

# 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**

Mr Matt Foran, President, SPELD Victoria, and

Mr Cameron Peverett, President, Principals Association of Specialist Schools 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, so 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 advise you 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 welcome SPELD and the Principals Association of Specialist Schools. We invite you to make a brief 5-minute opening statement. We also ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes, and then this will be followed by questions from our committee. Thank you.

**Mr FORAN:** Would you like me to go first, Cameron?

**Mr PEVERETT:** Yes, go for it.

**Mr FORAN:** My name is Matthew Foran, and I am the President of SPELD Victoria. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak here today. SPELD Victoria has been representing Victorians with specific learning disorders for over five decades now, and in fact we actually turn 51 tomorrow. Research shows that learning difficulties impact about 20 per cent of the population, and if we talk about specific learning disorders such as dyslexia and dysgraphia and dyscalculia, the impact is around about 5 to 10 per cent of the population. So to put this into some context, what we are talking about is approximately 97 000 Victorian students who are diagnosed with a specific learning disorder. These are essentially invisible disabilities, but they have lifelong consequences. And the fact that you cannot see the visible signs does not diminish the impact at all.

There is extensive research that shows that if you ignore a student with specific learning disorders—or worse, not identify them in the first place—then this leads to all sorts of downstream negative social impacts. So when the COVID-19 impact hit, SPELD Victoria understood that this could have major implications, and so we conducted research on the impact of remote learning on our constituency. The result was a report, which was then shared with the Department of Education and Training, on what I will refer to as term 2 remote learning, and these results were highlighted in the submission that we made to this inquiry.

When Victoria went into lockdown for the second time we reached out again to our constituency, and we did a comparison piece of research on term 3 remote learning. I guess we were really hopeful that we would see an improvement, that schools adapted as quickly as possible to the changing COVID-19 situation. And look, certainly from term 2 to term 3 over 60 per cent of parents had noticed an improvement in their school's approach, and there was active feedback sought from parents as well. However—and unfortunately—we saw a rise in the number of parents feeling that students with specific learning disorders were not receiving the adjustments to their support for remote learning. These are adjustments that they are entitled to under the *Disability Discrimination Act*.

We also saw increases in parents reporting that they believed their children were falling further behind due to remote learning, describing the use of the assistive technology as poor and also noting that the provision of adjustments during remote learning was quite poor. Worryingly, too, parents also reported students with specific learning disorders have increased disengagement from school, increased anxiety and depression, a challenging and disruptive behaviour increase and also just change in moods during remote learning. During

remote learning in term 2 about one in four parents surveyed did not feel supported by the child's school. Unfortunately in the second round, in term 3, this dissatisfaction increased to nearly one in three. This is not to say that the experience has been uniformly bad for students and parents. In short, the experience of remote learning has been very variable, and that is part of the problem, as what is needed is greater levels of consistency.

Look, I want to stress—and I am sure you have heard this a lot—there is no playbook for a pandemic. We are all in uncharted waters—schools, businesses, departments, governments. We have all been responding under extraordinary circumstances and immense pressure and doing it to the very best of our abilities. This research is not intended as a criticism. It is more designed to give a voice to the key challenges facing parents and students in this environment, what they believe they need to change to better support their kids and the key areas of improvement needed for schools.

It is important also to understand that these are problems that students and parents living with specific learning disorders routinely face in the education system. COVID-19 and the shift to an online learning environment has only served to bring these into sharp relief for a number of the parents. I very quickly wanted to share just two quotes from the surveys that I think put some light onto this. The first one:

It took home-schooling for us to really see how deep our son's learning difficulties were and not a single teacher ever picked it up.

And then the second one:

We value all of the teachers that work with the students in our family. They are talented, diligent and professional individuals. They are being let down by a system that does not provide them with the resources or training to teach students who learn outside the middle of the bell curve.

While there are many things that can be put in place to improve the experience of remote learning for students and parents—and our original submission had five recommendations—it really does boil down to two overarching themes from our perspective. The first is that school leadership must be made aware of and must take responsibility for their obligations to students with specific learning disorders under the Act and under the education standards.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, that is the 5-minute bell.

