

# 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**

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

Ms Jenny Atta, Secretary,

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

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

Ms Kim Little, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

Ms Sandy Pitcher, Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills, and

Mr Chris Keating, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority, Department of Education and Training; and

Ms Brigid Monagle, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, and

Ms Elly Patira, Executive Director, Social Policy Group, Department of Premier and Cabinet (*all via videoconference*).

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

We welcome the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and his departmental officials 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.

We have asked that phones 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, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

We ask you to make a brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes. We ask that you state your name and position for broadcasting purposes, and this will be followed by questions from the Committee relative to their representation at the table. Thank you.

**Visual presentation.**

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Chair. James Merlino, Minister for Education. To begin with I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather and pay my respects to elders past and present. Thank you, Chair, and Committee members for the opportunity to speak with you today. At the outset of this hearing I want to particularly thank our teachers, support staff and leadership teams across every education sector—government, Catholic and independent schools—for their extraordinary work and dedication to the students and communities that they serve.

This Government has acted quickly and decisively to respond to the pandemic, based always on the very best public health advice. I think it is important to say at the outset as well, to put this into perspective, the scale of what we have done and its unprecedented nature: schools in just a few weeks shifted a million students across more than 2200 schools in Victoria to flexible and remote learning. It was a massive effort and I could not be prouder as Minister for Education. I also could not be prouder of our parents and our students for responding in the way that they have. There have been challenges and we said this at the very outset—that there would be

challenges. This is a massive undertaking. We have never asked schools, parents and students to undertake remote learning of this nature, but none of our decisions have been taken lightly. Our actions in Victoria have been in line with the advice of national cabinet, and we stayed in lock step across all our sectors here in Victoria. We followed the COVID-19 national principles for school education every step of the way, whether it was ensuring our schools remain healthy, safe and clean, supporting our students or moving to remote learning. Our decisions, like the decisions in every state and territory, have been based on expert public health and education advice consistent with these national principles.

While the extent of the pandemic has varied from state to state, Victoria's transition to remote learning and the return to classroom closely matches other states and territories, particularly the eastern seaboard of our nation. In the same week we brought forward the school holidays for students so schools could prepare for remote learning, New South Wales, Queensland, WA and the ACT all made their own moves towards it. Following advice from the Victorian Chief Health Officer we are now returning to face-to-face teaching.

We have worked closely with the profession on the best way forward and listened to their feedback. Moving to remote learning, as I said, was a massive shift, just as the transition back to school will be, so we have provided the notice that our schools need. We are investing \$45 million for enhanced cleaning, making sure high-touch points are disinfected throughout the day, and we have brought forward corresponding funding for Catholic and independent schools for cleaning as well. And we are staging the return of students, with the first returning next Tuesday, 26 May. All other students will return on Tuesday, 9 June—the same day as Tasmania, a week after the ACT and over a month ahead of the full planned return in New South Wales.

When we announced remote learning we knew some things would work well while others would be more challenging. We knew that we would learn from these experiences and we have. Every day I am hearing stories of the innovative and creative ways our outstanding teachers are giving their students a world-class education. At Yarra Primary the school sports captains have helped deliver online physical education lessons. Strathewen Primary has combined online resources with hard-copy packs tailored to each student and distributed fortnightly. Mildura Specialist School has supported families by providing flexibility for students to attend on site on different schedules.

As I said, parents and carers have both understood and acted on the message, 'If you can learn from home, you must', and across this term around 2.7 per cent of students have attended on site. We have also been responsive to parents and staff through a dedicated hotline and a frequently asked questions portal. Parents and teachers were understandably anxious when we announced the move to remote and flexible learning—as you can see on this slide—with around 300 people calling with school-related queries on 14 April, so the peak was as we moved to remote and flexible learning in those early days of the term. These levels of anxiety quickly reduced as learning from home got underway, and those calls fell dramatically to only 71 on 24 April.

With approximately 3 per cent of students attending on site, I acknowledge all Victorian families who have juggled working from home with education and childcare responsibilities. This has not been easy for anyone. We knew this change was always going to be hardest on students and families who need the most support. We have provided learning resources as well as tips and advice to parents to best support their children. We have provided more than 57 000 laptops and tablets to students in need, and school buses have helped transport learning materials in areas of limited internet connectivity. We have made ongoing adjustments to better support students with a disability, whether they are learning from home or on site. I particularly note the outstanding work of teachers and principals in specialist schools.

Remote learning has also had benefits for some disengaged students who have reconnected with this way of learning, as well as for some high-ability students. This is going to be an important piece of work as we transition back: how do we understand the lessons learned, particularly for those students who have flourished under flexible and remote learning? We are looking at how we can replicate that. Finally, to take some pressure off VCE students, we have made some changes to VCE studies and reduced school-based assessment tasks.

In terms of early childhood, under advice from the Victorian CHO and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, early childhood education and care services have remained open with risk-mitigation measures in place. Thousands of dedicated early childhood teachers, educators and support staff have worked tirelessly to give Victorian children the education and care they need. It has been a tough time for the sector, and we are investing up to \$45 million in addition to our existing kindergarten subsidies and payments to keep

services open and workers employed. This funding ensures sessional providers not eligible for the Commonwealth JobKeeper payment can offer a free 15-hour kindergarten program. As you can see on this slide, a number of families, particularly in the early days and weeks, have chosen to keep their children at home, so attendance at sessional kindergarten has been around 30 to 50 per cent, and in long day care it has been 40 to 70 per cent. Services are working with their communities to continue learning programs remotely, and we are supporting that through our School Readiness Funding and an additional \$900 000.

In terms of higher education, our training system is helping to supply key workers needed for our coronavirus response. TAFEs have responded well and have increased the courses being delivered remotely, including our free TAFE courses. Enrolments in government-subsidised training are holding up very well, with a decrease of just 0.3 per cent compared to the same time last year. With the Premier and my colleague Gayle Tierney I announced a \$260.8 million support package for Victoria's TAFE and training system, including crisis support funding.

**The CHAIR:** Can I stop you there, please, Minister? Sorry, the time for the presentation has expired, and I will hand to Gary Maas, MP, for the first questions.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Deputy Premier, for your appearance and for your presentation this morning. A big thankyou to your departmental team, who we know are also online as well. Deputy Premier, I would like to take you to the education infrastructure package that was announced this morning. Would you be able to tell us exactly what was announced and how the package will support Victoria's economic recovery?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Mr Maas. I am glad you are asking me that question, because that was the component I did not get to in the presentation—a really significant investment announcement this morning that is all focused on job creation but has quite a profound impact on education. The whole package that the Premier and I announced this morning was \$2.7 billion: road projects, public housing, sports—a whole range of other investments. But out of that \$2.7 billion, more than \$1.18 billion in education infrastructure projects, and this is across early childhood schools and TAFE.

I will provide a breakdown for you and the Committee: \$438.6 million to build 10 new schools and deliver a further four stages of new school projects; \$130.1 million for the established areas program to provide additional capacity at nine metropolitan schools; \$388.8 million to deliver 57 upgrade and modernisation projects at schools right across Victoria; \$10 million for the accessible buildings program, so this is the fund to provide small upgrades at schools to support the needs of students with additional needs—ramps and the like; \$114.5 million for the relocatable buildings program, so that is 250 additional relocatable buildings; and \$20 million for the minor capital works fund, so this will be a fund for those smaller projects that schools have identified, that can get out of the ground quickly, and we will have that fund for projects across the state. In terms of TAFE, a \$55 million maintenance program across all our TAFEs in Victoria. And in early childhood, \$27.7 million for the building blocks program, so this is capital funding for local government not-for-profit kindergartens to improve facilities and increase capacity. That is a breakdown of the very significant announcement we made today.

**Mr MAAS:** Would you be able to inform the Committee how many extra construction jobs will be accommodated as a result of the announcement?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. Thanks, Mr Maas. This was a key component of this. This is about bringing forward projects to get projects out of the ground quickly and deliver jobs. Just the education component of the announcement we made today will create more than 1600 local construction jobs in communities across Victoria. For example, over 680 jobs will be supported in the construction of new schools to open in 2022 and new school stages, including over 290 jobs for the Greater Shepparton Secondary College alone. Over 430 jobs will be supported in the upgrade of 57 schools, over 150 jobs to deliver the nine established area projects, more than 240 jobs to deliver the accessible buildings program and the relocatable buildings program, and over 120 jobs to deliver the TAFE asset maintenance program and the building blocks programs. So a significant job creator in the early part—well, particularly over the next three to six months.

**Mr MAAS:** Can you let us know what is being delivered as part of this program to support regional schools?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. Thank you. It is a really important question. There are essentially two elements for our capital program: the projects that respond to growth and the projects that respond to condition and to our

education plans. So if I was to split up what I just took you through, there is \$420 million for growth projects, and the growth projects are in those growth areas—places like Clyde North or Greenvale and the like. But in terms of upgrades and education plans, the split is fantastic. For rural and regional Victoria, just under 50 per cent of those projects are funded in rural and regional Victoria—so \$259 million for metropolitan upgrades and education plans and \$248 million for rural and regional upgrades and education plans. So almost half, as I said.

