

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 Meredith Peace, Branch President, and

Mr Justin Mullaly, Deputy President, Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch.

The CHAIR: We welcome the Australian Education Union to the public hearings 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.

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 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. 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—no more than 5 minutes, please. We ask that you state your name and position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting and Hansard purposes, and this will be followed by questions from Committee members relative to their representation at the table. Thank you.

Ms PEACE: Thank you. Meredith Peace, Branch President of the Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch. And I have with me Justin Mullaly, who is the Deputy President of the AEU. The AEU Victorian Branch represents 50 000 members in public schools, early childhood, TAFE, disability and AMES. Throughout the pandemic the union has engaged with thousands of members remotely via video, email, telephone and social media, hearing directly about their experiences, concerns and ideas. We are tremendously proud of the work of all AEU members in implementing the necessary changes to enable the response to COVID-19 in education. It is more than fitting that through this Committee of the Parliament the professionalism of teachers, principals, education support staff and other educational leaders across all of our sectors is acknowledged and celebrated.

The union's primary objective has been to ensure the health and safety of staff and students and that the quality provision of public education and all that entails was front and centre in decision-making, with the issue of member work and workload fundamental to this. On behalf of members we have been active in ongoing discussions with Government at both the state and federal level; the department of education; various government agencies, such as the VIT and the curriculum authority; TAFE CEOs; and employer groups in early childhood and disability. We have also liaised with our interstate colleagues, other unions and other education stakeholders to share experiences and exchange information. We have always acknowledged the primacy of the advice of the Victorian Chief Health Officer as we have advocated on behalf of AEU members in discussions about changes to educational provision. Overall, the messages from the Victorian Government have been clear, which has enabled implementation of decisions at the local level to occur more easily, although not without their challenges. In schools the move into remote and flexible learning occurred rapidly, although challenges were already being experienced in the final weeks of term 1, with parents increasingly deciding to keep their children at home. This created difficulties with the need for dual delivery of educational programs, both remotely and on site, without any time to prepare for those circumstances.

I want to briefly address the issue of disadvantage. Providing quality public education in communities that confront social and economic disadvantage is not a new experience for public educators, and it is not an issue created by this pandemic. However, you would be forgiven for thinking that some of our federal parliamentarians had only just discovered the issue, given some of their comments in the media. Public education institutions educate the vast majority of disadvantaged students across kindergartens, schools and TAFE. Before the pandemic we knew that our members did not have all the resources they needed to tackle disadvantage to ensure all students could access the educational, social and economic opportunities of a high-quality, properly funded public education. We must not miss the opportunity we have currently to consider how we can ensure all public education institutions have the resources to meet the very real needs of our

disadvantaged students. At times of adversity and economic uncertainty governments must redouble their efforts to invest more in public education to ensure that every Victorian is able to access the education that they need, no matter their stage of life. Our TAFEs are fundamental to the recovery from the pandemic. They are valued by the community and provide the path for education and training so Victorians can get the jobs that they need, and the time for investment in TAFE has never been more important.

The extensive work of our members to support the wellbeing of young people through direct contact with students and parents has resulted in stronger relationships with many parents. We must see new investment to take the opportunity to further develop those relationships, especially given the new insights that some parents have gained about the educational program their child experiences and the challenges of engaging our students in their learning and meeting their individual needs. Thank you.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Ms Peace and Mr Mullaly, for attending our hearing today, and thank you to your members, who have gone through a particularly challenging time but obviously have given the community more broadly a great insight into the importance of our educators across the state. So we thank them. You touched a little bit in your presentation on some of the experiences that your members have been through in the last couple of months, but I am wondering if you can give the Committee a bit of an insight into the types of issues that you have been advocating for from when the pandemic first emerged as an issue in schools.

Ms PEACE: Perhaps I will start, and then Justin you can add. I think initially, as I said in the opening statement, one of the first challenges we faced was that period when the infection rate started to increase. At that stage we had not moved to a circumstance where the community restrictions had commenced in the way that they have in recent times. So we had a circumstance where, particularly in schools but across TAFE and early childhood as well, many parents—because the level of anxiety and fear in the community started to rise—were keeping their kids at home, or young people in TAFE were staying at home. So we had circumstances where parents were asking for work to be delivered at home, but we were still running a full educational program at those institutions, and that created quite significant workload issues for our members, who were trying to juggle all of that at a time when they were dealing with their own personal circumstances in this pandemic. So that was very challenging until we got to the point where Government made the decision to go to early school holidays and that settled down significantly. So workload has been a major issue.

