

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Monday, 18 May 2020

#### Members

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallenge

## WITNESSES

Ms Sue Bell, President, and

Mr Colin Axup, Deputy President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, and Principal, Suzanne Cory High School.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian Government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. The hearings may be rebroadcast in compliance with standing order 234. We ask that photographers and camerapersons follow the established media guidelines and the instructions of the secretariat.

Welcome to the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals. We invite you to make a 5-minute presentation. We ask that you state your name, your position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes, and this will be followed by questions from the Committee relative to the representation at our table today. Welcome.

**Ms BELL:** Thank you very much. My name is Sue Bell, and I am the President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, which is explained in my introduction. Our body is a professional association through membership of the principal class in state government secondary schools. The three pillars of VASSP are to support our members to grow professionally in educational leadership; to effectively represent members by providing input to the Department of Education and Training decision-making, policy development and implementation; and thirdly, to advocate for public education and the principalship in the wider Victorian community.

As President, I regularly meet with our 12 regional groups across the state, and our five field officers provide both individual and group professional support to principal class members. The vast majority of secondary principals belong to VASSP, and we have principal, assistant principal and aspirant principal members in the leadership team in most schools. I will refer to them collectively as 'principals'. I seek professional opinions from our members through these avenues and use this information to provide feedback to the department and to the Minister for Education on current and future proposals. In seeking feedback from Victorian secondary principals on the matter in front of this Inquiry, I have found strongly united thinking on many factors impacting their work in their individual communities around the state. Principals understand the characteristics of leadership, and particularly leadership in times of crisis. This is a critical component of their work, and they have recognised it in the work of the Victorian Government in its response to COVID-19.

Principals applaud the high levels of communication provided by the Government to keep the community informed to help them make sense of the crisis. The message about what actions will be taken has been clear, including being honest about the possibility of dire consequences. Not shielding us from the worst has built a sense of trust. They have made it clear what our job is and how we can all contribute to managing the crisis. This has given principals a clear road map for the work they need to do, often as a central leader and decision-maker in their local community. The focus on evidence-based decision-making by the Premier and Chief Health Officer sat well with principals, as that is the proven methodology used in schools. Principals were not unhappy waiting for a decision on the return to onsite learning until the end of the state of emergency as that stand was definitive and reassuring.

The feedback I have received on the implementation of the Government's approach by the Department of Education and Training has focused on the high levels of regular communications. In the run-up to the decision to move to flexible and remote learning, pushing out information each evening helped build collective

understanding for the government school system. This, coupled with a strong sense of personal care for the children in our charge that came across in the communications, inspired a united willingness to do whatever it would take. Principals and teachers pulled out all stops to adapt their current style of teaching and curriculum to what was required by their communities. This was different in many different areas but all had as the basis the desire to ensure continuity of learning and to provide a settling influence for young people going through what could potentially be one of the greatest traumas in their lives.

The decision of the Government and the department to provide student-free days for schools to initially ready themselves for the transition to remote learning and the return next week is highly appreciated by principals. Secondary schools were on a varied continuation of readiness for this work, and the time taken has been paid back multiple times by the quality of much of the work delivered to students working at home. Every single principal I have spoken to has said how proud they are of their staff for responding so well to the situation. Having the time to do the work has made a huge difference.

The continued work of the department on supporting the mental health and wellbeing of principals has been greatly appreciated during these difficult times. The concept of putting on your own oxygen mask first before you can help others is clear in the minds of principals wishing to support the mental health of their teachers and their students and the students' families. Supporting the work of principals directly in the OH&S area has allowed them to spend more time looking after the young people in their schools. The department's setting up of a dedicated COVID-19 task force comprised of high-level staff has allowed them to be more responsive and has given VASSP a clear and efficient way to find answers to queries of principals that we are receiving at each new stage.

Secondary schools were generally well positioned to move to a form of remote learning, either synchronous, asynchronous or a combination of both. Previous experience with learning management systems such as Compass has done it. The vast majority of secondary schools use the Compass learning management system to share resources with students and to communicate with parents generally and specifically about their child.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, I might stop you there. The time for the presentation has expired.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you for your presentation and for your appearance today. It really is some very fine work that our school principals have done, so a big thankyou to your members, who have been able to respond to this crisis with adaptive leadership and have been able to show that leadership and that change to ensure that we have had remote and flexible learning for students across the state. It is really a fantastic thing. For my first question, could I ask you what has been the experience of your members and the members' schools during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Ms BELL:** That is a very broad question. I think it has been varied depending on where you are. If you are in country Victoria, where there are few cases of COVID-19, it has been different. If you have been in the city, there has been probably far more sense of urgency around what is happening. Depending on where you are on the continuum of having your curriculum documentation up to date, many teachers have been really prepared for this; some teachers have perhaps been caught a little bit further behind.

