

Ms BELLINGHAM: And for some it has probably been a struggle to realise how much supervision their child needs for the same kind of activity as their sibling.

Mr LIMBRICK: And one final thing: I acknowledge that this media release was not written by yourselves specifically, but one thing it started out with was that families and their children with disabilities are not being recognised by the media; it is something that is not getting a lot of coverage. Is that something that you think is a problem for parents and organisations trying to get support in that it is not getting enough widespread attention?

Ms BELLINGHAM: That media release was released on 7 April, leading up to schools moving to remote learning. So it was before the decision was made to move to remote learning. I think there has been concern that people do not realise the unique risks that children with disabilities, students with disabilities, face because they would find social distancing practices, even if we teach them to them, which we do, much more challenging to follow. I will give you a really plain example. You have got some children who cannot help but want to put their hands in their mouth a lot, so if you are telling people that part of social and physical distancing is not to touch their face or to not spread bodily fluids, well, some children want to put their hands in their mouth to soothe themselves and then they will just go and put that hand somewhere else without really thinking about it.

Mr LIMBRICK: I think we are out of time, so thank you so much.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Felicity and Helen, for the work you do. We have all been praising teachers and principals today, but I think we all know too how teaching students with a disability is difficult at the best of times. It must have been extraordinarily difficult over the last couple of weeks. On the last point you were just talking about, I think we have probably all walked into a specialist school and had a student walk up and give us a hug, and we know that—

Ms BELLINGHAM: They are often very friendly.

Mr D O'BRIEN: They are often very friendly, and that would make it even more difficult. Just on the issue of access to school-based learning, was there clear advice given to principals, to teachers and to special developmental schools about families being able to take their kids to school?

Ms HATHERLY: Yes, that was very clear, but it was the interpretation that perhaps was not.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right, and by that, I mean we certainly had reports of some children being turned away when the advice from the Government was that vulnerable children could go, and I think, Felicity, you said before that clearly this cohort falls into the vulnerable group more often than not. Did you get feedback to that extent that some schools just were not implementing it consistently?

Ms HATHERLY: I think it is the terminology that was used. There was a doubling up of using the same words for vulnerability as for children with special needs. Not all children with special needs are vulnerable. They might be vulnerable in the way they learn and the way they need to be taught, but they are not vulnerable as you might consider a family who is vulnerable that you have got an association with child protection over. So there was confusion with the wording.

Ms BELLINGHAM: There are some students who despite having a disability have been very happily learning from home—well supervised, very safe learning at home and continuing their education.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, as in the mainstream system there would be some that would be thriving, I assume, because the social interaction is too overwhelming for them at school and probably being at home is great, but it is horses for courses, I guess.

Ms HATHERLY: Look, it is always disappointing when you hear about some children that might be missing out because of a decision that is made at a local level, but I suppose it is about looking at that decision and why it was made. There are many things that I know from our school we took into consideration when we had the discussions with families, but we have had over 25 children at our school throughout this time.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Out of how many, sorry, Helen?

Ms HATHERLY: One-hundred and seventy-five.

Mr D O'BRIEN: All right. So the vast bulk were not at school.

Ms HATHERLY: Pardon?

Mr D O'BRIEN: The vast bulk of the students were not at school face to face.

Ms HATHERLY: That is correct, yes. But if you are going to have children at school who are, say, from a special developmental school, the student-to-staff ratio would be higher, so then you would have to guarantee that you were going to have that number of staff available who are also expected to provide home learning as well. I think, Felicity, you mentioned about the goodwill. There has been a lot of goodwill in all of this.

Ms BELLINGHAM: It is essentially voluntary that the teachers who are supervising students in the school are willing to do it.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That presumably is far more challenging too, because unlike at a mainstream school where teachers were asked to simply supervise remote learning but on the school site, you cannot just set up most of the students at a special school in a room and say, 'Get on with your work'.

Ms HATHERLY: No.

Ms BELLINGHAM: No.

Ms HATHERLY: And if you think about the specific needs of students at a special developmental school, for a lot of those children the way it works is the relationship they have with their teacher and the teacher assistant in the classroom. So if that teacher and teacher assistant are not available, then you are putting a student with staff that do not know them, do not know their specific needs and do not know all the risks associated with them.

Ms BELLINGHAM: Particularly if they have behaviours of concern and they rely on those relationships with people who are familiar with them.

Ms HATHERLY: So if you sift through, you would get to why. The first part of it makes you think, 'That's terrible', but then if you sift through and do a risk analysis of it probably you can understand it a bit better.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Did your organisation have a role in advising Government on these issues at all?

Ms BELLINGHAM: No, we were not asked. No.

Ms HATHERLY: We were quite excited to be asked for this.

Mr D O'BRIEN: You said before that you had no involvement with the department directly and—

Ms HATHERLY: That is right.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I assume also then no involvement with the Minister or the Minister's office?

Ms HATHERLY: No.

Ms BELLINGHAM: No.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Is there some other organisation that represents specialist schools that would have been doing that?

