

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Monday, 18 May 2020

Members

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Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

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Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

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WITNESSES

Ms Nina Laitala, Executive Officer, and

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

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

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

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

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

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

The CHAIR: Thank you.

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

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

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

Assessment Authority. The gaps were also filled with rumours on line, which also increased student anxiety even more. Most students reported to us that they understood that it is a difficult time for all and that things are still uncertain, but they wanted just some sort of messaging and assurance from authorities, even if that messaging was, 'We are working on a solution'.

Ms LAITALA: There was also inconsistent messaging from schools to parents, carers and students around managing workload. Parents/carers were advised to do their best to support students in between their own work and other caring requirements, whereas students reported increased workload and pressure to complete tasks within time frames that were beyond their capacity. Students reported schools in general were not taking into account their potential work, caring or extracurricular activities when setting work tasks and due dates.

This period has also really highlighted the importance of strong school-family relationships. It has been clear that schools with existing well-developed relationships with families before the shift to remote learning found the transition easier, and students from these schools reported feeling more supported in their experiences and able to provide feedback to their schools personally or via their parents/carers. Parents Victoria have done considerable work in this area and we would recommend speaking with them about the experiences of parents and carers in relation to education during this time more broadly.

Mr MOE: Regarding mental health support, students reported inconsistent approaches from schools around communicating access to mental health support during this time, as well as inconsistent approaches to providing mental health support to students during remote learning. This was particularly felt by students in bushfire-affected areas prior to this whole pandemic, as was shared by a student through a blog on the Student Voice Hub.

Ms LAITALA: VicSRC was really impressed with the Government's efforts to distribute appropriate devices and internet access to students in need during this time and acknowledge that the demand was greater than expected. VicSRC also commend other agencies, including State Schools Relief, on their ability to adapt their services around this area. We are concerned, however, that requesting that these devices and internet access be returned when schools recommence face-to-face learning is not a strategic long-term approach to providing equity for disadvantaged students.

Mr MOE: In conclusion, VicSRC was impressed with the speed with which the Government acted to ensure remote learning commenced safely and in a timely way, and while students' experiences were diverse, the general response from Government in regards to ensuring the continuation of learning was positive. VicSRC looks forward to playing a more consultative role with the Government to ensure that the voices of students are heard and acted upon as we plan to return to face-to-face learning so this experience can strengthen our education system now and in the future. Thank you.

Ms STITT: Thank you to you both for appearing this afternoon. You have certainly given us a good flavour of some of the difficult issues that you have been dealing with during the pandemic, so we thank you very much for that work that is obviously ongoing. Can I ask: were there specific issues that were common across the state that you were getting feedback on in terms of how students were coping during the pandemic? Were there some critical issues that you think are a priority?

Mr MOE: Throughout the social media platforms that most students browse through there have been particularly key points regarding the mental health issues that have arisen from the pandemic, from staying at home for prolonged periods of time and also from the varied workload that we have had, depending on schools, since SACs and other assessments were dependent on the schools' discretion. That led to varying levels of stress between students across Victoria. That was something that I noticed throughout the weeks that we were stuck at home.

Ms LAITALA: If I can just add that the main point that came up was just a lack of accessible information. Most anxieties seemed to come from just not knowing what was going on. So I think that was probably the key thing that we felt, which is why we have raised that in our initial statement.

Ms STITT: And as an organisation one of your key roles, I would imagine, would be to try to improve that situation and that communication, so in that regard did you have much contact throughout the period with the department of education?

Ms LAITALA: Yes, we did. We had weekly meetings with the department, including some deputy secretaries, so there was a really good process of us being able to feed back what we were hearing from students regularly and being able to provide that feedback loop, but it was always after the fact. The actual information coming out was usually a couple of days after schools got it, so just that understanding that students had before they started hearing rumours from other schools via social media and so forth did create a bit more angst for students.

Ms STITT: Yes, and overall do you think that having that regular contact with the department helped you iron out those issues as best as possible given the kind of unique circumstances that everyone has been in?

Ms LAITALA: Look, I think as much as possible. I think there is a gap just generally. From what we have seen, students, as the biggest stakeholder in education, are not sort of prioritised in receiving information, and I think that is probably young people in general. So we will continue to advocate for accessible, easy-to-understand information that goes directly to students through platforms that are more accessible for them as well.