We are fully funding a number of projects: \$495 000 for Ararat Primary, \$8.32 million for Baimbridge College, \$1.26 million for Bairnsdale Secondary, \$7.2 million for Ballarat High, \$8 million for Ballarat Secondary College, almost \$5 million for Cowes Primary, \$5.85 million for Delacombe, over \$4 million for East Loddon P-12, over \$15 million for Miners Rest, \$2.8 million for Newcomb Park. I can go on and on—\$10.5 million—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Foster and Korumburra, Minister?

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, the important point here, Mr O'Brien, is—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** That is no, right.

**Mr MERLINO:** there are projects that we can fund and identify that we can deliver within this six-month time frame. There is also going to be the normal budget process for the budget that the State will deliver later on this year. That time line has been announced by the Treasurer. So this will not be all the projects in Victoria that we need or want to do, but this is a significant program across the state: \$13.7 million for Latrobe Special Development School; over \$4.1 million for Upper Yarra Secondary College as part of the Lilydale and Upper Yarra Education Plan; Morwell Park Primary; Wangaratta District Specialist School; \$19.8 million for Warracknabeal Secondary College, which has been a project very, very close to my heart; and \$119 million to deliver the new Greater Shepparton Secondary College—so delivering that school in full as we promised. That school will be open for the start of the 2022 school year.

**Mr MAAS:** Thanks very much, Deputy Premier. Could you tell us how the new school projects were decided?

**Mr MERLINO:** As I said, it is a combination of growth and condition. It is anticipated that the total school-age population, so children aged five to 17, in Victoria will increase by over 110 000 student enrolments over the next five years, and we committed to delivering 100 new schools across the state over that eight years, 2019 to 2026, building on our record investment in government schools for new and upgraded buildings. So based on the department's demographic analysis, these 10 schools represent areas of high enrolment growth in the school system or are delivering on education plan projects, as is the case with Greater Shepparton Secondary College or the Lilydale and Upper Yarra Education Plan. The department annually reviews the need for new schools using demographic modelling of residential growth, demographic change and enrolment trends at schools across Victoria.

The department and the VSBA consult and work with state and local planning authorities to identify and plan sites for proposed new government schools, and these schools have already been designed and are all ready to commence construction within the next six months. So the fact that we can have education as such a significant part of the \$2.7 billion program is because of the work that we have been conducting over the last five years, the biggest school building program the state has ever seen. Many, many schools are already at that planning and detailed stage where we can bring them forward and deliver this economic rebound investment that we have announced today.

**Mr MAAS:** What are the new schools and additional stages of new schools?

**Mr MERLINO:** So the 10 new schools are Bridge Road Primary in Melton, Clyde North station primary school, Clyde North station secondary college, Endeavour Hills Special School, Gisborne South Primary, Grasslands Primary, Greater Shepparton Secondary College, Greenvale Secondary School, Kalkallo Common Primary School and Wollert East Primary. Then the four additional stages of new schools are: stage 2 of Dohertys Creek P-9; stage 2 of Saltwater P-9; stage 2 of Beaumaris Secondary College; and the San Remo campus, which is stage 2 of Wonthaggi Secondary College, so this is the junior campus in San Remo.

**Mr MAAS:** How many extra students will be accommodated as a result of the announcement?

**Mr MERLINO:** So this is the other great thing about the package. It is more than 1600 jobs, but it is also providing additional capacity for more than 20 000 extra students in Victoria's education system. It is almost 6000 from the 10 new schools, over 1000 from the further four stages of new schools, 1550 from the nine established area projects and 12 775 from the relocatable buildings program.

**Mr MAAS:** Could you inform the Committee how the upgrades were decided and how quickly you will start to work on them?

**Mr MERLINO:** Strategic and timely capital investment and condition-based maintenance of school infrastructure plays an important role in extending the life of the assets. The department has been working with these 57 schools that have received funding for an upgrade to design projects that are nearing the construction phase and are requiring investment now to ensure the project can start on a quick time line, which is what the Victorian construction industry needs most.

I know we have not got much time left, but another important project was the rebuilding of Clifton Creek Primary School. That is ready to begin, that rebuild, from August of this year following the devastating bushfires last year that destroyed this school. There are a number of other upgrades—Sandringham College; Yarra Ranges Special Developmental School, \$10 million; and over \$18 million to rebuild Croydon Community School. These are projects that we need to get out of the ground quickly and that were already in that planning and detailed design phase where we have confidence that we can do exactly that.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thank you, Minister, and if you could pass on the thanks to all teachers and background people from the opposition, who join with other members on the Committee, for the good work that our teaching community has done to get everybody through this period. It is acknowledged by everybody that a lot of effort and a lot of work has been put in by a lot of people.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Riordan. I will certainly do that.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Having said that, Minister, I am not so sure there has been that amount of work from your office with this press release today. To continue the theme from last week of meat, I would say this press release today from you is mutton dressed up as lamb. In your last paragraph you make it very clear that your project of \$1.1 billion today is on top of the \$6.1 billion you have done for the last six years. That to me is a billion dollars a year. You have just announced another billion dollars a year. So are you saying that this year you had no intention of spending anything on schools or are you just reannouncing what you are going to announce anyway?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Riordan, for that question. You obviously were not listening to the exchange that I just had with Mr O'Brien when he asked the question about one of his schools in his local community—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Which you have left out.

**Mr MERLINO:** There is the announcement, Mr Riordan, of what we are funding right now to provide that economic rebound for our state, creating jobs and activity, so \$1.18 billion. We have also got the state budget, the normal state budget, which previously was of course to be handed down in May but due to COVID-19 is now going to be handed down in October/November. We will be making investments in school infrastructure in October/November as part of the state budget, as we would normally do, and we are also making, Mr Riordan, this announcement today of \$1.18 billion.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So is that then a commitment—

**Mr MERLINO:** It is very courageous of you to ask questions about school capital when this—

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, Minister. We are talking about your COVID response.

**Mr MERLINO:** announcement equals what you had done in the four years that you were in government.

**Mr RIORDAN:** You have come out today with a big splash of spending the same amount of money that you have spent every year for the last six years. I am not quite sure how that generates new jobs and helps. Is what you are saying that—

**Mr MERLINO:** I am embarrassed for you, Mr Riordan.

**Mr RIORDAN:** you are committing to a further \$1 billion dollars in October/November? Is that what we can take from that?

**Mr MERLINO:** I am not going to foreshadow what may or may not be in the budget in October and I do not think any Committee members would expect me to today. What I am saying to you is that we have got a statewide \$2.7 billion investment package this morning of which \$1.18 billion is for education projects across early childhood, schools and TAFE. We will also—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Which is exactly what you have spent in the last few years.

**Mr MERLINO:** Mr Riordan, you are not listening to my answer. We will also have the state budget, the normal state budget, which will also include investment in school capital, in October/November. So the premise of your question is completely wrong.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. We will agree to disagree. So in getting us back to school and back to learning can you tell us, with the extra four weeks delay that Victorian school students are experiencing, what planning has taken place and what different outcomes students and families can expect with the extra four-week delay?

**Mr MERLINO:** Sorry, Mr Riordan, can you explain the extra four-week delay? I will take you back, and I will take your Committee members back, to my presentation and slide 4, which is the slide that has the move to remote learning and transitioning back to face-to-face teaching across all jurisdictions around our country, and you can see in terms of remote learning duration, at the bottom of that slide, in Victoria it is nine weeks. It will be nine weeks once we transition our students back. In New South Wales it is 13 weeks, in Queensland six weeks, ACT eight weeks and Tasmania eight weeks. So if you have a look at that slide, in terms of moving to remote learning and how long our students have been learning under flexible and remote learning and transitioning back, across all our jurisdictions, particularly the eastern seaboard of our nation, it is very, very similar, Mr Riordan. So it is incorrect to say that there has been some four-week delay. It was always understood at national cabinet and repeated by the Prime Minister that jurisdictions will approach and have different settings because there is different data and responses that need to be made per states and territories. So, for example, the Northern Territory, and to a lesser extent South Australia and WA, did not need to respond the way that jurisdictions along the eastern seaboard of our nation have had to respond. But you can see quite clearly from this comparison to jurisdictions around Australia that Victoria is very much in keeping. Each one is slightly different, but you go to the bottom of that slide—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Minister, we need to keep moving.

**Mr MERLINO:** and I think it tells the story, Mr Riordan.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. So in preparation for moving on, your department has offered or is set to organise COVID testing for teachers in the preparation to go back.

