

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Wednesday, 2 December 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 Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallenge

WITNESSES

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

Ms Jenny Atta, Secretary,

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

Ms Lee Watts, Acting Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills,

Ms Kim Little, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

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

Mr Chris Keating, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority, and

Mr Stephen Gniel, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Department of Education and Training.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their elders past and present, and other elders that might be with us today.

The committee is reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the third series of public hearings for this inquiry.

We note that ministers and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards. All telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

Welcome again, Deputy Premier and Minister. We invite you to make a presentation of no more than 8 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Mr MERLINO: Thank you very much, Chair. And thanks again, everyone. Chair, before I go to the presentation, Mr O'Brien at the budget estimates had a query about all the projects funded through the minor capital. I have that list, so I am happy to table that now if that is appropriate.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you. If the Secretariat could take that from the minister. Thank you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Minister.

Visual presentation.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Chair. Can I also begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are all located and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging, and thank you for the opportunity to speak again and to speak for a third time in terms of our COVID response.

Once again, I pay tribute to the huge efforts of Victoria's students and their families, our educators and education leaders for all they have done to drive down coronavirus case numbers and get to where we are today. In everything we did and continue to do we have followed the Chief Health Officer's expert advice. The decision to move back to remote learning was not taken lightly and was never done because our kinders or schools were unsafe. We gave students all the support they needed and retained onsite access for children of permitted workers and our most vulnerable.

I thank all our school staff but especially those in specialist schools who ensured our most vulnerable children received the onsite support that they needed. The hard work and sacrifice of so many meant we were able to get students safely back in the classroom as quickly as possible and make a major contribution to suppressing the spread of the virus.

In terms of keeping our schools safe, we have kept our schools safe with enhanced cleaning, disinfecting high-touch points throughout the day, thanks to a \$45 million investment. We also gave schools almost 3 million free reusable masks. We supported our early childhood providers in schools impacted by a positive case by embedding a team in DHHS to assist with contact tracing. And thanks to the new COVID-safe assurance program for schools, specialists continue to support our school leaders to ensure our schools remain safe environments. This has included strategies for school pick-up and drop-off, access to the school site, safe lesson planning, cleaning and physical distancing measures.

While our schools provided strong support, the global pandemic has had a significant impact on the wellbeing of many of our students. We provided \$28.5 million to ensure students get more mental health support, and to look after the wellbeing of our staff we have tailored employee supports to meet the challenges of the pandemic. This included providing 90 per cent of government school principals with training on how best to support the mental health and wellbeing of school staff and the delivery of wellbeing webinars.

We did everything we could to keep senior students studying on site ahead of stage 4 restrictions. Our teachers worked hard to engage and support our students throughout. We staggered the return of secondary students to ensure all our VCE students were able to complete the general achievement test. More than 83 500 students have sat at least one VCE exam, with not one exam disrupted by a positive case. And I am pleased that we got to the point that yesterday marked the end of our VCE exams. So it has just been an amazing effort by schools, staff, students, the VCAA and the department.

Every single VCE student will be individually assessed and any adverse impacts of COVID-19 reflected in their ATAR ranking. VCAL students have been given more time to complete practical work, with VET studies extended until 18 December. We also announced \$4.6 million to cover the extra costs schools may face for year 12 students to complete their VET studies. Finally, all year 12 students in a VET course will be able to study the same course in 2021 with any TAFE or dual-sector training provider. As we recover we will give our students every support they need. Thanks to \$250 million we are deploying 4100 tutors across Victorian schools to make sure students get catch-up support and \$24.5 million of investment to reimburse schools to help bridge their digital divide by allowing students to keep more than 71 000 devices. We are also helping make that transition to prep and high school easier with dedicated tools and resources for our teachers.

Moving our youngest learners in Melbourne to remote learning was one of the most difficult decisions. I am really proud of how everyone responded to this challenge. As with schools, providers showed great innovation in supporting families through the difficult period of remote learning, with the department providing webinars and other advice. We committed up to \$71.7 million to support services during terms 2, 3 and 4, including free sessional kindergarten. This relieved the pressure on families and providers and kept workers in early childhood employed.

We know how much family budgets have been stretched this year. That is why we are investing almost \$170 million in free kinder in 2021, saving parents around \$2000 in participating sessional and long day care kindergarten programs. This will also ensure more kids can access critical early learning and help get more women back to work, because we know how much they have been affected. There is also more than \$6 million in early intervention specialist supports, and we are continuing the \$5 billion rollout of the landmark three-year-old kindergarten initiative. This will boost outcomes and change lives.

Our higher education and skills sector has been at the forefront of training the workers our state needs to respond to the pandemic. It has shown great innovation in responding to remote learning and supporting students with devices and conducting welfare checks. To help TAFEs get through the pandemic we provided almost \$425 million to TAFEs for business continuity and crisis support. We also established a Victorian Higher Education State Investment Fund of \$350 million to support research partnerships and capital works. It is fantastic that students and staff can now return to campus for summer programs. Our higher education and training sector will play a critical role by retraining and reskilling Victorians with \$1 billion of further

investment. As part of this we are funding an extra 60 000 free TAFE places as part of 80 000 training places so more people can get the training they need.

We are investing \$33.2 million towards Big Build apprenticeships to ensure the next generation of tradies get their start on our biggest infrastructure projects. This will secure a pipeline of 1500 apprentices and trainees every year and will support them to complete their course. And because we want to grow the number of apprentices from all walks of life we are investing \$9.3 million to fund further apprenticeship support officers and \$5 million towards a dedicated fund to get more women into non-traditional trades. Thanks to a record investment in capital works we are not only providing our students with world-class learning facilities, we are supporting the recovery of our whole economy. We are delivering over 8000 jobs as part of Victoria's biggest ever education infrastructure program. This means hundreds of projects across every corner of the state as we rebuild and modernise early childhood centres, schools and TAFEs.

Once again, thank you to everyone involved in all our education sectors for all that you have done this year. Through all our hard work we have been able to drive down case numbers and save lives, and as we recover the government will support you every step of the way. Thank you, Chair. I am happy to answer questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and I will pass to the Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair, and thank you again, Minister, for coming to talk again about this topic. My first question is to the Secretary. Did the Department of Education and Training procure any legal representation during the Coate inquiry?

Ms ATTA: No, Mr Riordan, we did not.

Mr RIORDAN: None at all, okay. Is your department expecting to incur any other legal costs or complications arising from the unexpected COVID experience this year?

Ms ATTA: Not to my knowledge, Mr Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: No. Okay. Thank you. Minister, we discussed a little bit in the previous hearing that the New South Wales Department of Education has done things differently—different state—but what they have done is they have gone about measuring the educational impact of remote learning this year, finding that their students have fallen between two and four months behind. Is Victoria planning to do something similar, considering that our students were remote learning for a much longer period?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Riordan, for your question. It is an important question. As I said at the earlier hearing, term 4 particularly has been focused on two things—first of all, on mental health and wellbeing, re-engaging students and reconnecting them to their school community, to their peers and to their teachers, and then secondly, an assessment. There are a whole range of assessment tools that are available to schools—assessment tools that schools have been familiar with for some period of time and also a literacy and numeracy toolkit that was delivered in New South Wales that we have brought down to Victoria. That is part of the suite of tools where teachers and schools are making that assessment at an individual level. To answer your question: yes, we will have a sense across all of our 1500 government schools of what has been the likely impact in terms of learning growth. I might ask Mr Howes if he has got anything further to add in regard to the toolkits.

Mr HOWES: Thanks, Deputy Premier. Mr Riordan, the reference to New South Wales is to a check-in tool that they developed for students' learning, and through agreement with New South Wales we have been able to provide our schools access to that. But a number of our schools use well-established tools in addition to that—the well-regarded PAT-R and PAT-M tests from ACER—and we also have been developing our own digital assessment library. Given the priority of the need to get students settled back rather than to impose a new tool with which teachers are not necessarily familiar, we have enabled schools to continue to use the tools with which they are most familiar to be able to identify those students who are most in need of support.

Mr RIORDAN: In accessing the hybrid of tools that you have got there, have you got either some firm results or some preliminary results that give—to a lesser extent, students—parents and schools and school communities comfort as to where they are starting next year at and, in light of other commitments around tutoring, as to where students are now and where we are planning to move them to?

Mr HOWES: We have asked schools to do that by the end of this year, so not all schools have completed that process at the moment.

Mr RIORDAN: There is not a lot of time left. Will all schools be completing that process before the end of the year, or will some have to do it next year?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. That is the task before schools for term 4 so that when schools resume in 2021 we absolutely know the students that require additional support, additional catch-up or additional support if they are at risk of disengaging. That has been the task for the entirety of the term, Mr Riordan. We will have that data at a school level for individual students and we will have a sense across the state. Our assessment is that it is around 200 000 students—that is what we have based the tutor program on—that will require additional support to catch up.

Mr RIORDAN: Can I ask, as the disadvantage is socio-economic often—it can be a lot of reasons, we all know that, but there is no doubt that regional areas often feature uncomfortably high in these areas. I am from a regional area. Can Victorians rest assured that the funds—200 000 is your estimation—are not going to be allocated just to education department regions but will be accessible to everyone? Are we going to be guaranteed that Barwon South West, for example, in my region, is not going to say, ‘Suddenly our allocation of money has run out and there’s no more left’? What is the rule for engaging that?

