

TRANSCRIPT

PANDEMIC DECLARATION ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Review of Pandemic Orders

Melbourne—Tuesday, 29 March 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Suzanna Sheed (Chair)

Mr Jeff Bourman (Deputy Chair)

Mr Josh Bull

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr Enver Erdogan

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Vicki Ward

Mr Kim Wells

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Mr Peter Roberts, Head of School Services, and

Dr Heather Schnagl AM, Ambassador, Independent Schools Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome today, Peter Roberts, Head of School Services, and Dr Heather Schnagl AM, ISV Ambassador. It is good to you have you here.

I will just read out, first of all, the parliamentary privilege rule. All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

I welcome you here today, and I invite you each just to make an opening statement before we go to questions.

Mr ROBERTS: Thank you. I will make a statement on behalf of both of us, if you do not mind. Independent Schools Victoria welcomes the opportunity to appear before the committee. In Victoria there are three school sectors: government, Catholic and independent. Our association, Independent Schools Victoria, or ISV, represents member schools in the independent sector. ISV is a member-based organisation and is not a system authority. Independent schools exist for a variety of reasons, including cultural, religious and philosophical. Some independent schools operate on a standalone basis while others are part of a system or group of schools with a common bond. Independent schools are diverse in the communities they serve, the approach they take to education, the needs of their students and their size. What they all share is a sense of autonomy. All schools in Victoria operate within the bounds of Victorian and Australian government legislation in areas such as finance, accountability, curriculum and assessment and reporting. Independent schools are distinguished by their own management and governance structures. ISV's members educate more than 150 000 students at some 230 member schools, operating on more than 380 campuses.

ISV received its first query from a member school on Wednesday, 22 January 2020, in relation to the pandemic, and from that moment we have recommended that schools follow the advice of health authorities, even when this was not mandatory. Member schools overwhelmingly followed this initial advice. Once the various health directions became mandatory for all schools in all sectors during 2020, we consistently advised our members to follow them.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will all have a variety of questions that we will want to ask, but I particularly have an interest in concerns around privacy and the collection of information within the school system. I wonder if you could just explain what processes or procedures that you have in place to ensure that privacy is maintained when you are collecting and recording health information or personal data in relation to COVID cases.

Mr ROBERTS: Well, we at ISV are not doing that because we are not required to. But in terms of individual schools in our sector, they will be doing what is required under the various directions in terms of vaccination status, for example, or in the past, QR code checking and so on. So they are doing what they are required to do in terms of citing or keeping records and so on—keeping them for as long as they need to. We have produced a lot of information and advice and guidance for schools based on those directions around all of that.

The CHAIR: Are you aware of any particular challenges that schools have had that they have come to you to seek advice on in relation to those issues?

Mr ROBERTS: In terms of the privacy and the storage and those sorts of issues?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr ROBERTS: No, I am not aware of those issues. I think early on it was schools wanting to make sure they were clear about what they were supposed to be doing and perhaps not going over the top or not falling short, and once we had all worked out what was required, then generally we are hearing that has been okay.

The CHAIR: Good. Go ahead.

Dr SCHNAGL: I think there was some concern with schools providing their communities with information about the number of cases and in particular parts of a school at the moment, that that might identify someone in a very, very small school, because some of our member schools are pretty tiny, and I have helped them with how to phrase it so that it is not as obviously identifiable.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you for that. It has certainly been a very challenging time, and I am just wondering whether you are able to speak to some of the challenges that your member boarding schools have faced over the course of the various orders and particularly perhaps relating to this year and the current orders.

Mr ROBERTS: Certainly across the past two years it has been very challenging for schools with boarding facilities, with closures of borders and different arrangements between different states and so on. It has been very, very challenging, and we have had many, many conversations with individual boarding schools over that time. In terms of this year and the past few months, we have worked closely with the education department in Victoria in particular on the development of boarding guidelines, where the department has worked closely with the Department of Health on developing boarding guidelines for schools to use. Some of the challenges for schools have been—there has been national guidance as well, and so where that has sat with Victorian schools compared with schools in other states has been challenging at times.