We shifted incredibly quickly from normal classroom learning to remote and flexible learning. We had the school holidays in between, but the reality is we had a very short period of time. I think it is quite extraordinary what staff in early childhood, TAFE and schools—and particularly schools—have been able to do in that space of time to ensure that our kids continue to be educated. It was not without its challenges and positives and negatives along the way, but I think that has been significant.

The other critical issue for us throughout this has been about the health and safety of our members, because I think far too often, particularly in public commentary, it became all about schools being safe—forgetting that we have tens of thousands of adults working in all of those sectors educating our young people in this state. And they felt very vulnerable as a result of that. You know, ‘Why isn’t our health seen to be as important as anyone else’s in the community?’. So it has been particularly challenging for us to assist members and make sure—and we have been criticised for this—those things were taken into consideration in any of the decisions that were made and to ensure that the adults could be safe and comply with the sort of broad community restrictions that were in place within our education environment.

Mr MULLALY: I think it is worth also bringing to the Committee’s attention the important work and the special circumstances of special schools and specialist schools. The challenges there in terms of work, workload and safety for both students and staff at the school are very different, as people will appreciate. I guess one of the things that is incredibly important there is that relationship with parents of the students with additional needs. So we certainly provide a lot of support and advice to members in that situation, and as circumstances have changed over time, of course, the need for that advice has been ongoing.

I think another thing that is important to point out is, like with many unions, we have advocated where we have needed to around the continuation of salary for some members. Of course it was a very clear position of Government from the outset that teachers and support staff who were permanent or fixed term would continue to be employed as they were continuing to work, but the challenge was certainly there from the outset around

casual relief teachers and casual ES as well—ensuring they could actually continue to be in receipt of some form of salary given the changes that were bestowed upon us in terms of the work available to them.

Ms STITT: And given those sorts of challenges and the diversity of the issues that you have been dealing with, have you needed to be in contact with the department regularly throughout this period? Just give us a bit of a sense of how that has been going.

Ms PEACE: Yes, a lot. We at different times have been in daily contact and sometimes far more frequently than that during the course of the day at some of those critical moments. So that contact has been very important for us to be able to convey the views and the concerns from our members about what they were experiencing at the local level but also to hear from the department about decisions that were being made and the kind of advice that they were going to provide and to be able to have some input into that in the context of the needs of our membership.

Ms STITT: Given that, how important has the clear messaging from the Government been in terms of your members' understanding of the situation for schools?

Ms PEACE: It has been generally good. I think one of the messages that we heard, and particularly in more recent times as some of the restrictions have been starting to lift and leading up to that decision about the return of schools—one of the clear messages we got from our members was that they wanted the messages from Government, whatever the decision, to be clear and consistent and continue to be clear and consistent, because that has certainly enabled our principals in particular, but leadership teams across all of those sectors, to be able to make the local decisions they have had to make with that clear advice.

Ms STITT: And what has been your view on the announced transition back to school?

Ms PEACE: I think the membership are pleased that we have a decision and they know what is ahead of them, but that was made at a time when other restrictions in the community were starting to be lifted. I think at different times our members have felt like they were being treated in a vacuum. You step in the doors of a school and suddenly, magically, you are safe, and when you step outside the door of your school suddenly all these other restrictions apply. So I think it has been important that the decision about returning to school was made at a time when clearly the health advice was we could start looking at other options in the broader community.

The significant thing for us has not been really about the date when school may or may not return. It has been about what provisions are in place to ensure the health and safety and to manage the workload of our members and also the health and safety of the students we educate. The decision about the timing in some ways was irrelevant, because we have always said that we will rely on the advice of the Chief Health Officer and the Government decisions arising out of that.

Ms STITT: I should really correct myself and not say 'back to school' because of course school has not stopped.

Ms PEACE: It never closed.

Ms STITT: You have been delivering it in different ways. Have you got any insights into what you think some of the key learnings and best practices might be around remote learning?

Mr MULLALY: There are many. Some are small; some are more significant. I think that the way in which our profession has been able to adapt to change so quickly, I guess, highlights perhaps in the most profound way in recent times its ability to meet the needs of students. I think in that sense one of the things we have learned is around the importance of teachers and their absolute dedication to their students and to their colleagues, and I think in that way the recognition that they get from the community more broadly, I would hope, into the future will certainly remain at the high point that it perhaps is at the moment.