Mr MERLINO: I can give that assurance, Mr Riordan. As I said in the earlier hearing, there will be a base level of funding for all schools and then there will be loadings in regard to disadvantage. Similar to the rollout of equity funding, which is a disadvantage-based, targeted fund for schools where rural and regional schools have got a vast bulk of that fund, that would be reflected in tutoring. It also does go towards enrolments, so it is a combination of student base level, student numbers and disadvantage.

Mr RIORDAN: All right. Do you currently have feedback on what percentage of particularly secondary school students dropped out this year, and is that figure higher than normal?

Mr MERLINO: It is a good question. So as I mentioned in the earlier hearing, attendance and absence rates compared favourably to the same period in 2019 through the period of remote and flexible learning, but there is a higher proportion of students at the disadvantaged end that are at risk or have disengaged from education. So that was one of the reasons why through the course of the pandemic, Mr Riordan, we announced additional funding, part of which goes toward a significant boost to the Navigator program, which is about engaging with students at risk or who have disengaged.

Mr RIORDAN: So the ones that are disengaged, does the department have any stats on whether they have been able to gain employment—perhaps they left school for employment—have they gone to another form of learning or have they lost the system?

Mr MERLINO: So the—

Mr RIORDAN: Sorry, and the second part to that is, assuming you have that knowledge, do you have plans to re-engage with those students?

Mr MERLINO: Sorry, Mr Riordan, just the second part of your question?

Mr RIORDAN: Do you then have plans to re-engage with people that are now out of your school system?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. So the first port of call, the first priority, is to get those kids back engaged in their education, and that is why—and I am happy to talk through the hearing—part of our investment is in Navigator, in Lookout, so that we can engage those students and get them back into education. In terms of data at hand, student attendance in term 4, to week 6, for all Victorian government schools—92 per cent for prep to year 6; 87.5, years 7 to 10; 89 for years 11 and 12.

Mr RIORDAN: They are state averages though, Minister, aren’t they?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, that is right. That is across Victoria, and I have got metro and non-metro.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, can you give us a breakdown by areas that have high disadvantage? So, for example, when I look in my electorate—which is predominately all single state secondary school, smaller disadvantaged country towns, for example—the disengagement and non-attendance rate is much higher. I am picturing that that is not just unique to my area, that it is probably consistent across. So if you take out, you know, schools with really good internet connection availability and more engaged families, what does that statistic look like?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, so I am happy if there is any further information that I can provide to the committee, I will do so. Across the board we compare favourably this year to last year, but there has been—and we knew this at the start, Mr Riordan, that remote and flexible learning would have the biggest impact on vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts of students, and that is reflected in engagement, it is reflected in academic performance, it is reflected in attendance and absence rates.

Mr RIORDAN: So anecdotally, Minister—

Mr MERLINO: If there is information that I can provide, I am happy to do so.

Mr RIORDAN: Anecdotally, Minister, the feedback I would have is that the dropout from year 11 was well above average this year. Do you have that feedback?

Mr MERLINO: No, I do not. I will give you the data that I have before me, and if there is anything further, I can provide it to you, but—

Mr RIORDAN: I guess another way of looking at that is: do you have yet a concept of what your year 12 enrolments for next year are?

Mr MERLINO: Enrolments—we will have a strong sense of enrolments a bit later in the year than the normal year because transitions have been interrupted, whether that is kinder to prep, year 6 to year 7. So in terms of the questions of enrolments for 2021, I will have a—

Mr RIORDAN: No, specifically year 12, though. Haven't they picked their subjects and things by now?

Mr MERLINO: I will go to attendance first. Attendance rates this year for years 11 and 12 are higher than last year—so 89 per cent, term 4, 2020; 87.9 per cent, term 4, 2019. In terms of enrolments—

Mr RIORDAN: Sorry, just to clarify that—that attendance rate, though, is for the kids, students, still enrolled at school. That does not tell us if students had disconnected from the school and were no longer enrolled.

Mr MERLINO: You have got more students attending and engaged than at this time last year, Mr Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, but that still does not answer the question, because there might have been more students enrolled in schools this year. My question is—

Mr MERLINO: No, this is a percentage.

Mr RIORDAN: can you tell us or can the department tell us the number of students enrolled in years 11 and 12 at the enrolment point in February, and then what that figure is compared with when they started back in term 4?

Mr MERLINO: We do not have that data yet.

Mr RIORDAN: Can you provide that to the committee?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, I am happy to take this on notice, and if there is further information that we can provide, we will. But yes, there are students in any year that through the course of the year may go to TAFE or might find apprenticeship opportunities. So I am happy to take that on notice.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The call is with Mr Gary Maas, MP.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Deputy Premier and your team, for making yourselves available for the third time now before this inquiry. It is greatly appreciated. If I could take you to schools—it has been an extraordinary year by any indicator for schools and the education sector more broadly—could you inform the committee what support the government has provided to schools to help them adapt and respond to challenges posed by the pandemic?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr Maas. It has indeed been the most extraordinary year, and again I am very proud of the way our schools have adapted and responded to the challenges posed by this pandemic—and this is across all schools; government, Catholic and independent sectors made enormous efforts to transition their students as quickly and smoothly as possible to remote and flexible learning in term 2 and then again in term 3. Since the return to onsite schooling in term 4 the Victorian government has announced significant funding to address some key challenges emerging from the extended period of remote and flexible learning for some students. This includes funding, as we have discussed, for tutors to help students catch up on learning and for increased mental health and wellbeing supports. Firstly, in October I announced \$250 million to support students whose engagement in learning has been disrupted through remote and flexible learning. This includes \$240 million for the tutor learning program for government schools and non-government schools to recruit approximately 4100 tutors to deliver additional targeted teaching and \$8.6 million for 16 additional career engagement support officers and 60 additional multicultural aides to support schools working with families to lift student outcomes and re-engage students with learning. On 7 August 2020 the Victorian government announced new student mental health funding of \$28.5 million to expand, as I have mentioned before, capacity for the Navigator and Lookout programs—Lookout is our targeted program for students in out-of-home care—and mental health services and Headspace training programs for staff, some additional 1500 staff, to participate in that Headspace training. But as the Premier, the health minister and others have said a number of times, the pandemic is not over and will not be over until, one, we have got a vaccine and, secondly, that vaccine is distributed effectively across our community. So we will continue to respond to the challenges and opportunities as they emerge, and we will support our schools every step of the way.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. We have had two separate periods of remote and flexible learning this year. It has been quite an experience, I think, for teachers, parents and of course students. What are some of the lessons that the government has learned from this?

Mr MERLINO: Well, we commissioned three reports on the first period of remote and flexible learning in term 2 so that we had a clear picture of the experiences of schools, students and families and to make sure that we learned from that experience. That report includes, as Mr Richardson would know, the Parliamentary Secretary for Schools report on findings from their experience of remote and flexible learning in schools, with a particular focus on vulnerable students; analysis of data on the experience of remote and flexible learning in Victoria, prepared by Learning First; and qualitative research on remote and flexible learning, undertaken by Kudos—so three distinct pieces of work that were informed by feedback from more than 3600 teachers, parents, students and education experts as part of a community consultation process. This also included an independent analysis of the Department of Education and Training's data and input from focus groups and firsthand experiences of students and parents across the school sectors.

The reports found that despite the challenges of remote learning, the majority of Victorian students continue to progress with their learning, with some even thriving due to the increased flexibility. However, some students struggled, particularly those, as I have said, in disadvantaged cohorts. Evidence suggests students who struggled most with online learning included those with low levels of English, those already at risk of disengaging from school and those with home environments not conducive to remote learning. Teachers found benefits in engaging parents more in their children's learning, as well as in using new digital resources as part of their teaching practice. Factors that were identified as affecting some students' experience of remote and flexible learning included lack of access to specific educational supports, the ability of parents or carers to support remote learning and the availability of devices and connection to the internet.

The Victorian government took the key lessons from term 2 to make improvements. Schools were making improvements locally with what worked for them. They tweaked how they delivered, and we did likewise at a statewide level. So we loaned a further 9401 computers and 4821 internet access devices to students in term 3 in addition to the 62 000 computers and 23 000 devices loaned in term 2. We expanded the scope, as I mentioned earlier, of the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund to include the purchase of internet plans for Victorian government, Catholic and independent schools. We expanded health and wellbeing supports,

including new mental health and wellbeing resources made available for teachers, students and parents, which were available in easy English and 20 languages; a regional health and wellbeing key contact allocated to each government school to plan and respond to student need; and new mental health funding of \$28.5 million to expand capacity for Navigator, Lookout, mental health services and Headspace training. We provided extra supports for groups of students who thrived or needed additional attention. It is not just students who struggled academically; it was high-ability students who needed that extension. How do you deliver that in a remote and flexible way? We created a challenge and enrichment series to provide a virtual learning experience for students who have thrived from prep to year 12 across all areas of the curriculum.

