

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Tuesday, 25 August 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallenge

WITNESSES

Ms Meredith Peace, Branch President, and

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

The CHAIR: Welcome, Australian Education Union, to the second series, the second week, of public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. 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 and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We ask that people note that members are attending these hearings remotely from their homes and from their electorate offices. We ask that you note that members are not required to wear a face covering if they are working by themselves in an office under the stay-at-home directions, 6 August, part 2, section 7(i).

We also advise that all evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible. We invite you to make a brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes. We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes, and this will be followed by questions from our committee. So welcome to the AEU.

Ms PEACE: Thank you. Meredith Peace, President of the Australian Education Union Victorian Branch. The AEU Victorian Branch represents 50 000 members in public primary, secondary and special schools, and early childhood, TAFE, disability and adult migrant English services. Our members are teachers, principals, education support staff, early childhood educators, disability workers and other educational leaders. Throughout the pandemic the union has engaged with thousands of our members remotely, hearing directly about their experiences, concerns and ideas.

We continue to be tremendously proud of the work of all AEU members in implementing the necessary changes to enable the response to COVID-19 in public education. The professionalism and commitment of educational leaders, teachers and support staff across all our education sectors to the children, young people and adults they educate has been outstanding. Throughout the past six months we have continued to meet and communicate regularly with the Minister for Education, the department of education Secretary and deputy secretaries, employer groups in the early childhood and disabilities sectors, TAFE CEOs, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, the Victorian School Building Authority, as well as AEU branches nationally, the Victorian Trades Hall and other unions.

The AEU's primary objective throughout this period has been to focus on the health and safety of members and their students and to ensure access to high-quality education either remotely or on site. Central to achieving this for members has been advocating for the best possible employer responses to meet their needs, including managing their work and workload and addressing stress and anxiety that has been experienced. This has been very challenging, as each sector has had to deal with different working arrangements, and the impact of COVID-19 has played out differently for different groups of our members.

Broadly, our members have had job security when compared to other industries; however, that has not been universal. Our members employed casually, as in many industries, have been hit hard, particularly in schools, where the amount of work available has decreased considerably during remote learning periods. Fortunately the department of education instituted a subsidy payment scheme for casual teachers employed directly by schools. However, the use of labour hire agencies by many schools has left many other teachers reliant on those agencies applying for or being eligible for the federal government's JobKeeper scheme.

Early childhood teachers, particularly in long day care settings, have been stood down or had reductions in hours, and the federal government's disastrous decision to take away access to JobKeeper in the early childhood sector has left too many members in the sector extremely vulnerable. With a highly feminised workforce, the federal government's approach has had a very negative effect on women. We advocated for and have welcomed the additional financial support from the state government for kindergarten programs, including

fee gap support for parents, which has meant our younger students have been able to continue to access educational programs either on site or remotely.

The story has not been any better in the adult disability day services sector, with members notifying us they have been stood down—and in some cases without access to either JobKeeper or JobSeeker—leaving individuals and their families financially vulnerable, alongside their clients with disabilities, who are not able to get all the support they need. We have also had concerns where employers have not provided adequate personal protective equipment for disability instructors working directly with some of our most vulnerable members of the community. We remain concerned about the financial impact of the pandemic on our TAFEs, especially as they are central to the retraining of many thousands of Victorian workers so that they can get back into the workforce.

More generally, we know our members have been impacted in other ways. They may now be the sole wage earner in their household. Some are doing the heavy lifting with child care and remote schooling. Many may have caring responsibilities for vulnerable family members, and some are deeply worried about family members in aged care and disability settings. These issues are particularly challenging for members when combined with working from home.

We are also deeply concerned about the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of members and their students. I think it is imperative, despite the challenges we are facing at the moment, that we look at the existing issues that have become much more visible during this pandemic and start thinking about how we are going to take the opportunity to address them. These issues include the greater impact on women in the workforce, insecure employment, including casual work, the yawning gaps experienced by disadvantaged students and their families as well as mental health and family violence. These are issues important to us as they impact on the children, young people and adults that our members educate and their capacity to access the education they both need and deserve. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will hand to Ms Ingrid Stitt, MLC, for the first questions.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Peace and Mr Mullaly, for appearing before us today, and thanks to your members for the incredible job that they are doing under very difficult circumstances. I was going to ask you first off if you could give us a little bit of a flavour of some of the feedback that you have received from teachers about their experiences of teaching and working from home.