**Mr MERLINO:** That is correct.

**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?

**Mr MERLINO:** Okay. Thanks, Mr Riordan, for that question. The testing over this particular period as we are preparing for the transition back to face-to-face teaching—that two-week period last week and this week—we announced that we are going to particularly focus on teachers and education staff to provide that extra level of reassurance to school communities and staff as we move back to face-to-face teaching. I am advised that to date we have had about 2000 teachers tested, and I am not advised of any positive results, which is a great thing. In terms of both fixed and remote locations for teachers and staff to get voluntarily tested we have been coordinating with the Department of Health and Human Services. I will take on board your comments, Mr Riordan, in terms of access for teachers in rural and regional Victoria. I have got department staff in the

building next door, so I am not sure if the Secretary or Deputy Secretary Howes want to add any further in terms of the testing arrangements that we have got in place.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Well, we will take that on notice, but it would be good to supply to the Committee what you are doing there. In the few minutes we have left, once again getting back to the funding that you have announced for getting people back to school, I bring to your attention a notice that has gone out to one of the primary schools in my electorate, where they are calling for the early years to ‘bring your own device for learning’, which is essentially telling parents of students in prep, 1 and 2 that they will need to bring their own iPad back to school. The recommended iPads are \$700 or \$800 devices. Are you providing funding to support parents and families in that request to bring their own device? This means that children in prep to year 2 will bring their own iPad to school each day. Are you funding that?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Riordan. Are you referring to the students that received a device on loan? Is that what equipment you are talking about?

**Mr RIORDAN:** No. This is for this particular state primary school. So as not to have children contaminating or sharing devices, they need their own device. That is a new policy. So they can keep their original individual login details and there will be no need to share devices at school, also ensuring the highest standards of hygiene are met. Is this a policy that is across the whole state? And that \$700 or \$800 is a big impost on families. If you have got a child in prep and grade 2 you are looking at \$1800 before you can go back to school.

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. Thanks, Mr Riordan. I am not sure who wants to respond to this from the department, whether it is Secretary Atta or deputy secretaries Bates or Howes. In terms of devices, there are devices that we have provided on loan to students and the message is: we want kids to hang on to those devices—bring them to school for their learning, but hold on to those devices—because we always run the risk that there may be a spike in the pandemic.

**Mr RIORDAN:** This is a program organised through JB Hi-Fi. Are you aware of that program? It does not sound like—

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. I will ask the department if they are aware of this particular case. I am not.

**Ms ATTA:** Minister, it is Jenny Atta, Secretary, Department of Education and Training. There is no new policy around students and iPads and laptops. I am not aware of the details of that particular school. We are happy to follow it up and have a look. But all schools will have arrangements, often through a bring-your-own-device program, where students will already have access to a laptop or iPad, and indeed where they have not had access we have had a widespread program during remote and flexible learning to ensure that they do have access through a loaned device. The school may be reminding parents that all of the students should bring those devices with them so they are each working on an individual device during this period of transition.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So will parents have access to funding support in order to, as the brochure from this school says, ‘ensure the highest standards of hygiene are met’? Are parents to be concerned, who cannot afford these pieces of equipment?

**Ms ATTA:** Mr Riordan, I am really happy to follow up the particulars for that school program, but we have worked hard to ensure that all children who require a device during the period of flexible and remote learning have one. In many cases that will be through the standard school program, and we have supplemented that with loaned devices for many, many more students—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Secretary. I will interrupt you there. The Member’s time has expired, and I pass to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Deputy Premier, and, of course, thank you to all of your officials, who I know have worked very hard to help prepare our students for remote and flexible learning. I am going to take you, Deputy Premier, to the Government when they announced that Victorian Government schools would shift to remote and flexible learning for term 2. Can you take us through what led to that decision and the preparation that went into the transition?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Ms Richards. Throughout the course of the pandemic we have carefully followed the advice and recommendations of the Victorian Chief Health Officer every step of the way. We do not have the luxury of picking and choosing the advice that we will take and implement. We have been very careful every step of the way to follow the advice from the Victorian CHO. If you would recall, in the lead-up to receiving his advice to shift to remote and flexible learning, things were moving very, very quickly with the pandemic: international travel bans, incoming passenger quarantines, school camps and excursions cancelled, group gatherings banned. These changes were being made in swift succession—within days of each other in many cases.

In early April, the Chief Health Officer advised the Victorian Government that increased physical distancing across the population and preventing the transmission of COVID-19 meant children in Victorian schools should move to remote and flexible learning and care at the commencement of term 2. Onsite learning should continue to be provided for vulnerable children and for children of essential workers who are unable to make alternative arrangements, and when onsite learning is provided hand sanitiser should be available at the entry points to classrooms and education should be provided on hand hygiene, physical distancing should be implemented in classrooms to the extent feasible and ill children should be excluded from attending. So that was the advice provided by the CHO to move to flexible and remote learning.

Giving Victorian parents and carers, students and schools and the broader community certainty was absolutely essential. We knew our message needed to be clear, easy to understand, consistent and straightforward for schools to enact. So on 7 April we announced that on the advice of the Victorian CHO for term 2 all Victorian schoolchildren who can learn at home must learn from home. We understood that as Victorians we all have a responsibility to help minimise the impact of the pandemic and that the move to remote and flexible learning would help ensure we can maintain physical distancing and help slow the spread of the virus. As the Premier and I and the Victorian Chief Health Officer said a number of times: we do not want a million students, 80 000 staff members or their parents and carers congregating in and around schools.

We announced that all Victorian government primary, secondary and special schools would move to remote and flexible learning following the advice from the CHO, with exceptions for students in limited circumstances. We have been working very, very closely with both the Catholic and independent school sectors, and every step of the way again the advice from Catholic Education to their schools and Independent Schools Victoria to their members has been to follow the advice of the Victorian Chief Health Officer, and they also moved to remote and flexible models.

Onsite learning has been available for children whose parents cannot work from home and vulnerable students without access to a suitable learning environment at home as well.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Minister, how did you determine the exceptions for the students who needed to attend on site?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. This is one of the important decisions we made early on. In planning for the transition to remote and flexible learning, it became very clear to us that it would be very difficult to create a list of essential workers who would qualify for sending their children to school—like, who is in or out of that essential workers list? During the pandemic so many sectors have played an important role in keeping our community going during such challenging times. We did not want to leave any family stranded or having to choose between a shift or supervising their kids, so instead we determined that onsite attendance would be available for children on days when they are not able to be supervised at home and no other arrangements can be made; children of parents who cannot work from home; vulnerable children, including children in out-of-home care, children deemed by child protection and/or family services to be at risk of harm, children identified by the school as vulnerable, including via referral from a family violence agency, homelessness or youth justice service or mental health or other health service; and children with a disability.

The onsite learning program provided at schools has been the same as the remote learning program students were receiving at their homes, with supervision provided by school staff. That way kids who are on site have been connecting remotely with their regular classroom teacher, just like their classmates who are learning from home.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Minister. Minister, what has school attendance been during this period?

**Mr MERLINO:** It has been very consistent, and this goes to the point I made in the introductory presentation. Parents understood the clear message and acted upon it, so the daily onsite attendance rate for term 2 has hovered around the 2.2 to 3.1 per cent mark since the transition to remote and flexible learning at the start of term 2. Student attendance remains critical during the period of remote and flexible learning and is still required and expected. To ensure the health and safety of staff and students and to inform planning and staffing services, schools have been required to note and record attendance a minimum of once a day, continue to keep a record of all student attendance and absences and upload attendance/absence data into CASES21 once-a-day. Early attendance data for students attending on site shows that vulnerable cohorts are attending at a higher rate than the general student population. That makes logical sense. We thought that that would happen, and that has indeed been the case. This suggests schools are supporting vulnerable students to attend school where appropriate.

We have got senior education improvement leaders—health and wellbeing staff—who have been working closely with schools and families at the local level to ensure appropriate arrangements for onsite attendance are in place and that schools are managing this consistently with the government direction. This includes providing additional support to families that may need it, including for students with disabilities and complex needs, such as further support and adjustments to the remote learning program or enabling some onsite attendance.

Support and advice in relation to onsite attendance is also available for parents and families from the department's parent hotline for COVID-19 on 1800 338 663, which has handled more than 700 queries in relation to onsite attendance and supported resolution of these queries in collaboration with the department's regional and area teams.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Minister. I would just like to take you down a slightly different tack now. Can you inform the Committee of how many government schools have been closed to date due to coronavirus incidents and describe how a typical case would be handled?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes; great. Thanks, Ms Richards. So a total of 10 schools—eight government and two independent—and one early childhood education centre have been closed for contact tracing and hygienic cleaning following a confirmed COVID-19 case. The confirmed cases associated with closed Victorian schools were nine staff and one parent, and all of these settings have since reopened. My department works very closely with the office of Victoria's Chief Health Officer and experts from the Department of Health and Human Services to monitor and respond to coronavirus and support school communities in providing safe education environments. DET has directed government schools to follow the most current recommendations from Victoria's Chief Health Officer, so there is constant communication, guidance, advice and support being provided by the department to our schools.