Ms HATHERLY: That would have been the Principals Association of Specialist Schools, PASS.

Ms BELLINGHAM: P-A-S-S, PASS.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Did you try and get access to the Government, or is it just not something that you get involved in—you are more about supporting teachers?

Ms BELLINGHAM: Well, we are volunteers on our committee and most of us work in schools, and the workload has been increased recently. So we have been fairly busy managing to provide our usual professional development to our members while teaching our own students remotely and while a lot of us are teaching our own children at home. So no, we have not chased after the Government, but we have been—

Mr D O'BRIEN: But apart from all that you must have had some spare time, surely! Sorry, for Hansard purposes that was sarcastic. Can I just ask: do you think there will be a need for additional supports for children to catch up or to get back on track once they do return to school?

Ms HATHERLY: Not to catch up.

Ms BELLINGHAM: Yes. So additional supports. A lot of our members are talking about the need to really concentrate on the students' wellbeing and a reintroduction to the school environment and their wellbeing in terms of what kinds of anxieties they might be arriving with. A lot of them are aware of what is going on with the pandemic. They have heard in the news; they see what is going on; they are being told to be really careful of germs, and some of our students would take that very seriously, be quite anxious and will be feeling quite nervous about coming back into the school environment because of what they have been told to be so careful of outside. I suppose this is why a lot of our members are concerned about whole schools going back at once and why we would have preferred a staggered approach.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes; okay. And just in the brief time I have got left, we have had a couple of instances where families who were struggling to cope were told by schools or the department to access their NDIS packages for support. Have you heard anything along those lines, and if so—

Ms BELLINGHAM: I have not.

Ms HATHERLY: It has been raised by some of the principals who are members of AASE that that has been a way in order to support families. Because as well as the students' goals that they are working towards at school, there are also the NDIS goals that they are working towards, so you would not want that to have stopped during this time either. But, yes, parents were choosing to access the NDIS funds to support them while they were doing their own work at home, for their own employment, to help engage students at home in their learning,

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Is that an appropriate avenue to be using NDIS, do you think? I know it is obviously there to support those families, but normally it would be through school that those families would have been supported.

Ms HATHERLY: Normally, but it has not been normal—we are in a pandemic.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, fair enough. All right. I am just about out of time. I will leave it at that and thank you very much for your time again.

Ms HATHERLY: Thank you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am glad someone did come and ask you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We appreciate you taking the time to appear before our Committee today. We will follow up with any questions which were taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of our Committee's request. We thank you very much for your time and for the work that you are doing with your schools and your school communities and wish you well in your future endeavours. The Committee will move to the consideration of the next witness. Thank you.

Ms HATHERLY: Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.

WITNESSES

Ms Nina Laitala, Executive Officer, and

Mr Wai Yan Moe, Student Executive Advisory Committee member, Victorian Student Representative Council (*both via videoconference*).

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's 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.

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent. 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. The hearings may be rebroadcast in compliance with standing order 234. I ask that photographers and camerapersons follow the established media guidelines and the instructions of the secretariat.

Thank you to the student representative council for joining us today. We invite you to make a 5-minute presentation. We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes, and then this will be followed by questions from Committee members relative to their representation at the table. Thank you for joining us.

Ms LAITALA: Thank you so much. Hi. My name is Nina Laitala. I am the Executive Officer for the Victorian Student Representative Council, VicSRC.

Mr MOE: And I am Wai Yan Moe, an Executive Advisory Committee member for the Victorian Student Representative Council.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms LAITALA: Thank you. As the peak body for the school-age students in Victoria, VicSRC would like to congratulate the Victorian Government on what has been a swift and adaptable response to education during the COVID-19 pandemic so far. Our main criticism of the response is that students were not consulted in the shift to remote learning or when determining the time line for returning to school physically. VicSRC believe that direct consultation with students before and during the changes to schooling would have seen a more effective response in the following areas.

Mr MOE: In terms of the communications from the Government to students about change, the information from the Government regarding updates to school operation during this period has been solely focused on teachers and school leadership, and there has been a clear gap in providing accessible, easy to find, practical information for students about change to their schooling situation. VicSRC communications has therefore heavily focused on giving this information to students in plain English via our website, social media channels and email communications. Students' schools, particularly regional and rural schools, and youth service organisations have reported that the information shared through VicSRC communications was often their key source of information.

Our website has seen a 150 per cent increase in traffic since the end of March when schools began remote learning. VicSRC also worked together with the Department of Education and Training during this time, and accessible student targeted communication was one of the key areas we advocated for that has not been adequately addressed based on feedback from our members and partner agencies. We understand that the Government and the department have been working on some student-focused communications, particularly around learning from home and mental health support. However, their internal processes have been a barrier to making this information accessible and available to students while it is still relevant and timely. In particular, we have heard that VCE students have had a large amount of anxiety about the impact of the crisis on their final years of schooling simply because there is very little information coming from the Victorian Curriculum and