

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 Gail McHardy, Executive Officer, and

Ms Leanne McCurdy, Operations and Support, Parents Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome 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 these hearings remotely from home 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). 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. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Welcome, Parents Victoria.

Ms McHARDY: Thank you, and thank you for that warm welcome. Afternoon, everybody. I am Gail McHardy, Executive Officer of Parents Victoria, hereon referred to as PV, speaking on behalf of our organisation. Leanne McCurdy is here today as my administrative support. We have both, firsthand, liaised and responded with families throughout the pandemic, be it directly by phone, email, our website and/or social platforms. PV has been an active representative organisation since 1925 in public education and has a longstanding working relationship with present and past governments and the Department of Education and Training.

For your information, our organisation covers all school-related education matters, so the questions that come to us from families in our school system are wide ranging. Through the pandemic it has ranged from school communications to the home; clarification about access to onsite learning; additional supports and learning at home; student engagement; disciplinary matters; and VCE, VCAL and VET assessments, including support for parent clubs and school council operations during this time.

PV's submission to the inquiry was to provide insights and an overall parent perspective on the impacts of the COVID-19 health crisis impacting on our Victorian government school families. We are very mindful that our session is the last for today, and we feel it is important that we highlight the key elements: communication, relationships and especially the will, skill and capacity of the education workforce and school community to build on the strengths and address any of the weaknesses identified through 2020. PV are well aware of the problems and challenges facing people in our community, because throughout this whole crisis to date, wherever we have been engaged or have participated, the themes and examples are consistent. We pride ourselves on being proactive and being part of a solution-making process. That will involve supporting parents directly, liaising with DET or the minister's office where and when necessary, and navigating and advocating for and supporting families and schools on a way forward. PV welcomes this opportunity to share and to respond to your questions today for the purposes of the inquiry.

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

Ms STITT: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for appearing this afternoon. We are keen to hear your insights in terms of how things have been going throughout this pandemic from your members' point of view. Are you able to give us some differences, perhaps some perspectives from parents and carer members on what they have observed of their students' first and second rounds of remote, flexible learning? What lessons have come out of both of those two lots of remote learning?

Ms McHARDY: Thank you for the question. I think what people need to be clear about is that across every household there are slight differences. People are certainly overwhelmed, and there are others that are coping if they have got the required resources, but there are many without. We are also very mindful as an organisation of the voices we do not get to hear. That is reliant on coming through other voice boxes, as you could appreciate, be it support people and sometimes, in some cases, schools themselves, which will refer people to our organisation for assistance.

Obviously we have done a number of submissions to a number of inquiries across this process, and we had some words that described it: ‘brilliant’, ‘unsustainable’, ‘stressful and overwhelming’, ‘underwhelmed’, ‘great’, ‘student has drive’, ‘student has struggled with return to school learning’, ‘teacher unavailable’, ‘teacher amazing’, ‘loved it’, ‘wonderfully supportive school’, ‘incredibly frustrating’. So the mix and themes have been varied but consistent and similar in lots of ways. Maybe a couple of examples might also help, and I will go to those.

I will just scroll down to those—trying to predict the questions is very difficult. We can share with you an example of when a father contacted us for assistance the second time around, when some families were a bit reluctant to speak up to the school because they knew the school was already under a lot of stress and pressure to fulfil the needs of government and deliver services to all the community. But we reassured that parent and we empowered the parent to have the confidence to talk to the principal without fear, and to the credit of the principal that did happen. The principal contacted that father directly and they came to an agreement and a resolution was reached. That was in relation to access to onsite learning for a couple of days a week. We have got another example of a family where the family has an essential working mum but the father transferred to working from home. Their children are both primary-age children and both have learning needs and are supported usually at school, so for them having them home without support was difficult. So they negotiated with the school to have the children go on site one day a week to allow them to be in touch with their known support teachers so that they were able to reset them for the following week of learning.

A third example in answer to this question would be a secondary school example where the children in the household are year 7 and year 9. Particularly families have expressed to us that for the year 7 young people this has been an incredibly difficult year. We have heard a lot about the upper secondary level, the VCE students, but equally the transition for the year 7s has been hard because they have not been able to establish the relationships they would normally establish in that first year of secondary. In this household it is a year 7 and a year 9, and the mother, who was a stickler for the rules, sought to give the children more flexibility to do the learning outside the 9-to-3 window where they were able to manage better. In her view she has written off the year 2020, and if they get through to the other side unscathed, they will be extremely happy.