The resources the department provided on the FUSE website have been very helpful for those schools. We never expected things to be perfect when we went online, and they did have a small glitch on the first day, but pretty well since then the remote learning has worked well for schools. But schools have done it differently. So some schools have actually sent out hard-copy material, including Doveton College, which sent out ukuleles to grade 3 students because that was on their curriculum for this term, so all those kids are at home playing ukuleles. Schools have done different things. Colin's school has high levels of online learning. I do not know if you would like Colin to talk about that.

**Mr MAAS:** Sure.

**Mr AXUP:** I am Principal of Suzanne Cory High School, which is in Werribee. It is a 9–12 school, select entry, so while the students are highly able and tend to be more engaged we also have a significant proportion of them with families from non-English-speaking backgrounds. I think our experience has been that we were ready for remote learning because we are a very online school because we are geographically dispersed—our students travel from pretty much all over greater northern and western Melbourne.

Sue talked about those different responses. Probably our biggest challenge was actually around not schooling per se when the school was still open and in preparation for coming back but actually around public transport, for example, because two thirds of our students catch the train or the bus to get to school.

To reiterate a point that Sue made, I think the most amazing thing I have seen is the teachers stepping up and the learning they have undertaken. One of the processes we are undergoing is capturing that knowledge and information and working out what we can continue to do when we come back to face to face. It has almost been one big professional development exercise for us—not necessarily a 100 per cent positive one, but we are looking at that silver lining, if you like, in that respect.

**Mr MAAS:** I will get to the response of the broader school community in a moment, where we can talk about teachers, support staff and parents as well as students, but you mentioned differences, Sue, between regional Victoria and the metropolitan schools. Would you care to expand on that a bit more?

**Ms BELL:** One of the things I think has been brought very much into a spotlight is the different levels of access to internet and to electronic devices. Lots of schools, particularly in Melbourne, have been moving to one-to-one programs over the last few years, so most students have something. But in the country that has not necessarily been the case, and what I did not understand about the country was how limited internet access is. Even in schools themselves at times there is limited internet access. It was fantastic that the Government came up with the idea of sending out computers and dongles and providing internet access. That has really impacted quite dramatically on low socio-economic families, particularly to the point where schools are now seeing re-engagement of students who were school-refusing or disengaged from learning. Wodonga secondary college, at the junior school, have quantified it as 10 to 15 per cent of their disengaged students have re-engaged because they have had a device put in their hand and they have been able to access it. But there are other schools, like Birchip and Horsham, where once you go out of the main town there is very limited access, even through a dongle, to the internet. So they have had to do different things and actually send out hard copy packs. People have responded in different ways to those different situations.

**Mr MAAS:** To the response of the broader school community, what has the feedback been?

**Ms BELL:** Amazing, absolutely amazing, really. I called the quiet parents when I was a principal at my school the ‘silent majority’. You do not usually hear from these people because they are very happy with the way things are going, and you have a regular group of parents that you hear from. The silent majority has spoken up—it has been amazing—because they have so appreciated the work that schools have done, particularly once the students were at home and parents could start to see what the tangible pieces of work were that they were doing and what the learning was. They were getting the phone calls from the redeployed education support staff asking about how their children were going. They were seeing the packs of information being delivered. They were seeing what an online class looked like and how the teacher was interacting with the students, or they were doing things like at Sunshine College—the home economics teacher has gone on Instagram and put up something called ‘sunniefoods’, where she actually demonstrates the cooking for the day. The students are there online watching her, sending up the little likes and talking to her, and she is talking back to them. She even got her mother involved on Anzac Day for the Anzac Day biscuits, and the students have loved it. You can just see that relationship. She has got something like over 800 followers on Instagram now; a lot more people have learned cooking from her than she actually ever intended. The feedback has been phenomenal, I would have to say, from the silent majority of parents. They are still worried, and they will be, as Colin has implied, about their children coming back to school, but hopefully we can provide some confidence for them that it is going to be safe and it is going to be the right place.