Ms PEACE: Yes, they have been pretty varied. I might get Justin to add to this as well. It has been a challenge, and I think I mentioned in my opening statement that part of that challenge has been as members of the community, like many others, juggling the responsibilities of not only delivering a high-quality education to their students but also juggling their own families and often remote schooling or support for their own children. I think also just being away from their colleagues has been a challenge. We are a very collaborative workforce, and we rely on that really heavily in terms of the work that we do with young people every day. So I think being separated has been an issue, and it raises that concern around mental health. Particularly as we have come into this so-called second wave I think we have been more conscious of that impact of people being isolated again and having very important roles to play in the community and the impact that is having on their own mental health when they are trying to support their students' learning but also the mental health of their students. Justin, I might hand over to you and let you expand a bit more.

Mr MULLALY: Thanks, Meredith, and thanks for the question. I think an important thing to add is the way in which teaching and learning of course are very different when they are being delivered remotely. I think we had an opportunity at an earlier hearing of the committee to make it plain that the preferred mode of teaching is in a classroom with your students, and being required to do that remotely is not ideal and brings the challenges of having to try and recreate the best possible learning environment to students in their many households. With that comes a considerable workload concern. I think that many of our members have experienced workloads which have not been particularly tolerable, and I think that that also has an impact on their wellbeing. Inevitably when you affect a teacher's wellbeing—and for that matter support staff and principals—you can have an impact on the program that they are delivering to their students.

Ms STITT: This is obviously the second round of remote learning. Can you give us any examples of some of the learnings out of the first round of remote learning that have been able to be improved upon in the second round?

Ms PEACE: I think we have learned a lot from the first round, and people felt a lot better prepared, if you like, going into the second round of remote learning, based on their experiences during term 2. I think there was more acknowledgement of the fact that perhaps trying to recreate the normal school day as much as possible was not really necessary. Obviously structure is very important for young people, but when you are learning at home and doing a lot of that in front of a screen I think schools realised that we needed to build in breaks for students and that we needed to perhaps have some less screen time and mix that up with a variety of other activities throughout the day. We know of some schools, for example, that have instituted breaks, if you like, midweek, where students are not on screens and they are either working with specialist teachers, art teachers for example, or doing activity-based learning which does not require them to be on a screen all of the time and they are just having that break—so really providing a variety of different activities.

I think the other thing we have seen is—we made this comment, I think, at the first hearing—that our members have learnt an enormous amount. I mean, the amount of professional development, deliberate or otherwise, that has gone on is huge. People have learned a lot about different programs that are available and different types of activities that they can use, and I think we are starting to see some of that in the second round of remote learning, where we are getting a lot more diversity and different ways of presenting information.

But the other really important thing, and I have made mention of mental health, is that schools—they did this in the first round, but I think they are very conscious of it this time because the community broadly has found the second lockdown challenging, if I can use an overused word—are paying a lot of attention to the mental health of our young people and checking in not only with the students but with their families, not only about their learning but about their wellbeing, making sure they are engaged and making sure they are okay, and I think that has been critically important in this period of remote learning.

Ms STITT: You have given us some good examples there of how teachers have kind of adapted the way they are teaching because they are teaching remotely. Were there particular issues with the technology where there have been differences between the first and second rounds of remote learning that you can give us examples of?

Ms PEACE: I think we had some examples in the first round, particularly where some schools had problems with people—hacking is probably not the right word—interfering with programs and coming into classrooms when they should not have been. We have not heard, as I understand it, about those issues as much, if at all, as we did in that first round. So I think schools are always conscious about those issues around the use of technology, but I do not think we have seen as many concerns being raised this time as we had previously, which is fantastic.

I think schools were probably a bit better prepared around making sure that all students had access to materials, and if that was not able to be on a computer, or perhaps they were in an area where internet access was not as good, schools have been well prepared in terms of making sure that all children get access to learning materials, whether that is in hard copy or whether it is online. But I also think on the technology front our experiences from the first round held schools in good stead in terms of being able to get equipment and get access to internet and so on for students so that—particularly for our more disadvantaged students and their families—they did not miss out on some of that work that was more challenging in that first round.

Ms STITT: Yes; terrific. I think it is fair to say we have all had a few IT challenges over the journey, so I am not surprised to hear that. You touched a little bit on the mental health of students as well as teachers. I am just interested in the feedback you have received from your members. Are there particular issues they have observed with their students between the first and second round of remote and flexible learning from home—anything that you think that the committee ought to be aware of?