Ms STITT: Sure. I mean, you did point out that the experiences are very different and diverse, and I was about to actually ask you: do you think it is different between year levels? But you have just pointed out that year 7 has been an example. Is that something you have heard much feedback about, year 7? Are there other years that have stood out to you as having more difficulties than others in flexible learning?

Ms McHARDY: I would have to say all anecdotal. I mean, people in their inquiries—you get insights depending on the question they are asking, and then sometimes that conversation leads to hearing a little bit more about that. So in answer to your question, particularly for year 7s, that has certainly come up a number of times, and equally for the grade 6s. It is about milestones in education. So for the grade 6s this is their last year of primary school. Equally for the ones that are entering for the first time secondary school, and then of course we have heard it reported quite substantially in the media and through social platforms for the year 12s—they have certainly had a year that no other year 12 student has ever had before.

Ms STITT: That is true. In terms of the feedback you have had in relation to health and wellbeing activities and programs, how do you think that has gone in particular during the second phase of remote learning?

Ms McHARDY: I think the best way to describe wave 1 to wave 2, or phases 1 and 2, is in phase 1 definitely what worked was having that time for teaching and the workforce to be prepared for learning from home. That gave the workforce that opportunity to prepare, but for families in particular it was so heavily reliant—and this is one of our common themes—on communication and relationship. Because where schools had a really strengthened, strong relationship, a quality relationship between their families and their school community, that was successful—incredibly successful—and they have really played to their strengths on a

whole range of levels. Where there have been struggles is when the communication has not been clear or there has been mixed messaging or ambiguity in some of the instructions, and in the technology piece government particularly got straight onto it as far as where there was definitely—some of these problems were in existence before COVID with engagement and services and delivery of services. We cannot ignore the elephant in the room that our public schools—and, look, we are an advocate for public education, so we are not going to be afraid to say this: our system was already having issues with delivering on certain things. All the virus did was amplify some of those cracks.

Where schools struggled was if they did not have the relationship, if they did not have the effective communication, they are the ones that are still suffering irrespective of phase 1 or phase 2. But what has been clearly evident is the department was able to respond and support those schools that were struggling. Certainly in phase 2 those schools have now had the opportunity to play to their strengths and step up to the plate and assist those families, but not in all cases we have to say. But again, we can only respond to the people we hear from. But, look, there are certainly as many good stories as there are bad stories.

Ms STITT: We heard some evidence earlier today from some of the education unions about their members' experience in remote learning in regional Victoria. Have you had much interaction with parents about regional experiences with flexible learning from home?

Ms McHARDY: Look, we have, because particularly in phase 1 we did, particularly for accessing devices and connectivity, and also because Parents Victoria, as I said in the introduction, covers a wide range of school-related issues. We have had a longstanding relationship with the department, so we are on many advisory groups. I represent the organisation on the regional and rural advisory groups, so we were already having conversations in that space, and certainly those families did reach out to us where there were some difficulties where they were waiting on some devices and things. Eventually those things did come through, but that was not necessarily an issue. It was a challenge for government, and it was a worldwide challenge as far as supply. It is really hard because you cannot lay the blame at particular people's feet when it is beyond their control, but certainly there were some people that were disadvantaged in that early phase. Certainly by phase 2 those things have been addressed, and people found other ways to support those people.

Ms STITT: I guess your organisation would be better placed than most to understand how schools can be very close-knit communities and be a really important gathering place for families and teachers and students. Can you give us some examples of how communities have banded together in the absence of everybody being together in the schoolyard?

Ms McHARDY: I think we are all well aware of that great word 'pivot', and a lot of people have pivoted, not just educators, even communities. The really clever schools that do the family engagement piece correctly, they know how to exchange those ideas, amplify and mobilise those ideas. This comes into our whole theory around will, skill and capacity and how that can be shared and demonstrated with others to embed that into the DNA of a school community across not just the state but our nation. Family engagement is so incredibly important, because if you do not know your families, you do not know the strengths they have.