Since the beginning of the outbreak there have been regular communications to schools and early childhood settings on critical transmission-reduction strategies. The message has been consistent. For example, if a student or staff member is unwell, they must not attend their educational setting. If they have symptoms of COVID-19, they must self-isolate and seek testing. On the advice of the Victorian Chief Health Officer, early education services can continue to operate at this time with appropriate risk mitigation measures in place. Onsite learning has remained available in schools for children of parents, as I said, who cannot work from home and for vulnerable children.

The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, the AHPPC, of Australia's chief health officers provides advice for schools in the management of suspected and confirmed cases. DET's response to confirmed cases in education settings is guided by the advice of the Chief Health Officer and DHHS. As I said, we work closely with DHHS to support containment of COVID-19, reduce the risk of transmission in educational settings and ensure the safety of all staff and students. Processes are in place for early childhood education services, schools and TAFEs to follow, which align with AHPPC and DHHS guidelines in the event of a confirmed case.

We have also established a dedicated incident coordination response team to support education settings through this process, and the current processes will continue to apply when students transition back to school and other education settings. As we said this morning and as the Deputy Chief Health Officer, the Chief Health Officer and the Premier have said, as we transition back, as we ease restrictions, we will still get confirmed positive cases. We will still see outbreaks across the state. So in those settings that I have taken you through, that will

continue as we transition. In the event of a confirmed coronavirus case, DET seeks advice from the DHHS public health team to determine whether the educational setting needs to close to contain the disease transmission and undertake hygienic cleaning. DHHS directs an early childhood education service, school or TAFE to close. Clear communications are provided to the community. Schools and their communities continue to be supported by the DHHS public health team and DET in the event of an outbreak in their immediate or nearby area. This includes detailed information and specific advice on additional measures that may be required.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Minister, and thanks for your attendance and evidence this morning.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Minister, for appearing today, and I would like to send my acknowledgement to all the teachers and principals and school communities that have worked so hard through the last few months to support their students. One of the main issues with remote learning was internet access, and it was really good to see that the Government did step up and provide some dongles and devices, but it also was concerning that there were thousands of students out there without internet access and without access to devices from the get-go—and acknowledging that a lot of schools actually went outside of the department's program to source devices for students. Can I just get some clarity? You have mentioned that you have loaned these to students. Does that mean you are going to be asking students then to return these devices to the department once we are through the crisis?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Hibbins. To your introductory comments, I will certainly pass on your thanks to the profession, so I appreciate that. To the last part of your question first: not any time soon. Tens of thousands of devices have been loaned out to families. We are not asking for them to be returned. As we have said, we are going to be living with coronavirus, living with this pandemic, for weeks and many, many months. It is not going away anytime soon, and there remains a risk that we will see, obviously, positive cases and outbreaks and a risk that we will see a spike, as we have seen in other jurisdictions, Singapore being one, where the efforts they put in place and the numbers looked very good, they eased restrictions, then they got a spike and they had to reimpose restrictions. The message to students that have received a device is: hang on to those devices, take it to school, use it as part of your teaching and learning. And that is going to be in place for quite some time.

**Mr HIBBINS:** The issue here which it has really highlighted is that I do not think anyone would think that any student, regardless of whether it is remote learning or learning from school, can properly receive an education without actually having a device or internet access at home. I guess the question is: given these devices have been loaned out, why would you ask for them back in the first place once this is over, and what is the department going to do with the thousands of devices that they have loaned out if they get them all back?

**Mr MERLINO:** Where the devices are coming from is important, Mr Hibbins. We have had a central allocation of 6000 laptops that were part of the department's procurement. There have also been more than 57 000 laptops and devices loaned out to Victorian schools in total since the beginning of term 2. A lot of those devices and laptops are laptops and devices that schools own, so directly from schools, or other schools loaning to students elsewhere. It has been quite fantastic how this has been coordinated and the support from schools across the state.

In terms of going to your question about what does this mean for students who have been identified as in need of a device and a device has been loaned out, my immediate response to your question is that we are not asking for those devices back because we want those students to have those devices through the course of this pandemic. In terms of the broader question you have asked around vulnerable students, students in need, and the provision of devices and laptops, I am doing some work with the department in terms of what this means in the long term for those students. We have got some quite clear processes in place, Mr Hibbins.

Schools approach this differently. Some schools, for example, purchase devices for their school communities. Other schools purchase class sets. Other schools have a system where they have 'bring your own devices'. So families purchase a device for their children. But in those cases we have a really strict policy that every school must have a program of supporting families in financial need so no student who attends school misses out. A child may not have a device at home, but in terms of their learning at school, if a school has a bring your own device program, for children that do not have a device, they have it at school.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Time is an issue, but I will just leave that with you. I think this has probably exposed some deficiencies in terms of the supply of laptops and internet devices at home, and I think that might be something that the department should now look at in the long term in terms of the provision of those devices at home and the deficiencies of any existing programs. But I would like to move on now. Essentially we are going to have nine weeks of students learning from home, and despite, I am sure, the best efforts of our school communities there are going to be some students that have fallen through the cracks. Do you have any data—I mean, you have given data about attendance at schools—about any students or the number of students who have actually fallen through the cracks? And are you looking now in terms of what you are going to do now to support the recovery or the learning recovery of students where that has occurred?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes, it is a good question, Mr Hibbins. You go back to the scale of this: 97 per cent, 98 per cent of our students in Victorian Government schools have been learning flexibly and remotely. There will be students that have struggled to maintain normal progress that you would expect through the course of term two. But there are also students that have flourished in this environment. This is one of the exciting things that have come out of this forced flexible and remote learning environment that we have had over the last couple of months. There is a cohort of students who have been school refusers, may have had behavioural issues, may have had high anxiety. For whatever reason the mainstream school setting has meant or has led to their being disengaged from their education. So I am talking constantly with individual schools, teachers and principals, with the principal peak bodies, with the profession more broadly and across Catholic and independent schools as well. Everyone I am speaking to at every school has said there is a cohort of their students that have flourished. But there is no doubt that there will be a cohort of students that have struggled. As we transition back—and the fact that we can get prep, 1, 2, VCE and VCAL back into school for the last five weeks of this term and the rest of our students back in for the last three weeks of this term—it will give our schools the opportunity to make that assessment both in terms of academic performance as well as mental health and wellbeing.

**Mr HIBBINS:** And so what support is the Government then going to provide students who have either fallen through the cracks or who have not progressed during this time?

**Mr MERLINO:** Schools will make decisions on any additional support that students need individually, and they will be using the assessment tools that are available to them. So schools will make the individual call if a student needs additional support in maths or in literacy or any other aspect—

**Mr HIBBINS:** And will the Government be providing any resources or any assistance to schools?

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, that will be provided at a school level. There is also going to be support as we transition. Our mental health and wellbeing teams, who have been engaging with students remotely, will now be transitioning back to face to face. So we will be asking schools in this transition back to prioritise students' mental health and wellbeing, and we have regional supports in place to enable this. This is not saying to schools, 'You're on your own. Kids are back; deal with them as you see fit'. There are additional supports at a regional level to provide support to schools and students as they transition back.

**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?

**Mr MERLINO:** In terms, Mr Hibbins, of the percentages that I went through, we had about 2.2 to 3.1 per cent of students attending on site.

**Mr HIBBINS:** And what was the range across schools, I am interested in?

**Mr MERLINO:** The range as in year levels? What do you mean by 'range'?

**Mr HIBBINS:** As in the range as in the highest number, the highest percentage of students that attended on site, versus the lowest on site. Do you have those figures?

**Mr MERLINO:** I might ask Deputy Secretary Howes to talk to this, but the highest range of students would be students attending our special school settings. The lowest number would be students attending our secondary school settings. Perhaps, Dr Howes, you could add to my answer.

**Dr HOWES:** Thanks, Minister. There was a range of attendance across the state and across the sectors. It was highest in primary schools and lowest in our secondary schools, but it was also higher in rural and regional areas. They had a higher attendance rate than did metropolitan schools. It was as high as getting up close to 5 per cent in our primaries and lower in secondaries.

**Mr HIBBINS:** So the highest range of attendance at schools was 5 per cent? Is that at primary schools?

**Dr HOWES:** It was higher than that in specialist schools. Specialist schools had close to 6 per cent on average.

**Mr HIBBINS:** So you are giving me the average, but I am looking for the range across all individual schools. So the school with the highest percentage versus the school with the lowest percentage.

**Dr HOWES:** I do not have that to hand, but we can take that on notice.

**Mr HIBBINS:** If you could take that on notice and provide that information for the different classes—the primary, the secondary and the specialist—I think that would assist the Committee.