But the greater challenge from our perspective is that so many boarding facilities are just different from each other. You know, we probably all have a picture inside our heads of what boarding houses look like, but they are so different. They are so different to what they were decades ago, and from one school to the next to the next they will have different arrangements as to where they house their students anyway. So for some the concept of if there is a positive case, bubbles and isolation and so on is easier to do than others, and then there are the challenges of course of getting children home if they need to go home to isolate or parents want to come and collect them or whatever it might be. So all of these sorts of things you can imagine have been very, very challenging.

The education department has been very willing to—a bit like us—learn more about what happens on the ground. So we have been able to get a few individual schools to have direct conversations with the education department, who have been more than willing to take on the direct advice from those schools about how the operating guides could work better.

The CHAIR: I come from a regional area, and I have had a number of constituents contact me with issues where, you know, on the first day of school their boarder has been sent back home again. And in that first week there was apparently a lot of confusion, and it did seem that there may have been variations between what local public health units' advice was. Are you aware of whether that was a cause of confusion?

Mr ROBERTS: We are not surprised if that has been the case. But also the first week of the school year was challenging and messy for everyone, and everyone was doing their best to try to kick the year off to a good start—because if we take ourselves back to January, the case numbers were very, very high given the omicron variant was running through the place. And from the government's perspective and therefore the education department's perspective, to go too early with what the start of school might be—to say on 15 January 'This is what school will look like on 30 January'—would have been probably not quite the right thing to do, and things had settled a little bit later on. So for the people within the department of education and presumably working with health around 'What will be the conditions for schools in that very first week?', it was also really hard to nail down because of the very fast changes in the climate at that point in time, I think. And things like getting RAT kits out to schools and all those sorts of operational things that were going on was very, very difficult for the very beginning of school. But once we got through the first week or so things started to settle a bit and people realised, 'Okay, yes, we can manage this'. But for boarding houses there was that slight delay in getting those guidelines updated from the previous version, because of course the main focus was to get things ready for the 1 million kids in all schools in all sectors, and within that then there is the subset of the boarding house kids and so on.

Dr SCHNAGL: I was just going to add, Ms Sheed, that it was also that some of our schools actually started before the government schools started, and hence they were hoping to have the operations guide earlier. But it came out on the first day of government schools, so we were trying to second-guess what the guidelines would be, which was a bit challenging. But we were trying to be conservative to minimise infection spread.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you. I will move now to Ms Ward.

Ms WARD: Thank you. Thank you for coming along today, and thank you to all of your schools and their communities for all the work they have done over the last two and a bit years. We know it has been particularly difficult for educators. I live with one, and I know how hard he has worked over the last couple of years. It is very nice to see you, Dr Schnagl. We knew each other at Ivanhoe Girls, when I worked for Jenny Macklin. It is very nice to see your face again.

Dr SCHNAGL: Yes, well, I have been one of the team on the COVID hotline for the past two years, so I think I would say, Vicki, I have failed retirement—and please call me Heather, like you used to.

Ms WARD: Yes, that is exactly right. I am. You were mentioning that you had worked with the department around procedures for your boarding schools. Can we expand that a bit further and talk about your relationship with the department in the last two years, the kind of work that you have done and what kind of support you might have had—or I hope that you have had—to adapt and respond to the challenges that we have seen?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes. So overall the relationship with the department has been really good. The department of education I assume you are talking about?

Ms WARD: Yes.

Mr ROBERTS: Yes. The relationship has been really good and in fact has really grown in a positive way and a different way, particularly through 2020 when all of us across the world were grappling with what we have been trying to do with all of this. So we have built on already existing relationships with senior people in the department. I think some of those relationships have grown in a positive way, as I have mentioned. As Heather said, she is pretty much—she and a couple of other colleagues—looking after the COVID hotline for schools, and I have pretty much sat with most of the COVID things since that first call we got on 22 January, or whenever it was, a couple of years ago. So having worked—and with Michelle Green, our chief executive—very closely, with Michelle talking with the minister and with the secretary, myself with dep secs and all the others in the COVID team there, it has been a really good thing and a very supportive thing. We have been able to ring each other at any time of the day, which has happened—any time of the day, basically, particularly on those many occasions when things have been at their hottest, at their craziest, so to speak.

