

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 Vallence

WITNESSES

Ms Fiona Sharkie, Chief Executive Officer, Amaze; and

Ms Karen Dimmock, Chief Executive Officer, Association for Children with a Disability.

The CHAIR: Welcome to Amaze and the Association for Children with a Disability to the second series of public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Members are attending remotely from their homes and from their electorate offices, and we ask that people 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 names, positions and the organisations you represent for broadcasting purposes. This will be followed by questions from the committee. We invite you to make a presentation. Thank you.

Ms SHARKIE: Thank you very much. Karen Dimmock is the CEO of the Association for Children with a Disability, and I am the CEO of Amaze. We have been working together quite closely over the last six months or so since COVID began, and our information today relates specifically to students with disability and education during the COVID experience. You just mentioned that we have 5 minutes as an opening. Is that 5 minutes each could we dare to ask?

The CHAIR: Five minutes together. I will be a little generous on the clock, but it is 5 minutes together.

Ms SHARKIE: Then we will hold back the dancing girls and just go straight in.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to present. As I mentioned, Karen and I have been working together—our organisations have been working together. We have heard from more than 1000 students and families of students with disability through this period. So two different organisations, but through our social media, through engagement, COVID-like face to face and also some surveying that we have been doing of the community we have gathered quite a lot of information and have been feeding that into the department of education. We have also produced a paper that we have circulated to the committee. We understand that you will not have read it yet, but basically all the comments we are making today will be documented there.

Essentially, in terms of overall, we found that COVID has really highlighted and re-emphasised the general lack of successful inclusive practice for students with disabilities to choose schools. What we have been living with I guess as a society is hairline cracks in a system that became cavernous under the earthquake that is COVID. It just kind of blew really everything open.

The committee, we know, has already heard from other organisations providing evidence around students with disability through COVID, and we have seen your report already. We reinforce and reiterate those same comments with what we have found of the experience of students with disability, specifically about them being unable to learn effectively at home. There is very little support for students with disability. The silence was deafening around the lack of specific curriculum, specific adjustments. Mental health and wellbeing has been really badly affected, parents' capacity to be in paid work, siblings' capacity to learn—all really impacted by COVID. There were some promising measures and practices that came out with some students with disability. Autistic students did like access to online learning, but it did tend to be short lived. And then when we saw the changes in term 3 prioritising special schools to open and for students with disability to be able to return it was

very, very well and gratefully received by the community until the stage 4 further restrictions really prevented that from happening.

We did see also a positive response from the NDIA in being able to give families flexibility with their funded package to obtain additional support at home. But that was really just additional money that people could use. But unless they had their own agency, energy and capability to try and bring that workforce in, it was still pretty problematic. But it was good that NDIA and DET worked together.

We also have what we think is important—some recommendations that are recommendations for the immediate term, the longer term and then the broader systemic reform that Karen will go into.

Ms DIMMOCK: Thanks, Fiona. Karen Dimmock here, CEO of the Association for Children with a Disability. Our recommendations for right now and the road out of COVID include clarifying and easing who can attend on site right now, establishing a minimum standard of support to students with a disability, particularly the support that is provided by the education support staff, and having student support group meetings. These are essential for really effective, reasonable adjustments, and they need to be prioritised over the coming weeks. And in talking about that prioritisation, the return to school. Students with disability were prioritised in the return in term 2 and term 3, and we certainly want to see that again in term 4.

There will be students who need catch-up support post COVID, and there will be some students, particularly those in those transition years of grade 6 and year 12, who may need the opportunity to repeat the year. They would be our most top-level recommendations at this point.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. I will pass to Mr Tim Richardson, MP, for the first questions.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Fiona and Karen, for your time today. It is an amazing engagement with some 1000 people and individuals highlighting the challenges and the opportunities as we go forward, particularly in supporting those families of children with additional needs in our education system. I want to just touch on a point, Karen, that you just raised then about onsite learning. Feel free to jump in, Karen and Fiona—whoever wants to answer as well. I just want to go through why that was so important, and what were the benefits of onsite learning for our children with disabilities and their teachers and all the support staff?

