

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into 2019-20 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne—Thursday, 25 February 2021

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 Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallenge

WITNESSES

Ms Jenny Atta, Secretary,

Mr Chris Keating, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority,

Dr David Howes, Deputy Secretary, Schools and Regional Services,

Ms Kim Little, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

Ms Lee Watts, Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills,

Mr Anthony Bates, PSM, Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services,

Mr Ian Burrage, Acting Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support,

Mr Stephen Gniel, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, and

Dr Simon Booth, Executive Director, Tertiary Education Policy and Performance, Department of Education and Training.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be here today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2019–20 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government achieved in 2019–20 compared to what the government planned to achieve.

We note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent. We again note the apology of the Member for Mordialloc, who is on paternity leave. His family had a new baby this week.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege. Witnesses 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.

We welcome the Department of Education and Training. We invite you, Secretary, to make a 10-minute presentation, which will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Ms ATTA: Thank you, Chair, and the committee, for the opportunity to be here today. I am pleased to present some of the highlights of the Department of Education and Training's 2019–20 performance. The Department of Education and Training provides services that have an impact on the lives of almost every Victorian, and our vision is to give every Victorian the best learning and development experience, making our state a smarter, fairer and more prosperous place. Across 2019–20 we have continued the delivery of high-quality education and training to meet the challenges of a new decade, and it was a year of some significance. In January 2020 we welcomed 1 million students to Victorian schools. We began implementing the landmark three-year-old kindergarten program, and we saw record growth in TAFE enrolments, driven by the introduction of the free TAFE initiative.

In 2019–20 departmental expenditure was \$15.69 billion across the seven output groups for the department to deliver these critical education and training services. The department is committed to delivering excellence and equity in education right across our portfolios. In the early childhood portfolio, it was particularly pleasing to see a 100 per cent participation rate for Aboriginal children in kindergarten in the year before school. Our kindergartens continue to operate to extremely high standards, with 91 per cent of parents reporting that they

were satisfied with the services their children attended and 91 per cent of services offering funded kindergarten meeting or exceeding the national quality standards.

It was the year, as I mentioned—2020—that the department began to roll out the three-year-old kindergarten program. As implementation of this reform got underway at the start of 2020, almost 600 three-year-olds in six local government areas attended kindergarten for the first time. To support this decade-long rollout, the department launched the new Building Blocks program to upgrade kindergartens across our state. We also started to build our early childhood workforce, including the addition of two early childhood qualifications to the free TAFE for priority courses list, and both courses were among the most popular in the first half of 2020.

Beginning with school education we continued to build and improve the state's school infrastructure so it meets the community's needs. As the graph shows, more than 1.4 million students are projected to be enrolled in Victorian schools by 2051, and we are building for this growth. Eleven new schools opened in 2020, and 266 school infrastructure projects were completed. If we look back to the 2016–17 outcomes, where we reported we had completed 59 school infrastructure projects, we can see that the growth in investment and delivery of improved infrastructure since that time is really noteworthy.

In schools we also continued to support the health and wellbeing of our students, including becoming the first state in Australia to provide free sanitary pads and tampons in every government school. We also expanded the highly successful school breakfast program to more than 750 schools and helped tens of thousands of students to see a doctor through the GPs in schools program.

Improving the quality of teaching was another strong focus for the department over this period. We extended the support and training provided for teachers at more than 800 schools through our professional learning communities program. In addition, 292 primary teachers completed intensive training to become mathematics and science specialists, and almost 6000 teachers and principals further developed their leadership skills at the Bastow institute. Student performance in the national assessment program of literacy and numeracy remained strong, with Victoria consistently in Australia's top three performing jurisdictions. Since 2015 Victoria's performance in the top three NAPLAN bands has improved reading and numeracy across all year levels. There were also increases in the proportion of students in the top two bands in every year level except year 9. Year 9 does continue to be a challenge for all jurisdictions in Australia, and certainly Victoria's NAPLAN performance has fluctuated in line with other states and territories. Nevertheless we are focused on working to ensure secondary students can better engage with NAPLAN.

We are pleased to note that there is real strength in the performance of our primary schools. Victoria outperformed other Australian jurisdictions, with our primary schools achieving the highest mean scores in the country in seven out of 10 measures in 2019. This is up from 2018, when we led in four of the 10 measures.

In skills and training we saw the first full year of free TAFE, which saw a record growth in enrolments. It was particularly pleasing to see significant growth in the number of women taking up training opportunities, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and people from regional Victoria. Free TAFE has given more Victorians from different backgrounds access to the skills they need to find a pathway to rewarding work. The free TAFE for priority courses are also giving Victorians direct connections to jobs working on government priorities and major projects. Better TAFE facilities are also crucial to better training outcomes, and the 2019–20 budget provided further investment to ensure that more TAFE facilities can be modernised. This included beginning work on the Morwell Trade Skills Centre and the revitalisation of the Bendigo Kangan TAFE campus.

As we know, at the beginning of 2020 Victorians experienced extraordinarily challenging bushfires, and the department supported those affected communities in a range of ways, including getting our schools back up and running as quickly as possible. Assistance for families included financial support for 489 children in kindergarten and more than 3600 vouchers for school uniforms, books and devices. And 1125 students benefited from grants to TAFEs in affected areas for student support, subsidised course fees and counselling for staff and students.

The bushfires were quickly followed, of course, by the onset of the global coronavirus pandemic, creating a range of challenges across the portfolios. In early childhood we provided a range of supports to kindergarten services, and by the end of term 2 almost 96 per cent of funded kindergarten services were offering learning-from-home programs. For schools, it was important as the situation worsened that we supported more than

1 million students across 2200 schools to transition to remote and flexible learning. Our online learning-from-home portal supported parents and carers with learning activities, while schools provided onsite supervision for vulnerable children and children of essential workers. The risk of significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of students was also a key focus, and the rolling out of the vital mental health practitioners initiative was an important step.

In the training and skills sector, services showed real innovation in meeting the challenges of the pandemic, including the move to remote learning and the delivery of courses contributing directly to our response. Our support package helped the sector deliver more online and remote learning and retain more staff. TAFE supported students by providing laptops or hard-copy materials and conducting welfare checks on disadvantaged students and international students. TAFEs also played a key role in helping Victorians who lost their jobs to gain new skills.