We introduced a consideration of educational disadvantage process for senior secondary students and provided more time and support for students studying VCAL and VET to complete courses and work placements, enabled greater access to onsite attendance for students with disabilities and provided additional inclusive remote teaching and learning resources to support those students, and we worked closely with community organisations to provide targeted support to vulnerable students, including disability peak bodies, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association and community organisations working with students living in high-rise public housing estates.

We also provided resources and professional development for teachers on a range of topics; more than 900 high-quality, engaging virtual learning experiences through Arc, the department's new digital events hub; and online professional learning courses for teachers, including practices and strategies for sequencing learning and teaching in an online environment.

And since the return to onsite schooling in term 4, the government has announced significant funding to address some key challenges from the extended period of remote and flexible learning for some students. This includes funding for tutors and for increased mental health and wellbeing supports, and we will continue to explore options to address other challenges and opportunities as they emerge. We want schools to focus on their kids this term—mental health and assessments—but we will at an appropriate time have another round of further engagement, particularly the lessons learned from that second period of remote and flexible learning.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thank you. I would like to move to the much-talked-about staggered return back to onsite learning. Can you explain for the committee why there was a different approach taken between metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Maas. So the staggered return to onsite learning earlier this term was designed to get all students back in the classroom as soon and as safely as possible, and it was successful. We were able to transition all students back to onsite learning without putting at risk all that had been achieved through the period of restrictions to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Having—and this has always been the case—1 million students, staff, parents and carers all going back to school and travelling to and from school at the one time would have compromised the ability to monitor the impact and potentially the safety of staff and students. So I have said this many times, but I will say it again: throughout this entire pandemic we have followed the advice of the Victorian Chief Health Officer every step of the way, and the staggered return to onsite learning was no different. It was on the advice of the Victorian CHO.

As you have noted, the staggered return of students was different in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. Both approaches, however, were based on the advice of the Chief Health Officer in terms of when it was safe for the community for schools to return to onsite learning. In regional Victoria that was from 5 October. Students enrolled in prep to 6 in standalone primaries were able to return to classrooms. On the 8th it was students prep to grade 6 in P-12 schools, because we had the gap on the 7th, and from the 12th all students were able to return to face-to-face learning. And in metro Melbourne it was from the 12th that students enrolled in prep to grade 6, year 7 students and students that attend special schools were able to resume face to face. Students enrolled in years 11 and 12 also returned from the 12th, though I note that VCE and VCAL students were able to return to school for essential assessment the week commencing 5 October. From 26 October students in years 8 to 10 joined their peers at school.

It was important that health authorities had the time to monitor the impact of the first stage of return, and the staggered approach to getting all students in all year levels back on site also supported a more gradual increase of community mobility across metropolitan Melbourne. It provided a full 14 days between stages to account for that full incubation of the virus.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. And in the remaining 50 seconds or so that I have could you tell us what improvements have been made to the contact-tracing process for schools?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, thank you very much. So, the Department of Education and Training works very closely with experts within the department of health to monitor and respond to COVID-19 and support school and early childhood communities to provide safe educational environments. When cases connected to education settings first emerged, those settings were immediately closed for cleaning and for contact tracing. Time frames started as short periods—generally three to four days—but did expand as the numbers of cases across the community expanded. To ensure that education services reopened as quickly as possible the Department of Education and Training supported the department of health by identifying key department staff to join a newly established and dedicated education sector team in the department of health, and that made a big difference.

Mr MAAS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I will pass to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Deputy Premier and team, for appearing again. I will start with the obvious question and hopefully something useful that this committee can do: if you had to do all this again, what would you do differently?

Mr MERLINO: It is an interesting question. I think the answer is in two parts. My immediate response is that if I had my time again, I would continue to follow the advice of public health experts—the Chief Health Officer. Now, we are not out of this yet and will not be out until we have a vaccine and it is distributed, but I would not change my approach or the approach of the Department of Education and Training. I would not change the approach in terms of getting advice from the Chief Health Officer. There will be broader and deeper assessment, Mr Limbrick, of how we tackle the pandemic in Victoria, in Australia and across the globe over coming months and many years, but my immediate response is I would not change our approach in terms of very diligently, carefully following the advice of public health experts.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Deputy Premier. Something that we have spoken about before and that has been brought up a number of times: we know that there was some harm caused by the switch to remote learning, evidenced by the response that is necessary now. You have also mentioned again how the schools were safe all along, and this has been discussed as well—the idea that we are trying to shut down overall community movement, so children going to school and that sort of thing. One of the things with the Chief Health Officer's directions is that that they must be the least restrictive response. I think we have spoken about this as well. You seem very convinced that the recommendations that you have been given by the Chief Health Officer are the least restrictive, like there was no other option. What evidence was presented to you to convince you that there is no other option? Do you know what I mean? You know, if I was having to make that decision, I would need some serious convincing, right, because we are causing harm. What sort of evidence were you shown that convinced you that this really is the only option?

Mr MERLINO: When you think about it, the biggest call we made was the call to move to remote and flexible learning, and the driving reason for that was to limit the movement of people and the interactions. So whether it is remote and flexible learning, whether it is the restrictions in terms of the kilometres, whether it is the reasons for leaving home, all of that was based on reducing contact and movement between people. So, Mr Limbrick, that was the advice, that is the detailed advice that we received through the CCC cabinet. It is the process the Premier and other first ministers received through national cabinet. The advice was: you need to do these things to reduce movement.

So you have got your overall public health reasoning. Then there was some really important engagement between the Department of Education and Training and the public health experts in terms of: okay, what does this mean at a school level, how do we ensure that we can continue to support children of permitted workers, how do we support students for whom the best environment for them in terms of their learning was a continuation of remote and flexible learning on site. So there is that real engagement between health and DET in terms of what the policy means on the ground. And there was modelling that showed the risk of faster opening up. So in terms of the dates that I just went through, that is based on, again, public health advice and modelling.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Deputy Premier. One thing that I am interested in: I notice that schools have done—in my own kids' school, they have done a lot of changes in the way that they operate, right. So parents are not allowed on the site. They do like kiss and go, they call it, where you drop the kid off and do not actually interact with other parents. They have different hygiene protocols at the school. Do you think that these new protocols and things that the schools have instituted would in the future—God forbid we have another large outbreak—lower the probability that we would need to do another remote learning because schools are better at managing this sort of thing?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Limbrick. I think that depends on the scale of the health emergency. There is no doubt, whether it is changes in practice at schools or early childhood settings or in our TAFEs or whether it is just human behaviour, perhaps in the future there will be, outside of a pandemic, 'If you're sick, you're staying home'. We can see what a difference that makes to the flu, for example. So I think there will be learning and changes in practice and attitudes that will last beyond COVID response and recovery.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Deputy Premier. One of the things I am trying to get my head around as well is these harms. There are two categories: one is the educational harm and then the other one is the potential mental health harm, and that seems to be what the government is focusing on attempting to remedy. Do you see these educational and mental health harms as short-term harms or very long term harms? I note that some of the funding is short term, like for these tutors—that is just for the next year—but I imagine that these mental health harms and possibly the educational harms are actually far-reaching into the future.

Mr MERLINO: Yes. And you go back to some of the modelling that Orygen did, for example, and it went to exactly that point. When you are thinking about a crisis event—so Black Saturday, the fires of earlier in the summer—the mental health and wellbeing impact is not just immediate, it is months and years. So Orygen and others, their research is indicating that this has a long tail as well. So what we are doing in schools is a mixture of what are the immediate things that we need to do—and this is the focus on tutors in 2021, for example—but what are some long-term changes. We are rolling out the \$51 million for additional mental health practitioners in every government school. By the end of next year they will be right across all our government school settings. We provided further funding to expand the mental health in primary schools pilot. There is a \$200 000 partnership with Smiling Mind to support mental health and wellbeing resources for senior secondary. We have got the additional Headspace training that I mentioned a moment ago. And I am very much looking forward to the final report of the royal commission in February. I could not be more excited about having both portfolios of mental health and education in terms of what that could mean, using the universal setting of our school system, and what we could do in terms of prevention and early intervention.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Deputy Premier. Last, I would like to pick up on something that Mr Riordan brought up—that is, children dropping out of school, disengaging from school. I have had a number of anecdotal reports to me as well where either students just gave up or parents were having a lot of trouble managing everything with their children, and some parents, I have had it reported to me, just said, 'Look, the children are having too much stress with this at home. We're just going to focus on their mental health and we're not going to worry about the schoolwork', and they ended up disengaging. What sort of support is there for parents that were having trouble with this and what opportunities are there for students to re-engage who might have gone through that process where they just gave up? Can they get back into the system? How can we re-engage them?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, and I hear these anecdotal reports myself when talking to educators, visiting schools, talking to parents. I know we have all had those conversations. There is no doubt that some students desperately struggled with remote and flexible learning. That is why the \$28.5 million investment is so important. That is why we have significantly expanded Navigator—to identify, engage and re-engage those kids into education. There is also the importance of the tutor program, sending a message to parents, 'As difficult as this year has been for your child, there will be much greater individual learning support so we can get them back up to speed'. The key thing is ensuring that they are in school now and they are back at school on day one, term 1, next year, and that is what this investment is all about.