Ms DIMMOCK: Yes. Thanks very much for that question. Students with disability are obviously a diverse cohort themselves, but I will perhaps focus my remarks on those that because of their disability receive additional funding and support in school to help them access education. There are 28 000 students funded within the state education system. Many of those students, due to the nature of their disability, need additional assistance in the classroom. They need the learning activities to be modified. Sometimes that is to meet their hearing or vision impairment needs. Sometimes that is to meet their intellectual disability. Sometimes it is to meet their physical needs. Those adjustments are often tailored very specifically to the needs of the student, and many of them cannot be delivered in an online platform. For those students to really participate in education and get that support, which really is an essential service for their learning, that needs to happen there in the classroom.

Ms SHARKIE: Tim, I would also like to add to that from an autistic point of view. One of the first things we heard in the first weeks in term 2 was I had an email from a mum who is autistic herself who had a 10-year-old boy and a baby. One of the things that we heard from her and also from many other parents was that autistic people generally thrive on routine. So when the routine is broken, all the cards go up in the air and you have students—here is a lovely little person here—saying to their parents, ‘But you’re not my teacher’. That is not the routine they are used to. That is not the format they are used to. So bringing it actually back into the classroom or having the education support staff that Karen is talking about is really critical to them actually learning. They do not see their parents as their teachers.

Mr RICHARDSON: I think that is a really good point and a really important perspective for our committee to hear as well, about the challenges in balancing those needs and the best outcomes for families as well as those students trying to learn and adapt. How did parents—I mean more broadly—of children with disabilities respond to being able to send their children to onsite learning? Obviously there was a significant amount of concern and anxiety during the first stage, but how—broadly—did our parents perform?

Ms DIMMOCK: I think it is probably reflected in the attendance data. Certainly students with disability—when the opportunity was extended, the majority did return to school. Obviously among students with disability, there is a certain proportion who are medically vulnerable, and many of those families were making the choice to keep their children at home. I think the data and the picture did differ across metropolitan Melbourne. I live in the western suburbs, and we certainly have a much greater sense of community concern over here, and that is reflected in parents' decisions to send their children to school. But the majority did. I think they could see that was where their child could learn, and many of the children were just really keen to be back in that setting.

Ms SHARKIE: I would add also, Tim, that we had, again, some direct feedback from parents. One parent said, 'My daughter, in returning to school in term 3, has never had a better time in school because it is less crowded, and she is getting the adjustments and attention that she needed'. So it is a bit of a perverse benefit of returning, but again, it highlights the need for inclusive practice in schools.

Mr RICHARDSON: I might go to the overall experience of the pandemic and particularly through the second wave and where we are at at the moment. What has been the experience of students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that can be through the first wave into what we are experiencing now. What have been their experiences?

Ms DIMMOCK: Of course that is diverse. There are some students who have really engaged and enjoyed the opportunity to learn from home. We are hearing, particularly in this second wave, of students who are disengaging from learning—just that lack of connection to their peers, really feeling like they are struggling to follow the learning activities, whether it is via Zoom, whether it is online learning activities; they are really starting to withdraw from those. I think there is an increasing number of students who are disengaging from education. I think there has also been a real identification by families of just how much their child does struggle with learning and that in fact some really important reasonable adjustments are not being made to enable their child to do their best learning and to achieve their best results. And that has certainly given a whole lot of families a lot of insight.

Mr RICHARDSON: You are on mute there, Fiona. Sorry.

Ms SHARKIE: Thank you, Tim. One of the critical things that we have become aware of is in special schools with students doing the year 12 equivalent in special schools. This is a year where those students are really looking for those vocational opportunities, so things like work experience. We have a mum who had, for her extremely high-needs autistic son who really wants to be a barrister, set up for him to be able to do some work experience in cafes. She had organised that herself, but with COVID, he cannot, obviously, do that. So that child now will not get that vocational exposure to employment and some kind of transition, which already is very challenging for students with disability, let alone those with such high needs. You cannot repeat the year in a special school, so that opportunity to get that vocational experience for that child is gone now. If he does not have the opportunity to repeat next year, he will not have had that. So that is really concerning, and we have raised with the department about consideration of special school students in that year 12 equivalent being able to repeat next year.