Now, that does not make it easier for anyone. We have all had challenges in trying to get things like updated operational guides out to schools when we all know what is coming because we know the COVID settings have changed in some way—they have tightened or they have loosened or whatever. Things might come out on a Sunday afternoon or a Saturday evening, as happened on occasions. We get that. We understand the backwards and forwards between the education and health departments about the balance between what is in the orders or the directions at the time, what are the overall COVID-safe settings that the government wants in place but how does that play out practically in a school setting, particularly now when we are wanting all kids to be at school and we are wanting schools to operate as normally as they possibly can. So I understand the backwards and forwards between education and health. The frustration for us and individual schools across all three sectors is the time lag it did take on occasions from significant announcements—whether we are tightening or loosening the settings—through to, ‘Okay, what does that mean we can do on [Zoom dropout]?’ And for some schools it might be because they had an event planned that night or tomorrow—

Ms WARD: Yes, that makes sense.

Dr SCHNAGL: They did expect us to have the information in advance, and there was no way that was going to happen.

Ms WARD: Yes. None of us got sneak previews, no. You were talking about some of your schools starting earlier in the school year and that posing some challenges. Were things like the air purifiers and the RATs rolled out reasonably well across your sector, or did you have some challenges?

Mr ROBERTS: I will talk about them separately. The air purifiers—yes-ish, in the sense that I believe by the time that school started the vast majority of schools that were being given an allocation would have had them. Again, this is acknowledging the very challenging work for the people in the department who were managing this, getting the purifiers into the country and getting them out into trucks and out to schools, with all the other logistical problems, particularly in January with the omicron numbers as they were. But the challenge for that program was that most of the deliveries were going to be happening in the first couple of weeks of January; at the end of December and in January schools are closed. So I think it worked okay. It was more about an individual school being able to have someone who could be contacted to go to the school, open it up and get a delivery of 50 purifiers or whatever. So in the main I believe it was pretty much done by the time schools returned—even before, say, the Australia Day weekend.

In terms of the RATs, the timing was, if we recall, most schools, certainly government schools, were starting on Monday the 31st. Australia Day was the Wednesday of the week before, and it was only on that weekend just before, from memory, that the full distribution of RAT kits was going to occur, knowing there is a public holiday in the middle. So the logistics with all of that—we do not underestimate the challenge with all of that. But we did have some schools that started on Thursday and Friday the 27th and 28th, so they were saying, ‘We haven’t quite got RATs. What’s going on?’ and so on and so on. So we said, ‘Look, sorry. You started earlier than the government school dates. Give everyone a break. They’re trying to get 6 million kits out in the space of—whatever it was. Probably more of the challenge around the RAT distribution was—and I do not know where this sat; I am assuming it is with the distribution company itself, I do not know—once kits started going out in those couple of days before school started there seemed to be an unusual distribution method where schools were getting dropped off a fifth or so of their allocation with the remainder coming the next day or by the time school started on the Monday or whatever. I have no idea why. I think you would be better off just giving one school 100 per cent, and the other four schools can get theirs over the next day or so. It was weird, because we had been putting out announcements to schools that ‘You will get a full allocation by the time school starts on Monday the 31st’, and the phones just went into meltdown—‘We just got about 20 per cent. We only have 20 per cent’. We had no idea what was going on, then we found out what had happened.

Dr SCHNAGL: They were also in strange containers, so schools did not always recognise what they were. They were in margarine containers or butter containers. Now, I think that is for their safety in terms of the distribution, but the fact that they might have been delivered with that sort of labelling might have helped schools. We also had some who got 10 times as many as they needed and some who got very tiny numbers, but we managed to get a few schools delivering to other schools within our sector.

Ms WARD: Well done. That is terrific. And have you found that the RATs have made this year easier? Are you finding good take-up with families? Are there any challenges that the RATs are creating, or is it going okay?

Mr ROBERTS: We think it is going okay. We are not hearing a lot from schools. Initially there was a little bit of worry from some schools about ‘How are we going to be able to do this?’, particularly special schools catering for students with disability—‘How are we going to be able to get these children to do this?’. We said, ‘Look, in the end it is not a mandatory thing’. We would talk schools through this—‘It’d be great if you could get some done. At least it would give you a level of confidence about who’s coming into the school’. And we are trying to also change behaviours anyway. Clearly a school does not know whether an individual student or an individual family is doing a test, but at least if we are trying to change behaviours broadly around ‘Don’t come to school if you’re not feeling well, whether or not you’ve done a test’, that is probably a good thing.