In conclusion, Chair, I would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication shown by teachers and educators right across the education and training portfolios. I think 2020 has really highlighted the essential work they do and the way it is valued by the community. I also want to acknowledge the sustained commitment and effort of all staff across the department. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, and I will pass to the Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms Atta, for the presentation. I guess I too would like to acknowledge your final sentiments there in terms of education—the huge family that it is—but also I would like to add the students, parents and carers and all the others that got involved over particularly last year to hold it all together for everybody. I think everyone is mindful of that contribution, so I too support those words. But what I would like to go to first is one of the items you touched on towards the end there. I refer to pages 12 and 13 of the questionnaire regarding the mental health practitioners initiative. Areas where this was set to be implemented during 2019–20 were across Bayside Peninsula, the Barwon region, Loddon Campaspe, North Eastern Melbourne and Outer Gippsland. Can you tell us across these areas how many mental health practitioners were employed during the 2020 school closures?

Ms ATTA: Thanks very much, Mr Riordan. Yes, it was incredibly important to get that initiative rolling out. I might ask Dr Howes if he could talk to some of that detail.

Dr HOWES: Thank you, Secretary. Mental health was, as you have indicated, Mr Riordan, one of the key points of focus for us during the pandemic and is now as we move to supporting students coming back out of remote and flexible learning—and we are all conscious of the challenges that that represents. The mental health initiative is a very important one. There are two components of that: mental health practitioners in secondary schools, and we are also launching a pilot of mental health support for primary schools. Bayside Peninsula during term 3 of 2019 saw 32 campuses funded and a total number of 28 578 students with 31 mental health practitioners.

Mr RIORDAN: Sorry, 31?

Dr HOWES: Thirty-one for Bayside Peninsula in term 3 of 2019. In term 4 of 2019 in Barwon 21 campuses were funded and 10 375 students were supported by 20 mental health practitioners. In term 1 of 2020 in Loddon Campaspe 18 campuses were funded and 9873 students supported by 15 mental health practitioners. In North Eastern Melbourne in term 1 of 2020, 39 campuses were supported, and 25 734 students were supported by 38 mental health practitioners. In term 2 of 2020 in Outer Gippsland 10 campuses were supported and 2640 students were supported by five mental health practitioners. In Hume Moreland Area in term 3 of 2020, 19 campuses were supported with 10 000 students and 17 mental health practitioners.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. Can you tell us what impact the ongoing school closures had on the logistics of the rollout of this program?

Dr HOWES: It obviously presented challenges in that practitioners needed to move to remote delivery in some cases, as did our SSS workforce. But as they were recruited they were able to pivot to that means of delivering their services.

Mr RIORDAN: Did the department record as outcomes or was it reported how many online or remote consultations were accessed by students, particularly secondary school students?

Dr HOWES: I am not sure that we kept separate data on remote consultations.

Mr RIORDAN: Right. So for what ended up being a long time without people being able to sit one on one for these types of services, is there an indication of how accessible those services were?

Dr HOWES: The feedback that we have got has been that the services were very, very positive. Of course the mental health practitioners are providing direct support for students, but they also provide reactive support for students who need counselling—but that is not their only role. Their other role is providing proactive support, which includes support for staff as well as mental health programs run for the whole student cohort. The response from principals—I can give you an example of one who indicated how appreciative they were of this service because they had not been previously able to engage someone to do this kind of proactive work. They had previously been limited just to providing reactive counselling, and this practitioner at the secondary school developed a mental health plan for the school, ran staff wellbeing sessions, worked with the year-level coordinators to build their understandings of the needs of adolescents and behaviour management and provided professional learning for teachers on site, which means they have not had to—

Mr RIORDAN: So they are some examples of how the teachers were helped, but I am just trying to get a sense of whether there is any quantifiable amount of young people that were assisted over what was a very tough year?

Dr HOWES: Well, one of the points of data that I can provide to you is the support that is also being provided by the GPs in schools program, which of course was established before the Mental Health Practitioners. Over the period of time since that program has been established there have been 33 500 consultations and 40 per cent of those, or 13 400, have been for mental health issues. So the level of support that is being provided—

Mr RIORDAN: But once again you are not able to quantify that over this lockdown period when the schools were closed.

Ms ATTA: If I could, Mr Riordan, there are a few programs in this category. So we could have a look at if we could provide that for you for the mental health initiatives that we rolled out—the work of the GPs in schools program; the department's partnership with Headspace is important here as well, an investment that enables referral to direct, one-on-one counselling, which also took place via telephone and video in a remote sense, where students could not access that in a one-on-one sense. We could see if we could.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes. If you could take that on notice and perhaps compile something, because I guess my next question is: during the 2020 school closures, some of which were in this period, many mental health support services saw calls from students jump dramatically. Data tells us that there was a 28 per cent spike in calls for the phone counselling service Kids Helpline between March and July 2020 as compared to the same period the year before, and a 19 per cent jump compared with the previous month. This continued to intensify during the snap-down periods, which saw all our schools close. So what is being done? I mean, will something be done to continue to provide increased mental health services in this space?

Ms ATTA: Yes. We are certainly acutely conscious of what an important issue it is for us. The interim report of the royal commission really shone a spotlight on the level of need for children, young people, adolescents, and so it is an incredibly important issue for our schools. Later in 2020, in August, there were significant new announcements to expand our mental health services, so I could go to those, but certainly expanding the Mental Health Practitioners program across further secondary schools and P-12 specialist schools, and a further expansion of the primary schools pilots and further funding for mental health training for schools. We had nearly \$7 million to expand the Navigator program for disengaged students, another important issue across 2020.

Mr RIORDAN: I am hearing lots of programs. It is getting back to: can we identify how many students we have worked with? But I guess my next question speaks to that a little bit. On page 120 of the questionnaire, the questionnaire indicates that the department has indicated an intention to evaluate the Mental Health Practitioners program. When is that due, and what, and will that be public?

Ms ATTA: Certainly. So that evaluation has been commissioned, and I might just ask Dr Howes to give us a sense of timing there. It is an evaluation that looks out across two or three years, I think.

Dr HOWES: And we are looking at getting interim reports twice a year on the progress of the rollout of that plan.

Mr RIORDAN: Have you had any reports done yet?

Dr HOWES: Not yet, no.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. So it is running behind schedule?

Dr HOWES: No, because the program, as we said, is being rolled out at the moment. My information is that the evaluation reports will come in four times each year in 2021 and 2022 (April, July, October and December).