Ms PEACE: Look, nothing particular stands out, other than I think being much more conscious of how challenging this second round is. As a community we kind of thought we had got through the first round and then we came back into another period of remote learning. I certainly think kids had a chance to come back to school, be with their friends. Of course then you are faced with another period where you are remote and you

do not get to see your friends as much. You do not have those face-to-face connections at least. I think schools have been very conscious in making sure that we have those connections and encouraging our students to have those connections. That is obviously within their own families and their friendship groups, but also through their schools. Schools have put in place things like support staff playing an active role in contacting families and contacting individual students to make sure they are okay. I do not think there are any really specific issues that you need to be aware of. I think it is just the longevity of this and the fact that kids like to be social; they like to be around their friends; they like the structure of school, generally speaking; and they really miss that when they are not there. I think schools have made a huge effort to try and fill in those gaps and make sure our kids are connected and get the specialised support when they need it when they are dealing with more serious issues, whether that is welfare staff within schools or directing kids to outside agencies when they need that additional support.

Ms STITT: Very important. I am wondering if you can describe any of the experiences with your regional members during remote learning. I mean, obviously we are a big state and there have been different restrictions in place depending on what part of the state you are from. I am interested in your perspective on your regional members and how they have been going with remote learning from the first period of remote learning to the second.

Ms PEACE: Look, there are certainly some differences between rural and metro, but there are also a lot of things which are very similar across all of our education settings. Restriction levels are obviously a little bit different at the moment, but everyone is remote, other than our special schools in regional and rural areas. So they are all kind of on an equal footing in that regard.

I will not labour the point about the technology, but clearly technology is a challenge in some areas of regional and rural Victoria, where coverage is not as good. It is just very difficult to be online sometimes at all and sometimes for periods of time. So schools in country areas have probably had to be a bit more flexible in terms of being able to get hard-copy materials and resources to children. We have heard stories of schools leading into that period using that time they had before we went to remote learning to put together packs of books and other materials for children to use at home so that kids had access to those learning materials when they were remote as well as using the online forums.

I think it would be true to say our members in country schools would have preferred a little bit more lead-in time. We had one pupil-free day and there was also an additional day that schools in the country could use during that first week as we went into remote, and they appreciated that time. But unlike the city, where we had already been at least in part working remotely, they could have done with a bit more time to move into that, because it is a big change and it is not the same as being face to face with your students. But look, I think generally speaking a lot of the issues have been similar in terms of the remote learning experience for both country and city. Justin, I am not sure whether you would like to add to that.

Mr MULLALY: No. I think you have covered it, Meredith. Thank you.

Ms STITT: I mean, obviously school communities are pretty close-knit communities, and when people are not physically at the school that can present some challenges. Have you got any examples of where schools have collaborated across different school campuses during remote learning and how that has gone?

Ms PEACE: I think there has been a lot of collaboration using whole varieties of platforms and groups that people are part of, utilising not only access to their colleagues but a whole variety of resources that they can use in their classrooms and different ways of presenting their particular teaching areas to the kids.

If I can talk about our work as a union, which is probably a good example, we have certainly seen in a variety of forums that we have run, whether that is our regional meetings with members to talk to them about how they are going and what kinds of things they are doing to more direct professional development activities that we have done where we draw people from all across the state and across different settings, there has been a huge amount of collaboration and sharing. I think people have really enjoyed it. It is one of the positives of technology, where in some ways we are all a bit over Zoom conferences and so on but at another level it has been a really good tool for people to easily connect with each other, talk about some of the activities they are doing in their own classrooms and share those activities with staff from other schools and staff from within their own school. Often we do not have enough time to do that in a normal busy school day where you have got

hundreds of children on site and you are managing all of that. I think it has presented some opportunities for people to really have some time to be able to share what they are doing and to learn from others in situations that they perhaps would not normally get exposed to.

Ms STITT: Great.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The member's time has expired, so I will pass the call to the Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan, MP.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms Peace and Mr Mullaly, for your time today. I guess to Ms Peace first. What do you think is the best measure of a child's engagement with online learning?

Ms PEACE: Oh, that is an interesting question. What is the best measure? I think our classroom teachers, if I can talk about the person rather than the measure. But obviously our teachers are integral in terms of assessing their children all the time in the broadest possible sense, whether that is about their learning and their progression in their learning, whether it is about their mental health, whether it is about their level of engagement. That is much more challenging when you are largely in an online environment I think, and as I have mentioned before, some of the things that schools have done to really tap in to individual children—I think there has been a lot more one-on-one and small group connections within our classrooms and within schools. When you are doing that work either directly with a student, or in some instances where we have got schools contacting families, having conversations with parents, all of those kinds of measures—all of those conversations, watching the kids and how they are interacting with the learning activities are all measures that a classroom teacher and the surrounding people in a school, whether it is welfare or support staff and so on, can use to measure whether kids are engaged or not.