Mr LIMBRICK: And I noticed—I think you mentioned it previously—schools are sort of very focused on the wellbeing of students, rather than education, as the primary thing at the moment, sort of getting them back up to speed. How long do you think that process will go on for? Is that something that is short term? Because I notice in my engagement with schools that that is, like, a huge focus at the moment.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, that is certainly the story of term 4—reconnecting kids, re-engaging them. Some students have forgotten how to behave with each other, with their teachers. That is why getting students back to face-to-face teaching in term 4 has been so critically important, so we can address health and wellbeing, make the assessment of exactly where you are at as a student and then next year hit the ground running in terms of what catch-up support is required.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Limbrick, and the call is now with Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I just want to go along the same lines for just a moment. On 11 September Adam Carey in the *Age* had a report on a report, an independent report, on the experience of students from the state's first wave, and it showed 10 per cent of students from disadvantaged schools were absent during the first wave and just 4 per cent from advantaged schools. Is there a similar report for the second wave that has been produced as yet, and if so, what did it find?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. We have been tracking attendance and absence rates on a weekly basis, and across the whole period of remote and flexible what is reflected in the data coming from schools is that broadly attendance and absence compare favourably to the same period of last year, but it is having a disproportionate impact on vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts of students.

Mr D O'BRIEN: On the specific question, though, was there a specific report? I do not know what this one was referring to other than a report for the Andrews government. Was there a second report?

Mr MERLINO: There is weekly data that is presented to me. I might ask Mr Howes to—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Perhaps, Mr Howes, if that data could be provided to the committee.

Mr HOWES: Thank, Mr O'Brien. That report, by memory, that Mr Carey was referring to in the *Age* was one of the ones that the Deputy Premier referenced earlier—into that first wave—so that is all public. Schools have recorded absence every day and have reported back to us, and we get that report each week, so we could do the same summative report for the second wave as was done for the first.

Mr D O'BRIEN: If there is a summary report you can provide to the committee, that would be great. Could I just for the record get a yes for Hansard?

Mr HOWES: Yes, if it is available. Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you. And going back to tutoring and the catch-up from the wave, what is the criteria that is to be used to identify what students will be able to access the tutoring? I appreciate it is going to be that they have fallen behind, but is there specific criteria on what that means?

Mr MERLINO: It is twofold. In terms of the allocation of funding, it is similar to the way that we allocate equity funding, for example—so a base level of over \$15 000 for every single school and then adjustments based on enrolment numbers and disadvantage. So every school will get an allocation based on that formula. A very large secondary school, high disadvantage—they will be up in the area of \$1 million.

In terms of the assessment of which students will receive that additional individual support, that will be based on the assessments that we talked about earlier. Schools are best placed—the department is not best placed; it is individual schools and teachers—they know the kids that need that additional support. So it will be—

Mr D O'BRIEN: There will not be a centralised set of criteria.

Mr MERLINO: No, and Mr Howes can add some comments as well.

Mr HOWES: Mr O'Brien, the key criterion that we have asked schools to measure is not the level of learning attainment this term but the relative gap between what they would have been expected to achieve if COVID had not intervened and what they are demonstrating. So there will be some of those high achievers who still have missed substantially on the learning gain that would have been expected and that you can measure compared to other students.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And that is the standard reporting process now, I think, too. You know, you are grade 1 plus six months, or whatever it is.

Mr HOWES: That is right.

Mr MERLINO: But it is looking at the gap—so it is similar to how we are approaching educational disadvantage for senior secondary. What is the gap? Where are they, and where would they have been—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Where they should have been—

Mr MERLINO: had it not been for COVID and bushfires.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And on that, you have said that schools have been asked to complete their assessments before the end of this year, and you expect about 200 000 students.

Mr MERLINO: That is our assessment, yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: If it is a lot more than that or a lot less than that, will you adjust the funding available?

Mr MERLINO: We do not anticipate it will be less. You know, we will see what data comes back from schools, but I have got high levels of confidence that the assessment the department has made will be accurate, give or take.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. And can you guarantee, Minister, that schools themselves will not have to dip into their own reserves to fund tutors?

Mr MERLINO: So, there is an element of the \$250 million—there is a small proportion, and Mr Bates can talk to this—that goes towards unspent credit. So this is not school-raised funds, Mr O'Brien—not in any way, shape or form. This is funding provided by the department for staffing that has not been allocated, and that is about \$30 million of that \$250 million.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So it is possible that schools who have got some excess money may choose to top up—

Mr MERLINO: Yes, and schools may well choose to top up the money they receive for tutors. They could choose to use equity funding; they could choose to use other funds available to them. But as I said, it is \$250 million; \$30 million of that is unspent credit from the department to that school.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Right. With regard to applications for the—I think you said—18 500 or thereabouts who have actually expressed an interest in the tutoring jobs, do you know how many of those are retired teachers and would still need to reregister with the VIT?

Mr MERLINO: It is a good question. I have not yet seen a breakdown of the 18 000—so we are working through that. So there might be a teacher who retired a year or two ago, where they have either continued with their registration, so that will not be a problem, or they can get a very quick permission to teach. I do not know if Mr Howes has got any further data.

Mr HOWES: No, we do not yet.

Mr MERLINO: We are just working through that now, Mr O'Brien, so—

Mr D O'BRIEN: So will you be asking the VIT to fast-track them for re-registration?

Mr MERLINO: Absolutely. There will be a fast-track process; there will be a simplified process—but no shortcuts around child safety or any of those arrangements. But yes, it will be a fast-track process.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Like vaccines, Minister.

Mr MERLINO: That is right.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Like vaccines—a shortcut, but no shortcuts.

And on the 18 000, has it been assessed that already we can just knock out 10 000 of them because they are not remotely qualified, and they have just applied for jobs?

Mr MERLINO: I have not seen the breakdown of the data of the more than 18 000 that have expressed an interest—you know, how many are retired by a number of years, how many are recently retired, how many are CRTs. I imagine there will be a lot of CRTs. I imagine there will be a lot of preservice teachers. We are just working through that now, Mr O'Brien, but it is such a pleasing position to be in. We had discussions with the department about advertising—you know, 'Have we got some funds to put to advertising to promote this program?' Within days we had over 10 000, and now we have got more than 18 000.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, okay. Can I just go back to a question Mr Riordan asked earlier to the Secretary about Operation Soteria and legal costs? Were there actually any DET staff at all seconded to Operation Soteria?

Ms ATTA: Sorry, Mr O'Brien. We had a small number of staff that were seconded to some different operations in response to the pandemic, across government. I do not have that detail with me. I could not tell you right now if any of them were to Operation Soteria, but I can certainly follow that up for you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: If we could have that on notice and the detail around it to the extent that you can—where they went, how long they were there.

Ms ATTA: Yes, I can do that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I jump around a bit here. I just want to ask the minister in the short amount of time I have got left: you talked about how you only accepted advice from the CHO about returning to school. One of the bugbears for me and many, many people in regional Victoria was the fact that VCE students had to go back to remote learning at a time when all other regional students did not. I think that was around early August, when metropolitan students came back. Was that on the basis of advice from the CHO? Because you actually said that it was about creating a level playing field.

Mr MERLINO: Yes. This goes to the engagement between DET and public health in terms of: how do we reflect the advice, the recommendations, of public health in a school context? The overarching public health reasoning was around the movement of people across our communities. Then there is engagement between education officials and public health officials about how that is reflected in the school system with the particular needs of students and school communities. The most important factor for me is that, as I have said a number of times, with prep to year 11 we have got time next year to catch them up and support them, but for our senior secondary students, our year 12 students, this is it for their education.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Do you accept though, then, that (a) that decision caused a lot of disquiet among regional year 12s and their teachers and (b) the notion that it was to create a level playing field was pretty rich given regional students already are well behind on a whole lot of markers when it comes to VCE?

Mr MERLINO: I appreciate the feedback that I have received, but my view remains that it was the right call. I wanted to ensure for that cohort of students, the year 12 students, that their experience and the dates—everything—was the same, whether they were a student in Bairnsdale or a student in Mordialloc. So I appreciate the question and I appreciate some of the feedback from rural and regional, but I wanted to make sure that for year 12 students their experience of 2020 was exactly the same. I think that was the right call.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But the point is—and we could argue about it—it is not the same at the best of times. Rural and regional students already face an unlevel playing field with their metropolitan counterparts. This was the one chance they had to almost get an even break, and it made it harder for them.

Mr MERLINO: I do not think we should address those issues via how we deal with a pandemic. We have made very significant announcements last year and in recent years in regard to greater support for students and teachers in rural and regional Victoria. We do need to continue to do that. There is a difference in educational outcomes between rural and regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne, but I do not think we address that via how we address the pandemic.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Pauline Richards, MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Chair. I think I will be segueing on a little bit from that discussion about year 12 and from Mr O'Brien's questions, but I do want to take the opportunity to thank the officials and the educators of your profession as well for the way they have responded. Year 12 is one of the most important years for students, Deputy Premier. How has the Victorian government supported this cohort through what has been a challenging and disrupted final year?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Richards, for your question. There were lots of things that kept me up at night this year, and our year 12 students were probably the one that kept me up the most at night. But I am so pleased that we are now in a position where the last VCE exam was yesterday, the GAT was delivered and I think the attendance at VCE English in 2020 was almost exactly the same as the attendance rate for the VCE English exam last year. So we got there, but it has just been an extraordinary year for our VCE and VCAL students, their teachers, their schools and their families. It has required extraordinary commitment and patience, so we have taken steps to reduce the pressure on senior secondary students and ensure they have the support they need to complete their year 12 studies, no matter where they live. In recognition of the impact that the coronavirus pandemic and the bushfires that we can never forget have had on the academic year, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority has implemented a range of changes to support Victorian students.