So we have not heard a lot from schools around challenges with doing them. I think it has given people a level of comfort that at least it is there, and with all the other things in place—whether it is purifiers, whether it is just simple ventilation, whether it is mask wearing, whether it is still distancing or whatever—all of the things lined up together can at least allow most schools during this term to operate reasonably normally. There are pockets here and there where they have had large enough cases to perhaps send a class group home or have not had enough staff here and there, so they might go to a bit of remote learning for a class group or a couple of classes or part of the school or whatever, and that has happened in all sectors. I am aware of that. But in the main, I think the RAT testing, like all the other measures this term, has at least allowed schools to operate fairly normally and get on with it. And they have all said, despite some of the challenges around all of that and challenges with absent students and absent staff and so on, having students and teachers back in school doing the normal school things far outweighs the difficulties. Everyone is tired, like everyone is anyway. Principals

are really worn out—we get that—but they are still saying, ‘We’re so much happier at least having kids and teachers at school’.

Ms WARD: Oh, completely.

Dr SCHNAGL: The only thing I would add to that is there was just a belief that this is the be-all and end-all, that they were as sensitive as the PCR tests, which they are not. And occasionally where someone has been saying, ‘Well, it’s not coming up positive on a RAT’, we have given schools advice to encourage the person, particularly a staff member, to go and get a PCR test, and then they have come up positive.

Ms WARD: Yes. That is good feedback. Thank you. I mean, the RATs certainly seem to have slowed the spread of this contagious variant of COVID, omicron, and allowed us to have a relatively normal term 1, which is really good. Thank you for answering my questions. Sorry, Heather?

Dr SCHNAGL: If I could just add one point, please. There are a few schools at the moment which have got an increase in cases, and there are a number that have gone back to wearing masks indoors in schools for their secondary students. A couple of schools that I know have done it in the last week have said they have had a massive decrease in the number of cases.

Ms WARD: That is really interesting. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will go now to Ms Crozier.

Ms CROZIER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both very much for being before us. There was a lot of confusion for boarding school kids, especially around when the borders closed. There was a *National Code on Boarding School Students* that was undertaken by the national cabinet and put out by the federal government. What discussions did you have, and how many kids were caught up in those cross-border issues?

Mr ROBERTS: In terms of discussion, we certainly had lots of individual discussions with schools and again worked closely with some people in the education department here around trying to find a way for not just boarders but also students and staff living, say, on the other side of the Murray River but working in schools in Shepparton and in Cobram—all those things.

Ms CROZIER: Yes, cross-border communities.

Mr ROBERTS: All that tied together. But in terms of the border specifically, working with the schools, trying to find out what their particular circumstances were, what the challenges were, we were able, whenever the department of education was seeking some data, to talk to, say, the New South Wales people about, ‘Well, this is the situation: there are 5000 or 55 000 students in all schools’—or whatever—‘affected’. We were able to fairly quickly gather that data from individual schools. I cannot remember what the numbers were off the top of my head now, but we were able to gather that data from schools and gather the stories from schools and what those challenges were and work with the department here, who would work with New South Wales or South Australia—usually New South Wales—just to try to find a way, if we could, of getting students and staff into the boarding houses or into the day schools and so on, if they were cross border. It was challenging, like all those other challenges when there were border closures and different rules either side.

In terms of the national guidelines, yes, I believe they informed the Victorian education department a lot around what the overall settings could be, but with enough local variation. Firstly, they needed to align with what the health directions were in Victoria at the time, but also, from my comments earlier on, seeking feedback where we could from individual boarding houses in Victoria—‘Does this make sense? Will it work in your boarding facility as best it can?’, given the range of different settings in different types of boarding houses. Some are very large, and some are in houses and units and all sorts of things. So we are certainly very well aware of those national guidelines. Yes, they are good, but often, as we know, in the federated country that we are, national guidelines for all sorts of things often need a more local state-based approach too.

Ms CROZIER: Or perhaps the other way. Maybe we need a better federal approach for these cross-border issues, I would have to suggest, because it was particularly concerning for so many kids who were interstate and could not get across back to school. It was very confusing for parents. It was very difficult for the boarding schools as well. And there was a lot of inconsistency, I think, from what I was getting from my constituents

who were contacting me about their concerns, through the local health response in their local area. It did differ from metropolitan Melbourne into regional Victoria, and I am just wondering if you could respond to that.