**Mr MERLINO:** And what it also does, Mr Hibbins, we will provide that data to you, but it shows that schools at a local level responded to students most in need, particularly vulnerable students. I think that is what the data shows you, so we will be able to break that down a bit further for you.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Minister, for joining us here today. I want to take you back to some of the remote and flexible learning that we discussed earlier. It is amazing to think that in less than a month our teachers, our principals, our students transitioned to education by remote learning and flexible learning. I think all members would be pretty astonished at some of the amazing efforts and the one-percenters our teachers and principals have gone to to support their students and their communities. I am wondering if you could take the Committee through some of the aspects of curriculum delivery in this new environment.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Richardson. You are right, this was just an extraordinary effort from the profession. There are always silver linings in this, and I think one of the silver linings is parents in particular have seen firsthand the work of our teachers, education support staff and principals. Turning this around has been quite extraordinary. To go to your question about curriculum delivery, to support schools to provide continuity of learning for students my department developed a huge range of resources and planning information to support the delivery of learning at home. The department issued guidance notes to schools to support learning from home, including minimum guidelines for learning activities at each year level across literacy, numeracy and other key curriculum areas, and include provision for both online and offline modes of learning. You can think of the challenges for the little kids in prep, 1 and 2 versus students in years 7 and 8 and our senior secondaries. The department also established a new Learning from Home website providing resources for schools to use in delivering remote learning. This is complemented by a collection of curriculum resources aligned to the Victorian curriculum and suitable for remote and flexible delivery. As you recall, we brought the term 1 school holidays forward so schools were provided with four pupil-free days in the last week of term 1 and a pupil-free day on the first day of term 2. This enabled school staff to work together to develop school-based plans for remote and flexible learning.

Schools were also provided advice on the range of online platforms and applications available, including privacy and data security requirements; learning resources and best practice advice in relation to remote curriculum delivery; resources and advice for offline options, such as hard copy materials for students where access to technology might be limited or inappropriate given the needs and ages of children; and professional learning for staff tailored to the remote learning context. To support schools to focus on remote learning during term 2 the department also made a number of changes to school audit compliance reporting and other requirements to term 2. So we wanted to as much as we could take that work off the desks of principals and teachers and enable them to focus on this massive transition to remote and flexible learning. To further assist schools, DET has a range of supports available, including through our regional teams; health and wellbeing contacts dedicated to each school; IT support technicians—these are the unsung heroes of coronavirus and the education setting, our IT staff; and the COVID-19 advice line for schools.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** That is a great call. I think a lot of parents are even more greatly appreciative of teachers with the last few weeks as well. It is a dynamic space, and online resources and platforms have been

really important as well. I was wondering if you could take the Committee through what online resources and platforms were developed in the lead-up to supporting schools during term 2.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Richardson. The department has developed and published a number of resources for educators to support them to design, plan and deliver flexible and remote learning in term 2. These were made available by two publicly accessible websites on 18 March in anticipation of the possible need to move to remote flexible learning at some stage. We launched the Learning from Home website, with resources and information to support learning and wellbeing at home. That has had more than 400 000 page views to date. On 18 March a separate Learning from Home page on the department of education's FUSE platform was also made publicly available. It houses a large collection of high-quality curriculum-aligned resources for use by educators to support flexible and remote learning, and that has had 190 000 visits to date. So this is the profession accessing the resources available for online delivery. Traffic to the department's FUSE website has also been coming from other Australian states and territories as well as internationally, so I am quite proud of that. We have been leading the way in many aspects in regard to flexible and remote learning. So for example, 15 per cent of traffic is coming out of the United States. This attests to the high quality of materials provided on the platform.

Hard copy as well of course—printable resources that can be used offline were published on FUSE to provide extra support for schools and students where online functionality may be limited. This supported the Government's broader initiative to distribute laptops, tablets and internet devices to students who did not have access to digital technologies. More than a full term of printable teaching and learning resources across the Victorian curriculum F–10 was made available to all schools—government, Catholic and independent—before the start of term 2, and these printable resources have been very, very popular with teachers, with more than 120 000 visits to the FUSE site page hosting these materials.

We also had and have an exciting collaboration with the ABC. The Victorian Government and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation have formed a partnership to broadcast content and publish accompanying resources to support learning from home designed to help ensure that all students have access to quality learning opportunities irrespective of whether they have access to a digital device and internet, and there have been 18 000 visits to FUSE to date to access the suggested learning activities that accompany each day's ABC ME broadcast.

In terms of online platforms, the department has provided collaboration and learning platforms, and they have been in high use across government schools. The Webex videoconferencing platform, provided at no cost to government schools in 2018 as part of the Government's \$51 million refresh of critical school wi-fi and virtual conferencing equipment, is being used by schools to keep students and staff connected. Almost 10 000 educators across Victoria have accessed Webex training since March of this year, and since February 60 new secondary schools and 1003 new primary schools have been onboarded to ClickView, a virtual library that hosts video resources and interactive learning activities aligned to the curriculum. ClickView includes resources such as documentaries and Australian-made educational videos and mini clips. Funding of \$25.4 million over four years was provided in last year's budget for the expansion of ClickView and other high-quality education software.

Finally, Mr Richardson, on online safety, the online privacy and safety of our students is a priority, which is why the department's Learning from Home website provides detailed advice to schools so they can make sure their use of technology complies with relevant legislation and departmental policies. The department's PROTECT website also provides guidance and resources to support all schools, early childhood services and post-secondary institutions to comply with the child safe standards and other safety obligations. So all in all just a mountain of work has been undertaken to make this a success.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** It is hard to comprehend that it is under two months since learning from home was established that all that has been achieved so far. Minister, VCE and VCAL are a critical year for our senior students. I am wondering if you could take us through what changes have been made for senior secondary students to ensure the disruption to their year was factored in.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thanks, Mr Richardson. There is no doubt that the impact of coronavirus has been pretty stressful for our senior secondary students. They have been building and preparing their whole schooling life towards years 11 and 12 and could not have expected a global pandemic to strike just as they are hitting their

strides. This has been really front and centre for me. It is the challenge of engaging prep–1–2 students and the challenge of supporting our senior secondary students.

So in April we announced a number of changes to help ease the pressure on senior secondary students and teachers and provide clarity and certainty for VCE and VCAL students and their families. The changes include moving the GAT test from June to October or November, postponing the end-of-year exams until at least December, reducing some school-based assessment tasks, where possible, to relieve some pressure and asking the universities to delay the start of the 2021 university year to take into account impacts of coronavirus on senior secondary. So that was the package of what we announced and what we were thinking back when we announced the change to flexible and remote learning.

Small groups of VCE and VCAL students have also been able to attend on site for short periods if their learning requirements cannot be conducted at home. Whether it is chemistry, dance or visual arts—things that cannot be done at home—there has been the ability for senior secondary students to go to school for short periods. And physical distancing provisions have been made for the safety of teachers and kids.

We have provided assurance to VCE students that they will receive an ATAR to give certainty to those who plan to undertake tertiary education. VCE study scores will continue to be a combination of school-based assessment and external exams, so there is no difference. For VCAL students we announced that the date for them to complete the requirements for their courses will be pushed back consistent with the revised dates for the VCE. Where possible theory components of subjects will be brought forward and practical components postponed to minimise disruption as much as possible.

It is important to note that when we announced these adjustments it was on the basis that we would need to be in a remote and flexible learning environment for at least the whole of term 2. Given that Victorians have done such an outstanding job—it is the testing blitz, getting the positive outcomes and then allowing us to make decisions to ease restrictions, including coming back to face-to-face teaching at an earlier time—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Minister. I will interrupt you there—the Member’s time has expired—and pass to Mr Danny O’Brien, MP

**Mr D O’BRIEN:** Good morning, Minister. Can I also thank for their great work all our teachers and particularly principals, who have got a tough job at the best of times let alone what they have had to do over the last couple of weeks. Minister, just following up a couple of the questions from earlier, the full reopening of schools is four weeks from the time of the announcement made last week: why is it that some students can go to the pub with their families before they can go back to school?

**Mr MERLINO:** We worked really strongly with the sector, Mr O’Brien—with the principal peak bodies, with both of the unions, with Catholic education, with Independent Schools Victoria. So for weeks leading up to the advice from the CHO that we can transition back to face-to-face teaching we have been working with the profession on what is the best and most logical transition back to face-to-face teaching. Now, there are two elements here. There is the advice at the national level from the AHPPC that as schools transition back to face-to-face teaching they need to do so in a staggered way. What we do not want—

**Mr D O’BRIEN:** Well, that organisation also provided advice that schools were safe to stay open the whole time.

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes, absolutely, Mr O’Brien, and that is why our schools have been open the whole time. So the advice from the AHPPC is that we need to—

**Mr D O’BRIEN:** That is splitting hairs, Minister.

**Mr MERLINO:** Mr O’Brien, can I answer your question? The advice from the AHPPC is that as we transition back to face-to-face teaching we need to do it in a staggered way. We do not want in Victoria from day one 1 million students, 80 000 teachers, parents and carers all congregating at the same time. We need to take careful and cautious steps. And secondly—

**Mr D O’BRIEN:** I understand that. On the AHPPC, South Australia and Western Australia are also following the advice of that committee, and they have always been basically face to face. I am trying to get a

sense of why it takes four weeks to transition. You mentioned that prior to the CHO making the decision that face-to-face learning could resume you had been working with the whole school sector, including, you just said, the independent Catholic sector. So you had been planning that, and you said that in response to Mr Richardson. I am just trying to get a sense of why kids can go to the pub with their families before they can go back to school. Why is it taking so long to do that?