**Mr FORAN:** Sorry.

**The CHAIR:** That is all right. You have taken all the time. But maybe, Mr Peverett, did you have something that you wanted to add as well quickly to that?

**Mr PEVERETT:** Yes. I am Cameron Peverett. I am the Principal of Colac Specialist School and the President of the Principals Association of Specialist Schools. I am here in my office because my school is currently open, and obviously we are one of the 30-odd out of the 2000 schools across the state that are in this situation. There are very few that are actually open. I easily have at least 5 minutes worth of notes here myself speaking about the impacts that this has had on students, families, schools and staff, but I think the overarching core across all this is the feeling within our specialist schools of the inequity about how this has broadly been applied across our government schools.

I would certainly also like to say that it has been very disruptive with entering into remote learning and the removal of remote learning. We have a majority of very vulnerable students with their health, yet we have been expected to operate under similar conditions as per normal. Social distancing is an impossibility. The access to students' bodily fluids is albeit not what we are wanting at all but it is something that we cannot avoid.

I would certainly say that part of the complexity and part of our confusion around this situation is anecdotally our families within specialist schools have been telling us that, yes, remote learning was not wonderful but it was actually handled really well, and in some cases students actually thrived in that situation. When we have heard anecdotally that remote learning has not worked for our kids, that is not what we have been hearing amongst our specialist school families. I cannot vouch for how education or remote learning has been provided to students with disabilities who attend mainstream settings, but in specialist schools what we have heard is actually quite the opposite to some of the vernacular that has been put out into the media.

Like I said, I do have plenty of stuff here that I can comment on, but I am sure that there will be plenty of questions coming through. It has not all been bad news, but we felt that we have not been treated in the same kind as our mainstream counterparts, and we are perplexed as to why, because every decision that seems to have been made has not been one that has been of a greater level of support for our families, students and staff but has been quite the opposite. That is pretty much where we stand.

**The CHAIR:** And was there anything else you wanted to add to that? I do not want to cut you off if you have got something else you needed to say.

**Mr PEVERETT:** Well, I think to jump on Matt's stuff a little bit there, we do have students who cannot communicate their needs as well as others, so it is very difficult for some of us to determine whether a student is unwell and therefore according to the guidelines must stay at home. So some of the decisions that we would have liked to have as principals with a little bit more authority or autonomy to be able to make the best judgement calls we can, based on each student's individual needs, were taken away from us through some of the expectations that have come through the guidelines.

And it is very true that it has been eye opening for some of our families as to the actual learning needs of their children when they enter into remote learning. Some of them have been astonished at just how clever they are, and some are astonished at the additional support. So from a specialist school's perspective, we have found that there has been a greater awareness of the quality of education that our specialist schools provide—generally by our families—that when we say the kids are actually more capable of doing things, that they may actually be that and when we say they need additional levels of support, then they may actually need that, because we do pride ourselves on being great practitioners in what we do. We specialise in this, and we do not discriminate at all.

I think that a big part of our main issue is the shortened amount of time we have had to get prepared. So there have been so many OH&S requirements and remote learning requirements, and our mainstream counterparts were given five days entering into this section of remote learning, but we were given one. And if remote learning was such a challenge for our special-needs schoolkids, then maybe we actually needed more time to prepare. So we have got a little bit of mixed messaging going on. Certainly anecdotally we would have liked that extra time, but we still felt that we have done a very good job in this, and from what our families are telling us, they agree with us.

We also felt that it was a little bit insulting at times where we were coined as being utilised as respite, whereas that is not what we are. We are not a respite service; we are an education service. And we felt that sometimes what was put out in the media was more about—which we certainly acknowledge—that it can be very tough to have a child at home with additional needs. But we are here primarily as educators, and we felt on a number of occasions throughout this process that we were not treated as such—that we have highly trained staff and that on occasion we were not treated in such a way.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will cut you off there, because that is an additional 5 minutes, and I will pass the first questions to Mr Gary Maas, MP. Thank you.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Peverett and Mr Foran, for your time before the committee today. I am sure I speak on behalf of the whole committee when I say thank you for the work that you do and of course thanks for your appearance. My first question is to Mr Peverett. You spoke of some of the benefits that came with remote learning. I appreciate the difficulties that you did take us through. I was just wondering if you would be able to go a little bit more in depth into that but also talk about some of the benefits or do a comparison with the benefits of on-site learning as well.