Ms STITT: I am interested in your views and your experience talking to students about what you think were some of the best practice examples out there with remote learning during the period that we have not been having face-to-face education.

Ms LAITALA: Sure. I might give a broad example and then Moe can speak more specifically. Some of the best examples really were when students got to lead the way in how they wanted to learn. Students really appreciated having the key kind of learning tasks given to them, but then they could really adapt to learning the way they wanted to. The schools that really, I think, had good experiences and the students that had the best experiences—that level of communication, the face-to-face video interactions and little kind of personal videos from teachers really worked well with students. I definitely saw that those students that did not get as much videoconferencing or have that ability to talk to teachers individually found it harder to engage with schools. So I think it is really about—once again, same with when schooling is face to face—that individual interaction and the fact that students had agency in their own work.

Mr MOE: I guess that the discrepancy lies in the ability of the school's resources. It is directly correlative that, I guess, schools that are not as advantageous when it comes to resources do suffer in being able to provide individual attention to individual students. In my case I was privileged enough to have face-to-face classes with every teacher for the first 20 to 30 minutes for them to explain the learning task, what is included in the lesson for today and what is expected of us. So I guess having those small little hints of direction and not leaving teaching or learning at the sole discretion of students, if that makes sense, really did go the extra mile when it came to students being able to learn online. And with that, I guess that different resources, such as Edrolo or other online textbooks and online resources that we have had, definitely benefited most students because the video aspect of sort of being in a classroom helped students continue learning the way that they have done for the past 10 years, having a teacher in the front. It just depended on who could adapt to the situation and who could not, unfortunately.

Ms STITT: That is interesting. Some of the other witnesses that we have heard from today have talked about some aspects of remote learning that they would like to see continue on. Have you got any thoughts about particular settings or particular cohorts of students that you think would benefit from some kind of ongoing remote learning opportunities?

Ms LAITALA: We have definitely heard, not so much through students but through other agencies and organisations, that some students that really found it difficult to engage in face-to-face learning have found this a better way. So from our experiences and what we have seen, I would be very reluctant to say a particular cohort, because I think the key that we have really seen from this is that flexibility is the most important part of this remote learning and something that we would like to see back in face-to-face learning as well—that opportunity for students to really have a chance to figure out the best way that they learn and be supported by teachers, as Moe has pointed out, so that there is room for agency but also room for that scaffolding teaching.

Ms STITT: I think you might have mentioned this in your introductory remarks, but can you give us a bit more feedback on how students are taking the announced transition back to face-to-face teaching, schooling?

Mr MOE: Most students are taking it positively, but there are some that are reluctant because of the impending SACs that we would have—the assessments—within the two weeks since only year 11s and year 12s would be back. So I guess teachers are taking advantage of this time to catch up and do as much assessment as possible. So there is a feeling of—it is a bittersweet feeling.

Ms LAITALA: And I think from a nonVCE student, senior schooling, perspective, there are a lot of mixed feelings. Particularly for those in the younger primary school years who have not had as much time at school, this period of being at home with their families, where they have enjoyed that experience, I think there is going to be some adjustment. I think there is a bit of anxiety, I have heard from a lot of students, just around what school will look like again. Are there still going to be those opportunities for them to be able to direct their own learning in certain areas or in lots of areas? I think a big anxiety is that schools will close again, that there will be another outbreak. Students have made it clear that they feel like that has not really been addressed enough and that they would like to have more of an idea of what the plans are by the Government and by schools if this happens again and schools have to close, whether it is en masse or in small schools, to make sure it does not disrupt their learning more.

Ms STITT: So you are talking about responding to individual school, not outbreaks, if somebody tested positive in a particular school—what the protocols would be then.

Ms LAITALA: I think then, and I think students are also concerned about wider outbreaks as well.

Ms STITT: In terms of what you think are the key lessons from this whole pandemic period for education and particularly through the perspective of your members, students, can you give us a bit of a flavour for what you think the key lessons are and also any examples of really good work that has been done that you think we ought to be aware of on PAEC?

Mr MOE: I would say that communication is very important, especially just from the top all the way to the bottom, with students and teachers in mind. Maybe having more effective communication targets for the demographic of kids, be it on social media or any platform that would be easily accessible to students, would be a nice takeaway in this unique circumstance that we have experienced. Other than that, there is not much to mention, I would say.