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, I think Heather might have sighed when local public health was mentioned earlier on. You are right, and not just around boarding facilities. Just broadly, we have found that there have been occasions when the involvement of local public health units, whether they are in regional areas or metropolitan areas, has actually muddied the waters a bit. We have tried to work closely with the education department, who have been working with the health department, so that at least there is consistency, as best we can, across the three schooling sectors and across the state, assuming there are no rings of steel around Melbourne, for example—assuming that the settings are the same across the state. We were always mindful of trying to have as much consistency as we could for all school sectors across the state around how you would be dealing with cases, with outbreaks et cetera, et cetera, and with local public health units being available to assist if a school was seeking that assistance. But we just found at times that local health units—and, Heather, feel free to jump in in a moment—would in their view, I am assuming in a positive way, try to get on the front foot: ‘There’s an outbreak in this part of’—particularly regional—‘Victoria; we want to get onto it as soon as we possibly can’. But they would then be talking with schools and would on occasions be giving perhaps outdated information or inaccurate information compared to what we thought we had agreed with the education department, who had agreed with the health department, about ‘This is what the overall approach should be in schools’.

Ms CROZIER: I will just go to Dr Schnagl, if you want to comment, and then I will come back to that, if I could.

Dr SCHNAGL: Certainly I spoke to a number of schools who got very different responses from local health units than what was being officially recorded in the operations guide for schools in the state, and that certainly added to the chaos. I had times with different regional and metropolitan units ringing me at night and over the weekends at least a couple of times apologising that they realised they had given schools incorrect advice.

Ms CROZIER: How often did that happen?

Dr SCHNAGL: Only three or four times, but that is still not ideal—where they suddenly told a school that they were back to restrictions that were from more than six months prior, and also it made the school feel that they were not doing the right thing when they absolutely were.

Ms CROZIER: Yes. Can I tease that out a bit more, because I think that is right. There was so much confusion and that advice that was out of date. Certainly with some of the boarding schools, where you have got teachers and others coming into the school from surrounding areas who could easily bring the virus in, at times the boarding houses themselves were locked down because a child might have tested positive on a RAT. So there was inconsistency from the local health advice around that too, and it caused a degree of confusion. Do you think that is improving now, that communication and that consistency of the risk? There is risk always when you have got that setting. Why was there not that consistency? If a kid was positive, then send them home, but let the rest of the kids be able to participate in the school environment.

Dr SCHNAGL: Ms Crozier, I was not just referring to boarding schools. Most of the problems I dealt with were day schools in both metro and regional areas. So I am just making sure that was clear.

Ms CROZIER: I beg your pardon. Thank you for that clarification. I think that it is a valid point that you make, in terms of day schools or boarding schools, but I particularly am aware of a number of these inconsistencies from local health authorities around the boarding community, if you like, where there were day kids coming in as well as boarding school children. That is what I am saying. Has that been clarified, do you believe, by those local health authorities to have that consistency?

Mr ROBERTS: I can only go on what we hear or do not hear from schools or from my colleagues in the department, and I have not heard anything about that in the last several weeks or so, so all I can assume is it is improving, or they are not bothering to come to us anymore, which I doubt.

Ms CROZIER: I think they are coming to me as the local member. Thank you. I will leave it there for the moment. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will go to Mr Bull now.

Mr J BULL: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Peter and Heather, for providing evidence this afternoon to the committee and for all the work that you both do with the 220-plus member schools and I think over 150 000 students within those schools. I just acknowledge the support that you have provided over the last two-and-a-bit years. It is also really pleasing to hear those introductory remarks. I think you characterised that relationship with the department, Peter, as continuing to evolve and perhaps as even having improved over the journey, which I think is of note and something that is very important. In your introductory remarks also, Peter, you referenced that you moved quite quickly to supporting health advice early on as COVID hit the state. Can you just explain for the committee what that meant and how that continual engagement with schools evolved over the two years in terms of supporting that health advice?

Mr ROBERTS: In the early stages—you always need to cast your mind back a bit with this, and there is probably lots that I have forgotten until—

Mr J BULL: Indeed. It is all a bit of a blur, isn't it, in some ways?