**Mr PEVERETT:** So I think we did not have a long lead-up time at all to make sure we were well prepared, which was probably part of the complexity, because as all of our students have individual needs, the way they engage in their learning can be quite different. So just to roll out an online platform and expect all students to be able to attend to that we certainly know does not work necessarily across the board. Some students really struggle with the lack of personal engagement and having somebody right there to assist them with their learning, whereas other students, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder, have actually found that slight little bit of distance away from actually having a human face in front of them has actually been of great benefit to them.

We have found with some of our students, where there has been greater flexibility in when they begin their learning during the day—like, for some of our students who have complex, challenging behaviours where we were sort of not so worried about what time they started their program; you know, they might start at 9.30 am or 10 o'clock depending on what time they got to bed and all that sort of stuff—they were then able to engage in the activities that were provided for them at a deeper level than sometimes when they come to school having had a bit of a rough night and it takes them that good half hour to an hour to actually get going in the morning.

Because of the range of disabilities that we have across our sector, what works for one did not necessarily work for another. We found that a high amount of engagement, which would be across all the mainstream settings as well, is dependent upon how engaged the parents are in their child's education and their program. So where parents are more engaged, we have had greater success, or where parents provided greater flexibility, we have had greater success. We did find the opposite, where some parents felt that they had to provide a full learning program to complement what we were putting out there, and once we were able to alleviate that pressure for families and go, 'No, you don't have to try and do everything; we don't expect you to be the teacher. But we just want you to support, with guidance, what we're able to provide for you', they found that it was far more successful.

What we found that we had to do a lot more frequently than we would normally do is make that personal contact with our families. Generally across our specialist schools every student has a diary and we write in it every day about how the child has gone, and then hopefully the parent responds back to us. Because that was somewhat taken away, we found that we had to call our families every couple of days, primarily to do a welfare check and then secondary to that to do an education check to manage the guided tasks that we had given their child—'Do you need more, less? What additional support do you need?'—and give those families a little bit more ownership over how they delivered some of the content.

So for some of our schools and our families it actually helped to build some relationships and form quite strong positions of trust. For others, where they felt that they were unable to have their child at home and they felt that their child should be allowed to come on site, even though they were not part of the essential workers and all that sort of stuff, some of those relationships actually became quite fractured and became quite a challenge to negotiate between schools and families. Thankfully, anecdotally from what I hear, they were a very small minority. The majority of what happened was that with the high level of communication, the high level of support and trust and flexibility in learning, generally the remote learning situation seemed to go pretty well. We just would have liked to have had a bit more time to be able to prepare for it and to be able to individualise it better, because that is kind of our bread and butter in special schools and that is what we are used to.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. My next question is to Mr Foran: taking you to the topic of positive examples of remote learning, I was wondering what steps schools have taken to cater for children with learning difficulties during the pandemic 'period'?

**Mr FORAN:** I think when you look at the comparison between term 2 and term 3, there were certainly greater efforts made to adjust the time for children to be allowed to do tasks and a much greater emphasis on direct online learning. We saw more one-on-one time with teachers or teacher assistants as well. Particularly with regard to the amount of work, the expectation of workload and the time allocation, I think a lot of teachers were actually finding their feet within the classroom as well and actually trying to understand how much work was going to be offered, how much was going to be work across other teachers as well and then what you could reasonably allocate in that time, except everyone was sort of learning in that first instance and we certainly saw some significant improvements in that area.

**Mr MAAS:** Just a follow-up question to you: are there any practical examples that you are aware of in terms of best practice with remote learning?