Ms LAITALA: I was going to say, just to add to what Moe said—a bit broader than Moe's experience—I think what we have seen here is the Government's and the education department's ability to respond very quickly and be far more flexible than I think anyone realised that they could be. I think there is a really incredible opportunity to go back to the way things once were and to really reflect deeply on what this situation and what this time has provided to students and where the gaps have been but also to take away those really important parts of student agency; of parent, teacher, family and student relationships; of that community approach—you know, beyond just schools and students—to education. Those are some of the things that we have really seen students reflect on and say that they have enjoyed. From a Vic SRC perspective I think generally that is what we would like to see continued.

Ms STITT: Yes. That is good feedback. I wanted to ask you about mental health, and I do not want to put words in your mouth, but I would imagine that for the year 12 students this year it has been quite a stressful time, and whether you have noticed that mental health issues for year 12 students have been particularly stark?

Mr MOE: Commenting on the mental health support, I guess it depends on not individual schools being able to adapt and cater for students en masse but providing links and support to make sure that we are catered for. I guess it stems back to the communication, or lack thereof, for students because there are platforms on social media that we VCE students use to keep in contact with each other, so that we can share information regarding assessments and other sorts of matters, but from that it also allows an avenue for rumours to spread really easily, and that is a downside, I guess. It is a very hard topic to talk about since all of this would be very personal to each student.

Ms LAITALA: I might be able to provide a bit of a broader understanding from some of the students that I have spoken to. I think the main feedback is around the inconsistencies from schools. For some students the schools have reached out, given them information, and it has been very clear who they can get support from. Other schools have done very little, and it is really focused on those students that have acute needs rather than thinking about the students that might be needing extra mental health support during this time. I think that from

a government perspective in terms of response we did feel that there was more of a focus on the academic and making sure that the academic learning continued and less of a focus on ensuring that the wellbeing, learning and development continued. Once again, I think as Moe has pointed out, this is a communication piece too. Particularly for the VCE students that pressure around exams and finishing year 12 within a certain time frame seems to really outweigh the need for these students to actually just look after themselves in what continues to be a really stressful time period.

Ms STITT: Okay. Well, thank you so much. I hope that we have got some good feedback from you about how we might be able to communicate in a more formal sense going forwards, so thank you.

Ms LAITALA: Great. Thank you.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you for appearing today. Obviously I think it is probably an ongoing challenge to make sure that students are seen as the biggest stakeholders in education and are seen as experts in the field. Can I get your feedback on whether you have felt that student voices have been taken into consideration in all of the decisions that have been made in going back to school and what have you? And also in the future, with a lot of discussion now about how things might change, how would you like students' voices to be taken into consideration in the future?

Ms LAITALA: As an organisation we have been disappointed around how students have been consulted. While we understand that there needed to be a rapid response, we are the peak body for school-age students in Victoria and there are no other organisations like ours in Australia, so there was a really good opportunity for the Victorian Government to utilise the experiences and the skills of our organisation more and be able to really get more of a sense of what students needed from the get-go. Having said that, we have had some really good chats with Minister Merlino as well as the department of education around a review from this, which we are really, really interested in feeding into. I guess with learning, even when things need to happen quickly and there are not a lot of options, it is really important to actively include those young people in particular that will be impacted most by the decisions. I think the reflection from young people is they felt very disempowered through a lot of this process, which was not just because of the schooling but because of everything. So if they had been able to have more of an opportunity, I guess, to provide some insight and feedback at earlier stages, I think that could have really helped students feel like they had a sense of ownership and agency in some of the decisions that were made that affected them.

Mr HIBBINS: And in terms of going forward?

Ms LAITALA: Moe, would you like to respond?

Mr MOE: In terms of going forward, I would say that the increased collaboration and communication and having a voice on the table matters to an extent. In the first few weeks of us having online schooling—I guess this could be related to the mental health support again—a lot of us, myself included, were feeling increasingly unmotivated in learning at home, and similarly this could be a result of not having enough consultation with students for knowing how we feel in our shoes. Regarding that, we also as Vic SRC have written letters to the Minister's office compiling questions that we have asked from VCE students expressing their concerns on how the situation was being handled. So we do look forward to being consulted, I guess, in the future regarding how we would return to face-to-face learning and in the case, on the off chance, that there is another outbreak regarding COVID-19 how we would handle the situation differently from how we have.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, terrific. Thank you. You mentioned in your opening remarks the issue around students that have been provided with laptops and devices and internet access at home but then concerns that these are on loan at the moment and would have to be returned at the end of this crisis. Is that a concern for you, that some students might actually go backwards if they have to return those devices?