**Mr MERLINO:** Okay. To finish what I was saying, the advice from the AHPPC is that you need to stagger. The advice from the profession is that the best way to stagger a transition back to face-to-face teaching is by year level cohorts—so those students where it is hardest to provide that home learning environment. So it makes logical sense—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So why four weeks, though, Minister? Why don't those students—prep, 1 and 2, years 11 and 12—start now and then the rest of them next week?

**Mr MERLINO:** Mr O'Brien, I take you back to slide 4 of my presentation, and it quite clearly shows, particularly in relation to the eastern seaboard of our nation, that the transition back to face-to-face teaching—the time that students have been learning remotely—is very similar. The remote learning duration in Victoria will be nine weeks. The remote learning duration in New South Wales is 13 weeks.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** That is not the question I asked, Minister.

**Mr MERLINO:** In Queensland it is six weeks, in ACT it is eight weeks, in Tasmania it is eight weeks. So you have got health advice saying you need to transition in a staggered way, and you have got advice from the profession that the best way to do that is by year level cohorts. So we have, within a two-week period—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I am not arguing about that, Minister, I am just asking you the question—you made the announcement last Tuesday morning—why prep, 1 and 2, years 11 and 12 could not have started today and the rest start next week, for example, instead of waiting four weeks.

**Mr MERLINO:** Because the advice from the profession—the clear advice from the profession—is that they need to have time. They need to have advance notice so they can prepare for students transitioning back. This is a massive undertaking, both the move to remote and flexible—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** We did the move to remote learning in a shorter amount of time.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, can you let the Minister answer the question.

**Mr MERLINO:** and the movement back to face-to-face teaching. The profession required advance notice, which we gave them. We gave them time, and that includes, Mr O'Brien, a pupil-free day on Monday of next week before students start on site on the 26th. Just going back to your comment about the AHPPC and at the national level, on slide 3 I deliberately put the seven principles agreed at national cabinet. There is no setting that we have had in place in Victoria that contradicts any of the seven principles. Everything we have done in Victoria has been in line with the principles agreed at national cabinet, has been in line with the advice and the recommendations of the Chief Health Officer, and I remind all Committee members this is not just government schools that have supported following the advice of the Chief Health Officer—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, my time is limited.

**Mr MERLINO:** it has been the Catholic education commission and Independent Schools Victoria.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you. Can I ask about today's announcement? How much of today's announcement's funding is from usual capital appropriations and how much of it will be from the Treasurer's drawdown of the \$24.5 billion passed by Parliament last month?

**Mr MERLINO:** Well, there will be a significant element that will be drawn from the additional funding. The funding that the Treasurer announced, the \$25 billion, will be reported in the usual way, Mr O'Brien—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Can you give me a percentage of how much of it—

**Mr MERLINO:** in accordance with the *Financial Management Act*, the budget update and the budget that we will hand down. There is an element that is being brought forward and there is an element that will be funded. This is precisely the type of investment that was envisaged through this additional funding that the Treasurer announced.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes, that is exactly why I am asking. Can you give me a percentage? Is it 50-50, 80-20?

**Mr MERLINO:** We will report this in the usual way—through budget updates and in the budget that we will hand down later in the year, in accordance with the *Financial Management Act*. To reiterate the comment I made earlier, Mr O'Brien, to Mr Riordan's comments, we have got this announcement, which is about economic rebound. We will also have the state budget later on in the year. There will be in the budget a further allocation of capital projects to schools across the state.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Committee member's privilege: can I ask will you guarantee that Foster and Korumburra schools will be funded in that?

**Mr MERLINO:** What I will acknowledge is the advocacy of yourself for your local schools, Mr O'Brien.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** As much as that is nice, Minister, that is not the answer I am after.

**Mr MERLINO:** No, I appreciate that, and you can appreciate that I cannot give you a guarantee today what will be in the budget, but I do acknowledge your advocacy. There are a lot of worthy projects across the state. This is the biggest school building program Victoria has ever seen in its history.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Thank you for the acknowledgement. I would prefer that you acknowledge the needs of the kids of Foster and Korumburra. But I will move on. Just quickly, on the advice that if you can be schooled at home—schooled remotely—you must: you would be aware that some parents were turned away from schools and many schools actually had a form that parents had to fill in if they wanted to send their kids to school. Was that advice and template provided by the department or were those schools operating off their own bat?

**Mr MERLINO:** In terms of those local conversations, that is quite appropriately at the local level. We want our principals to engage with local families in terms of the needs of local kids. What we do at a statewide level is make very clear what the settings are, and the settings have been: if you can learn from home, you must learn from home. The exceptions are, as I have outlined: if you are vulnerable student and it is simply not possible to deliver a home learning environment, and if it is impossible for parents to provide a home learning environment because of their employment obligations. Those are the types of students that could be attending school and learning flexibly and remotely on site. There is the engagement and discussion at a local level, and we set the policy at a statewide level.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Right. So there was no template provided for attendance forms from the department to schools?

**Mr MERLINO:** I might ask Dr Howes to supplement my answer. What we did have was a COVID-19 school hotline, and you could see in the presentation I gave you earlier that in the lead-up to the start of term 2 there was a significant uplift in calls from parents, and we were able to—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Sorry, Minister. I am limited on time. I am just wanting to get an answer to the question: was there a template provided or was it left up to schools?

**Mr MERLINO:** There was guidance and support provided to schools. But, Dr Howes, do you want to supplement my answer?

**Dr HOWES:** Yes. Thank you, Minister. There was a template provided by the department that schools could use. It was important that schools had the capacity to identify how many families might be seeking to access onsite provision to ensure that there were adequate numbers of staff available to provide that support. So we did provide advice, including the sample form that parents could be asked to indicate over a week how much onsite attendance they would be requiring. That was in part to meet the different needs of families over a week, especially where shiftworkers were involved or where people were working for some days during the week but not others and were able to provide at-home supervision for those days or half days.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Likewise, Minister, in the special developmental school sector, you mentioned Mildura had a flexible arrangement. We had reports, though, of other schools saying, 'No kids coming at all'. Was there a directive to that sector as well as to what—was it any different? I mean, the Premier actually said in Parliament it was a decision for parents and yet we had schools telling people that they could not come.

**Mr MERLINO:** No, there was no difference in terms of the advice or the templates, but you are right, Mr O'Brien, to highlight this. This was one of the areas, and particularly in the first couple of weeks of term 2, with students with additional needs, with quite high complex needs in a special school setting, this is very, very challenging to parents; it is very challenging for staff. So there was some engagement, particularly with special schools—Dr Howes might want to supplement my answer again—particularly engagement with special schools, to look at the whole needs of the child, if you like. You can see, and we will be able to provide some of this data, there was an uplift in the number of students with additional needs, students from special schools, and their attendance on site at special schools. The Premier said it was a partnership between parents and schools.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister. The Member's time has expired.

**Ms STITT:** Good morning, Deputy Premier. Thank you for your attendance this morning, together with your departmental officials. I will echo the comments of my colleagues on PAEC and thank our educators in what has been a pretty extraordinary time. We are very grateful for all of the amazing work that has been done.

I wanted to refer you, Deputy Premier, to the directive from the Chief Health Officer and the Victorian Government that all students who could learn from home must learn from home, which obviously included students with a disability. What steps did the department take to ensure that students with a disability were able to receive an education whilst learning remotely?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Ms Stitt, and thank you for your support of the profession—and from all Committee members—and I will definitely pass that on. This follows on from the discussion that we have just been having. Children identified by schools as vulnerable, including via referral from a family violence agency, homelessness or youth justice service or mental health or other health service and, Ms Stitt, as you mentioned, children with a disability are able to attend school. Schools continue to support students via student support groups, involving school and specialist regional staff to maintain student learning, monitor risk and respond to potential changes and complexity in the home environment over time.

All schools are supported by a regional health and wellbeing key contact to provide advice and support to schools in assisting students with vulnerabilities, including students with a disability. During this remote learning period, the department and schools have provided students who need them, as we have discussed earlier, with access to devices including dongles and laptops so they can learn from home. The range of support provided through the students with a disability program were maintained, as was regional support such as visiting teachers, student support services, education support staff and the area disability coordinators. The department also liaised with school bus providers and arranged for hard-copy work to be dropped off to some students where access to technology was not available.

In addition to existing supports for schools, the department provided a range of supports for students with a disability: in terms of teaching and learning, resources for students accessing A to D-level curriculum and students with learning difficulties on the Learning from Home website; in terms of school support, current advice provided through the department's website, a phone hotline service for school staff, term 2 schools operation guidance, a regional health and wellbeing key contact for each school, a prac planning framework to help schools identify students who may be at risk learning remotely, additional PPE and cleaning services, and a physical distancing guide for students with disability and students with medical needs.