Mr RIORDAN: Right. So we have been going for more than a year now, so does that mean if they are coming in twice a year, we are going to expect one pretty shortly, or are you waiting for something?

Dr HOWES: No. I would expect one to be shortly.

Mr RIORDAN: And will that be a public document?

Dr HOWES: Initially that will come to the department.

Mr RIORDAN: Right. So we can ask about that at the next budget hearings, can we?

Ms ATTA: That is right. We expect we would have one of those reports in for the next reporting period.

Mr RIORDAN: Linking back to the earlier questioning on the surge in mental health issues, and I think that has been widely acknowledged by the whole community and certainly reported extensively, if there has been strong engagement with the program and related mental health and wellbeing services within schools, will this create greater impetus to fast-track this program? You have indicated there is still more to be rolled out, so are you looking to roll it out more quickly and can you just give us a sense of how much is left to roll out?

Dr HOWES: The program has been accelerated in response to two issues. One was the bushfires. The support in outer Gippsland schools was brought forward and then the rollout has been brought forward for all the other schools, so every secondary school will be receiving support at the end of that initial program.

Mr RIORDAN: So when is that initial program—what is left to roll out? I think we only listed—

Dr HOWES: A further 135 campuses across seven remaining areas by term 4, 2021

Mr RIORDAN: So the fact that we have probably gone through the most disrupted educational year in Victorian history has not been able to—what would be stopping the department hitting the ground running immediately for this?

Dr HOWES: We have accelerated, because it was due for 2022. So it has been accelerated, but of course we want to make sure that we have got the workforce that is able to deliver that program, because it is about finding the people who are equipped to deal with the particulars of adolescent mental health. We have been very pleased at the way in which we have been able to support the schools that have come on stream so far. The program has been brought forward, and schools have certainly welcomed that. But we do want to do the program properly, rather than rush it.

Mr RIORDAN: Can you give us an example—I know in rural and regional areas like I represent, getting any form of mental health practitioner for anybody is very, very difficult—of how you are supplying that resource to our rural communities?

Dr HOWES: One of the reasons why we were confident in bringing the program forward was that—your point is one that we had considered, and that had informed the original design of the program—schools have shown they are able to recruit to that, including in the areas that I indicated to you that, as you know, include regional Victoria. So while we do expect that there will continue to be challenges, that has not proved to be insurmountable in recruiting people into those positions, which is something that we have been very pleased about. The school that I cited earlier is one of the regional schools. They have said it has made a very, very substantial difference to the support that they are able to offer both their students and their staff. We do not

pretend that it will be all straightforward, but the indications are that schools have been able to so far successfully recruit to those positions.

The CHAIR: And I would again remind the member it is financial/performance outcomes for 2019–20, not an estimates hearing.

Mr RIORDAN: I appreciate that, Chair. Dr Howes wanted to give us more information, which we will take. Just finally, on page 12 it says that there are briefings for principals in implementing areas delivered. We know from the Victorian Auditor-General's report *Systems and Support for Principal Performance* that a principal is a critical leader in the school. The report also indicates that across Victoria many principals had said they felt they were not receiving enough support. Considering this, how long do the briefings and support run for principals, and can they be improved?

Dr HOWES: One of the things that emerged from the experience of the pandemic was a practice that we intend to keep, which is to do more regular surveys of our principals. As we moved into that experience of remote learning, which was obviously new for everyone, we were surveying our principals often on a weekly basis to get their feedback on a range of things, so we are looking to continue that practice, probably not as intensively. But certainly that proved to be a very productive mechanism for us to be able to identify the areas in which principals were requesting additional support and to mobilise that, so their feedback will inform, as will happen with every program, the way in which we roll that out in the coming months.

Mr RIORDAN: Referring to pages 18 and 90 of the questionnaire, kindergarten viability funding, expenditure as of 30 June 2020 was \$19.1 million to cover lost parent fees. How many kindergartens did this funding support, and how many kindergartens would not have remained viable without this funding?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Riordan. I might ask Deputy Secretary Little if she could speak to that.

Ms LITTLE: Thank you very much for the question. So as was put in the Secretary's presentation, during term 2, during the period under inquiry, that initiative supported 700 sessional kindergarten services to cover the income that would have been lost as a result of lost parent fees. To take one step back, in the context there are about 1100 sessional kindergarten services in Victoria. A significant number of those kindergarten services were excluded from the commonwealth's JobKeeper initiative. What that meant was that they had a situation where many parents were not paying their term 2 fees because perhaps they were considering that they would not attend or perhaps they were experiencing their own financial issues, and some parents were considering disenrolling as a result of those fees. So rather than have those 700 kindergartens that were not eligible for the JobKeeper uplift and hence would have struggled to pay their main cost, which is their wages cost, because they did not have access to the parent fees coming in the door, government made a decision that it would fund that amount up to a certain amount in order to ensure that those sessional kindergartens were able to remain viable and were able to continue to pay their staff. That was very welcomed by the sector at the time, and while it is out of scope of the inquiry, it was also extended for the following two terms.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. And, Chair, what is the time left on that? I think it is—

The CHAIR: Two.

Mr RIORDAN: We have still got time. Sorry, I thought it was gone.

The CHAIR: No, it has not gone—16 seconds.

Ms LITTLE: If I may, sorry, I will just add one more thing quickly which might be useful, which is that in addition to that amount of money we also guaranteed the underlying per capita funding, which is the normal funding. So even if children were not attending for a period or even if their families disenrolled for a period, we guaranteed that underlying amount as well as that top-up.

Mr RIORDAN: And that was all in the \$19.1 million?

Ms LITTLE: That was all included within the bucket of funding that was allocated at that time, yes.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Gary Maas, MP.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you everyone for your appearance before the committee this afternoon. If I could take you to pages 14 and 87 of the questionnaire, I would like some commentary on the funding that was provided to TAFEs, Learn Locals and AMES Australia, and with particular respect to viability during the pandemic. So could the department please explain why this funding was necessary and what it was used for?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Maas. The provider viability package to support TAFEs, Learn Locals and AMES included funding to support those public and community providers: \$192 million to lock in funding at expected pre-COVID-19 levels through business continuity grants and \$68.9 million in crisis support to assist Victoria's public providers with the transition to online and remote learning. I might ask Ms Watts if she could talk to a little more of the detail of what that was able to achieve.