Where that has been successful, some of the examples would be where they have families sharing online, and obviously they have worked with the school in those permissions and those consents, but even where some of our parent associations pivoted and did things like assisting with the supply of face masks. Just think of the students at Mac.Rob Girls, where they have done the letters from iso, writing to elderly members in aged care. There are so many wonderful stories.

Talking to our principal colleagues in the principal associations, we are just having those convos saying, 'How do we keep this going?', because we have a particular view about how schools understand family engagement and that relationship. Often people feel that because parents are compliant by attending a parent-teacher interview or responding to an email or showing up to an appointment, that is engagement. That is compliance. What we need to do is ask: How do we support schools going forward? That is why one of our recommendations to government for some time now has been family engagement officers. We have to give schools the human resource to assist them to do that labour intensity. Schools often are taking on extra roles with their existing workforces without that additional need.

So in answer to your question, there are numerous solutions we could offer in this piece. What we have endeavoured to do is, rather than being part of the problem, be part of the solution, so wherever possible through this whole crisis we have given ideas and suggestions when a problem has arisen.

Ms STITT: Thank you. Look, we have heard a lot about VCE, and obviously there have been some challenges for students that are in years 11 and 12, or year 10 for that matter if they are doing VCE subjects. How do you think that is going? There is a bit of a mixture at the moment in terms of remote learning and there was some access to face-to-face classes. Have you had a lot of feedback from parents whose kids are going through senior years about how things have been in the second round of flexible learning?

Ms McHARDY: Look, phase 2 has been interesting. A lot of people have gone to ground because they are just in survival mode. There are a lot more other priorities and pressures on their family household outside of schooling. So it is very difficult to measure the complexities and detail of what you are asking there. What we can tell you is where people have reached out is in seeking clarification on the communications about what is ahead as far as how those things are going to be dealt with.

Ms STITT: Do you mean exams and things like that?

Ms McHARDY: All those things, so ‘How they are going to do the special consideration?’, ‘Are the exams in jeopardy et cetera?’, ‘Why do we have to have an ATAR?’, ‘What does it look like beyond 2020 as far as enrolments to other pathways and university?’. There are all those questions.

As an organisation we are preparing at this point in time to run a session for parents and obviously to support their young people going forward about how best to navigate that space, because we have such a high level of uncertainty about when the institutions will be equipped to be able to reopen and do those things when they are permitted to reopen and what that might look like.

Of course listening to one of the hearings earlier today about that level of uncertainty, some families in their minds may be wanting to reassure their young person about, dare I say it, having to repeat the year for whatever purpose to complete those competency-based assessments et cetera, but not every young person will be wanting to do that. So we really do need to consider as a community, as a government and as departments that are responsible for the relevant areas of these types of discussions how we do that together and how we communicate effectively about the best way to support young people going forward.

Ms STITT: Okay. Thank you. I think I am out of time now, Chair.

The CHAIR: About 5 seconds, thank you. I will hand to Mr Danny O’Brien, MP.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, Ms McHardy and Ms McCurdy. Can I begin with the schools that were forced to shut because of a positive case. Can you give a comment on communication between schools, the department and parents?

Ms McHARDY: I certainly can. Right from the outset of the pandemic, even in January—can you believe this—even before we got it, we were already an organisation being contacted. People that know us know that we are very proactive in getting messages through to the department. That was even when families were returning from China and families being nervous about sending their kids back to school. And if you know the Chinese culture in particular, they are very clear: education is the highest priority and being compliant is the highest priority for them too, so they did not want to be judged or the children to be disadvantaged. So that conversation was had right at the onset.

When it got to the actual school closures the communication around primary and secondary contacts was a huge issue. And the frustration for our schools—and we do not blame our schools; we are one of their greatest supporters—was that because we had two government departments doing communication and liaising with each other in that space, that added further complication. It is our understanding that those staff were already overwhelmed with quite a heavy workload and demand on them in this crisis. So to be constructive in our response is to say that parents needed to know what needed to be done first and they needed to know why. And so sometimes we have a habit in this space when doing communications, often they are driven by fear and not wanting people to be reactive, but in fact what happens is you actually escalate the angst and anxiety if you do not necessarily put the actual communication clearly and succinctly right from the outset and say why you are

doing what you are doing. For principals to be in that difficult position, because they could not do anything until they had the authorisation from DHHS. So that of course had an impact on not only those schools directly but also those families associated with those cluster breakouts. So in answer to your question, there was certainly a lot of learning in that piece, but to be constructive we did feed back about how that could be best done.