Mr RICHARDSON: I think, in the circumstances of the one-in-100-year event that this is, that those things need to be considered, and it is important for our committee to hear that. Just back to your point before, Karen, about those adjustments as well, what more do we need to be understanding or doing? Obviously there are the one in five of our students with additional needs in our school settings and then our students in those specialist school settings as well. What would you be looking for, or what are some of the things that we need to be considering?

Ms DIMMOCK: Thanks for that. Look, we are really looking for a minimum standard of education support at this time. Both of our organisations have had a lot of examples of good practice and practice where education and support staff have been really proactive with students with disability. We have shared all those examples of good practice with the department. It is about rolling them out and rolling them out as quickly as possible to reach as many students as possible so that they are able to keep learning during this time. But I think we are all working differently right now—this setting shows that—and some of the changes that need to be made include industrial changes so that education support staff can in fact go into the homes particularly of students with the highest level of support need. Students with level 5 and 6 funding—that is the highest level of funding—receive

one-on-one support all day at school because that is what they require to access education. Those staff have often had training from the school and from the family. They are supporting those students. That support actually needs to be provided in the home. Some of those students will be amongst the last to return because they are medically vulnerable as well, and that support cannot be replaced by something like Zoom.

Mr RICHARDSON: Do you want to add anything further to that, Fiona? Okay. I am really interested as well in just the role that both the Association for Children with a Disability and Amaze have played during this time and the advocacy. Obviously you talked about the number of people you have engaged, but what are some of the things you have been doing to support your broader communities and indeed get that information and support out there?

Ms SHARKIE: I think the main thing that we have been saying, with the greatest respect to the public officials, is that the main role that I think Karen and I have really played with the community and that we get such positive feedback about is that we are translating what is happening to them. There are lots of notices that go out. Often parents are hearing from the schools, so there is a lot of power, if you like, in the school principal at the moment to tell families what is going on and what is and is not happening. So the minister's announcement about what students with disability will have access to is not being effectively translated down to the front line. The current situation is that the minister determined that students with disability living in families in extreme stress could access school. We know that that is a smaller number. The definition of 'extreme stress' is subjective, and it is in the power of the principals at the moment. We had a parent that was told by her school that the only reason that her child could go to school is if he was unsafe to be with her and that the school was quite happy to report that to child protection if that was the case.

Now, that is not what the minister intended the definition of 'extreme stress' to be. There is a completely separate category for vulnerable students that are living in homes with family violence or out-of-home care or child protection. This is not students with disability with families in extreme stress, so that makes our parents very frightened. So we have been saying, 'We've talked to the department of education. This is what's happening; this is who you can call. If it's not working for you, let us know', and we feed that back to the department. They contact the regional offices and get it sorted. But a lot more has to be done about that communication between the minister's announcement and what that principal is told and what he or she hears and acts on.

Mr RICHARDSON: Have you got anything to add further on that, Karen? I think that is a good segue into, then, the mental health and wellbeing support for our students—indeed our parents and our teachers—in the specialist space and supporting those kids with autism. I just wanted to, I guess, go to the recent announcement about mental health and wellbeing support and particularly the mental health practitioners that will now be at our 83 specialist and SDS schools. Can you take us through, though, the impact on mental health and wellbeing—what we need to be doing for our kids in that space and our teachers and our parents?

Ms DIMMOCK: We are certainly hearing a lot from families deeply distressed about their child's increasing mental health concerns, and that is coming through in their behaviour and clearly in their mental health. There has obviously been a whole royal commission about mental health services and access to them, and that can be limited.