Mr RIORDAN: We heard earlier today from the minister, who could not rule out next term being at home as well, and if the pandemic does not come under control and we have extended states of emergency, we may well see next year starting with remote learning. Do you think we have enough measures and knowledge in our education system to be able to fully assess the effects of what could become a prolonged period of remote learning?

Ms PEACE: I think we do. I have had a lot of conversations with teachers and principals in particular, both during the first period of remote learning and this period, and schools are incredibly conscious of doing the work that they would do regularly whether they were off site or on site, and that is assessing where their kids are at with their learning, where they are at with their mental health and their wellbeing. That has not stopped just because we are not at school. And schools will use all sorts of material. Teacher judgement is integral in terms of those connections I have described in relation to your first question, but schools are also able to use other assessment tools. Things like the PAT tests, which are commonly used in our schools to assess the progression of a student's learning—those kinds of assessment tools have not gone away; schools are still able to use those kinds of resources to assess where kids are at.

Certainly when we returned in between stage 1 and stage 2 remote learning schools were obviously constantly at the classroom level but more broadly in the school assessing where their kids were at to see where they needed to fill in any gaps and respond to kids who might be disengaged, kids who just had not adapted all that well to remote learning or kids who had done extraordinarily well—perhaps sometimes unexpectedly—and seeing where they were up to with their learning and whether they were falling behind. So that work continues on in our schools regardless.

Mr RIORDAN: Have you had much feedback from your members? Just on our committee alone many of us have small or primary-age children, and there is no doubt that we are all living the experience of some households being far better equipped. There might be a parent who is not working who can provide the required amount of attention and care for a child. We heard in evidence earlier today of a single mum who is flat out working a full-time job at home who just simply does not have the time to dedicate to the care and the proper supervision of their children's work. So when we are talking about these prolonged periods, are you getting feedback from your staff that there is a potential growing divide between outcomes for children with remote learning?

Ms PEACE: There are certainly concerns being raised. I think what is unknown at this point—and this has got to be part of the ongoing assessment both at schools with classroom teachers and also that the department of

education does. But there are certainly individual concerns being raised by members around some kids being disengaged and schools working really hard to find ways to try and connect with kids where they do not believe they are engaged. Of course if you are not engaged, you are going to fall behind in your learning. You make a good point about some of our disadvantaged families who are not always in a position to be able to provide the level of support that perhaps some other families are, or it might be an advantaged family that simply has parents working in the household and it is very difficult to provide as much time as they would like to supervising their children's learning. So it is a real challenge, and I think it is one we are going to need to keep monitoring.

Mr RIORDAN: Mr Andrews, when we went into this mode back in July—I guess in part addressing this issue of parents, that some are better equipped than others—referred to a kind of respite arrangement that might involve children attending school for part of the week. Do you have a view on the Premier referring to children going to school as 'respite'? Does that concern you, that it is viewed as respite, sending kids to school?

Ms PEACE: Our children go to school obviously primarily for learning, but without doubt our schools provide what I would describe as both education and care for our young people. Kids are at school for many hours a day, and their classroom teacher or teachers, for example, are responsible adults in their lives for a big chunk of that time, probably next behind their parents. So schools play a critical role in both of those areas; it is not kind of an either/or. Primarily our schools are for the education of our children, but schools also provide an enormous amount of wellbeing and welfare support to our kids as best they can.

Mr RIORDAN: So in those critical years—the first year, prep, and perhaps the final year in primary school, grade 6, and so on—are you getting expressed concern from teachers and even parents about, with so little face-to-face interaction this year, the ability to fully assess where students are? Are we going to need to do a lot more with our next year's year 7s and our next year's grade 1s to really suss out what the effect of this year was for them?

Ms PEACE: I think one of the things the education system as a whole will need to look at and address is the issue you have raised around those kinds of transition points, I suppose. But that is relevant for our kindergarten children, who also are having a period of remote learning. Those kids coming into prep perhaps will not be socially, academically and emotionally as prepared as perhaps our preps have been in previous years. You have highlighted our preps, who really, for their first year of schooling, so far have had a very disrupted year. Our year 6s into year 7, our year 10s into VCE, our VCE students into university—they are all really critical points around thinking about: what work do we need to do in every sector of education to make sure that, first of all, we monitor and evaluate what has gone on, what additional supports might be needed, and then how do we make sure that those supports are actually provided to all those groups of kids? That will be essential work in the coming months.

Mr RIORDAN: Just before we finish, you have made mention of country students and perhaps lack of access to internet and other connections, and as a country member I fully concur with that.