**Mr FORAN:** Look, no, probably not specifically. What we did see is there were some schools that probably performed better than others in that space. I think anecdotally probably preparation and I guess being very ordered in terms of the way you approach those classrooms as well made a huge difference. And, Cameron, you will probably support me here, different subjects lend themselves differently to an online learning environment as well. So there are some subjects where it could have actually been a bit of a revelation, whereas there were other subjects where both teachers and students probably struggled in that environment as well.

**Mr MAAS:** Yes, sure. Mr Peverett, would you like to speak to that?

**Mr PEVERETT:** Yes, and that is absolutely the case. I suppose that we found that we had to provide a lot more structure and guidance around those more formal—English and maths and science and some of those areas. But it also gave us a lot of licence to provide a lot of flexibility and creativity with a lot of the others. So some broader things where, you know, you go and you do whatever is going to suit you more and whatever is going to engage you with—well, maybe not your community so much—but your families a bit more. So there are certainly pros and cons to it. We found in our schools that there probably were some key learning areas that were not addressed to the same level of detail as what we would normally do on site.

**Mr FORAN:** Yes, and I think also, just to add to that, an understanding of what the technology was capable of for the teachers, but also the students and the parents can make an enormous difference as well, particularly if you are looking at assisted learning technology for kids with specific learning disorders.

**Mr MAAS:** Okay. I just have a question for both of you about some of the other challenges associated with teaching and remote learning and just how some of those challenges have been overcome. Mr Peverett, would you like to go first?

**Mr PEVERETT:** I think the challenge in the remote learning space is where you start to lose that constant reviewing of the welfare and wellbeing of our kids—that is probably the main thing. Being that we do have kids that have more complex medical needs or often they may have families that are not as socio-economically stable, I suppose, it was really challenging to make sure that the wellbeing needs were being catered for appropriately. You can only gauge so much from a phone conversation or from a Zoom meeting, if that is what you are using. So we certainly had some concerns in some cases where we would try to engage with child protection and try to get them a bit more involved and get either a light or a heavy touch on some of our families. We found that that service was not maybe as accessible or as available as what it previously would have been, so that was probably our main concern—around the actual wellbeing side of the kids rather than the curriculum delivery.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. Mr Foran?

**Mr FORAN:** Look, it is probably not our area of expertise to respond directly to your question.

**Mr MAAS:** Sure.

**Mr FORAN:** I think from our perspective the overarching point, though, is that there is a very limited awareness amongst teachers of specific learning disorders. You can manage to get yourself through a teaching degree without learning anything substantive about specific learning disorders at all. When you think about the volume of students that will be in your classroom at any given time, that is problematic. And also there is the sort of lack of general professional development in that space as well, which I think would not just serve in an online environment but probably more generally for the education system.

**Mr MAAS:** Okay. And I have a final question to both of you just around the level of communication that you had with the Victorian Department of Education and Training during the second period of lockdown. Mr Foran, would you like to go first and comment as to that?

**Mr FORAN:** Yes. Look, certainly my CEO, Claire Stonier-Kipen, has an active dialogue with the Department of Education and Training. I will not put words into her mouth, but I would say she is in regular contact, probably at least once a week, maybe a couple of times, and certainly over this period they have been in close contact. I think, as I mentioned, this original report, and certainly the second one, will be provided to the department as well to assist them in terms of formulating some broad policies as to how you can improve the online learning environment.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. Mr Peverett?

**Mr PEVERETT:** Yes, I suppose I need to acknowledge that it is very difficult to build a plane as you are flying it, and I think in our particular case we have found that sometimes getting the appropriate guidance and direction from the department was probably delayed longer than what we would have liked. We found that we were not in a position where we felt that we had the right autonomy or authority to make decisions because we

were not sure what the guidance was then going to say. And even then, once the guidance came out it was not necessarily specific enough to our specialist settings, and in some cases where we were looking for very clear direction it was kept fairly ambiguous, and probably deliberately so. But it did not support some of our higher needs families, or where there was unclear messaging in the media, to then try and go, 'Yes, I know that's what you've heard, but that is actually not the case for our particular school'. And that was very clear with our 30-odd specialist schools that were still open, where the conversation was, 'All schools are going to remote learning', where we know that was not the case. And that, again, becomes difficult to negotiate when parents are asking for ICT devices or whatever that we actually cannot avail them because we are still open and require them for any students who may come on site.