One of the things that I think is always important in providing mental health support to young people, and particularly young people with disability, is that you need to be supporting the family as a whole. Even if they are accessing and seeing a mental health practitioner once a week or once a fortnight, the majority of care and support does happen in the home, and families need to be able to reach out and access, I guess, support to give them the confidence that they are doing the right thing to support their child and young person at a time where accessing mental health support, even with all the extra funding that has been provided to it, still remains difficult to access. It remains particularly difficult for young people with disability, so that wraparound focus on families as well is critical.

Ms SHARKIE: Tim, I think I would add there that, again, and I know the committee will have heard—and COVID overall is just having such an impact on mental health for so many members of the community, but in relation to autistic children or students—autistic people, 40 to 70 per cent of autistic people have coexisting mental health conditions, usually anxiety and depression. So they are very anxious, but the very nature of how autism impacts them can make them anxious—and any change to routine—so that is going to really increase.

The other part of anxiety and mental health issues at school is bullying or lack of in-school support. So, again, perversely, we have had some kids say, 'Well, it's great being at home because I'm not being bullied', or, 'It's great being at school when no other students are at school because I'm not being bullied'. We actually need to look—and again this is around systemic issues, and we are working with the department on the government's commitment to an education strategy for autistic students, and mental health and wellbeing is one of the five pillars of really dealing with that. So we absolutely welcome mental health professional support in special schools—it should always have been the case—because children with intellectual disability, or autistic people with intellectual disability, have just as high mental health concerns as those without an intellectual disability. I do wonder about that type of support in the primary school system as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, and sorry to cut you off there, but the member's time has expired. I will hand the call to Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, Ms Sharkie and Ms Dimmock. Mr Richardson, I am disappointed you did not let Paisley get a question in there; it would have been a good opportunity.

Can I ask on the question of attendance at school—and you talked about, Karen, clarifying who can attend onsite—the government talked earlier, or the minister talked earlier, about there being guidelines, or I think operational guidelines, provided to schools. Have those guidelines been provided to you or any other general advice about who can and cannot attend in person?

Ms DIMMOCK: We do have the operational guidelines that have been provided to schools. They were in multiple versions. Unfortunately the first version for stage 4 did not include the detail around families experiencing severe stress. Subsequent versions have, but I think that was a missed opportunity right at the start. It is of course a subjective assessment around severe stress, and families are certainly calling for, I guess, greater guidance around what that includes. One of our concerns with the operational guidelines is that they do indicate that sibling attendance may be an option that is explored. I think we feel that that is something that is a very practical option and in fact should be perhaps more widely promoted and made available to families.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So that the student themselves stays at home but their siblings go to school to relieve the pressure, I guess.

Ms DIMMOCK: Correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Have you got an idea of how many kids that you represent—both of you—would be slipping through the cracks and not being able to go to a school onsite?

Ms DIMMOCK: Our understanding at the moment is around 3 per cent of students are attending at special schools. In term 2 it was closer to 6 per cent, and there was really very strong gatekeeping through term 2 as well. When students were able to attend those first few weeks of term 3 it was absolutely in excess of 50 per cent who were attending. So I think there are absolutely thousands of families who are in incredibly difficult situations where options need to be explored, whether it is for the student with disability to attend or for their sibling to attend.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Should there be almost a blanket 'If your child is on the spectrum, they can go to school'? I know there is a great variation in difficulty, but probably those of us who do not have children like that really do not understand how difficult it can be and what tiny little things can cause issues.

Ms SHARKIE: Well, what was so positive about the beginning of term 3 was that parents did have that choice to send them or not. That was fantastic. It was so well received. The sense of relief that came through our social media and emails directly to me was about, you know, 'Thank goodness this has happened'. So it is unfortunate for everybody in Victoria about stage 4—and most of all the Premier having to deal with this crisis—but that was a really good move. It was very, very much appreciated. And now I guess what is happening—and going back to, I guess, Tim's question about the impacts—is that we are seeing parents say 13 September is just a week or two before school holidays, so for autistic kids it is another upheaval. Do we go back to school and then be home from school in two weeks time and then back to school in two weeks time? We are hearing from parents saying, 'You know what? I'm going to give up on the year. We'll just start over next year'. And that is really not what we want to see.