I think in terms of program provision and more practical things, clearly there is an increase of skill amongst the profession around remote delivery, whatever that means—and of course that means a range of things—and I think that we will see opportunities in schools to extend on that to meet the needs of particular student cohorts.

But in terms of using technology as a learning tool, not just the deliverer of information, I think there will be opportunities to build on the experiences people have had.

Meredith touched on it in her opening remarks, but it is a critical point—the opportunity that teachers have had to engage with parents and to build that relationship, I do not think we should underestimate the power of that. We certainly have many stories where teachers have engaged directly with parents multiple times a week supporting the learning and welfare of their children in a way that just simply is not available in the normal school arrangements, so being able to find a way to continue that, I think, is going to be an important thing that we can learn, and structuring schools so that that can occur is something that we are going to have to work out.

I think the other thing that is probably worth highlighting is the ability for our students to have adapted as well and that some of these learning modes of course suit some students better than others. I think that we can take some opportunities to provide programs to students in a remote way that might actually meet their needs in a better way than what we have been able to up until this point.

Ms STITT: And in terms of the transition back to face-to-face schooling, how has that announcement been received by your members? Does it differ in regional versus metro, or are there other differences that you think you have picked up in talking with your members?

Ms PEACE: I think generally it has been received well. There were a lot of questions of course, because there is a huge amount of decisions that will need to be made. Once that decision was made we had close to two weeks, and schools automatically went into, ‘What do we need to do to be prepared for the arrival of the first lot of kids on 26 May?’. So I think people are happy to have a decision. They can plan. As we saw when we came into remote learning and we went into that kind of community shutdown, our members’ capacity to respond to change quickly is enormous. I think they proved that, and they will prove it again as we come back into more classroom-based learning.

Ms STITT: We have talked a little bit about some of the key learnings, but what do you think are the key lessons out of this whole experience from your members’ point of view and from an education point of view?

Ms PEACE: Look, I mentioned the issue of disadvantage in my opening statement. There has been a lot said about that. Of course, we have always had to deal with significant issues of disadvantage and having the resources that we need to respond to the needs of kids, but clearly this circumstance has highlighted some of those things. By the same token we have heard some really positive stories around, as Justin said, the more regular and direct contact with parents, and in some instances students, from some of those backgrounds has been really helpful. So I think we need to learn from that how we can respond. The lack of resources, pretty simply, is a significant part of that. That has been highlighted through the technology issue, where Government has provided significant amounts of equipment—dongles et cetera—to support those kids, but there have been a lot of other things as well.

I think it also highlights issues around the time our staff have for professional learning. They had to learn incredibly quickly about a whole range of, particularly IT, platforms and so on that we were not necessarily familiar with to enable that learning to occur effectively. Professional learning is sometimes difficult when you have got kids at school every day, so I think that is one thing that we should try and focus on—how we can ensure that ongoing professional learning for our staff in a whole range of areas, not just waiting for a crisis that triggers that.

Ms STITT: Is the union turning its mind to how you might gather all of this good information back from teachers so that that can inform planning for the future?

Ms PEACE: Yes. As I said, we have been meeting regularly throughout the last couple of months with our members remotely in our kind of normal meeting structures, but it gives us access to a lot more people in some ways when they do not have to travel to a meeting, and we have been getting a lot of really good feedback. At the moment that discussion is largely focused on the return and what is happening now, but we internally have started to think about how can we gather that information. Whilst we have not made any firm decisions about that yet, I think we will do something in a variety of different ways, but we will certainly look to gather that information—what are the positives, what are the negatives and how can we make the most out of what has been a really difficult period.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you both for appearing today. I want to ask about the workload for teachers and what that has been like. Obviously, as you said, giving teachers the time to professionally develop and prepare for classes is something that is very important. Can I get some understanding of just what the experience has been for teachers, because I get the feeling that they have worked very hard to make this work, but I would be interested to hear from you.

Ms PEACE: I think the easiest way to respond to that is that staff in our schools and staff in TAFEs and early childhood—and remember early childhood has continued throughout all of this despite the fact that some parents have kept kids home. I think our education staff across all sectors are tired. They did not really have a break over the Easter holiday period because we knew we were going into more remote learning, whatever the setting you worked in, and our staff continued to work during those periods to make sure that they were ready for the kids when they came back. The overwhelming feeling at the moment is we can see and hear from our members that they are very tired.