If I can, I would like to just talk a little bit about Colac specifically, because we were in a hotspot at this point and up until very recently. And thankfully the numbers are going down, but it has been extraordinarily difficult to run a school within a hotspot where all the other schools around you, Catholic and mainstream, otherwise are closed. I was getting around about 35 per cent of student attendance because the parents were talking with their feet. They felt there was a greater health concern and health risk rather than education concern or education risk. So managing the mental health of my families and my students and my staff has been an extraordinary challenge, and where sometimes it may have been useful to consider some particular cases individually, that was not afforded to me, as much as I was making it known that we are in an extraordinary space right now and maybe an extraordinary decision needs to be made. So I think that where those tacit and blanket-type rules were put out there, sometimes it just needed an executive decision for some circumstances, and I do not feel like that was afforded. It was not just my school that was affected like that, but there have been other examples of other schools where maybe a sole decision just for that one may have been more appropriate than, 'Sorry, you're in the same boat as everyone else'.

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

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Peverett and Mr Foran. Cameron, it is great to see you have got a matching map to mine behind you, and I hope all our colleagues have noticed the best part of the world on display. Secondly, just before—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Point of order, Chair!

**Mr RIORDAN:** Before I ask the first question, Mr Peverett, I will remind our assistant education minister, who is also on the committee, that you are in fact talking to us today in a run-down old portable building and that you are very much open and—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, I will remind you of the terms of reference of the inquiry.

**Mr RIORDAN:** very accepting of any grants that the government may be sending your way as part of its stimulus package post COVID-19 recovery, and I am sure that you join me in making that known to Mr Richardson.

So, Mr Peverett, it has been a difficult period for the education sector broadly. What is the current level of school attendance across the special school sector at the moment, do you understand?

**Mr PEVERETT:** It is difficult to gauge because if you are talking about those that are currently in remote learning it would be highly variable between settings. When you are looking at the regional and rural schools that are still open, mostly from what I can gather it is around about 80 per cent. Some are getting more, some are getting less, except for us. We have had an influx this week, and we are up to about 40 per cent of students attending.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So you touched on your situation just before and quite rightly pointed out it was a pretty unique situation. For the purposes of Hansard, the Colac area, if it was Melbourne, would have had the equivalent of about 35 000 active cases—it was a fair onslaught. Your families and students voted with their feet. Did you feel the department could have done a lot more to support families that clearly were not coming to school? No other students in town were going to school and many of your families felt really worried about that. Did you feel that the department could have done more to support your students to access education? Because it went for three or four weeks, really, where people were quite worried.

**Mr PEVERETT:** I think that what we have done as an association, all we have really advocated for is equity, and we just wanted to be treated on the same basis as our mainstream counterparts. That is all we have ever really been advocating for. While we did not have an active case within the school or my school community, which would have straight away elicited a shutdown and a cleanout and whatever else happens, because that never actually happened it did become a difficult situation to manage. All we could do was try to put to our families that we, according to the Chief Health Officer's advice, are still deemed as safe, even though it does not look like that to the other schools in the community where they have been afforded a different set of parameters in which to operate under. So that is a very tricky one for me to answer because as much as I felt that it has been our particular circumstance, a different position may have had to have been taken. What that would have done to alleviate the concerns of the families I would be purely speculating.

**Mr RIORDAN:** I guess that one of the concerns would have been that families whose children have been kept at home have not been able to access remote learning like other students in the city may have been and so therefore a less than optimal educational experience was on offer.