Mr D O'BRIEN: No. Sorry, Karen, did you have something to add to that?

Ms DIMMOCK: No, that is good.

Mr D O'BRIEN: We certainly heard the same: parents saying, 'Look, 2020's a write-off'.

Ms SHARKIE: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I think there are probably a few people in the community saying that more broadly, which goes to my next question, I guess. Fiona, the comments you made about specialist school year 12s not being able to repeat—I was not aware of that, I must say. Is that across all years at specialist school or just year 12?

Ms SHARKIE: I would have to check that, but I do understand it is all years. But we are saying this year, particularly if those kids cannot get that vocational experience, educational experience—it is hard enough for them to get work even with that, but it is really going to set them back. So that is a real concern. And as I said, Danny, we have raised that with the department. They acknowledged, 'Yes, we may need to look at that this year,' and I really think they do.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So have you had any response, formal or informal, from them at this stage?

Ms SHARKIE: No.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. It might be something for the committee to note in our coming reports, I guess. On that issue, to both of you, are there any other standing issues of great concern that you have raised with the government that are unaddressed? I know, Karen, you raised three or four at the start, the priorities. Are there any that you are just not getting any traction on at this stage?

Ms SHARKIE: No. I mean, I would have to say that we would really compliment the department, the representatives that we are working with and the minister's office, for really being open to hearing and open to working together. I think it has been a good system that we are feeding back in, and what has been really positive is that even on individual cases and individual schools we can report it up. So Karen and I both run phone lines. We hear a call. It goes straight to the department. The department contacts the office. You know that is working. And then the information that we get through discussion, as I said, Karen and I are able to translate back down in community language in a summary, which has been very helpful.

But I think really what the big picture is, as I said, is we knew these cracks about lack of inclusive education—where good practice and inclusive education is really clear—and we really need to act on that. Where schools were doing inclusion well, they translated well into the COVID home learning. But no school was going to become inclusive during COVID. So we need many more schools to be inclusive.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And on that point, Karen, you talked about, I think they are called education support officers—what we used to know as aides—really need to be in the home. Is that happening? Sorry, I might have missed that.

Ms DIMMOCK: No, so that currently is not allowed under the industrial settings—is our understanding. Some students are able to be supported well remotely by their education support staff, but again this is where we talk about that really wide spectrum of students. Some students are not able to access education unless they are in with an additional person, that education support officer, next to them. I think all of us have changed the way we are working, and we would like to see them providing support in the home.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So, again, is that something you have raised with the government or the department and have got any response on?

Ms DIMMOCK: So the response at this stage is it is not allowed under the current industrial settings.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I imagine that would apply to stage 4, but for stage 3 you are allowed to go out for work. I would have thought perhaps potentially on education or compassionate grounds it should be allowed.

Ms DIMMOCK: I think the issue is that teachers and education support staff are not allowed to go into a child's home.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right.

Ms SHARKIE: At any time.

Ms DIMMOCK: At any time, yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I guess hopefully this will not continue for too much longer and it will not be an issue, but it is probably something for us to watch as we go forward.

Ms DIMMOCK: I think it is one to watch, because I think it is the most—perhaps the students with the greatest support needs, and they are the ones that will be the last to return. They often are quite medically vulnerable as well. But I think we cannot predict what is going to happen, and we want to make sure that those students are able to access education if we find ourselves in the unfortunate situation of restrictions again in months ahead.

Ms SHARKIE: So one of the other—I guess it is not necessarily outstanding, but it is a consideration that we believe needs to have some focus on on the road out of COVID. It is how we are actually going to assess the impact of COVID on those students with disability, what sort of catch-up programs are going to exist, or catch-up support, because they will definitely have regressed; many students may have, but students with disability, as Tim knows I will say, have disproportionate needs and need a disproportionate response here. So when they do get back, however that is, there needs to be additional support there. That is one thing that we put to the department that—again there is no response yet; not that they are not going to do anything, but we are really emphasising it.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Well, thank you very much for your time, both of you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. I will pass the call to Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. And thank you both for appearing today. Look, you have probably already touched a fair bit on the two issues that I was going to bring up, which were the support for support staff being able to access students' homes, and then the clarity around the rules. But I will ask just about, with educational support staff not allowed to enter students' homes, what is then occurring. Is that all then falling essentially back on parents, and what is the experience there?