That workload has differed, probably, for some people. We have talked a little bit about technology. Obviously some people are far more expert at some of those technological requirements than others, so some people have had a pretty steep learning curve in that regard. I mentioned the dual learning. We still have that circumstance, for example, in early childhood where our early childhood teachers and educators are providing learning programs for families where they are keeping their kids at home, as well as delivering onsite programs. It does not necessarily double their workload, but it is certainly more than they would normally carry, and it is particularly challenging with some of the younger age groups around the use of technology because they might be familiar with technology, but they are not used to using it in the same way as some of our older students in terms of learning programs. So getting material to families and making sure they are kept up to date has been an issue.

Mr MULLALY: I think another way of looking at it that adds to Meredith's comments is if you think about what a teacher might have planned to deliver in a classroom and then for them to be advised that that is simply not going to be possible. Then to try and replicate that in the best way they can in an online environment really is about them rewriting the work they have already done and then trying to do that in a technological environment, which might be new to them, and doing that in an environment where students may not have access at home or, even if they do, they might have brothers and sisters, and so the competition, if you like, for access is not straightforward. Then the need for teachers to adapt what they have planned to meet those various different requirements—hours and hours of work on a daily and weekly basis, on top of what they might have already put in to prepare for the basic units of work and lessons that they may have planned to deliver regularly. That is something that is replicated of course in terms of the work that support staff, particularly those support staff who are working in classrooms, need to do. They will have their plans in place, which have had to be redrawn so support can be allocated to students in a remote way. To say things were turned on their head I think is a pretty apt phrase.

Mr HIBBINS: Returning to onsite learning, for some teachers and educators for health reasons or other reasons that might not be possible at this stage. Are you happy with what has been put in place to support those teachers?

Ms PEACE: We are still working through a lot of those issues. There are clear guidelines from our public health officials about who is regarded as vulnerable, and it is quite clear that those staff will be able to continue to work at home—where they are not ill, they are just vulnerable. As that health advice has changed, that has created some concern for people who might have elderly parents living with them or family members who are immunosuppressed, for example. So we continue to work directly with the department of education and with our members, taking up those issues often on an individual basis, working with our principal members to work out the best solutions. Some of those people, if they cannot be at work, should be able to, in our view, continue to work remotely at home. Given we now know how to do that we should be able to do that, and I think we should not underestimate the relationships and connections our teachers in particular have with their students. To say, 'Well, you're not in a vulnerable category, but if you can't be at work then you just go onto sick leave', means that our kids then miss out on that connection with the person that they are used to seeing in front of their classroom. That is not a great thing either. So we will work through those issues on an individual basis.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you very much, Ms Peace, and your team, for appearing today at this very important Inquiry that we are conducting. You have talked a little bit about your members, and I would just be

keen to find out from you what you would say were the number one and two concerns of your members through this process and about the return to school?

Ms PEACE: I think their own health and safety and the health and safety of their students, and as we went to remote learning—and this will be the same as we come back—their overwhelming concern for their students in ensuring that not only their educational needs are met but their wellbeing needs are met. I think that is a consistent comment we have heard from our members throughout all of this kind of worrying, if you like, but also putting in place processes and arrangements to ensure that they knew their kids not only were continuing to learn but were getting the emotional and welfare support they needed.

Ms VALLENCE: So the number one concern, as you mentioned, the health and safety of themselves. I think you mentioned earlier that teachers thought that they were sort of perhaps being treated in a bubble and felt vulnerable. What were you hearing from your members in terms of those who are in primary and secondary school versus those in the early childhood sector? Was their approach to their vulnerability from a health perspective different?

Ms PEACE: No, I do not think so. Our early childhood members were and continue to be quite concerned about the fact that their centres continue to be open and they continue to work unless they are in a vulnerable category themselves. So those issues were similar across the board whatever education sector our members were from.

Ms VALLENCE: We know obviously that primary and secondary schools have been closed and early education is still open. Did you make any specific representations on behalf of early childhood educators?

Ms PEACE: Yes, we did. I know this is semantics, but our schools were not closed. They continued to be open, and I think every school had students on site as well as obviously doing remote learning. But, yes, we have been in regular contact with all sections of the department who are responsible for all the sectors that our members work in, including the early childhood area.

Ms VALLENCE: I think you mentioned earlier to one of my colleagues that you had met quite regularly, even daily or sometimes a couple of times a day, with the department. Did you also meet as regularly with the Minister?

Ms PEACE: We have been meeting weekly with the Minister—remotely, obviously, but yes, we have had weekly meetings with him.

Ms VALLENCE: And had you met with the Chief Health Officer?

Ms PEACE: We had a joint meeting with a number of stakeholders on one occasion with the Deputy Chief Health Officer.