Mr ROBERTS: If we think back to about towards the end of term 1 in 2020, so we are talking about March/April back then, this thing had been building, things were starting to happen across the community. It was during the holiday break, from memory, when the Victorian government announced that government schools would not return and would start term 2 with remote learning. We had already had a couple of independent schools start remote learning in the last week or so of term—from memory I think Carey Grammar might have had an outbreak—and a couple of others were certainly considering it, and during that holiday break they definitely were considering it. So when that happened and things were going on, schools would ring us and say, 'Well, what should we be doing?', because health directions at that point in time were only applicable to government schools. So we would say to our members, 'Well, listen, this thing is happening with government schools. They have moved to remote learning. The Catholic schools have followed suit, and as far as we can tell, most if not all independent schools are moving to remote learning, so you might want to think about that. We can help you with that', and so on and so on.

We had about six weeks of remote learning, case numbers declined—'This COVID thing is done and dusted. We are all over it. Fantastic'. It was a good little social experiment, six weeks of remote teaching. Then when we got to the next lockdown and a longer, harder lockdown through the second half of 2020, the health orders were written in such a way that it was applicable to all schools in all sectors, and so therefore we had been having lots of conversations with schools around, 'Are you sure you want to be doing that? You want to have a concert, or you want to play sport? Okay, we know there are no rules that apply to you, but other schools can't do this. There are settings in the community that make these sorts of things challenging. Do you want to be on the front page of the newspapers?'. That is what we would be saying all the time and eventually sort of talk a school down.

The game shifted when the orders applied to all schools in all sectors, and so then it was, 'Sorry, you do have to do this. You can't do that anymore', and so on and so on. So throughout that second half of 2020 a lot of the work that we were doing was, in my view, helping schools and school leaders come to terms with the fact that there was now, like for everyone in the community, a set of rules that we had to abide by, whether we liked them or not, whether at home we could only go 5 kilometres from our house or whatever. But it was actually working with school leaders to get them to accept that—and I mentioned autonomy in my opening comments—you do not have the autonomy that you normally have in running your school, which was challenging for many, many people, and in fact now we are having to undo that, because there are not many rules that apply in schools now. Really, there is some vaccination stuff, there is some mask wearing—that is about it in terms of rules that apply. So we are undoing schools' thinking now and saying, 'Okay, you want to do that, you want to take a group of kids on a camp or interstate or something. You can do that. Think about the risks, think about the challenges. What do you do if there is an outbreak?', and so on and so on.

So that is the journey we have been on through all this. It is working with schools—and Heather has done more of this than I have—working with individual schools and their individual challenges. Again, to go back to 2020, through that second half of the year we were also, ISV, working with the curriculum authority and with the VRQA. The VRQA was able to give exemptions to schools on covering all the curriculum because it was just challenging to deliver some things in remote settings, and the VCAA in terms of managing the end-of-year exams and that change, completely rewriting study designs through 2020 and so on and so on.

So working through all of that, all brand new, all unknown for everyone, and so us helping schools make sense of that—‘What does that look like for you? We know that in December you normally have a valedictory dinner or a farewell function or whatever. You may or may not be able to do that. Maybe you can. I know you need to book the people who do all the sound and lighting for you, and you might have to pay a deposit. I do not know what the answer is. I do not have a crystal ball’. We just had those sorts of conversations time and time again through 2020. And then 2021 was the same but different, because we thought we were through it. It came back again. People were more attuned to it, so then it was the ongoing grind, again like all of us in the community that have had to live through it over the last two years.

Mr J BULL: Really finding that path of consistency early through 2020, I guess—as you said the back half of 2020—and now you are at the other end where you are finding that path of independence where the autonomy is back with the schools in many instances. Heather, is that your experience as well in a practical sense?

Dr SCHNAGL: It is. I think if you go back to 2020, some of my biggest times were helping schools with contact tracing, because there was no way the health department could manage to get back to schools. I basically did all the contact tracing with schools or taught them how to do it, so that was very much 2020. I think today I would say, ‘Yes, you can, but should you?’ in terms of risk management, because there have been some school camps where 80 out of 90 have come back needing to be in isolation, and ‘Yes, you’ve got to look at the balance. Is it worth doing?’—and that is only in tents. If you had 20 or more people in a cabin, I do not want to think of what that might mean. But I think it is now a different re-education. I have a background in infectious diseases from before I became a teacher, and I never thought my two careers would cross. You can perhaps see how I ended up with this task, but I have done all sorts of things, from writing documents about why people should be wearing masks, ventilation—every school has got a specific question about their specific circumstances, and I keep saying my crystal ball is cloudy.