Ms WATTS: The primary reason for the additional funding was to ensure that there was continuity of education, training and support services within and across both the TAFE institutes and equally our very important community providers, our Learn Locals and the adult migrant and education service institute as well. Providers were able, therefore, to focus specifically on teaching and training delivery to continue to teach approximately 330 000 students per year to ensure continuity across that time. In addition to the business continuity outcomes that were achieved through these grants, there were many strong community activities that ensued.

For example, William Angliss college, which I am sure that we are all familiar with, in the city, provided food packages and support to many international education students who had been displaced across this period of time. That is just one example of how a TAFE college was able to continue its social support services but also equally ensure that their hospitality training outcomes were able to continue to support community—and international students in particular.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thank you very much. If I could move to online learning, there was \$1.2 million which was mentioned at page 87 of the questionnaire, which was put into TAFE transitioning to blended online and remote delivery during COVID. What has that money been spent on specifically, and can you report any outcomes from that?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Maas. Thirty-one courses were made available through that funding through the Working for Victoria initiative, and many of these courses included supplementary literacy and numeracy training. As of 11 January this year—or through the 2020 year—there were more than 14 000 course enrolments. That online training included a range of priority areas in that context: healthcare, including disability services, first aid and infection control; community services, through disability services, family violence, safe work practices for direct care et cetera; and customer service, call centre and business support food packaging and delivery—a whole range of priority areas right through to cleaning and sanitation, food preparation, hygienic practices et cetera. Twelve free TAFE courses have also been made available online through Working for Victoria, with eligible students able to begin studying those courses online. Courses are focused in the areas of infrastructure and building, health, community services, business support and education—and again, I might just see if the Deputy Secretary would like to add anything to that.

Ms WATTS: Thank you, Secretary. In addition to the comments that Secretary Atta has made, the impact and the agility with which these courses were developed was only possible due to the injection of the additional funds. My reason for commenting on that is that the standing up of these courses in March and April 2020 was fast and needed to be to ensure that we were well placed in terms of our response in the training system to and with the health crisis. So as Ms Atta has highlighted, many of these online courses were specifically chosen and developed with the emerging health pandemic in mind—so, the focus on healthcare; on, for example, customer service, where, as we will all remember, we were turning towards making sure that transport and logistics were very well serviced, in warehousing, freight, road traffic et cetera—so that there was a very quick turnaround to ensure that our workforces were able to be sufficiently skilled to meet those emerging needs in terms of employment.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. Let us go to the next layer of the onion, if you like. I would like to know how stakeholders responded to that funding that was provided to TAFEs, Learn Locals and AMES.

Ms ATTA: Again, I think Deputy Secretary Watts might be best placed to talk to that.

Ms WATTS: Thank you, Mr Maas. Obviously stakeholders responded very positively to and with the ability to be able to continue supporting their student populations and their communities as well as their local employers, all of course within the COVID-safe health arrangements that we all experienced. The primary output from the particular COVID funding that TAFEs, AMES and some Learn Locals focused on was the ability to have good-practice teaching online, to ensure that there were robust course materials that were able to be streamed but equally as well that there were very strong face-to-face opportunities for students to communicate with their lecturers and teaching staff.

That was an incredibly important outcome from this funding. In addition to that, the funds went to support, particularly in the TAFE sector, community services. And within that—going to Mr Riordan’s questions in terms of mental health support—there were significant funds that were devoted to mental health counselling and equally financial support that were provided through these particular funds.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. I am just interested now in the monitoring of how those funds were disbursed. Page 87 of the questionnaire states that the department is internally monitoring the TAFE and training sector with regard to the COVID-19 response and viability plan. Again probably a question for you, Ms Watts: would you be able to explain how this is monitored and share any deliverables so far?

Ms WATTS: Thank you. The monitoring across these three types of providers is primarily and deeply focused, if I could say, on our TAFE providers being fully owned public providers within the state. What we have put in place to do is monitor, for example, the numbers of teacher and student contacts to ensure that we can determine students’ progress, both online as well as equally through face-to-face teaching, for when students and particularly apprentices have been able to return to campus. In addition to that, we have been making sure that we monitor the dedicated wellbeing officer phone calls to our teaching staff in TAFEs and in our Learn Local sector. We have been looking to see and, most importantly, to track student progression across this period of time, and I am pleased to be able to report to the committee that across the first half of 2020 we have seen what we would state openly to be good retention rates and connectivity between our student population and our TAFEs and our Learn Locals.

Mr MAAS: Thank you very much. I might move to the topic of careers education. Of course our teachers and educators are a key part of how we deliver curriculum in this state. I was just wondering if you could explain and describe why the department is reforming career education in Victorian government schools.

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Maas. It is an incredibly important area for us as we look at our secondary schools in particular and we think about how they can be best fit for purpose for now and the future. And a critical issue is engaging students with purpose around their education and assisting students and their parents, who are significant influences understandably, to engage from an early stage of their secondary schooling in thinking about options and pathways. There was a review back in 2017 that really found that we needed to reinvigorate and reform our approach to careers education, and we have since rolled out a very important initiative to do that. I might ask Dr Howes if he could speak to the detail of that.

Dr HOWES: I can speak to the detail, but just to come back as well and reflect on your question about why, this is one of the things that will be different about education in the 2020s—that the world of work has changed in ways that we could not have imagined 10 years ago. The Foundation for Young Australians put out a report recently that indicated it was the source of that statistic that I think is widely used now, that our young people will have 17 jobs on average over their lifetimes. So that means that some are going to be doing plenty more than 17.

So this world of work is entirely different to the one that those of our generation grew up with. It is not a matter anymore of only being skilled with the foundational skills that will equip you for work, crucial though they are, but there is a whole new set of skills that are needed, that the Foundation for Young Australians described as entrepreneurial skills and that is the capacity to navigate your way through what is colloquially known now as the gig economy. You might have a job for three months or four months, but part of what you need to be doing during that time is not just performing that job very well; it is identifying, ‘What are the capacities that I’m demonstrating? What are the skills that I’m demonstrating? What am I building that I can then build into my portfolio to take to my next job’. So part of negotiating your way through this new world of work is thinking ahead to ‘What do I need to think about next?’.

So we have fundamentally redesigned careers education in schools to reflect that new world of work, and I am happy to take you through some of those initiatives.

Mr MAAS: Yes, sure, that would be great.