Mr D O'BRIEN: You just mentioned about year 12 in particular and the consideration of educational disadvantage process that the government has announced where every student will be individually assessed. Have you been briefed on how that will work? We heard from one of the principals associations earlier that there is a draft going around of how that will actually work. Have you had any contact from the government about that?

Ms McHARDY: We certainly have been in contact with the government on a weekly basis. However, we have not been shown that draft yet, and I hope that would not be too far away to us, being a peak parent organisation for public schools. But in saying that, we have fed back to the government too and to the department in relation to those comm pieces, because when they actually do communications, be it the operations guide or specific comms to principals and school leaders directly, we always give the department feedback about how that information needs to be front and centre even on the public face. Because they are transparent with the communication, it is just sometimes it is at a second or third level down in those website platforms. So our feedback has always been elevate it up and make sure it is clear because you are actually going to reduce the anxiety and angst if you actually up front with all that information, because then people will be able to construct their questions accordingly, and this is why the hotlines have been really critically important and actually probably have assisted schools greatly in trying to alleviate some of that pressure.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. And you said before that year 12 in 2020 will be a year like never before for those year 12s. Did you get feedback from parents, particularly about the fact that regional year 11s and 12s basically have to go back to remote learning for stage 3 even though for stage 3 in Melbourne the year 11s and 12s stayed at school?

Ms McHARDY: This is a huge quandary for everybody, because how can you not disadvantage one over the other? This is what has been ongoing. It is quite bizarre because in previous times, pre the virus, often it was said that our regional and remote students were at a disadvantage to a metropolitan students. Now with the virus, it is reversing; it is going the other way. But to be fair to all, the biggest issues in that piece were not necessarily from the students and parents. It was from the workforce, because understandably other people had the right to choose about if they were working from home or not, but in the education and health space they do not get that choice. They have certainly means to represent to their employer if they are unable to go on site, but let us be honest here: some of them did not really have the same liberties that a lot of other people did. So in answer to that I would say that certainly you could always argue what is equity and what is not—or quality in fact—but unfortunately I do not think anyone has the answer to that question right at this moment.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Have you heard feedback from parents concerned that there will be a much larger cohort of students repeating years next year?

Ms McHARDY: That will be a personal choice, and I think, to be fair, in 2020 a lot of people, particularly the young people, have just resigned to the fact that this is just an absolute write-off. I really feel for them because I think we have to instil hope into those young people, and I think that for 2021 they have to have a sense of confidence moving forward. I know there are a number of different discussions and pressures coming around about getting rid of the ATAR et cetera—you know, all those educational debates—and they will continue to go on. I mean, everyone has an opinion on education, but I think the reality is that the people it impacts on directly are what we have to all be mindful about. We can all hold an opinion, but we have to be really super fixed on how we are going to support those young people forward so that they do have hope for the future, because we do not know what lies ahead, particularly around employment opportunities et cetera. But we are always the optimist, so we want to do anything to assist and support those people and families forward.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, sure. Probably my last question, if I can squeeze it in: you talked about parents clubs before, and I wonder whether you have got any idea of the impact on parents clubs in particular in terms of fundraising, given the inability to do a lot of the usual Bunnings barbecues and cake stalls and things through

much of this year. Is that going to have an impact, and does the government need to look at how it can supplement schools for those things that are usually funded by parent clubs?

Ms McHARDY: Well, I will be very political here from our perspective. I think that, in fairness to our parent associations, that all happened before COVID back when the regulations were changed. The powers of the parent clubs and parent associations have already been diminished due to the repercussions of the dreaded word 'IBAC', when some certain people did what they did. So that has had a huge impact on those organisations in our schools. A lot of people just see them as fundraising bodies; they are not. They are actually a strength to the arm of that school community, and they are not only think tanks but advisory committees. They have a huge connection to their community. Unfortunately they are probably undervalued, and we would believe they need to be amplified and supported forward. And that has been the silver lining of the virus. It has taken a virus to amplify the critical importance of community connection, and that also came through with the review into mental health—the royal commission into mental health. A number of the opportunities I had as an organisation representative and as an individual to go to many of those discussions showed the loss we have had with community connection. So all I can say—