**Mr MAAS:** I am sure that that silent majority to which you refer have a new-found respect for the work that teachers, particularly our secondary school teachers, are doing. Thank you for that. I am just wondering what type of communication you have had with the Victorian Department of Education and Training during this time and also whether or not you were satisfied with that level of communication.

**Ms BELL:** We have developed a really good relationship with the department over the last few years, and so it has just accelerated through this process. Because I have 16 years experience as a school principal, they are always quite intrigued about the twists and turns in how schools work because secondary schools are quite unusual places. There are secondary schools with 1000 students, 2000, and even some with 3000, so they are quite large ships to manoeuvre. Sometimes if people in the department have not got an experience with schools,

they need to understand how policies might land, and we can provide advice. We have been involved in every stage of the planning: meeting with the Minister and talking about the way forward and then meeting with senior department officials to provide feedback on how ideas might land or how they could be done differently. Now we are kind of down to daily phone calls with the COVID-19 task force, who are incredibly responsive in the interpretation of the documentation that is being put out, particularly about staff returning to school and how that will work, particularly vulnerable staff who may have chronic illness of some sort. So, yes, I could not speak more highly, actually, of how we have been consulted.

**Mr MAAS:** I believe that the messaging from the Government has been pretty clear and pretty consistent with respect to education and schools as to when remote learning was to take place and how school would be returning. If you accept that premise, how important would you say that clear and consistent messaging from the Government was for you and your membership?

**Ms BELL:** Oh, critical—absolutely critical. When you are dealing with a lot of people, uncertainty and rumour and innuendo lead to a lack of trust and lead to a lack of confidence, and that is why it is absolutely critical in dire situations to be certain. Colin and I were just talking about it before, actually. You do not have to always be right but you do need to be certain. Then if you got it wrong you need to say, ‘Well, things have changed and we got it wrong. That was right yesterday; today the world is different’. I think the way the Government handled that, and the certainty and the clear messaging, really built that confidence in principals to do that in their own schools as well.

**Mr AXUP:** I think from the perspective of then communicating with our school communities, the Chief Health Officer’s advice was the hook you would hang all of your communications on. Because there was so much concern or even potentially misinformation in the community, especially the online community, to be able to say ‘We are doing this because of this advice’ and be able to actually share that type of communication—be it a letter from the CHO—was incredibly beneficial, because it was not me making the decision. It was me making the decision, but not making the decision at the same time, because the Chief Health Officer has basically said, ‘This is what you need to do’. It gives you a bit of coverage when it comes to those parents—who are not the silent majority—who are the ones most likely to complain or express their concerns. It gave you something as a principal to fall back on. As Sue mentioned in her presentation, we work on—and should work on—an evidence-based process. We do in schools, and that evidence coming from the Chief Health Officer was therefore imperative for, I think, principals to be able to do their job.

**Mr MAAS:** So how has the transition back to schooling been received by your members?

**Ms BELL:** I think they are very happy to be getting back to school. It is very exhausting, as you probably know, doing Zoom meetings all the time. For some reason they are really tiring. I think they want to see their students because it is easier to ascertain how they are feeling if they are up close—not too close, but just up close enough—and you can talk to them. I think they are very keen to bring them back in a staggered fashion so that the schools’ wellbeing teams—schools have social workers or psychologists, youth workers—can work with them in a staggered way to make sure that they can settle back in, because normalising back into the classroom is going to be strangely difficult. You would think, ‘They’ve done it for many years beforehand’, but there is going to be a sense of trepidation and fear for some students. There will be all sorts of things. They are very, very young people, so they will have different needs, so they will need to be settled back in quite carefully. That is why we were very keen on the staggered approach, particularly with year 11s and 12s, who see a whole lot of things flashing before their eyes. They see their most important year that they were looking forward to disappearing without valedictory dinners or awards nights or fun things. They also see the potential of exams looming, and they are not sure that they are ready or going to be ready for them. So they have a special level of need, as probably Anne-Maree talked to you about with the preps and grade 1s and 2s. Then the rest of the students will have a different set of needs.

But once again, they will come from homes where they have sick parents, they will come from homes where their parents have lost jobs. We have heard stories of students in year 12 having to do extra Macca’s shifts because both of their parents have lost their jobs and they are the sole source of income for the family. There are going to be incredible pressures over the coming weeks as well. We need to be ready for that, and we need everybody positive and very clear on how classrooms should operate and how students should be looked after.