Dr HOWES: One of the other notable things that we know now is that our young people start forming their sense of their aspirations early on in secondary school. This was one of the things that came out in the report that I was privileged to chair in 2019 in rural and regional education. Our young people in rural and regional Victoria in particular were forming their sense of what their future was very early in secondary school, so we now have a program called My Career Exploration, which at years 7 and 8 starts helping students understand their interests, strengths, and importantly, aspirations. It starts that dialogue with our students really as soon as they are beginning secondary school.

One of the most successful innovations so far has been the year 9 program, My Career Insights. That includes free access for every single year 9 student in Victorian government schools to the Morrisby career diagnostic tool, which is an online, interactive tool. Again, reports from some of our teachers in rural and regional Victoria described it as a light globe moment. One of the things that this tool does is that students complete a number of questions. It is very thorough. It takes about 1 hour and 40 minutes, but then it will throw back to the students possibilities of careers that they reported they had never thought of and never had the opportunity to consider because of their location, and that is transforming the future orientation for a significant number of our young people. Of course this applies to students in metropolitan Melbourne as much as it does to our rural and regional students, but it has made a really big impact on our rural and regional students. One of the things we are most pleased about, and again perhaps the experience of remote learning contributed to this because it is an online tool, is that over 98 per cent of students completed that. So we are very, very pleased with that uptake, and we are very pleased with the impact that it is having on our young people. We think these are the first steps to the transformation of careers education that the new economy has demanded.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. And in terms of stakeholder engagement, how has the department worked with community organisations, local industry and employers to implement the types of reforms you are speaking of?

Dr HOWES: It is a very good question, because that link between local employers in particular has been critical. We have put a lot of energy and effort into building connections with local employers, because they are critical people, as well as Learn Locals, and of course the universities, the TAFEs—their willingness to talk with students, engage in those roadshows to indicate to students what the range of possibilities are.

I can give you an example, again from regional Victoria. In Wimmera South West we held a school industry round table in June 2020, and indicated that one of the shortages industry there was facing was in the engineering sector. So we have developed a program there of industry immersion and that industry immersion is one of the things that again the Foundation for Young Australians identified as critical to helping accelerate the movement of young people into the employment market. At the moment it is around half of under 25s that are not in full-time employment, and the Foundation for Young Australians has identified two critical components of career education that enable the acceleration of that, looking at young people who do make that transition quicker.

One was entrepreneurship education, and one was programs of immersion, where students are really able to experience both the realities but also the possibilities of the workplace, especially when their skills are going to be in demand, as was the case with engineering in Wimmera South West. That is a terrific example of local employers coming together, saying, ‘We’re not able to attract the students we need’, the schools being able to work together and, with the students often not thinking that was a possible career path, that opening up. So stakeholder engagement has been a real win-win—employers want it, it is fantastic for our students and it is working very well.

Mr MAAS: Excellent. Great timing too. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Perfect timing. Thank you, Mr Maas. I will pass the call to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Secretary and team, for appearing today. In the presentation you talked about the number of mental health professionals—so 121 mental health professionals—that went to secondary schools. I think something we have heard a bit about was potential mental health effects

on children of learning from home. Was there any research conducted early on into what these sorts of long-term harms to both mental health and educational outcomes might be?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Limbrick. Research I think is still emerging on that question. It has obviously been a significant area of focus, certainly across the school community worldwide and for children and young people. I am not aware of any research that is completed at this point, but Dr Howes may be.

Dr HOWES: No, I am not aware of research that has been completed yet either. I know there is clearly a lot of interest internationally as other jurisdictions move into longer periods of remote learning than we had in Victoria. But no, we have not had completed comprehensive research on that as yet.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. So would it be correct to say that when this home learning started we did not really know what the effects would be? We sort of knew that obviously there would be some problems—it is intuitive—but we did not really have anything quantifiable to know what those harms might be.

Ms ATTA: As the onset of the pandemic emerged and we could see what was happening in other parts of the world, in Asia and in Europe in particular at the time, and looking at scenarios that might come about where onsite schooling was not able to be continued for any period, I guess there were two key risks that we were alert to from very early in the piece. This really was across early childhood and schools in particular, around that risk to the continuity of learning and the risk to health and wellbeing. So as we worked through how we might operationalise any decisions that were taken of that nature, we were very focused from the word go really on how we could mitigate those risks, which we certainly perceived to be very real. Dr Howes might add to that, but also in relation to early childhood, Deputy Secretary Little might want to add to that.

Dr HOWES: Mr Limbrick, I think we were very aware—acutely aware—in part because mental health issues and young people are not something that obviously was new with the pandemic. But we were acutely aware of the possible increased effect, and that was one of the reasons, when we were asked for advice, as the Secretary says, about how to operationalise the health directives, that we were very careful about ensuring that vulnerable children were able to access onsite supervision. So there were a number of—

Mr LIMBRICK: Sorry to interrupt. Can I just clarify what you are saying there. So you were given instructions to operationalise the health directives, as you say, and then you were looking at what the effects of those might be. Is that correct?

Dr HOWES: I am saying when we were operationalising the directives that schools would as far as possible move to remote and flexible learning, one of the categories that we maintained was the category of vulnerable children, in addition to the children of essential workers, and the definition of vulnerable children for schools were some formal categories of children in out-of-home care and so on, but the category was left open where the school had identified the child as vulnerable, and that was to ensure that children whose mental health might be particularly vulnerable because of their own individual circumstances or their social circumstances would be able to continue to attend on site. So that was one of the settings that was put in place when we moved to remote and flexible learning.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. These concerns that you might have had with vulnerable children or people with difficulties, is that something that all the health department requested advice on from the education department before the directions were put in place?