In terms of parent support, there is advice on learning from home, talking to children about COVID-19 and information on the NDIS for students with disability. DET's NDIS call centre has also been contacting families of any students yet to transition to the NDIS and providing additional support to gain eligibility.

In terms of stakeholder engagement, there is increasing funding for disability peak organisations Amaze, the Association for Children with Disability and I CAN to support parents and students with remote learning and engaging with the NDIA and DHHS to support students and families to access necessary supports.

But we also wanted to be flexible and respond to the challenges. As we said at the beginning, not everything will work and there will be challenges emerging. As I said, one of the challenges has been students with very high complex needs, students with a disability and the impact on parents and students and their siblings at home. We have had this family-centred approach in Bendigo and Echuca, and we are rolling it out across the state. We are working hard with families to roll out a trial to support students with a disability to return to the classroom. Since the beginning of term 2 Kalianna special school, Bendigo Special Development School and Echuca Specialist School have trialled a family-centred approach to support some children with a disability returning to the classroom. These are cooperative arrangements that are being put in place between specialist schools, their neighbourhood schools and the department's area office so the children with a disability and their siblings have access to online learning. It may be, for example, a family of three kids—two children at a mainstream school setting and one child at a specialist school—just working flexibly with the specialist school and neighbourhood schools to enable the child with a disability to go to their school and provide some respite for parents and other siblings, or vice versa: the other two students going to a mainstream school and the parents having that one-on-one time with their child with additional needs. We are rolling that out across the state.

In terms of a return to face-to-face schooling for specialist schools, on 12 May the Premier and I announced that Victorian government schools will begin a phased return to classrooms following advice from the Victorian Chief Health Officer. The primary objective is to provide the best possible learning environment for all students as soon as practicable. So from next Tuesday prep, 1, 2, all specialist school students as well as VCE, VCAL will return, and then the fortnight after all other students. Vulnerable students in years 3 to 10, which may include disability students, students at mainstream schools and children in those years whose parents or carers cannot work from home, can continue to attend onsite school as needed during this period.

Following advice from the DHHS, the department has provided schools with practical advice about physical distancing with students with disability and with medical needs. The department continues to follow DHHS advice regarding appropriate use of PPE in these circumstances. The department is working closely with DHHS to advise specialist schools on the range of actions that they can take to implement physical distancing and reduce the risk of infection. All government schools are being provided with hand sanitiser and a small additional supply of PPE, with specialist schools prioritised for delivery. This ensures staff can take appropriate precautions should they be presented with an unwell student. This complements a program of enhanced cleaning that has been implemented in schools that is focused on progressive cleaning throughout the day, particularly on high-touch surfaces.

**Ms STITT:** Thanks, Deputy Premier, for your very detailed response. It gives the Committee a good insight into the level of planning that has had to go into the COVID response across the sector. I am just wondering whether you can give us an idea of some of the challenges associated with students with a disability learning remotely.

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes, thanks, Ms Stitt. The key areas of concern for students with a disability and their families and carers during the transition to remote and flexible learning include higher health risks for medically vulnerable students should they contract the coronavirus; difficulty for some students to access additional supports, such as medical or attendant care in the home environment; and students with behaviours of concern, who may be at greater risk of causing additional stress and harm to themselves and family members without established and familiar structures and behavioural supports in place. Those were some of the challenges that were presenting to us through the course of term 2, and that is why we have seen both that innovative trial that I mentioned that we are rolling out across the state, plus the increase in the number of students attending on site at special schools. We are addressing these by working closely with disability peak organisations and the Principals Association of Specialist Schools, PASS, to find the best local solutions and engaging with the Department of Health and Human Services and the National Disability Insurance Agency to ensure all possible supports are in place for these students and their families.

**Ms STITT:** Thanks, Deputy Premier. I am interested in how the department and the individual schools responded to concerns raised by parents and guardians of students with disabilities during this period; can you give us some practical examples of some of those concerns?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. Thank you. In terms of the parent support provided by the department, advice has been provided on Learning from Home to support parents with talking to children about COVID-19 and

information on the NDIS for students with a disability. DET's NDIS call centre is also contacting the families of any students yet to transition to the NDIS and providing additional support. Also, I note the range of supports provided by the department—as I outlined in the substantive answer to your question; all of those supports to parents—and our engagement with ACD, Amaze, DHHS and the NDIA.

**Ms STITT:** Deputy Premier, what was the onsite attendance rate for special schools during lockdown? I think other Committee members have gone to this point. Did it change during lockdown, and how did it compare with mainstream school attendance?

**Mr MERLINO:** The attendance rate at specialist schools, as I mentioned and Dr Howes, was higher than primary and secondary schools and rose each week, and that was as we responded to concerns being raised and the need to engage to provide those opportunities for a bit of respite for parents. It was higher than primary and secondary and rose each week, possibly due to parents and carers requiring respite or considerations of their own personal factors changing during this period—so changes in work demand, loss of employment, not being able to draw on support from family and friends or due to stay-at-home directions. Schools have worked closely with families to support their individual needs. It goes back to what I was saying earlier: the best place to resolve this—any individual concerns or questions or queries from parents—is at a local level. It is also likely due to updated advice sent to special schools by the department that special schools should, and I will quote from the advice:

... consider holistically the home setting, including the functional impact of their disability. Schools may proactively and flexibly offer on-site provision as required on this basis in collaboration with regional colleagues.

I think that has had a positive impact, and you can see it again when you look at the calls being made to the hotline over the course of term 2.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Minister, I will interrupt you there. The Member's time has expired.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Deputy Premier, for your presentation. I would like to focus first on this staggered return to school. We have spoken about some of the negative effects on parents and the challenges that they have faced. A parent who is working at home, they have got a child in grade 2 and they might have another child in grade 5, at the moment they are all able to attend either their work or school online at the same time and get there on time at 9 o'clock. How would a parent be expected to manage this situation when they have got to turn up online at work at 9 o'clock, they have got another child that is meant to turn up online at school but another child that is going to have to turn up in person, all at the same time? How can they manage that?

**Mr MERLINO:** It is a good question and it is something that we really worked hard on over a long period of time, co-designing the transition back with the profession and thinking about the needs of parents. I am one of those where my three kids—grade 3, grade 5 and year 7—are home until all students are back on 9 June. We looked at what other jurisdictions were doing. So New South Wales, for example, their transition back, which goes right through their plan—goes right through to the start of their term 3, which is in July—was based on all student cohorts for one day a week. I think in terms of the impact on parents and the impact on the profession, the advice from the department and the feedback from every peak body within the profession was that would not work. The better way would be to go via a staggered approach, in accordance with AHPPC, and look at the teaching and learning requirements. What are the most challenging cohorts and get those kids in first. That was logically the littlest kids at our primary schools and our senior secondary students. Not every educator agrees, not every parent agrees, and I know this is very challenging and there will be circumstances where a family will have one child at school for this coming fortnight and one child or more at home. But for the period of two weeks, yes, it is an inconvenience, but it is the best way to stagger back. We do not want every student back at school at the same time. The clear medical advice is that we have to stagger it, and the conclusion we reached was that this was the best way.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** If the staggered return is based on medical advice, how does that work for schools where you have a junior and a senior campus? One of my children goes to a junior high school. The junior high school will remain empty—years 7, 8 and 9 will be empty—and yet the senior campus will be almost full. That does not seem to make sense to me. Why couldn't this decision be made by the schools themselves about which years come back and what is the best way to set up their schools? Like, if the purpose is for medical reasons to

lower the number of students in the school, for schools that are split into junior and senior campuses this would not seem to be optimal at all, would it?

**Mr MERLINO:** It is more about staggering it so we do not have large numbers of the community moving around. Whilst we are in this period following the testing blitz, the positive outcomes and the trends in terms of a reduction in community transmission, we are able to have this easing of restrictions. But we continue to say, for example, if you can work from home, you must work from home. Rather than the fact being the students at a school, it is the broad issue of the congregation of students, teachers, families moving around the community. Yes, you may have a junior secondary with sevens, eights and nines, all the teachers will be on site as they prepare for the transition back, so all teachers are on site from Monday next week. But for a period of two weeks, sevens, eights nines and 10s will be learning remotely. We wanted to provide certainty, clarity. When you are dealing with a pandemic, you need to have clear, simple messages and I think where we landed, whilst you can never land on any of these issues with universal acclamation, the clear advice from the profession and from parents is, 'Let's stagger it and let's stagger it in the way that we have described'.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** As you mentioned, some students have struggled with this learning from home experience, which is why I was a bit confused by the announcement this morning with the infrastructure investment. It seems like a lot of the support that you would think would be needed, and I acknowledge there is some support in there for things like cleaning at schools, but it seems more like a construction industry stimulus package rather than helping these children get back into school, doesn't it? I mean, surely the last thing that we want at schools is more disruption through rushed infrastructure projects that are coming up over the next few months. Wouldn't we want children to be settling into a routine again and getting back into doing what they used to do rather than having workmen on site digging up things and upgrading portable classrooms and this sort of thing? Does this seem like the right time to be doing that sort of work?