The CHAIR: Sorry to cut you off there, Deputy Chair, but your time has expired, and I will hand the call to Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. And thank you both for appearing before the inquiry today. I wanted to ask first about the impact on the TAFE sector, because I do not think that has been covered enough in these hearings. Could you expand just a bit more? You have already touched on it in your opening statement, but can you just expand a bit more on what the impact of the pandemic has been on the TAFE sector and what sort of response you would like to see from the government?

Ms PEACE: Yes, I did make that remark in my opening statement that we do remain concerned about our TAFEs. Clearly they have taken a financial hit, if you like, and it varies from TAFE to TAFE, but we have got TAFEs who have high levels of international students, for example, who of course are not here largely at the moment. But they also have contracts with private industry where they are providing education and training to workers in specific industries, and where industries have closed down or they have slowed down, many of those contracts have not been enacted. So there has been a significant revenue loss. We were really pleased earlier this year to see the state government provide additional financial support to our TAFEs to help them through the crisis. We would like to see some further support provided, because we do remain concerned about

the financial vulnerability of our public TAFEs. I think the 2019 annual reports attest to that, and of course that was pre-COVID.

There is no doubt that the free TAFE investment has been very important in terms of providing access to TAFE for many people, and particularly even during this crisis where people have lost jobs or they are looking to retrain, having access to free TAFE courses particularly in areas where there is job availability has been critical. We believe TAFE is critical to supporting not only workers who have lost jobs but people who are looking to move out of industries that they do not see a future in and want retraining, but also access is needed for our young people coming out of school. It is going to be vital for the Victorian economy to have a strong public TAFE system that is able to educate and train the next layer of workforce that our state is going to need as we rebuild and repair after what has been and what still is a really difficult time.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks. I would also like to get you to expand on some of the challenges faced by those educators, whether they are TAFE or at other settings, who are casual or relief teachers—just some of the challenges they have faced during the pandemic.

Ms PEACE: I think it is pretty widely known that casual workers across many industries have been one of the hardest hit groups, and we have certainly seen that in some areas of our sector. In TAFE we have a lot of casual and contract staff, but I am pleased to say that it was probably—Justin, correct me if I am wrong—12 or 18 months ago we signed a new agreement for TAFE teachers which enabled many teachers to translate into more secure roles, whether those roles were from casual to contract or in many instances into ongoing roles. So that has certainly served the TAFE workforce well during this crisis, because we did not have as many casual or insecure roles as we perhaps have previously had, and that is something we were very pleased to achieve with the current government.

Casual teachers in schools have been impacted, because when we have gone to remote learning schools have not had as great a need for casual relief teachers. I think as schools have kind of acclimatised to remote learning environments and how we can utilise staff we have seen some increase in the employment of casual staff, which has been really important to allow staff to continue to attend professional development, to cover people when they are sick, but most importantly I think with our casual staff, particularly in schools, to make sure that they maintain the relationships with the schools that they work at regularly. Because we will need casual staff on an ongoing basis to cover all the sorts of normal needs when we do return to normal, and it is important that our schools keep engaged with those people who are available for that work.

But it certainly created a financial difficulty for many of our members who are in those casual positions where work has not been available. As I said in my statement, we have had access to a state government-funded subsidy scheme for our school-employed CRT members, but there has been an impact in TAFE and in our disability sector where we do have more people who are employed on a casual basis.

Mr HIBBINS: You mentioned casualisation as one of the big challenges that has been exposed due to COVID. Going forward, what would your recommendations be to government to address that?

Ms PEACE: Pretty simply, we need to see more people employed in ongoing roles. That is the most secure employment you can have obviously as an individual, and from an education perspective I think one of the most damaging things about insecure employment in our industry is where we have teachers in schools who are employed on contracts of six months or 12 months. We have, as I said, casual and contract staff in TAFEs and in other sectors that we cover. Relationships in education are incredibly important in terms of the work you do with your students, whether they are adults or whether they are young children. If you are on a contract or you are working casually and you might be, for example, in a workplace for six months and then you disappear because you have to go elsewhere to find your next contract, it is difficult to build up those relationships. It is difficult for the kids to see a teacher come into a school for 12 months and then disappear when they have built relationships with families and with students which are vital to the learning process and really improve the opportunities for our kids.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am sorry to have to cut you off there, but the time has expired. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee again today. The committee will follow up on any of the questions that were taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the

committee's request. The committee will take a short break before consideration of its next witness. We declare this hearing adjourned and thank you very much for your time. Thank you.

Ms PEACE: Thank you. Thanks for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.