Ms DIMMOCK: Yes. Thank you for that question. Absolutely it is falling back on parents, and they are needing to support their child to access education. A really consistent theme that we have heard from families is that they have had to reduce their own paid working hours—and it is principally women—to be able to support their child to continue to learn. I think making that decision to reduce paid work at perhaps the start of what is going to be a very difficult economic time is a horrible decision to have to make. That is what families are doing. They are of course accessing NDIS supports if they are available and in place, but what I would just say about that is that to get an NDIS-funded support worker [Zoom dropout]

The CHAIR: Sorry, you appear to have frozen.

Ms DIMMOCK: requires an awful lot of [inaudible] around plans [Zoom dropout]

Ms SHARKIE: I know what Karen was going to say.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Sharkie.

Ms DIMMOCK: I will hand to Fiona.

Ms SHARKIE: Oh, she is back. Karen, are you there?

The CHAIR: Are you there, Ms Dimmock, or should we go to Fiona? Ms Sharkie, did you want to?

Ms DIMMOCK: Go to Fiona first. Thank you.

Ms SHARKIE: I think it is again to restate the point that getting additional NDIS funding or being able to use your NDIS funding in some way is really money, but it is actually the organising to go in. There is a lot of work required in trying to set that up and get those people in, and what we are aware—and this is again the

industrial restrictions that exist in the agreements with teachers and support staff—is many educational support staff are also disability support workers that are going into people’s homes under NDIS in a different capacity other than education support staff, so we really need to break that down so that the education support staff can go in but without this enormous organising feat that parents have to be able to do that, I think is really important.

And, again, when we hear from autistic parents what they are saying is that for students without a disability sitting down in front of your iPad or in front of your computer with a lesson plan to go through and do that independently is a given, but for students with disability or autistic students, getting them to focus on that unassisted is not a reality or not a possibility. For some autistic kids, yes, particularly those in mainstream schools perhaps, but that is what the education support staff do—help to retain focus and really assist them in that way. So it does not happen, so they do not learn, and the parents will say, ‘I spend all my day just attending to their needs without even getting to the education’.

Mr HIBBINS: Well, yes, it is concerning that a whole cohort of students are essentially missing out on education. Just in terms of the advice that is being given—or the clarity around the rules—in stage 4 about students with a disability being able to attend on-site school are you finding that when there is disagreement between parents and schools it is easily resolved? Is there a miscommunication of the rules or a misunderstanding, or is it genuinely going a lot more deep than that, the difficulty of actually resolving that issue?

Ms SHARKIE: I do not know, actually. All I know is that the department of education have some magic to work it out. I do not know what it was, but when we feed up—I mean, we had a single mother with a bad back with an autistic child with very, very high needs who was refused from their autistic school, and I fed that up to the department and said, ‘If this is not extreme stress, I don’t know what is’, and I think that was worked out. We suspect, because it does happen a lot, that it is gatekeeping of the principal. But the principals are also faced with the situation that they are working with a willing-and-able policy where staff have to be willing and able to return to school. So they perhaps have a reduced workforce, but the department has assured us that if they have a reduced workforce, they will get temporary teachers in or whatever. But I am sure that is something that they grapple with.

Ms DIMMOCK: I think we also have to understand that stress is cumulative and that what is happening with families and the impact of stress on them is growing through these restrictions. They are absolutely doing their best to support their children—and to support their other children learning from home—but the pressures are building and more and more families will need to have an option for on-site attendance, whether it is for their child with disability or for siblings.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. No further questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That concludes our questions for this afternoon, then. We thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions which 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, but we thank you greatly for taking the time to speak with us today. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.