Ms ATTA: Mr Limbrick, there was a close working relationship between DHHS at the time, their public health teams and our officers at the department to talk through a range of issues. It was a fairly fast-moving set of scenarios at the time, and I think throughout all of their work we were confident that they were conscious of the balance of risks as they formulated their advice to government. We were able to talk with them around considerations for children and students in early childhood and school education, but our focus in terms of formal advice into the process, if you like, was very much focused on how to operationalise policy directives as they were formed—how would we operationalise those for school settings, for instance, in a way that could best mitigate those two key risks that I talked about earlier. Those actions, the number of forms, including the increased investment for mental health and student engagement that flowed throughout the year, for instance, in terms of the information and support that was made available to parents and families at home; the on-site supervision of vulnerable children; the outreaching too and the checking in certainly with all children but with the teachers and school leaders being alert to those most in need; and the transformation of our one-on-one

health and wellbeing supports into telephone support or videoconferencing wherever we could. So that was really the focus of those efforts, but we were able to work closely with DHHS on the way through all of that.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. I suppose what I am getting at is when the health department and the public health team came up with these directions, so prior to the directions actually being issued, one of the things that we know from other inquiries is that they need to determine the proportionality of their response, so weighing up the possible benefits versus the possible harms. I suppose what I am asking is what sort of evidence of potential harms or thoughts on potential harms were fed into that process so that the health department could balance or come up with that proportionality? Is that something that your department provides them with evidence of, or they get it some other way?

Ms ATTA: I want to be careful about not speaking directly for them, but it was clear that they were very alive to any evidence that was available from the context in other countries where the pandemic was more advanced, and as I said, we worked closely with them to talk with them about potential impacts and risks and how they might be mitigated if the directions took a particular approach. So public health formed their own advice, obviously, for government, but there was a close working relationship and the opportunity to be talking with them from an educational perspective.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. And with regard to some of the outcomes, when I was going through the most recent budget and the performance measures, one thing that struck me was that it looks like the targets for 2020–21 are still pretty good. We are expecting, I think, things to be back to normal and outcomes to be fairly normal by the look of it. Is this a realistic thing, do we think, or are we going to see some sort of deterioration? I know some things were cancelled for a certain reason, like NAPLAN, for example, but are we not expecting any deterioration in educational outcomes?

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Limbrick. I would just remind you this is not an estimates hearing but financial and performance outcomes for 2019–20.

Mr LIMBRICK: Of course, but these considerations must have happened at the start of the school closures, which was in the period that we are looking at.

Ms ATTA: I mean, I would expect, Mr Limbrick, that we will be very interested to see a number of impacts that might flow through, but the measures are the same. Mr Bates might correct me here, but I think there was a whole-of-government direction to retain the same measures—not to adjust measures but to roll them over—for the 2020–21 year because of the level of uncertainty about what we were looking at. For the November budget and now setting up for the May budget, that truncated period of time, I think all performance measures have essentially been rolled over.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. I do not have any further questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Limbrick, and I will pass the call to Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, everybody. Could I just go back briefly to the kindergarten viability funding that Mr Riordan was talking about earlier. So, as we said, there was \$19.1 million of viability funding. Was it continued beyond 30 June?

Ms ATTA: I will just ask Ms Little if she could confirm that.

Ms LITTLE: I am happy to speak to this, and I am very pleased you have asked the question, because it gives me an opportunity to clarify the last part of the question from Mr Riordan.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sure.

Ms LITTLE: Mr Riordan, I think you said to me at the end, 'Was that all included in the \$19 million?', and I had just been talking about the underlying normal funding that we provide. That underlying normal per capita funding is not included in the \$19 million. That is additional. The \$19 million was focused on the issues that arose specifically from COVID. So just to clarify that point.

So apologies, Mr O'Brien. In respect to your question, outside the scope of this but in term 3 and in term 4 the supports that I was flagging earlier were continued for sessional kindergartens, for both their four-year-old funded kindergarten programs and for their three-year-old unfunded kindergarten programs. There were

differences in the regime there, but it was essentially supports to deal with the fact that parents were often in a position where they were not attending, perhaps were not paying fees, and this was causing financial problems for a variety of kinders.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So is that what is now the free kinder program, same thing, or different?

Ms LITTLE: There are differences in the design between the two, but fundamentally, from a parent's point of view rather than from the service's point of view, what it does is take the burden off them around paying fees. One of the key differences which I will highlight—without incurring the wrath of the Chair about scope—is that the regime for free kinder in 2021 includes kindergarten programs in long day care settings. So last year long day care settings were almost all eligible for the JobKeeper payments I was mentioning before. JobKeeper, as you may know, is shortly to expire, and as part of the government's announcement about how free kinder would work in 2021, a decision was made that in addition to offering support to sessional kindergarten services and their parents there would be a similar offer made to kindergarten programs in long day care settings.

I will just note that in Victoria about 30 per cent of children get their kindergarten in long day care settings—their funded kindergarten.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thirty per cent.

Ms LITTLE: Yes, roughly.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Righto. It was reported that about 9 per cent of sessional kinders would be financially worse off if they signed up for free kinder. Do you know what that actually is in actual numbers of kinders?

Ms LITTLE: The positions of individual kindergartens are diverse and varied, so I cannot comment on whether or not they would be worse off or better off. What I can do is give you the data about kindergartens that have chosen to take up the free kinder offer—and in the long day care.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Do you have that with you?

Ms LITTLE: Yes, I absolutely have that with me.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That was what I was going to ask, if you could. I think you said there were 1100 sessional kinders in Victoria?

Ms LITTLE: Noting that in 2021 the scheme is not just applicable to sessional kindergartens, it is applicable to—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right, it includes the long day care.

Ms LITTLE: There are about 2500 kindergarten providers in Victoria when you take into account the sessionals and the long day care providers. In terms of the latest statistics that we have—noting that the free kinder offer is still open, and so there are probably a couple of services that will still sign up—I am pleased to say that 96.1 per cent of kindergarten-offering services have signed up to the free kinder offer, and of the sessional community services, which are I think the ones that you were originally asking about, 98.9 per cent of those have signed up. So only 1.1 per cent, which equates to 13 sessional kindergarten services, have not chosen at this stage—noting that the door is still open—to sign up. Of the services who have not yet signed up—so that 3.9 per cent overall—some of those are long day care services who are still mulling over whether they want to do that. Some of them are high-fee private school services, and some of them are for-profit sessional kindergartens—and then there are those 13 community services.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Just to clarify: the 96.1 that have signed up, that is 96.1 per cent of 2500?

Ms LITTLE: That is right. And then of the sessional community kindergartens, which I think was your interest initially, the sign-up rate is actually much higher—it is 98.9 per cent, as of now, if that is helpful.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, that is.

Ms LITTLE: And of those kinders who have not signed up, they are obviously much higher-fee services, so everywhere from double the median kinder fee all the way up—which is around \$1800; there is a range slightly

below and above that. So they are services that in the way that they have set themselves up with their communities have made a decision that they are going to have fees that are on average about double that, all the way up to services that are charging above \$7000. So they are—

Mr D O'BRIEN: They are the ones that would be worse off if they signed up, presumably.