Mr ROBERTS: And one of the challenges for us, Josh, at ISV is that the 230 member schools are all different, and in particular we will have many schools that may have an alternative view to mainstream education, which is why they exist, to operate a school in a particular way with a particular philosophy, whether it is a faith-based philosophy or something else. Tied in with that is that there are often certain activities, whether it is camps or whether it is performances or other things, that are just integral parts of what makes that school tick, and not being able to do some of those things has been really challenging for those schools. Then tied in with that is we have, like all parts of the community, different appetites for risk amongst our members about anything at any time anyway, and so particularly now that we are coming out the other side and things have freed up a bit, some schools again will want to be willing to take on riskier activities. As Heather just said, you might say, ‘Are you sure you want to do that?’—‘Yes, we need to get back to doing these things. We know that. Is there a way we can do it?’. So it is still that hard transition phase now for schools to get back to what they had been three years ago.

Mr J BULL: I do not have any further questions, but I do just want to thank you both. I think as a state our education system is very lucky to have both of you, and it sounds like you have done an extraordinary amount of work through the most tough and challenging of circumstances and provided clear and calm advice that is based in science and based in evidence. As I said, I cannot imagine having the role of having all of those different member schools, all at different levels, all often wanting to do different things based on a whole set of different values, but I just wanted to say I think you have both done an amazing job. So thank you for presenting to the committee. And thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Bull. We will go now to Mr Wells.

Mr WELLS: Thanks, Chair. And thank you both for your time. Sorry, being on Zoom, sometimes it drops out, so just excuse me if these questions have already been asked. But in regard to the students at boarding schools, they need to be double-vaxxed, don’t they?

Dr SCHNAGL: No.

Mr ROBERTS: No.

Mr WELLS: So there is no requirement for them to have one vax or two vax at all?

Mr ROBERTS: No, I do not believe so.

Dr SCHNAGL: No, I don't think so. Their staff need to be triple-vaxxed, but there is no requirement for the students to be vaccinated.

Mr WELLS: In boarding schools?

Dr SCHNAGL: In any school.

Mr WELLS: Okay, that is fine. In regard to teachers refusing to be vaxxed, was that an issue with the independent schools?

Mr ROBERTS: Yes it has been. Like it has been in all sectors. When the announcement of mandatory vaccination for school staff was made, our assumption always was that if 95 per cent of the population is fully vaccinated, then you would imagine 95 per cent of the workforce in schools will be fully vaccinated, and that is probably about right. The challenge which we thought would happen and has played out is that a very small number of schools in our sector have a larger than the 5 per cent population, if you like. So we believe a number of schools have had difficulties with staffing this year, and they alerted us to that last year anyway. Generally small schools, often faith-based or perhaps with an alternative view, enough staff were not willing to be vaccinated. They have still been able to operate, but they have had some challenges around finding replacement staff.

Dr SCHNAGL: I think that was exacerbated with the requirement for the booster, because the original documentation re the booster did not account for people who had their second dose later, in other words who were not teaching last year—might have been on leave, might have been travelling, I do not think that is possible, but might have been doing something else—and those people were not eligible for a booster. It really looked for a while like that was going to be an even bigger problem, but the dates did change.

Mr ROBERTS: Yes, I think the date was last Friday, so I think that would have been okay. But, yes, there were probably a few challenges in individual schools, and we have heard that across all three sectors. In the main we think by now it has settled.

The other thing is that when the announcement around mandatory vaccination was made last year, we said to some schools, 'Look, see if you can just manage until the end of 2021 and just see how it plays out over the summer holidays', because we thought there might be some people, whether they were teachers or non-teachers, who might have thought, 'Do you know what? I really love working in the school, and despite my views about vaccination I am going to go and get vaccinated because I want to keep working at the school'. Some schools have told me they have had other staff say, 'No, I'm not coming back. I don't want to get vaccinated. I'm not going to work in a school. So be it, I will give up my job'. There is a bit of that. So there are a small number of schools in our sector for which it has been very, very challenging. For the rest of them it has been, as I said, the 5 per cent or whatever it is in the broader community.