**Mr MERLINO:** Absolutely, and we are trying to do different things, as you have outlined. So we have got significant additional funding for cleaning at schools in addition to the normal cleaning that schools receive—so daily cleaning throughout the day, particularly disinfecting high-touch surfaces. So what are the practical additional supports we need to provide schools as we transition? The announcement we made today is about economic rebound and job creation and, may I say, also dealing with additional demand in student places. We still need to cater for 110 000 additional students over the next five years, so the package we announced today provides 21 000 additional places.

Just to your point: this is absolutely not rushed. Because we have had such a strong capital program over more than five years, these are schools that have undergone planning and design. These are projects that will get out of the ground within the next six months. The new schools obviously do not impact on students because they are brand-new schools. In terms of the upgrades, the VSBA, local school communities, local contractors, they are great at doing the work with minimal disruption to the teaching and learning environment. Obviously you will need to fence off part of the school, but that is something that our schools and students have become well used to. The VSBA does an outstanding job, local schools do an outstanding job and the end result is improved teaching and learning spaces for our kids. So we need to chew gum and walk at the same time, and schools will be responsible for the transition of kids. Who are the kids that have really thrived in this environment and what can we do to continue that? Who are the kids that have struggled under remote and flexible learning and what supports do schools need to provide, both academic and in mental health and wellbeing? There are additional supports from the region for that work, and there is critical work that schools will do, but it is not rushed and it is not something that we should postpone.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** I would like to follow up on a point that was raised by Mr Hibbins about students that may have fallen through the cracks. How many students either did not turn up to school to learn on site, face to face, and also did not turn up to remote learning? Was there a significant number of students that just sort of disappeared?

**Mr MERLINO:** No, there was not, and in fact I might throw to either Secretary Atta or Deputy Secretary Howes about the absence rate. So we recorded both attendance and obviously absences. The absence rate was quite positive when you compare it to what would have been the usual situation for school on site as normal delivery. I might throw to the department to add to my comments.

**Dr HOWES:** We can confirm that the absence rate was in fact lower this time compared to last year. The weekly absence rate for weeks 1 to 3 of remote and flexible learning ranged from 5.4 to 6 per cent, and that is lower than the average rate this time last year, when 8.6 per cent of students were reported absent. So more students were attending through this period than was the case for the equivalent period last year.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** One final question before we run out of time: we have mentioned some of the mental health effects. Could you describe some of the negative mental health effects that students may have experienced through this period?

**Mr MERLINO:** That is a good question. Again, I might throw to Deputy Secretary Howes. It is a range of things. There are those students it has been very difficult for teachers and staff to engage with—so students that are simply not engaging via the flexible and remote platforms, they may not turn up to the Webex chats, the lessons, the touching base that teachers are doing at a school level. There will be issues around anxiety, issues around isolation, and it has been interesting—I think senior secondary students have felt that isolation at this period of time. But I might ask Deputy Secretary Howes to add any comments in terms of what we are seeing in terms of mental health and wellbeing.

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry, Minister, the Member's time has expired. One of the other Members may yet come back to those issues.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you, Minister, and your departmental staff, for appearing today. I would also like to pay tribute to all of the teachers and support staff in the education system through this very challenging time, and I would also like to pay tribute to all the parents out there through this challenging time and all the students who have responded as best they can. I just want to pick up on some of the points that have been raised by some of my colleagues, most recently Mr Limbrick. You referred to the figures around attendance and the percentage rates around attendance. To what extent can you attribute to participation? For example—and I am a mum of two children in school and doing schooling from home, so have some familiarity—how do you look at when a child is logging on and saying that they are here and attending versus their actual participation in the education program set for that day or that week?

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes. Thanks, Ms Vallence. That is a good question. There is the overarching data, so the attendance figure, the absences figure that we have outlined to the Committee, and in that respect it has been quite positive: 97, 98 per cent of students learning from home; lower levels of absence rates than we would see in a normal environment. Then your question goes from quantitative data to qualitative data, and this goes to the teaching and learning provided at a school level. Like you, I have got kids at school. There is attendance that is recorded but then there is the work. The primary school that my kids go to, they use Edmodo as their platform, and it quite clearly shows if there are learning tasks—

**Ms VALLENCE:** If they are submitting work.

**Mr MERLINO:** that have not been done and they are outstanding, and then there is engagement between the student, the teacher and the parents. So there is that engagement at an individual level to make sure that work is done, and if work is not done then there is follow-up by either the classroom teacher or a member of the wellbeing staff to that school saying, you know, 'Johnny hasn't been engaging on our Webex meetings; he's got this work outstanding', so there is that qualitative work that is engaging.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you for that. So has there been modelling done on the disproportionate impact of the learning from home process on lower socio-economic families and students or students where English is a second language?

**Mr MERLINO:** There is certainly research out there in terms of, you know, if you have got a learning from home environment for a long period of time, the potential impacts on disadvantaged and vulnerable kids. We have learned remotely for a period of nine weeks. We have got the period within term 2 to transition students back in. There are students—as I have said a number of times—that have thrived, there are students that have struggled, there are students that are behind where they should be academically, there are students in front of where they would normally have been academically, and there are students that may be struggling in terms of their health and wellbeing. All those assessments will be made as kids transition back—and the supports that schools need to be provided.

There is certainly research out there that talks about long-term impacts, there is no doubt, and that is why one of the principles that was agreed on at national cabinet is that we want face-to-face teaching. We want our kids back in the classroom, but we had to respond to the pandemic. We had to respond to the expert health advice. All of us want our kids to return to the classroom, but we have got to do it in a careful and cautious way.

**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. I would like to shift to pick up on some of the line of questioning from some of my colleagues around mental health. Like we are in an economic crisis after the coronavirus pandemic, I think with mental health there will also be challenges ongoing. There has been a lot of evidence about students being away from school and learning in a different environment, you know, by professionals such as Dr Leila Morsy or Dr Michael Carr-Gregg, and there is modelling around the forecast toll on students and prospective suicides, particularly at-risk groups such as Indigenous students and students from multicultural backgrounds, and only exacerbated when their parents may have lost their jobs. We would just like to know a little bit more about that. What additional support, particularly for regional schools—you mentioned there are additional supports for regional schools, I think, to Mr Hibbins's questions, but you did not detail what those additional supports were. Could you describe what those additional supports are and also whether schools, through this period of homeschooling, have notified the department of any particular challenging cases or where there might have been attempted suicide by students?

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Ms Vallenge. There are a number of things that we have put in place, and part of it was, obviously, transitioning the workforce to deliver flexibly and remotely. Victorian secondary school students have been able to access counselling via voice call or videoconferencing through the Headspace counselling partnership or via their school-based mental health practitioner during remote and flexible learning. As of term 2 we have got 83 secondary school campuses who have recruited mental health practitioners across our four DET areas. So we have had student support services officers, school nurses and our doctors in secondary schools, particularly in regional and remote areas, providing support to students, often with mental health support. Online professional learning is available for primary and secondary staff to increase their foundational knowledge of mental health. This includes SAFEMinds training for primary and secondary schools and aims to increase foundational knowledge of mental health and emerging concerns. We had, as I mentioned before, the key regional contact as well. The Headspace counselling is supporting secondary students under the Government's \$65.5 million investment in student health and wellbeing initiatives. So there are a range of supports that we have been putting in place, and not just in terms of our GPs in schools, our nurses, our student support services; we have got a whole range of other supports supporting vulnerable kids,

including being quite innovative in terms of how our breakfast-in-schools program has been rolled out and implemented—again, engaging with students with additional—

**Ms VALLENCE:** 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? Is that something that could be taken on notice perhaps?

**Mr MERLINO:** In terms of any further detail I might ask Dr Howes to respond.

**Ms VALLENCE:** That can be taken on notice.

**Mr MERLINO:** Yes, if there is anything further we can provide to the Committee, we will.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Just to shift tack a little bit, on cleaning, on 12 May you announced investment of up to \$45 million. How will you be distributing that \$45 million across schools, and is it new money or a reallocation of money?

**Mr MERLINO:** This is new money. It is \$45 million of additional funding support, so this is over and above the usual cleaning that happens in our schools, and we have also got—

**Ms VALLENCE:** How will it be distributed?

**Mr MERLINO:** We have got the Financial Assistance Model for Catholic and independent schools, so any investment we make this year in government schools will have a corresponding impact the following year in terms of additional—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Minister, if I can interrupt you there, the Member's time has expired, and that concludes our questions for this morning, so we thank you very much for appearing before the Committee. Before we adjourn, if these discussions here today have raised any issues for anyone who might be joining us in the gallery or online, the Beyond Blue phone number is 1300 22 4636; Lifeline, 13 11 14; and the Kids Helpline, 1800 55 1800. Thank you very much to you and to your team for joining us today. Any questions which were taken on notice will be followed up by the secretariat in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the Committee's request.

**Mr MERLINO:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Committee.

**Witnesses withdrew.**