Changes were made to VCE study designs earlier this year, with a focus on reducing school-based assessment tasks where possible to relieve some pressure on students to acknowledge the move to remote and flexible arrangements. It included modifications to VCE unit 4 learning requirements, school-based assessment and reductions in the content covered in related VCE examinations. The VCAA also rescheduled the date for the delivery of the 2020 VCE external assessment program, including moving the general achievement test from 9 September to 7 October and VCE written examinations, which were to be held between 28 October and 18 November, to 10 November and 1 December. The VCAA worked closely with the department and the department of health to provide schools with clear and up-to-date health and safety advice to ensure examinations and the GAT were conducted safely, with the health, wellbeing and safety of students, staff and the wider community the key consideration. VCAL students were given more time to complete their studies. The VCAA has also introduced a new consideration of educational disadvantage process that takes into account significant disruptions to VCE student learning caused by the pandemic as well as the bushfires earlier this year, and special consideration for VCAL students has also been introduced to support VCAL students in obtaining their certificates.

The VCAA has put in place robust arrangements to deliver results and ATARs on 30 December, giving students a clear pathway to further study or employment next year as well as a much-needed break. I know this continues to be a challenging time for our VCE and VCAL cohorts, but we will support our teachers, our students and our schools every step of the way. To get to that point, at 30 December you have got your results, you have got your ATAR ranking, you are in no way disadvantaged with any other year 12 student across the country, and given the second wave that we had in Victoria and the disruption to term 3, that is an extraordinary achievement, and I again thank the VCAA, the department and all of our schools. Our engagement with Catholic education and Independent Schools Victoria has been outstanding every step of the way. So to all educators, to be able to sit here before you at this final hearing on COVID and to give you that message is incredibly gratifying. It is a great result.

Ms RICHARDS: Can you take the committee through the consideration of educational disadvantage and the process—how it works and how you plan to make sure that the results are fair?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Ms Richards. It will be embedded in the VCAA's well-established assessment processes and will apply to every student completing scored VCE and VCE VET units 3 and 4 in 2020, including for year 11 and year 10 students studying those particular subjects. The process will take into account disruptions to learning caused by the pandemic as well as from the bushfires earlier this year, and it may include consideration of the impact of school closures, direct impacts on the health of students, students dealing with substantial extra family responsibilities, ongoing issues with remote learning and mental health challenges. Importantly, students have had the opportunity to submit a student statement, which is an opportunity to bring significant disadvantage experienced as a result of bushfires or the pandemic to their teacher's attention. Not every teacher knows, and it may well be only one or two staff members that know, a particular situation for a student, so this is an important process.

In normal years schools provide initial scores and indicative grades. That happens every year. This year schools will also provide expected scores and grades, as Mr Howes referred to earlier. These are the scores and grades that a student was expected to get had they not been impacted by the bushfires or the pandemic. The VCAA has put in place a range of assurance mechanisms to ensure this process is fair, equitable and robust. These mechanisms include supporting teachers to validate evidence provided from a range of data sources as well as undertaking a robust moderation process based on well-established practices.

So it is not open for a school to game the system, if you like. There are moderation processes that are well established. The VCAA will consider a range of data provided by schools together with each student's examination results, including the general achievement test, and the appropriate comparisons of performance across all assessments and schools when undertaking its analysis to ensure the validity of final results. Each individual student will have their circumstances considered when calculating their individual final scores to ensure that their results are fair. Students can be assured that their final study scores and their ATAR ranking will be a fair reflection of their year and of their courage of commitment in the face of huge adversity. As I said, no student will be disadvantaged as a result of this pandemic.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. Can you take the committee through whatever changes have been made to content and assessment this year for our VCE and VCAL students?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, thanks. I might start with changes to VCE content and assessment first and then go back to VCAL. For VCE students, the VCAA, as I said, is introducing the consideration of educational disadvantage process, which takes into account disruptions. Students whose performance has been severely impacted by factors that could not be mitigated throughout 2020 will have their circumstances considered when calculating their individual final scores to ensure their results are fair. There have also been important adjustments, including reductions in content and assessment for each study unit in unit 4 of the VCE while retaining the integrity of individual studies and the certificate. There has been no change to content and assessment in unit 3 of the VCE, as students had already commenced this unit. As you would be aware, VCE examinations were also rescheduled given the unprecedented disruption, and students will receive their results by 30 December. This means university offers can be made to Victorian students in time for the start of the 2021 academic year. It also means that their pathways to university or TAFE will be exactly the same as students right across the country.

In relation to VCAL, students have also been given more time to complete their courses, and this is consistent with the revised dates of the VCE. VCAL students in their final year of schooling could also access special consideration to support them in obtaining their certificate.

Ms RICHARDS: And again, further to that, if you could take the committee through changes that have been made to vocational educational training—the VET components of VCE and VCAL—as well, that would be terrifically helpful.

Mr MERLINO: Thank you. There are approximately 14 000 year 12 students due to complete a vocational education and training program or school-based assessment and traineeship as part of their senior certificate, either VCE or VCAL. All VCAL students complete VET as part of their senior certificate. Some students complete VET as part of their VCE. VCE VET programs containing scored assessment will continue to include an end-of-year examination. All VET curriculum included in a VCE or VCAL program is drawn from nationally recognised VET certificates. This is where it gets a bit complex. The requirements to complete a VET qualification are regulated by the federal government, and students must demonstrate competencies against a national framework. That provides prospective employers confidence that students have reached a certain level of skill, and this is particularly relevant in regard to safety. Where students have been unable to complete sufficient units of competency from VET certificates to meet those requirements, the VCAA has introduced the unspecified VET credit process. Schools can apply for unspecified VET credit where the student's learning or assessment in VET has been compromised. The VCAA will award the credit where it is only the VET component that is denying the student in their final year of schooling the opportunity to qualify for their VCE or their VCAL. Students who do not complete their VET qualifications in 2020 as intended will be guaranteed enrolment at a TAFE or dual-sector provider in 2021. We have covered all bases to make sure that this is a year of meaning for all senior secondary students.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you again, Minister. And maybe to the other side of this: did remote and flexible learning lead to some innovations or new practices that the Victorian government can learn from, especially in ways to improve vocational and VET learning and how it is going to be delivered going forward?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, it did. Many schools reported positive impacts, innovations and practices as a result of the move to remote learning. Schools reported increased use in online learning platforms for VCAL and VET students that enabled students to have greater flexibility in their learning and to increase digital literacy. I think that has gone through the roof for students and staff and parents. Some schools noted that students seemed to benefit from the highly personalised attention that was characteristic of some schools' remote and flexible learning delivery—

The CHAIR: Sorry to cut you off there, Minister, but the member's time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Sam Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and your team again for appearing before us. I want to ask about the impact on the TAFE sector. We have had a really good discussion about the impact on disadvantaged students, but I think a lot of that also applies to our TAFE sector, which we know is just so important to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Has there been any research or understanding in terms of the impact on disadvantaged TAFE students?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr Hibbins, for your question. I might firstly throw to Lee in terms of higher ed and TAFE, and if I can add further comments, I will.

Ms WATTS: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. It has been a very similar situation, as we can all imagine, in terms of our vocational education and training settings, akin to our school settings with some important differences, and a number of those differences relate to the qualifications and settings, meaning that we have hands-on and applied learning requirements, as everyone knows, in relation to key elements of training. It is fair to say that there have been major, major steps in the teaching of the theory-based components of all of the VET qualifications so that there has been continuity of study possible for in particular TAFE students, our Learn Local students and also of course our university sector students.

Where there has been a greater impact through COVID, however, has been in terms of the practical and hands-on components and workplace assessments that are required through the federally regulated training qualifications, as the Deputy Premier referred to in his opening remarks. What we have seen, however, is that the transition to remote and flexible learning has been facilitated and been successful in ways that we had not anticipated were possible prior to COVID. The government has invested in the preparation and dissemination of more than 50 online qualifications and units of study to enable regional and metropolitan students to be able to continue their education and learning. They relate to a number of important qualification areas, such as community services, such as nursing and also aged and mental health. In addition to the full qualifications, a number of short courses have also been funded that are directly relevant to both the health and economic recovery efforts. These include online learning in areas such as infection control, and also more deeply digital literacy.

Mr HIBBINS: So in terms of those courses that did require a practical element, the students who actually attend on site, what has occurred there? Have students not attended on site or did they attend on site?

Ms WATTS: Students attended on site wherever possible with the appropriate 1.5 metres of social distancing. Our public providers as well as government-funded private providers and in addition Learn Locals ensured that there was 1.5 metres of distance, and they ran multiple classes to the best of their ability to ensure that there was student continuity. For example, Holmesglen TAFE ran three to four classes in different blocks of training and education in building and construction to enable their construction students to continue with their studies to be ready for the economic recovery needs.