Ms LITTLE: The 13 services who have not signed up to date? Yes, they have made that decision. Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Okay. Can I move on to higher education, Secretary? Page 84 of the questionnaire indicates a \$308 million Treasurer's advance in 2019–20 that went towards TAFE's training sector COVID-19 response and viability plan, and on page 91 there is a further \$68.9 million of government funding to replace lost revenue. I just want to get a sense of how that money was used by TAFEs. Was it mandated to them, was it given to them for a particular purpose and was it focused on either increasing enrolments or covering for lost enrolments?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. I will ask the Deputy Secretary if she could respond.

Ms WATTS: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. The funds that were allocated to the TAFE system in particular for this were to enable there to be the continuation of training and teaching services to ensure that our TAFE teaching workforce, as well as all of the support workforces—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, could you maybe just bring the microphone a bit closer to you? It is a long way down here—I will not ask you to pass the salt and pepper, but it is a bit hard to hear from a distance.

Ms WATTS: Sorry.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry. So it was funding particularly for teachers?

Ms WATTS: Yes, to continue the teaching operations to ensure that there was sufficient asset maintenance across the period of both terms 1 and 2 but then also deeply into terms 3 and 4 of last year. So it really was business continuity funding.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But in the context of teachers, as you say, was it because of a drop in enrolments due to COVID? Was that the issue?

Ms WATTS: As I have indicated in a response to Mr Maas's question, it was around the conversion of and ability to deliver greater student supports through online delivery and in different flexible modes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Again, was that left up to TAFEs to decide how they wanted to spend the money?

Ms WATTS: Yes. It was.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Largely, within the confines of what you have said?

Ms ATTA: Yes. As you know, as TAFE institutes are autonomous institutions with independent boards, it was genuinely left up to each TAFE to make those decisions, as it was with Learn Locals.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. I mentioned the table on page 84, and the questionnaire says \$308.7 million, but it lists a couple of dot points actually, including kindergarten viability. Are you able to tell me how much of that was for TAFE specifically? I am not sure whether that relates to the \$68.9 million that I referred to on page 91, whether that is the figure.

Ms ATTA: Mr O'Brien, there was a \$260.8 million provider viability package to the TAFE network, AMES and Learn Locals.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, 260?

Ms ATTA: 260.8.

Mr D O'BRIEN: 0.8, right. So that is of that 300. This is obviously slightly separate to the COVID issue, but annual reports for 2019 show nine out of 12 TAFEs operating in the red. Some of them have actually reported that as being as a result of free TAFE. Are you able to explain the reason for this and why TAFEs have

been operating in the red since free TAFE was introduced, noting that I think there was only one with a deficit the year before?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. Yes. The 2019 TAFE annual reports, there are really two key stories there. We had a strong year in terms of performance for our TAFE sector, but for a number of the TAFEs their financial results declined. We can see that when we look at the net result from transactions, when we look at that in aggregate across the TAFE network. Before going to your question it is important to note that there is a range of things that we look at when we are working closely with TAFEs around financial health, if you like, and that includes positive cash flow, which the sector in aggregate was certainly generating, and the balance sheet and the strong cash position across the TAFE network. The Auditor-General of course has signed off on those accounts.

There is a range of factors involved. They vary a little bit across each of the TAFEs, but to go to the three key drivers, in our analysis there is some contribution to those results from uneven capital funding year-on-year. Capital grants necessarily vary, which can cause some fluctuation. There is the impact of some accounting changes, such as changes in the accounting treatment of leases held by TAFEs, which have increased depreciation costs. Then there is—and I think many of the TAFEs have noted—increased employee costs, increased costs of staffing, particularly moving into the current year of the enterprise bargaining agreement.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So that is a direct result of the EBA.

Ms ATTA: Well, the EBA when it was instituted had a range of salary impacts, wage impacts, across the TAFE network. Now, we would hope they are planned for and able to be met as part of the business planning across all TAFE institutes, but the point you have made about free TAFE—and the Deputy Secretary might say a little more about this—there has been higher throughput of training through our TAFEs. There has been a strong performance in that sense but of course additional staffing to support that, and one of the things their reports are noting is that that step-up in employee expenses is one of the contributing factors to the results.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So to that end, Secretary, TAFE Gippsland reported a \$7.9 million increase in staff in 2019 partly due to increased staffing to meet the demand for free TAFE but actually faced a reduction of \$1.1 million in government contributions, and I note in the *Herald Sun* on 5 July last year Meredith Peace of the union said that the funding model is broken. Is it the case that the government is not funding TAFEs adequately for the free TAFE program?

Ms ATTA: So there has been an enormous amount of work over the last few years to try and settle the funding and policy settings for TAFEs, and if we go back almost a decade beyond that it has been a bit of a rollercoaster ride for this sector, resulting in extremely high costs and significant concerns around quality a few years ago in terms of some of the training that was being provided. So there has been an enormous amount of work to move to a higher-quality rather than just a higher-quantity training system, and—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am sorry, Secretary, I am starting to run out of time. Yes, I have heard this from—

Ms ATTA: Sorry, Mr O'Brien. There is more work to do. I certainly would not characterise the funding model as broken, but there is more work to do to examine the funding model and the policy settings. The minister commissioned reviews in 2019 that can now be considered that will contribute to further thinking in that space.

Mr D O'BRIEN: To that end can I ask: are you satisfied that all TAFEs are currently financially viable and that they are being adequately compensated, if you like, for the free TAFE policy?

Ms ATTA: I am certainly satisfied that all TAFEs are operating appropriately. The 2020 outcomes are still being verified and validated through the Auditor-General. They will be tabled I think in April once that process is completed—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can you share with me whether there are still nine out of 12, more or less, that are in deficit?

Ms ATTA: I simply do not have the final outcomes, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I move onto the outcomes themselves. We have had a year of free TAFE now in the period we are talking about. Do you have completion rates for students undertaking free TAFE, and could I get those by TAFE and by course across the state?

Ms ATTA: Yes, let me just check with the Deputy Secretary what reporting is available.

Ms WATTS: Thank you, Secretary Atta. Mr O'Brien, could I also go back just for one moment to talk about the TAFE financials, just to—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, Ms Watts, I am running out of time.