**Mr PEVERETT:** It has certainly been different. In our community we still opted to provide at-home learning, which was a sort of diluted version of the remote learning package, for those families who chose to keep their children at home. So they were still provided, as was our wont—and it was not against department policy to be doing so, but we certainly were not expected to. But we certainly did not want to have families, because of family decisions or family anxiety, who were choosing to keep their children at home—we did not want those kids to be having a complete discontinuation of learning because of remaining open during this period in this space.

**Mr RIORDAN:** You touched earlier on some of your concerns at the commentary around the provision of special school opportunities. I quote the *Age* here:

Mr Andrews made it clear that there is an element of discretion for parents, describing 'a kind of respite arrangement' that might involve children attending school for only part of each week.

He said that in the *Age*. Were you disappointed that the Premier made comments about the great work that the special education teachers and staff do?

**Mr PEVERETT:** I was certainly disappointed at the terminology, and I suppose in recent years specialist education has come a heck of a long way to be more than deemed as a babysitting service, which I know has been part of the vernacular from a long time ago. But in the last 15-plus years we have worked extraordinarily hard to match our work with the Victorian government of the time to make sure that the curriculum was matched across all levels so that students were getting an education in-kind to what they would be getting at a mainstream school, albeit potentially individualised deeper than normal.

We certainly understand that having a child at home with a disability is extraordinarily challenging for many families, and they certainly need levels of support. I suppose I would have hoped that services that could have been afforded through the NDIA or NDIS may have been a more appropriate way of sourcing that rather than saying that schools could be used as a proxy to what the NDIA may have been providing in the first place.

**Mr RIORDAN:** In relation to school staffing do you have any figures of how many aides and support staff have been kept on in the specialist school setting? Or alternatively have schools had to reduce support staff to any great level?

**Mr PEVERETT:** Not to my knowledge.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So everyone has been able to find a role who would normally be employed in the system—because we heard earlier they are not allowed to go to people's homes. Is that right?

**Mr PEVERETT:** Yes. I suppose in the first tranche of remote learning we used this opportunity to upskill our education support staff. They were able to go through a whole bunch of learning modules to help support their skill set and knowledge when they return back to school, so that was a great opportunity there. Being that I am not in remote learning at the moment, I am not quite sure what the other specialist schools are doing. I have been in the fortunate position where I have still had staff able to come on site, and we have manipulated their roles to still be functioning and supportive and useful but maybe not directly within the classroom working with students. But with that it is a similar thing we did even through the first lot of remote learning, so—

**Mr RIORDAN:** And have special development school principals had enough support in managing, particularly the ones that have had to keep open, that tension between staff feeling safe in their own personal wellbeing versus the need to provide a functioning school for the students that you have got coming in—particularly, I guess, if you are only at 40 per cent attendance? If you had much higher figures, obviously you would have a lot less room to juggle staff if you were having an issue.

**Mr PEVERETT:** Well, we still have to refer back to the Chief Health Officer's advice, which is that schools are safe and the transfer risk between staff and students is low, so that is kind of where we are at. We have an adequate amount of PPE now to help support those programs. Concerns still do remain where we have small physical classroom sizes with often multiple adults within that space. And it is very difficult, or near impossible, to actually deliver a curriculum whilst wearing face masks to students who already have impaired communication delays, both expressive and receptive, and it does become a bit of a safety risk for them when they cannot easily understand those who work with them.

So there is a certain level of challenge around that, and a certain level of anxiety where you know that you cannot fulfil your job to a higher degree of satisfaction when you cannot necessarily follow the health guidelines to the highest standard that you would like to

**Mr RIORDAN:** And have you had—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Mr Riordan, but your time has expired, and I will pass the call to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Mr Peverett and Mr Foran, for appearing today and also for the wonderful work that you do in your schools and for your association.

Mr Peverett, I would like to follow a couple of points with you. We heard the education minister this morning state the same thing as what you have stated: that all schools are considered safe to attend for both students and staff and that that is not the reason that they have shut down schools, it is because of other reasons—to slow down community transmission and slow down activity. But the attendance rate that you mentioned at your school would indicate that parents disagree with that or have other concerns. How would you explain that low attendance rate, and what are parents telling you about why they are not bringing children to school?