Mr HIBBINS: So there were not cases of any students having to not do their course or cancel their course due to restrictions?

Ms WATTS: There were a number of different practices that were put into place around how students were able to continue and to catch up. The main area of focus has been in relation now to work placements. There are

a number of VET qualifications that require mandatory work placements, and that is an area that we are continuing to focus on. That is the biggest gap, Mr Hibbins.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, that was the challenge in the schools as well, that work placement, and that is why we have got the ability for students to access TAFE and dual-sector providers for next year. But yes, that has been the biggest impact.

Mr HIBBINS: So if you are a TAFE student and you have got that missing element, whether the placement or something practical, you are being facilitated to finish that next year?

Ms WATTS: Yes.

Mr MERLINO: Yes.

Ms WATTS: I can report to the committee that in areas such as early childhood, which is so important to us all—with the introduction of three-year-old kindergarten, more fulsomely—this is one of the areas of greatest focus, and we have seen in the last month a considerable uptake of students being able to complete their work placements in early childhood settings.

Mr HIBBINS: Are there any statistics or data on students who may not have made that transition to online learning—students that may have dropped out or otherwise disengaged from their course?

Mr MERLINO: In regard to TAFE, Mr Hibbins?

Mr HIBBINS: Yes.

Ms WATTS: There is, and I would be happy to provide that, because it differs across the different stages of the restrictions—so, very happy to provide that by area of restriction, restrictions 3 and 4, metropolitan and regional—and also equally it differs according to qualifications, as I have indicated.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thanks. I think that would be of assistance to the committee. And is there any support being put in place for those students who may have disengaged from TAFE, to follow up with them?

Ms WATTS: Yes, there absolutely is. There have been a number of areas of support that have been provided by the government in terms of business continuity grants that have been provided to TAFEs, to Learn Locals and also to the Australian migrant English institute, and what we have seen here is that those funds are dedicated to ensuring that there are daily and weekly phone calls to students and that there is a deep connection to and with all students but more particularly those who are more vulnerable and come particularly from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Mr MERLINO: And to add to that, Mr Hibbins, individual TAFEs have been supporting vulnerable students and identifying students that need that extra help. For example, in regard to staying connected through that period of remote and flexible learning, Chisholm Institute have loaned out laptops and/or dongles to around 300 Chisholm students, so it is again a reflection of what we were rolling out through our school system: individual TAFEs were providing similar supports for students who were impacted.

Mr HIBBINS: Terrific, thanks. I would like to now ask about the role of our adult and community education and particularly the role that they might be able to play in terms of the economic recovery, particularly if you have now had a whole cohort of people, potentially people from migrant backgrounds, who are in need of those foundational skills, who have lost employment, who now need to access adult education for those foundational skills. Are they being supported in any way, or do they play a role in terms of our economic recovery in supporting that cohort of people?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr Hibbins.

Thank you. Lee is happy to talk. We are just trying to locate the best spot in this document. So, Lee, I am happy to throw to you to answer that question in regards to ACFE and Learn Locals.

Ms WATTS: Again, Mr Hibbins, thank you for your question. It is really pleasing to note that package of \$260.8 million for business continuity grants and ongoing viability for the overall TAFE and training sector,

and that this has been of benefit to 76 Learn Local and adult, community and further education providers, which has enabled these particular providers, who are so important to those people who are starting their pathway or re-engaging with their pathway in education and training, to be able to continue to provide accredited training as part of the overall response and recovery phases of COVID-19.

The Adult, Community and Further Education Board provided further funding certainty of \$12.7 million to a further 250 Learn Local-contracted providers who provide training which is pre-accredited specifically for foundation level studies. In addition, the government has announced \$1.25 million in funding through this budget for the Learn Local sector to particularly focus on digital literacy and digital adjustment. This will be rolled out through regional and rural Victoria, and we will also continue to support lead practitioners in literacy and numeracy training for Koori learners and also equally for further students to enable them to move through to further employment and training.

Mr HIBBINS: Terrific. Thank you. And just finally, are we able to get—this is in terms of free kinder being funded for I think this year and next year—a breakdown in funding? Because it obviously covers four-year-old funded, three-year-old funded, three-year-old unfunded. Are we actually able to get a breakdown of the figure for each sector or each part?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. Mr Hibbins, I am happy to provide that additional information to you.

Mr HIBBINS: Great. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and the member's time has expired. I will pass to Mr Tim Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. And thank you to the Deputy Premier and education officials for joining us today on a marathon in hearings, but thank you so much for your time. Deputy Premier, part of your slide talked about the mental health and wellbeing support across the sector. I know you explored that a bit with Mr Limbrick as well. I want to go a bit further into this important area and topic. I am wondering if you would outline: how has the Victorian government supported mental health and wellbeing of staff and students during the pandemic?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Richardson, for your question. I will go to the further detail. So I have talked about the over \$51 million for the rollout of mental health practitioners in our secondary schools. We talked about the additional \$28.5 million around Navigator, Headspace, Lookout, but I will go into some detail now.

The Victorian government has also partnered with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the Ian Potter Foundation to implement a \$1.2 million mental health in primary schools pilot. This was something that we had been working on previous to the pandemic in discussions with Frank Oberklaid and others, and the feedback we were getting after having made the announcement of mental health practitioners in secondary schools—a lot of engagement with primaries talking about the additional needs in our primary sector.

So we have got this pilot with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and Ian Potter. The pilot provides evidence-based training and resources for school staff to better identify and respond to mental health issues affecting primary school students. Schools are being supported to build stronger connections with community-based health and other services to better link students and families to these services where appropriate. Each school has employed a mental health and wellbeing coordinator to build the capacity of teaching and education support staff to better identify and support children with mental health concerns. We are currently running the pilot in 10 schools in the north-western Victoria region in 2020. An additional \$3.5 million over two years has been allocated to continue and expand the pilot to cover 25 schools in 2021. And as I referred to earlier, we are all waiting with anticipation in terms of the final report of the royal commission and what it will find and recommend in terms of prevention and early intervention.

Headspace mental health training programs for staff to support all students through SAFEMinds and suicide risk continuum training are also being expanded, and we are further creating local wellbeing networks led by the department of health, bringing together mental health services, government and non-government school sectors, Aboriginal community controlled organisations, local governments and community sport. The package also includes boosting response capacity of Navigator for secondary students at highest risk of disengaging from school and expanding the Lookout program to increase support for the educational needs of students in out-of-home care.

The department is continuing to provide principals, teachers and school staff with the resources they need to support their students' mental health and wellbeing in response to the coronavirus pandemic. A regional health and wellbeing key contact has been allocated to each government school during this pandemic to plan and respond to the needs of students who may be at risk or require additional support. Secondary students have dedicated access to counselling provided by Headspace centres. The Doctors in Secondary Schools program continued to deliver continuity of care to students, including through telehealth, while students were learning remotely. And a range of mental health and wellbeing resources have been made available to schools, students and parents, including partnerships with Smiling Mind, the Melbourne Football Club and Melbourne Victory.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Deputy Premier. The transition back to onsite learning was met with optimism and hope for the future. At one stage it looked like we would not get back to term 4, and today we mark the end of VCE for our students. We have heard before this committee as well the impacts on mental health and wellbeing as almost the second phase—Professor McGorry has described it in those terms. What mental health and wellbeing supports are available to students during term 4 to get them through?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Richardson. In term 4 mental health practitioners, including mental health nurses, occupational therapists, psychologists and social workers, are continuing to provide direct counselling support to secondary school students—and other early intervention services. Our mental health practitioners provide vital support at government secondary schools to address mental health concerns and build the capability of school staff to identify issues. They also coordinate support for students with complex needs and contribute to whole-school approaches to mental health prevention and promotion.

The delivery of the \$51 million mental health practitioner initiative remains on track and, as I said, will be implemented in every government secondary school by the end of 2021. As of term 4, 220 secondary school campuses across Victoria are implementing the mental health practitioner initiative. This means more secondary students have access to suitably qualified mental health practitioners in term 4. This will increase to 240 campuses by term 1 next year and again to 379 by the start of term 4. A further investment of \$9.96 million over two years will expand this initiative to 83 secondary and P–12 specialist school campuses. You recall one of the announcements we made recently was broadening it out to specialist settings, which I am really excited about.

Again, a regional health and wellbeing key contact has been allocated to every government school. The department is continuing to provide principals, teachers and school staff with the resources they need to support their students' mental health and wellbeing in term 4. For example, the department has developed a students-at-risk planning tool to assist schools in identifying students who may be vulnerable and require additional support to maintain engagement and connection with education. The department's area-based SSS workforce, Student Support Services, which includes psychologists and other allied health professionals, is back on site in term 4 to provide critical support to students. They play an important role in providing a range of strategies and specialised support for students.

The department also has a partnership with Headspace to deliver SAFEMinds and suicide risk continuum training. This training helps primary and secondary staff increase their foundational knowledge of mental health. Primary welfare officers are working closely with schools in term 4 to promote whole-school approaches to health and wellbeing, and the wellbeing of all students is being supported through initiatives such as Respectful Relationships, school-wide positive behaviour supports and Bully Stoppers. We know this has been a challenging year for Victorian students, but we will continue to support them for the remaining few weeks of term 4 and beyond 2020.