**Mr MAAS:** And what would you say are the key lessons that can be learnt from this pandemic?

**Ms BELL:** It is interesting. The department has come up with a huge number of documents as resources, which are very useful, and hopefully we will never have to use them again, so they have done their job and gone. Principals are saying to me there are huge benefits in remote learning that they would love to hang onto in some way, shape or form. Schools where students travel long distances are thinking it might be good for one day a week to do that. I had a principal say the other day—I am not sure if this is true, but anyway—that every young boy wakes up every morning and thinks, ‘I hope I won’t be embarrassed today’, because they are very fearful of being embarrassed in class, being asked something they do not know or having pressure on, and in the remote classrooms they can actually be themselves an awful lot more. Some principals have referred to it as ‘the blinkers’—that students are getting through a whole heap more work and more learning because they are not distracted by misbehaviour in the classroom or someone chatting, and so there is a lot more work happening. So I think there is a lot of work for us to do in working out how we can latch onto that, particularly for students who have anxiety disorders, who do not want to come to school and are refusers. It is really important that we actually do what we can to build on that for them, and some schools are already appointing remote learning coordinators for that reason.

**Mr HIBBINS:** In the short time we have got I was really interested in your evidence that there has been in some schools a massive re-engagement rate because they have been actually been provided with a laptop or device from the Government, and one of the issues I raised with the Minister today was my concern that those devices are on loan and they would have to be ultimately returned. Would you support those devices actually being made permanently available to students? Can you also talk to just the experience that schools have had in securing those devices from the Government?

**Ms BELL:** Okay. Yes, schools have got varying numbers of devices. I heard of one school that had got 400 and some that got four, but that must have been what they asked for, because they were asked what they actually needed, depending on whether they were on the one-to-one program. I do not think we have let them keep those devices, because some of them are so high tech that they are the computers for next year’s new teachers starting, but I think there is a need for every student to have access to a device if it is going to enhance their learning. In the past when we first started down the path of computers in education there was no software. People used them as word processors, really, but I think now there is a lot of work you can do with personalised learning—so online maths tuition, where students can be tested and adaptively find out what level they are at and be challenged at their level. So I think there are huge opportunities now. It would be great if in some way, shape or form we could keep them with devices—not particularly those ones, though, because of the cost of them, but yes, I think that would be great.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Fantastic. And just in terms of how schools have gone about actually securing them from the Government, are there any experiences there? Because I know some schools have gone through other providers or through other means of securing them for students.

**Ms BELL:** Some schools gave out devices they had already before they knew that the Government was going to do this. You have like a set of laptops that move around on trolleys, so they gave those out. Some schools ordered their own dongles to give those out to students, and then we were allowed to use the CSEF funding, which was really helpful. We were not going to use that for excursions and camps, so we might as well use it for something good. So they were able to use that, and then later on this component came out. But I think it has been incredibly useful.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Terrific. Workload for principals or staff and for teachers—can you give some reflections on how the workload has actually been?

**Ms BELL:** Colin, maybe?

**Mr AXUP:** Personally with remote learning my workload has reduced because I do not have face to face. I do not have people coming into my office, and with the colleagues I have spoken to we have actually found more time back in our day because we are not in the office—well, I am in the office, but there are not many people at school to come in and interrupt. Certainly from a teaching perspective the teachers have definitely found the workload has increased. Doing remote learning—and we have a model of asynchronous and synchronous learning—their workload has increased because preparing for online lessons and preparing more resources information to go online does take more time than it does to prepare a face-to-face class. And as Sue said before, doing Zoom lessons and Zoom meetings—so all of their meetings, their collaboration with their

colleagues is all done online, and staring at a computer screen for those many hours, if you like, in a day is a lot more tiring when you are not used to it. And I will put that caveat: when you are not used to it. Certainly the staff are saying that some days are pretty big. They are used to teaching a full day, and they compare it and they go, 'I'd much prefer to be in the classroom for six out of seven periods in a day'. But I think part of that is also the lack of experience in spending so much time on line. One would hope that over time if we did it—fortunately we are not—they would get better at it. But in the long run, even if we have to go back to remote learning, we will be in a better place to pick it up, because it is not new anymore.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** One thing I wanted to follow up on was: if students are having issues with remote learning at the moment—we know that there might be mental health effects, we know that their family might be in a drastically different financial situation, as you have alluded to—what sort of resources do the teachers have to pick up on those figures and things that might be happening for children that are coming back to school and maybe to provide them with support, because presumably there are going to be a lot more children that might require some sort of extra support? Do you feel the schools are well placed to deal with that or do they need extra resources somehow?