The CHAIR: Sorry to cut you off there, but the member's time for questions has expired. I will give the call to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms McCurdy and Ms McHardy, for appearing today. This is an area that is of great interest to me. I have a year 7 son myself, so I know very much about the introduction to high school during a pandemic. I would like to get your opinion on something that we discussed this morning with the education minister. He said—I am putting words in his mouth, but I think I get the general gist; we went over it many times—that the schools are safe, have always been safe and continue to be safe places and that the reason we have shut schools down and we are doing remote learning is not for the safety of the children and staff; it is to lower the overall activity within the community, which will lower the spread of the disease. And to my mind this is like a moral bargain that the government has forced upon children and parents whereby there are harms inflicted on these children and their families. I am interested in your opinion. Do you think that parents understand this moral bargain that has been struck—and that they are currently in the process of handling—and that all these harms that are happening to their children and to their families are for the greater good, so to speak? Do you think that they understand that?

Ms McHARDY: David, I think there is a lot to unpack in there in relation to what a community does or does not understand. This is a worldwide event, so obviously it is not just Victoria; it is everybody everywhere and understanding at different stages everyone is doing different things because of how the virus has played out in those various countries. I think that from an organisation's perspective the most important thing, as I said earlier, is explaining the why—that is critically important and always has been important—and how we communicate that. So if you were to ask me could that have been done better, yes, of course it can be done better going forward. It is how we have those conversations. But this has been a unique event, and as to how any government—it does not matter of what political persuasion—engages with it, I think the most important thing I would say, and what I have said right from the outset, is communication relationships. It is all about trust.

Even now when every morning I put on the news—because obviously I have to listen to the media constantly to hear what is coming and what is going and how we can support families through that space, and often a lot of that stuff is driven by fear. That is the worst thing you can do to a community, to disengage—and for everybody's overall mental health. We need to reduce the conflict in relationships, and we have to work better going forward. I am not just saying this to be warm and fuzzy. I am really dead serious about this. We have to create hope. We have to give gratitude. We have to have compassion. We have got to have all of those elements of a relationship constantly, and that applies to politicians as well and how they message to the people. This is where the New Zealand Prime Minister was very good at it, because she has the trusted relationship. So irrespective of any of our political opinions I would say that you have to explain up-front why we do things. Even for school leaders that is difficult, because they are constrained by their employers.

Mr LIMBRICK: It is interesting, the fear thing. This is something that I have been paying a lot of interest to: fear in communication. Do you feel that there have been some elements of fear in the communication that people have been exposed to from government? Like, one of the recent advertising campaigns was saying that, 'Everyone can be hurt by the virus'—I cannot remember the exact tagline that they used—or do you think that

this sort of messaging could be done better or differently, or do you think it helps alleviate fear or increases it? I am interested in your opinion.

Ms McHARDY: Look, I know that there have been some other speakers today that you have listened to from other organisations. I think that we just must not do harm. That is the critical word. The golden rule is to respect each other and the Hippocratic oath, but it is so important not to do harm to another, and people have to be very mindful how they do that messaging, for whatever campaign purpose or any messaging purpose, to get the message through to people to do the right thing. But if people do not have the trusted relationship, you are not going to reach them anyway. So obviously this is a really big question you are asking an organisation. In everything we do we have found that success is where we have done relationship preparation within schools, with schools that have certainly had children that have got challenging behaviours, and we are working with those schools to do it differently, because if you do not have the trusted relationship and give people that will and skill capacity to do it correctly, nothing will change. It is not just about changing the mindset. We also have to change the skill set.

Mr LIMBRICK: I think I have just run out of time, but—

The CHAIR: You have 30 seconds by my clock.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. Look, I will cede that. I do not think I can do anything in 30 seconds.

Ms McHARDY: Have a look at our website and have a read of some things, David. I think you will find it quite enlightening.

Mr LIMBRICK: Okay. Great. Thank you very much.

Ms McHARDY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, David, and thank you very much to Parents Victoria for appearing before our 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.

If today's proceedings have raised any issues for anyone, we again read out: the Lifeline number is 13 11 14, the Beyond Blue number is 1300 096 269 and Kids Helpline is 1800 55 1800.

This hearing is adjourned, and we thank all of those witnesses who have appeared before us today, but most recently Parents Victoria. Thank you for your time.

Committee adjourned.