Mr RICHARDSON: We know that the government's focus on mental health and wellbeing in schools has seen more students come forward for support, with some of those mental health practitioners normalising and removing the stigma around mental health and wellbeing. But have we seen, in addition to that, greater access to mental health supports in our schools during the pandemic?

Mr MERLINO: It is a good question, and this goes to the long tail that many in the mental health space have identified. The department is building a reporting system for mental health practitioners in secondary schools and does not currently collect consistent data to determine increasing demand. For example, Headspace counselling appointments for secondary school students have been similar throughout 2020 compared to 2019. There were 1115 appointments in July 2020 compared to 1159 in July 2019. However, many health experts are

warning of a surge in the need for mental health care due to COVID-19. September and October saw an increased use of Beyond Blue's support line in Victoria compared to the rest of Australia—77 per cent higher—as did Lifeline, 16 per cent, and Kids Helpline, 24 per cent. That is why we are expanding and boosting the capacity of existing programs and initiatives as well as investing in new and additional supports. That is why we are expanding the Headspace mental health training program for staff. That is why we are creating local wellbeing networks to identify local emerging mental health issues. We want to ensure that every single student has the mental health support they need when they need it. Again, this goes to the full rollout of mental health practitioners in secondary schools, the really exciting and innovative mental health pilot in primary schools and what that could mean for all our primary schools in future years. But there is no doubt that, as I said, this has got a long tail, and the royal commission is critically important because our system is broken. It is even more important now that we are entering the period of recovery from COVID and what we fully expect to be a significant level of demand over coming years.

Mr RICHARDSON: The connection of education and mental health portfolios going into the future in your area, Deputy Premier, is really important as well. Turning our attention to school infrastructure, obviously that was a focus of the budget estimates this morning but also a feature of the COVID-19 response. Deputy Premier, in May this year you announced an education infrastructure package to assist in supporting Victoria's economy during those challenging times. Are you able to provide any further detail on what was announced and how that has been rolled out during this period as well?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. Thank you for the question. It is critical to our COVID recovery economically, and it is critical for the needs of schools right across our state. The budget in total was \$3 billion for infrastructure; \$1.18 billion was the part of the building works package that we announced in May, and that was all about identifying school projects across the state that we can deliver and get going on as quickly as possible. This investment, the \$1.18 billion building works, will fix and upgrade school buildings right across Victoria as well as creating space, as I said, combined for over 22 000 students. So of that package, \$438.6 million is to build 10 new schools and deliver a further four stages of new schools right across the state to open in 2022. This investment is providing new spaces for more than 7000 Victorian students. Importantly, it includes the \$119 million to build the brand-new Greater Shepparton Secondary College as part of the *Shepparton Education Plan*. We are investing over \$130 million in the established areas program, which will provide additional enrolment capacity at nine metro schools to meet their projected enrolment growth. This investment will support enrolment spaces for more than 1550 students. To further boost capacity in schools right across the state we have provided \$114.5 million to purchase and refurbish relocatable school buildings. This will provide space for an extra 12 775 Victorian students in the 2020–21 school year. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Premier. The call is now with Bridget Vallence, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much. Just to pick up on some of the questions that were just asked then about the mental health—and again, this is a very challenging area, particularly for our young students—at any time, Minister, did you seek or obtain advice to the extent that mental health issues were impacting any primary or secondary school students, and can this advice and the recommendations be made available to this committee?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Ms Vallence, for your question. If I can answer in the broad, and this goes to an earlier discussion we had through the mental health budget estimates, we knew that the pandemic was going to have an impact—an impact on our society, an impact on young people, an impact in our schools—from the modelling of Orygen at the beginning of the pandemic that identified this long tail of people that will be impacted and then to the weekly engagement with mental health service providers of what was happening on the ground, and that determining how we approached the settings that we had in place. But I go back, Ms Vallence, to the imperative of dealing with the pandemic. If we did not deal with the pandemic in the way that we had, if we had an uncontrolled pandemic—longer, wider, deeper—the impact on both the mental health of our community and the mental health of our young people, the impact in terms of service provision, would have been infinitely, infinitely worse.

Ms VALLENCE: It would have been different. Yes, I appreciate that. I guess I will rephrase the question. How many times did you seek advice in relation to the mental health impacts for our primary and secondary students?

Mr MERLINO: There is constant engagement and advice, whether that is via the department of education, through the IRIS reports—

Ms VALLENCE: It is iterative then, is it, through the process?

Mr MERLINO: It is, yes, and it needed to be because, and we saw that in terms of the first lockdown compared to the second lockdown. In the first lockdown we knew that there was going to be—and there was—a reduction in ED presentations and the like, and there was a corresponding significant increase in access to telehealth, videoconferencing. That was reflected in our schools in terms of our doctors in schools, our mental health practitioners engaging remotely with students. In the second wave we did not see a decrease in mental health ED presentation, we saw an increase. We have seen an increase in self-harm, we have seen an increase in suicidal ideation. We have not seen it reflected in suicide rates, which I am thankful for. So the combination of on-the-ground advice either via the department and its staff or via the department of health and the public health team.

Ms VALLENCE: Sure. It is a very delicate situation and hopefully those numbers get provided, again, at the end of this session. So just finally, again, can the advice and recommendations in terms of that advice to you be provided to this committee and the Parliament?

Mr MERLINO: If there is further advice that I can provide to the committee, Ms Vallenge, I will be pleased to do so.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you; sure. And how will you evaluate the effectiveness of the mental health practitioner program? Is there some criteria or is there something that you can provide to the committee on how we would evaluate that program?

Mr MERLINO: I might ask Mr Howes to answer that question. I think the evaluation will be once we have all students back at school, without a pandemic, the full rollout of the mental health practitioners, like we have done with all of our programs. You know, we have had an evaluation of Navigator, we have had an evaluation of Lookout. We will do it with all of our significant programs, and that will include the mental health practitioners in secondary schools and it will include, obviously, the evaluation of the mental health pilot in our primary schools.

Ms VALLENCE: I would imagine all of us on the committee would agree—the committee is very interested in this sort of information. We would all agree that we want to be able to address this. We want to minimise the impact. The object here of the question is what sort of criteria or elements you are looking at to make sure that it actually helps our kids.

Mr MERLINO: Indeed, and it has been an issue highlighted by the recent Productivity Commission, which highlighted the importance of prevention, early intervention, using schools as a universal setting. And, as I indicated before, I am hopeful and I am anticipating what may come out of the findings and recommendations of the royal commission as well.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you.

Mr MERLINO: I might ask Mr Howes to add to that answer.

Mr HOWES: There will be a full evaluation of the program that will be done that will include qualitative data, so that will include interviews with students about the extent to which they have benefited or, I guess, otherwise from the support that they had had.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. Thank you. Secretary, a question for you. Can you just please confirm: was there any recruitment from within DET for Operation Soteria in hotel quarantine?

Ms ATTA: Ms Vallenge, as I said earlier, we had a small number of staff across the department seconded to the whole-of-government effort across some different operations. I just do not know—I have not got the detail in front of me about whether that included Operation Soteria, but I have indicated that I am happy to follow that up.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you. On 5 April an email was sent to around 50 DET staff regarding expressly working in hotel quarantine coordinating returned travellers. Did any DET staff on the DET payroll take up this offer to work in hotel quarantine?

Ms ATTA: That is exactly the detail that I will follow up to find out if any staff did take up that opportunity.

Ms VALLENCE: And if so, any of those staff that took up that opportunity, were their interests represented in the Coate inquiry?

Ms ATTA: The department made no representations to the inquiry and have been asked no questions through the inquiry.

Ms VALLENCE: So were any DET staff—and perhaps you might need to take this on notice, Secretary—exposed to COVID while they were working on secondment in Operation Soteria, hotel quarantine?

Ms ATTA: Again, I will take it on notice to see if there were any DET staff working on that operation and can follow up that question.

Ms VALLENCE: And did the CPSU make any representations to you about DET staff working in hotel quarantine?

Ms ATTA: I am not aware of representations being made, but again I am very happy to follow up and confirm if that was the case.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you. Minister, in relation to students in years 8 to 10—and we know that they were the last ones to go back to school and the longest away from the classroom—I understand around the movement and the number of students, so I get all of that, and you have described that very adequately for the committee, but in terms of the Chief Health Officer's advice around that, could you please provide that to the committee, around specifically the years 8 to 10 cohort returning last or that number of students returning last?

Mr MERLINO: Sure. Ms Valence, this is precisely the advice we received from the Victorian CHO: supportive and recommending a staggered approach back to face-to-face teaching. And then the engagement between DET and public health is what does that look like. On the critical cohorts of students, you need to first make a decision—is it all back or are we staggered back? The recommendation from the CHO was that we stagger our students back because that minimises movement and allows for observation of any impacts as you move cohorts of students back. So you make that first call and that is based on the clear, unequivocal advice from the CHO. Then the engagement between DET and the CHO is on what are the priority cohorts that have to go back to school first. That has always been students with disabilities, particularly in the specialist setting; the little ones, prep, 1, 2, because they are the hardest—and any parent of a prep, grade 1, 2 knows how hard remote learning is—

Ms VALLENCE: Absolutely.