Ms LAITALA: Yes, and I think it is just the fact that there were so many students out there that did not have access to reliable internet and reliable devices. That is a concern as well. We talk about the Education State being about excellence and equity, and I think that was a really stark reminder that we have still got quite a long way to go. I think, as I said before, the flexibility and the rapid response that the Government has shown means that it is possible, and we would really like to see these sorts of steps continued, particularly around equity. Moe talked about the ease that students that had that access to reliable internet devices had. We have heard of students who could not log in so therefore were marked absent. So there are all sorts of implications to

that. But I mean the fact of the matter is the world is online and from this will probably be more so, so I think it is really important to keep that in mind as we move forward and really think about what students need nowadays. It is more than just access at school; it is also that home environment as well and what they need there.

Mr HIBBINS: Terrific, thank you. We heard evidence from the AEU today that they thought one of the benefits was the family-teacher relationship, and now we are hearing from yourselves that that is also a positive coming out of this and the need to further enhance that going forward. Can you speak to that and how enhancing that going forward might look?

Ms LAITALA: Definitely. We are a member of the guiding coalition for the Education State, and a lot of the conversations we have had over the last four years have really been about family-student-school relationships and that sort of triad approach to partnership—I am not sure what a partnership in the three is. I think we have really seen from this situation that school is not a vacuum—learning does not exist just within school—and that education should be everybody's business. I think we have seen some really fantastic results that have come out of the Marrung strategy, and I think the data can really demonstrate that when you involve community, when you involve family in education, not only do students' experiences and students' results and outcomes improve, but it also means that the whole community improves as well because they become part of the process and there is that ownership and real pride that comes from a community that has surrounded itself with the students' education. Sorry—that was not super clear.

Mr HIBBINS: No, that is all right.

Ms LAITALA: But it is something that Vic SRC have been working on with some of our other partner agencies, including Parents Victoria, which I mentioned earlier. It is a really strong and really big priority for us, and I think the opportunity that we have got through school councils and various other school bodies in independent and Catholic schools where students, parents and teachers all work together in a governance-making process, there is so much more that we could do with that to really, really situate schools as that central part of community.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The Member's time has expired.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, witnesses. I am just keen to understand the feedback that you have received from your members, mainly around the year 11s and 12s, for whom I think this year has been quite disturbing, but there is also that sense of a rite of passage that I know many year 11s look forward to in their year 12 year. School is a distant memory for me, sadly, but most of us recall that year 12 year, where you have graduation, schoolies week—whatever—come along. I am just wondering, for Moe, what sort of feedback he is sensing from how students might look at that.

Mr MOE: I guess we could look at it in a way where we just have to make the best of the situation, given that our exams have been postponed and pushed to December. So quite a lot of, I guess you could say, the celebrations that come with finishing year 12 would have to be pushed. It also sort of takes a toll on us mentally, given that we have to put in the effort and be year 12s for another six to eight more weeks. It is a very interesting year, because we did not expect this. We expected to have a normal year, looking at the preceding year 12s, and were sort of expecting a normal and a hard year without all of these interruptions that we had in mine. That being said, I think that most of us have emerged through this online remote learning better than we anticipated, expected, and even though it had its hard days, especially the assessments and the SACs, where there were plenty of schools that were discrepant in how they validated their SACs—as we heard online, on social media platforms—I would say that it has been an all right experience thus far.

Mr RIORDAN: You pointed out—and I think it was a fair comment—that we have heard lots about the impact of going back to schools from the teachers and schools and principals and parents and probably less so from students; I think that was a fair point you made in your presentation. I was wondering, if that is the case: do most students, you think, have a clear understanding of what the other half of the year might look like in terms of when their exams will be and how the universities will approach it? And do you think most students are confident that they have all the information they need in managing the end of the year and early next year?