**Ms BELL:** You have got a good example.

**Mr AXUP:** Look, it is interesting. Despite the fact that obviously doing an online lesson removes that human connection—you know, you are divided by the screens—one of the processes we have in place is about when the students are on line and checking in with them, and our teachers and our home group teachers check in with them regularly. It is about the fact that we knew our students before we went into remote learning—and we like to think that we know their families too—so we have been able to monitor that situation, if you like, with different students and then provide counselling, so we have continued student counselling throughout the process. We had already been trialling e-counselling before we went to remote learning—just separately, before all of this happened. Mind you, it was going to be e-counselling within school, because teenagers sometimes prefer to sit at a keyboard and ask questions to somebody who is in a room 10 metres down the hallway, rather than doing it face to face. All that we have done is to improve that platform to make it a secure video process, so we have continued to counsel our students, and we will continue to do so when they come back. It is about identification and having those resources; plus we of course have the SSS network within the regions to offer that support to schools as well.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Welcome to both of you. Can I also acknowledge all the teachers, but particularly the principals, Colin. I am surprised that you say it has been easier for you; I am sure that you are talking it down now that you have got everything under control. I think the period of setting up remote learning was probably pretty stressful for most principals in particular, so I acknowledge that. Just on that point, Ms Bell, from some of the evidence that you have given so far, one could almost say that you think it has been fantastic to have remote learning. Could I clarify though that your association does want kids to go back to face-to-face learning, and that that is the most appropriate?

**Ms BELL:** Absolutely. Very definitely, face-to-face learning is absolutely the best way of students learning, because it is so much about the relationship between the teacher and the student, and you can see that in the 'sunniefoods'. It is the fact that the teacher knows those students so well that remote learning is working, because she is still working on the relationship of it. Teachers need to be in the classroom so that they can provide immediate feedback, and they are not able to really do that particularly well with remote learning. I would say I do not think students have gone backwards at all probably in this time, but they certainly have not moved as far forward as we would have liked them to, and that will be caught up when they get back.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I note that there are some kids who are disengaged, and for whatever reason—they might be being bullied at school; you mentioned 'the blinkers' and that that has been good for them. Is there evidence coming back from your members though about the kids who have just wandered off—who login in the morning and then you just never hear from them again?

**Ms BELL:** Yes, there is evidence about that, particularly students who are without an internet connection and have no home phone so the only way that schools can get in touch is driving by and dropping in, and that has certainly happened as well. But it is very hard to maintain a strong relationship so it is critical for those students too to get back to school.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You mentioned some schools have appointed remote learning coordinators. Was that just for the purposes of what has been happening at the moment or is that going forward?

**Ms BELL:** No, because they see the benefit, particularly for those disengaged students and school refusers. So they are thinking, 'How can we keep a component of that? If a student has an anxiety disorder and can't be in the classroom, how can we keep up doing that work?' We will have to work it out, because we do not want teachers doing two lots of work—that is too hard—but you might be able to have some people in a school doing remote learning that those students can access so they can continue learning.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** But following on from that, does the association support the Virtual School Victoria program as a distance learning option?

**Ms BELL:** Absolutely. Yes, they do.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** What has your involvement been in that?

**Ms BELL:** Nothing, really, to be perfectly honest. We have not had very much to do with them at all. We have probably had more to do with Bendigo Senior Secondary College, who provide an outreach service for schools, which is really useful, where a teacher in a local community teaches and is filmed, particularly for subjects like specialist maths that not every school in the country can have a teacher to teach. I think the virtual school situation needs to be examined to look at how we can strengthen it for future possibilities.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You mentioned that you had daily updates with the COVID-19 task force and you also talked earlier about your involvement with the Minister. How often were you talking to the Minister or the Minister's office?

**Ms BELL:** I have met with the Minister twice this term, which is once more than usual, and the Minister's office probably, I do not know, five or six times, I would say, in this period—phone calls.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Is there anything that you have raised with the Government that has not been addressed or has not been addressed in the way you were hoping it would be?