Mr WELLS: Would it be fair to say that more faith-based schools had a larger issue with the unvaccinated teachers?

Mr ROBERTS: I am not sure. I would not say more faith-based schools, but we are aware of some faith-based schools but also non-faith-based schools. If there was any sort of pattern to it, and there is not, it is probably the smallish schools where a handful of people make a much bigger difference than a handful of people out of 200 staff.

Mr WELLS: Sure. And where there has been, say, the greater than 5 per cent—and I think you are spot on with that—how have schools manage that shortfall, because it would be obviously difficult to find teachers who have decided to get vaccinated to come straight into a school to pick up where those teachers have decided not to get vaxxed? What has been the experience?

Mr ROBERTS: I believe that generally the schools have then just gone out and found replacement teachers, which is difficult at the moment anyway for a variety of reasons across all sectors. But also in some of these schools I believe where there are non-teaching staff the school has been willing to keep them on if they can, if they can do their work from home—they might be in the finance team, for example, or something like that. But

in the end each individual school works through that. We have an employment relations team which provides advice on the requirements around workers—if people need to be wound up at their job and so on, how to do that sort of stuff—but certainly what the vaccination rules are with that. I think it has settled now. I think generally schools have realised that these particular people are not coming back or are not going to get vaccinated, so they will move on with what that looks like, whether they terminate them, keep them on or whatever.

Mr WELLS: Thanks. If there is no requirement for students to be vaxxed to go into boarding schools, then that would mean there would be no activities that unvaxxed students would be excluded from.

Mr ROBERTS: That is the case anyway.

Dr SCHNAGL: That is the case.

Mr ROBERTS: So a day school in Ivanhoe could take their students to the museum, for example. Is that what you mean—something like that?

Mr WELLS: Yes, or school camps.

Mr ROBERTS: Exactly, yes. So there was a bit of confusion early on about that. I think there were some camp providers and excursion venues that were open to the general public that were insisting on vaccination requirements, but I think the education department and other arms of government have worked through all that. So we got clarity late last year, from memory, that—

Dr SCHNAGL: The open premises directions were amended and they clearly state that it is an exception—that anyone on a school excursion is exempt from vaccination.

Mr WELLS: Sure. Just in regard to the ventilation and purifiers, obviously you have staff or maintenance people on school sites that are changing the filters and doing all that, or do you have to get contractors to come in? How does that actually work? And I am assuming the school picks up the tab for that.

Mr ROBERTS: Well, schools that have been provided with ventilators by the Victorian government are also being provided with two years worth of filters. In terms of changing the filters, that is up to the school to manage that themselves.

Mr WELLS: So are there some schools that have not received the purifiers?

Mr ROBERTS: In our sector and the Catholic sector, purifiers have only gone to so-called low-fee, non-government schools, and so around about half of our membership, about 119 or something—a number like that—received purifiers. Around half of our member schools were eligible for purifiers because they are so-called low fee, for grants to put shade structures up and for the tutoring program last year and this year.

Mr WELLS: And the other half of the schools that do not qualify, are they funding it out of fundraising or are they going without?

Mr ROBERTS: Well, a bit of both. We at ISV were able to broker a deal to at least get some slightly cheaper priced purifiers for our members, and many schools have bought purifiers through that scheme. Others will be buying their own and others will be going without. It will be individual schools.

Mr WELLS: Yes. And are the parents accepting of that, or has there been some pushback from parents saying, ‘This is grossly unfair—COVID is across the whole state; how come we have to pay for purifiers when other schools, or most other schools, don’t?’.

Mr ROBERTS: We have not heard directly from parents that. They might be asking at their schools, ‘How come we’re not getting them?’.

Mr WELLS: Sure. All right. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. There being no further questions, we will wind up now. I want to thank you both very much for making yourselves available and sharing all that information with the committee. You will

receive a transcript of the hearing within the next week to review, including any questions on notice, although I do not think in your case there were any. Thank you for all the hard work you do and continue to do representing your schools right across the state. We will finish for the day now. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.