Ms VALLENCE: You met just once, only with the Deputy Chief Health Officer?

Ms PEACE: Yes.

Ms VALLENCE: Did you meet with the Chief Health Officer?

Ms PEACE: No. He was supposed to be at that meeting but was unable at the last minute to come, so the deputy filled in for him.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. We obviously know that in mid-April the Chief Health Officer made mention that schools were safe for people to attend, and you mentioned earlier in your presentation the primacy of the information from the Chief Health Officer—you made that point a little earlier. In our hearings last week the Chief Health Officer told this Committee—he made mention—that obviously they made a press announcement that it was safe for kids to go back to school and that school should no longer be restricted and that transition should occur. He made mention that it was the health advice to return to school but that it was a government decision to actually wait for up to four weeks. Was the union opposed to teachers returning to school straightaway?

Ms PEACE: As I said before, we have never put a date on when a return should or should not occur. The issues we were discussing with the department, prior to the health officer making the decision that we should start to return, were all based around: what are the possible scenarios of different cohorts of kids returning, whether everyone might return if the health advice is that that is safe and so on. So we just really worked through the logistics of what the scenarios were and what issues they might raise; we did not have discussions about saying, ‘We want the date to be this’, or something else.

Ms VALLENCE: The Chief Health Officer—as you made mention in the hearings last week, his expert medical advice was that it was safe to return to school, so I am just interested in the union’s perspective on why we were not ready to be able to return to school straightaway.

Ms PEACE: Look, we have always said that we will listen to that advice. It is Government who makes those decisions—

Ms VALLENCE: Were you surprised that the Government did not heed the expert health advice to return to school straightaway? We have heard earlier from some of the previous witnesses today around being able to return within one week, not waiting for the two and four weeks. Were you surprised, after the health officer said that it was okay to return to school, that the Government deviated from that and had up to a four-week return approach?

Ms PEACE: We in those discussions have always said that we wanted time to allow people to prepare for that return—

Ms VALLENCE: I think you mentioned often many teachers were working through the school holiday period. Had they not been preparing already?

Ms PEACE: No, they were focused on delivering the best possible education to their kids remotely, and as Justin explained, that required in many instances a complete rethink about what they planned to do. I think it is unreasonable, whilst they are trying in really difficult circumstances to deliver the best education they can, remotely and in other ways, depending on what was suitable for their community, to then also have them preparing for what that learning might look like when they return to the classroom. That is a huge workload, and we have already been dealing with difficult workload problems throughout this pandemic. Now that we have had what I think will be about 10 days notice by the time we get to that date, it gives people a chance to work through the logistics. It is a huge planning exercise to work out how we can effectively and safely return our students to schools and make sure all the adults who work in our schools are also safe and able to abide by the restrictions which are still in place.

Ms VALLENCE: On that, obviously the Government has announced around teachers being able to access testing. Have you experienced that any of your members have struggled to access testing, particularly in remote and regional areas?

Ms PEACE: Not that I am aware of.

Ms VALLENCE: No issues there? That is good to hear. The Government has announced around cleaning of schools. I think there has been mention around PPE and the sanitisation and cleaning of schools. What are you hearing from your members around the receipt of PPE? What would you be expecting your members to be using? What PPE measures are you expecting your members to put in place, and will that prevent a return to school in some instances?

Ms PEACE: Not that I am aware of. The two critical issues around the hygiene are around some of those hygiene practices, so making sure that our kids continue to understand the importance of things like hand hygiene, the availability of sanitiser, soap and PPE where it is required.

Ms VALLENCE: Have schools received that yet? Have you seen that that has been received? What are you hearing from Government?

Ms PEACE: I have not had any complaints from schools that have not received and have shortages. When we came in—

Ms VALLENCE: Perhaps when we get to next week and in four weeks time are you expecting to hear from any schools? Would that cause an issue for you with teachers being able to perform their duties if they are not in receipt?

Ms PEACE: Not that we are aware of. It has not been raised with us. We understand our schools have either got supplies or have got access to supplies of those necessary things. We have got enhanced cleaning occurring, which has been occurring in our schools and will continue throughout term 2 and term 3. I think that has reassured our members that measures are being taken to ensure that our schools are as safe as they can possibly be.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The Member's time has expired, so we thank the Australian Education Union very much for their time here today and for the work they are doing with their members. You will be provided with a transcript to verify and any questions that were taken on notice as well. Thanks so much.

Ms PEACE: Thank you.

Mr MULLALY: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.