Mr MOE: At this point, to be frank, it is too early to tell, and even if we were to look at a definite answer, it would be a no. I will cite to you a no, given that we are not really sure what universities would be looking at,

besides the occasional news report saying that they would take into account unit 1/2 subjects, which did not really make any sense. But I guess that is the other side of students being anxious about how their year 12 journey will go. The updated study designs were sort of helpful for some students as they went through the study designs and looked at how unit 4 was drastically changed for some subjects, and that alleviated some of the pressures and stress that we had for the year as we looked forward, around the August to September mark. But besides that, it is still a very iffy and blurred line, if you would like to call it that.

Ms LAITALA: I think we could definitely say that most students do not feel confident that they know what the rest of the year looks like. I do not think there have been clear time lines, and even when we spoke to the Minister last week there were not clear time lines.

Mr RIORDAN: I guess on that, something else I am very keen to hear, Moe, is on the online forums and with young people talking, obviously everyone has friends at different schools and in different education systems. Is there sort of a general consensus about what has worked really well, what parts of it one school system or another does better than another? Is there something we can learn? An organisation like yours, towards the end of all this, would you be in a position to be able to tell the Government and this Committee probably what has worked well, what did not work well, what system did something better than another? Do you think there is enough learning online or from different groups to have some sense of all of that?

Mr MOE: Based on the comments that we have had and the interactions and conversations that we have had online with other students, there has not been much to say. To comment it would be too early, if you would like to put it that way, but not from our perspectives—we have not had much interaction.

Ms LAITALA: I think we could probably say that it has been very diverse, the experience of students, depending on sectors, depending on schools, depending on region, where they are—rural students have had very different experiences. So at this point I think, as Moe said, we do not have any specific recommendations.

Mr RIORDAN: And while we talk of country members—as a country MP of course—you did touch on the sort of lack of accessibility for some country students with internet and we have talked about that, but also I guess there are many city students who have big travel and big distances as well. You hear of some students who live in the city—2 hours or more going from one side to the other. Is there any anxiety amongst students about when school starts back up again, about transport links—students that have to use peak public transport and of course there are country students that may travel into town and stay with a relative or go to boarding schools or all sorts of different models that students have to deal with. Is there some concern about that, do you think?

Ms LAITALA: Not that we have heard yet. To be honest I think particularly with those students that are starting off first probably either being very independent—as in year 11 and 12—or very dependent on parents to drop them off, students have not really been talking about that yet.

I did just want to point out when you were talking about the anxiety around the year 12s, I think we have also seen that with grade sixers that are transitioning to secondary school next year there has been a gap—you know, that is their final year too. So there has been a lot of focus on those students that are leaving secondary school and less of a focus on the students that are transitioning from primary to secondary, so that is just something to keep in mind. Their year has been very disrupted as well.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes. And I guess that flows through all the year 9 students around that often have extra activities in year 9 that will miss out as well, so there is a bit of that.

With the disadvantaged students, we have talked a lot about the access to equipment and devices and electronics. I think the schools from what we have heard have done all they can to try and assist in that area. Are you aware of any students who, perhaps older students in a family, may get preference for the laptop or computer and if there are multiple siblings in the family there might be others missing out? Is there any feedback that we still need to do more in the provision of equipment?

Ms LAITALA: Not through our members, but I have heard through other organisations that definitely the devices did not come as quickly as needed initially. Once again, this is not through our student members, but I have heard that some students did not get them but the families just had to make do.

Mr RIORDAN: And families with English as another language and those sorts of complications, how do you think they have fared with gaining information and being able to be brought in and knowing what to do and what to expect with the changed circumstances?

Ms LAITALA: Once again I think it is really hard to speak to a whole cohort, because it really depends on the schools. All the information has gone to schools, so once again those schools that have really strong relationships with families and good communication, those families had better experiences. I think that is probably the case in most areas.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before our Committee today. Again, if these discussions today have raised any issues for anyone we have the Beyond Blue number of 1300 22 4636; Lifeline, 13 11 14; and Kids Helpline, 1800 55 1800.

Thank you for your time here today and the work that you are doing with your community members and stakeholders. The Committee will follow up on any questions which were taken on notice for a response in writing within five days. That ends today's hearing, so we will declare the hearing adjourned and thank you for your time.

Committee adjourned.