**Mr PEVERETT:** I know that my families particularly, at least here in Colac, are merely watching the Colac figures and hoping that they decline before they send their children to school. So I do not think it is necessarily a reflection on the school itself. It is a reflection on trying to limit the movement for our community to hopefully then hence reduce the risk.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** If I am hearing you right, what you are telling me is that parents are making their own assessments of risk rather than listening to what the CHO and the education minister are saying. They are saying, 'Well, we have seen on the news that there are lots of infections in Colac', and they have made their own assessments. Does that sound about right?

**Mr PEVERETT:** Yes. And it is hard for me to speculate as to what parents are thinking, but I believe at least in this space, which is a very challenging space, it is very hard to be convinced to be able to really put your children—when you are already have significant concerns and worries with their general abilities and health and all that—under an increased perception of risk, I suppose. I can understand and I certainly do not hold anything against my parents that despite the messaging that we are putting out there as to how safe we are—all the practices that we have put in place, you know, all the additional measures to make sure that the kids are safe—that they are still choosing not to. And look, to a certain extent maybe not all the principals are 100 per cent convinced that that is the case as well, not when you see that children are subjected to COVID-19 as well and there are transfers between staff members in schools on some occasions. It is not obviously across the board, but there is no way to make this risk free. And I suppose that until the parents are convinced that it is, that is where they are at.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** You mentioned the equity between mainstream schools and specialist schools. And one thing that you mentioned that I thought was very interesting was in mainstream schools, you know, they will manage social distancing, they will have hygiene stations and all this sort of thing. And you were saying that it is very difficult, I think, to manage social distancing. I imagine it is quite difficult to manage hand hygiene and

that sort of thing as well. And I am not sure, but maybe some of your students have other health issues which might make them more vulnerable. Do you think that the risk profile for schools such as yours would actually be quite different for the students even with these risk mitigation measures in place?

**Mr PEVERETT:** I think that there is certainly a heightened risk amongst our kids who are unable to moderate their behaviour in accordance with the department's or the Chief Health Officer's guidelines. So as much as we do what we can do to support that, you know, we have kids who do have impaired understanding about what that means. We are able to do simple things, like ensure that we are putting plenty of hand sanitiser on our kids as they transfer from one space to another—being outside to play and then back inside, and before they eat—lots of things that we were probably already doing anyway that we just ramped up. But as far as that general understanding and kids acknowledging and recognising that they needed to remain 1.5 metres away or whatever, once again that is a concept that is foreign to them to start off with. But also, the way that you have to engage with some of our kids, particularly if they have got vision impairments or hearing impairments or any of those sorts of things, you cannot engage with them or teach them without physically getting in their space.

So it is both an awareness and an understanding from the students and the impaired understanding that those kids have. But then also there is the need to still be able to be educating and sometimes physically assisting or helping to feed or toilet or whatever these kids—you cannot avoid it. And as much as there are these grand statements around what you can and should be doing, when we actually seek advice we keep getting the same advice back to us which does not meet our context. So we do end up having to deviate slightly from best practice because of the nature of our students.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** And this is fascinating to me in that I hear that the students in these schools and the staff at the schools are going to have difficulty managing these sorts of issues, and yet your school is still open. What was the reason that they gave you that your schools should stay as open and other ones should not?

**Mr PEVERETT:** The reasons that we have been given are primarily around trying to reduce the amount of movement within communities and particularly within Melbourne, so that there is less risk of transfer between people. But can I honestly say I honestly do not know. We have struggled with understanding as to why you would keep 30—I think it is 37 of us, maybe—open when 2000 others are closed, including those in regional and remote communities.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to cut you off there, but the time for questions has expired and we have gone over based on the presentations at the beginning.

We thank you very much for your time here today and for contributing to our committee's deliberations. 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. The committee will take a brief break before consideration of its next witness. We declare this hearing adjourned, but we thank you very much for your time today. Thank you.

**Mr FORAN:** Thank you.

**Mr PEVERETT:** Thank you, everybody.

**Witnesses withdrew.**