Mr MERLINO: and thirdly, our senior secondaries.

Ms VALLENCE: Right. I have got kids in a couple of different cohorts, as do you, but in terms of the advice around that staggered stage and those cohorts and that 8 to 10 cohort going last, could you just provide that to the committee?

Mr MERLINO: That is advice that has been provided by public health through CCC, the Crisis Council of Cabinet, and then there was engagement in the lead-up to that final recommendation and adoption at CCC. So the advice: staggered approach, priority student cohorts back. Beyond the three that I mentioned, there are year 7 students, first year of secondary; then there are primary school students and then there is years 8 to 10. It is an assessment based on learning needs and which students we needed back first face to face.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister, but the time has expired. I will pass the call to Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. If I may, I would like to just come back to the building works project because I think it would be really helpful for the committee to get some further detail on the status of the projects that received investment from the building works package.

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Ms Taylor, for your question. I am happy to provide an update on the status of those projects that were announced as part of the building works and fully funded through the budget. From our 14 new school projects, two of these projects are currently in construction, with the remaining 12 scheduled to commence between November of this year and February 2021. The majority of these remaining 2022 new school projects have already appointed their builders and will shortly be commencing construction. The 57 upgrade and modernisation projects are at various stages of planning, design, tendering and construction. So 14 projects are in design, 30 projects are at tender documentation and procurement, and 11 projects are in construction, with one project forecast to commence in December 2020. I am advised that 31 of these upgrade and modernisation projects are forecast to commence construction by March 2021.

To provide the committee with some detail on the upgrade and modernisation projects now in construction, I am advised that Ararat Primary is receiving an upgrade to transform their tired old sporting facilities with an upgrade to the oval and sports courts; construction of a brand new science, technology, environment, language and arts building at Brunswick North West Primary has commenced; work has started on Delacombe Primary School's brand new competition-grade gym; Diamond Creek East Primary School is receiving an upgrade; Gladstone Park Primary School; work has begun at Miners Rest Primary School to expand their school with new land as well as building new permanent classrooms and learning facilities. This upgrade will deliver a new competition-grade gym and football oval. We are now delivering the final stage of Monbulk College's master plan—which is a school close to my heart—including a new STEM and trades building as well as a new home economics building. Newcomb Park Primary School, Newcombe Secondary College, Southern Autistic School, St Kilda Primary has commenced work to replace their old classroom on the Chapel Street side of the school with brand new classrooms. Derinya Primary School has commenced construction.

I am advised that our nine established area projects are all in various stages of planning and these projects will be commencing construction in 2021. As I previously advised the committee, the Minor Capital Works Fund received an additional \$50 million in the 2020–21 state budget. This is on top of the \$20 million that we allocated in the building works package, and I was delighted to inform the committee that projects right across the state will receive funding from this grants program. This additional funding is part of the statewide building blitz to help Victoria's economy rebound from the coronavirus crisis, with successful projects commencing progressively from early 2021. Importantly over half the funding from the Minor Capital Works Fund will go towards improving the condition of Victorian schools right across the state.

In terms of the TAFE asset maintenance program, that has finalised funding agreements with TAFEs and one project is already completed. Our Building Blocks program is also continuing to support our early childhood providers, with IT grants announced in September this year to assist over 700 kindergarten providers purchase essential IT equipment. The accessible buildings program has been receiving and assessing applications from Victorian schools on an as-needs basis. The relocatable buildings program is purchasing new and refurbishing existing relocatable buildings to ensure sufficient capacity for the 2021 school year, boosting over 12 000 spaces. So these are projects right across the state, and I am happy both that it is making a difference economically in terms of activity and employment in construction but that it will be a major boost to the fabric of our schools across the state.

Ms TAYLOR: Excellent. Can you inform us how many jobs are supported as part of this package?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Taylor. The funding for these projects is creating more than 1600 local construction jobs in communities right across Victoria. To break that down even further our investment in new schools and additional stages of new schools will support over 680 jobs, and as I have mentioned, Greater Shepparton—one example of a major regional education building—is supporting around 300 local jobs, regional jobs. The 57 school upgrade projects in this package have created over 430 jobs, our established areas program over 150 jobs. There will be more than 240 jobs delivered through both our relocatable buildings program and the accessible buildings program, and finally 120 jobs will be delivered through the TAFE asset maintenance program and the Building Blocks program.

This significant investment in school infrastructure and jobs is just one part of our school building boom, and as I noted earlier this morning, in the past five years our investment as a government has now totalled more than \$9 billion, creating more than 10 000 construction jobs.

Ms TAYLOR: Numbers. If we can move to the new schools funding as part of this package, are you able to inform the committee of further details on these projects?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Taylor. So not only are we building 10 new schools but we are also building additional stages at four new schools, and this investment will build capacity to support 7000 Victorian students. As I noted earlier, this will be supporting over 680 jobs. Whilst two of these new school projects are currently in construction and the majority of the remaining projects will be commencing construction in the coming months, I would be delighted to provide some further detail on these new school projects for the committee.

Construction has already commenced on Endeavour Hills specialist school, which will be built on the site of the former Endeavour Hills Secondary College. The new school will feature five learning neighbourhoods, an administrative building, a performing arts and physical education building, multipurpose hard courts, a sports field for both soccer and AFL, bus bays and car parks. The new school will deliver brand new facilities for up to 288 students once opened.

To cater to the growing community in Clyde North we are building both a new state-of-the-art primary and secondary school to open in 2022. Clyde North station Primary will provide 525 student places and Clyde North station secondary college will cater for 575 students once built, and that will increase significantly over time. Clyde North station secondary college will feature an administrative and learning resource centre building, a learning neighbourhood building, STEM building, performing arts, physical education, hard courts, bus bays and car parks.

New work on Greater Shepparton Secondary College continues, and hopefully I will visit there shortly, with the finished school to have places for between 2700 and 3000 students. That new school will open in 2022, providing the students of Shepparton and Mooroopna and the region with the contemporary, brand new facilities they deserve. The school will include three learning neighbourhoods, an enterprise and innovation centre with specialist precincts to study technology, performing and fine arts as well as sciences, a student support, wellbeing and careers area, a library, a two-court competition-grade gym, a full-sized oval, a soccer pitch, outdoor learning spaces and a VCE study space.

We are building Bridge Road Primary School in Melton South, Grasslands Primary in Deanside and Kalkallo Common Primary School in Kalkallo. These schools will cater to 522 student places and once completed have administration and resource-intensive learning buildings, learning neighbourhoods, performing arts and physical education buildings, sports fields and hardcourts. Also Greenvale Secondary College, Wollert East Primary School, Gisborne South Primary School as well as additional stages to Beaumaris Secondary College, which I know is one of the favourite schools of Mr Richardson; Wonthaggi Secondary College, near you, Mr O'Brien—I am not sure if it is in your electorate, but nearby, the San Remo campus there; Dohertys Creek P-9 College; and Saltwater P-9 College to increase the permanent capacity at those new schools. By investing in those new schools and additional stages of new schools we are ensuring that every child can have access to a great local school.

Ms TAYLOR: Great. There is a lot going on, isn't there? I just want to move along to early childhood. Could you explain what additional supports the Victorian government has provided to the early childhood sector as well as families and children to assist them during the global coronavirus pandemic?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Taylor, and I am pleased to answer this question and start by commending the work of early childhood teachers, educators and providers throughout the year. They have been extraordinary. They have supported children who attended services in person as well as supporting the families of children who continued their learning at home. As we shift towards COVID normal with optimism about what 2021 will bring, it is important to reflect on how the early childhood sector partnered with the Victorian government to support children in early childhood education and care this year.

The government has committed up to \$71.7 million in extra funding to the early childhood sector. The extra support is on top of all the normal kindergarten funding streams to kindergarten services that we continue to

fully fund at usual levels regardless of attendance, whether the kindergarten program is delivered in long day care or standalone kindergarten services. This was a historic injection of funding support, but it was needed and it has worked. Our extra funding helped kindergarten services remain financially viable, ensured children continued to receive high-quality education and care and kept teachers and educators in their jobs. All of that was critically important, and if we did not do that not only would we have been doing a disservice to families, kids and service providers during this year of COVID, we would have also significantly put at risk the rollout of universal three-year-old kinder if we had allowed those services to go under.

This funding supported tens of thousands of children and helped families manage their costs. There were a range of financial and other supports that we put in place, and they should be thought of as a package of supports because that is what they are: free sessional programs in eligible services in terms 2, 3 and 4; funding for unfunded three-year-old sessional kinder in terms 2, 3 and 4; cleaning grants of \$1500 to services that needed them; funding support and additional advice on learning from home support and transition to school support; and funding to 29 local councils that operated integrated long day care based funded kindergarten programs to support the re-engagement of vulnerable children.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Premier. That concludes the time we have for consideration of this portfolio as part of the COVID inquiry. We thank you and your officers for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

Again for the benefit of those who may be watching, the Lifeline number is 13 11 14, and the Beyond Blue number is 1300 224 636.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.