**Ms BELL:** The thing I raised, which kind of shocked them, was the mobile phone policy. I do not think anyone had realised that we had banned mobile phones, and of course with returning to school we want students with a mobile phone with the COVIDSafe app on it and parents will want that, so how are we going to raise that? But I think it has been resolved.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So what is the outcome on that?

**Ms BELL:** Students are going to be encouraged to have the app but they will still put their phones in their lockers at the beginning of the day and take them out at the end, because we can trace where they have been during the school day and who they have been mixing with, so it is more a safety thing for when they are on public transport at the end of the day. So many principals said, 'Please don't go backwards on the mobile phones' because they fought long and hard to actually get it under control and have kids agreeing not to carry mobile phones with them, so they did not want to go backwards.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Have you encouraged your members to download the app, out of interest? And do you know if they are encouraging teachers to do so?

**Ms BELL:** I did go onto Twitter, actually, and say I had done it and suggest people should, yes.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. You talked to Mr Maas about the messaging to principals being quite clear. I have certainly had feedback that some principals were told, particularly early on, when remote learning began, that staff are not allowed to be at school. And yet there was the exemption that if your kids cannot be at home, they can go to school. Have you had feedback from your members about how difficult that was for principals to try and juggle the supervision in the schools when they were also told for the safety of the teachers that they needed to be at home?

**Ms BELL:** Generally what I have heard from principals is that they called for volunteers at that point in time, and most of them said they could easily supervise the number of students coming in. Not many students

came in to secondary schools—I think that was probably more a primary school issue—but there were a lot of teachers who were prepared to come in to school and supervise.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Did that put extra pressure on the prins, or have you found that most—

**Ms BELL:** I think early on, when it was all unknown and it was unfolding almost on a minute-by-minute basis, it was difficult, and we were going, 'What do we do? How do we handle this?'. Our field officers were doing a lot of support in schools. The regional SEILs—senior education improvement leaders—were doing a lot of support in schools with individual principals because the brain chemicals get going and people get stressed and find it difficult to deal with, so people needed individual support at that time. More experienced principals who have been through crises before were probably able to go, 'Well, this reminds me of something I have done before'; people who were in acting principal positions who had not ever been in that position before would have found it more difficult.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Likewise was it clear enough coming from the Government as to how to approach parents who want to send their children to school? We have all heard stories as MPs but more broadly in the community that, you know, 'I took my kids to school and they said, "No, you don't qualify", whereas the Premier had said in Parliament it's the parents' call'. Was that difficult?

**Ms BELL:** That was difficult in the first instance, I think, until people got used to the process and were clear on the guidelines and had sought advice and had had conversations with their school community. I do not think you had any parents wanting to send their children. Your children are older.

**Mr AXUP:** Being years 9 to 12—our youngest is 14 years of age—we were expecting three students, and they did not show up on day one, and we have not seen any student at the school for those purposes.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Is that a worry in itself, though? If they were supposed to be coming and they did not turn up? Not necessarily that they have been truant, but—

**Mr AXUP:** Oh, no. We then contacted them and the parents had changed their minds. As I said, because of our demographic dispersion and our geographic dispersion, for some of them it becomes more of a complication getting the student to the school probably than them being at home. I think one of the positives has been it has meant that parents have needed to trust their teenage children a little bit more than maybe they already did. So there are you go: there was a positive.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes, good luck with that with some. Just out of interest, does the association receive any funding from the State Government?

**Ms BELL:** Yes, we receive funding for professional learning that we provide for principals on educational leadership with a common funding agreement.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Is that an ongoing program or was that a once-off?

**Ms BELL:** We apply each year for programs that we want to provide, and if it fits within the parameters, yes.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Are you able to share with us how much that is?

**Ms BELL:** I would not have a clue off the top of my head, I am sorry.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. And just finally, we have had the question on mental health, but mental health and potential excessive screen time—have they been issues that your prins have raised with you?

**Ms BELL:** No, not really. To tell you the honest truth, I think they just want to do the best they can do at this point in time and figure that we will deal with that issue along with other mental health issues when students come back to school.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your attendance here today. We appreciate you taking the time to appear before our Committee. We will follow up any questions which may have been taken on notice in writing and require responses within five days of the Committee's request. We thank you for your time and we will move to the consideration of the next witness. Thank you.

**Ms BELL:** Thank you. Good luck with your deliberations.

**Witnesses withdrew.**