Ms WATTS: Apologies.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am happy to take some further advice on notice if you would like to provide it.

Ms WATTS: Thank you, I will.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Likewise, I am not sure if you will have this data on completion rates by TAFE and by course. If you are able to provide that on notice if you do not have it.

Ms WATTS: We will provide it on notice.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That would be great. What other assessments are being done of free TAFE when it comes to metrics like course completion, like jobs attained, like skills attained? Is there a review process underway?

Ms WATTS: We have already seen across 2018 and into 2019 and the first half of 2020 higher retention rates for students within free TAFE courses, which is a leading metric in terms of performance.

Mr D O'BRIEN: When you say higher retention, as opposed to prior or as opposed to non-free TAFE?

Ms WATTS: As opposed to both prior and in comparison with other TAFE courses. That is a very lead indicator. As we know, there are many free TAFE courses that have a two-year duration, so in terms of being able to provide the committee and yourself with information it will be patchy in terms of the duration of the courses. Many students have not yet completed, even though they commenced across that period.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, because they will be in a two- or three-year course or whatever. Could I—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Your time has expired. I will pass the call to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you again for appearing before us this afternoon. I appreciate your time. I would like to explore some of the issues that Mr Maas was unpacking earlier, and I would like to go a little bit further perhaps, in the area of—you will have to cast your mind back—careers education. I know we have traversed a lot of different areas across the education system in the last 20 minutes or 30 minutes or so. In the questionnaire the department demonstrated that there is some better data to understand student outcomes and the impact of the reforms to careers education. I know that there has been discussion about the evaluation in the questionnaire at page 123—about its ability to create better baseline data. I am interested in whether you could perhaps expand on the rationale behind collecting and developing data regarding careers education in Victorian government schools, and I look to you, Secretary, to see where you would like to pass this after you have perhaps made some comments.

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Ms Richards. I think I will go back to Dr Howes, who could speak to this.

Dr HOWES: Thanks, Secretary. And thanks, Ms Richards, for your question. Evaluations are a really increasingly important part of initiatives like this one that we are rolling out. And thank you for the question, because you were directing the question to the very intent of that project. We have three aims around the reforms that we are seeking to introduce in those initiatives. The first is to increase the capability and capacity of Victorian government schools to deliver career education. And both those words are important—the capability and the capacity. Have we got sufficient people in place, and have they got the right skills and knowledge to navigate what is, as I outlined to Mr Maas, that increasingly complex and very new environment? Given that context, our expectation would be that the answer to that is initially going to be no. No, we do not

have the people with the capability at the moment—that is hence the very reason for this program—but we need the baseline to know how many people are delivering those services and what are their current levels of capability in order that we can determine the most efficient and effective way of rapidly identifying and then meeting any gaps through the new initiative.

The second very important one—and again this is one of the things that will be different about education over the next decade compared to the previous one—is the critical importance of students' participation in, engagement with and completion of school education. We know from the research that every year that we are able to keep a student in school until completion reduces the chance of poor life outcomes for them. But in our view, given the complexity of the world that our students are entering, completion is necessary but not sufficient, and so what we want to look at is to what extent, as well as completing, are they actively participating in and engaged in their education, which includes that consideration of, as they move through school, 'What are the subjects that I want to choose that will enable me to pursue the kind of career or the variety of careers that I'm interested in?'. So we need the baseline around not only to what extent are students completing their secondary education, because we have got that available, but to what extent are they actively participating in and engaged in their education?

The third is the product of both of those, which is: to what extent do students have the capacity to make the career decisions that align with their interests and abilities and that meet the needs of employers. That is the point of providing career practitioners and equipping them with the skills and knowledge they will need. That is the point of designing engaging programs that enable students to more fully participate in the full range of school activities—it is so that they are making more informed decisions. So we are looking at: 'What is the basis for student decision-making now?' and 'Have we been able to enhance and increase that?'. They are the things that the evaluation will be exploring.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you for that additional information. I suppose the other pillar of this is the schools themselves. I am interested in understanding how the department is supporting the schools in the delivery of this transforming careers education initiative that you have outlined on page 123.

Dr HOWES: Thanks again. The other point I should make goes to your question of how we are supporting them. We are also looking at how we are able to provide better labour market data to schools, because that is obviously, again, a rapidly changing environment and it is complex to keep on top of. That is one of the things that we are doing to support schools—how do we provide more real-time information about emerging employment areas of demand and opportunities? But of course that is one part of a much more complex picture, and as I said, one of the key features of this reform is building the skills and the knowledge base of our career practitioners. We are providing 400 places for career practitioners to complete the new graduate certificate in career education, so that will substantially enhance—well, we hope the evaluation shows that it will substantially enhance—the capacity and the capability of our career practitioners in schools. We have also developed teaching and learning resources, conducting webinars and face-to-face presentations to support schools to understand the new initiatives that are rolling out—as I mentioned, those ones for years 7 and 8 and the ones for years 9 and 10.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority has developed the Victorian career education framework and resources to indicate where career education fits as part of the Victorian curriculum, and of course there are many, many opportunities through teaching many aspects of the curriculum where you are able to link with the applications of that particular set of knowledge that students are learning to a whole range of workplace-based applications. We have engaged the Career Education Association of Victoria to deliver the career advisory service My Career Insights, and the Career Education Association now has a staff of 10 to support delivery of that program. That includes eight regional coordinators who are working directly with schools, and then there are around 80 career consultants to develop the unpacking sessions directly with students. We have used the regionally based pathways workforce to support those programs that I outlined earlier, the career portfolio and those round tables that we have been holding with industry. So we have got a pretty widespread and comprehensive set of programs in place to support our schools.

Ms RICHARDS: Before I move on to another topic I will say that perhaps your enthusiasm seems to have really spread into my electorate, because I can see the way that the careers educators' eyes light up—they are sparkling a little bit more. So that is really terrific, to see that important work being done. That was a moment of parochialism—sorry, Chair.

I would like to move to supporting low-income families, and again this is such an important area—that has been demonstrated in the questionnaire. There has been some significant funding that has been put into addressing the impact of disadvantage on educational outcomes. I am interested in understanding how the funding for these initiatives that are outlined on page 13, including of course camps, sport and excursion funds—and how it has been spent—and if you have got any details on how these initiatives have supported Victorian families with school costs.

Ms ATTA: Thanks for the question. There are a range of important programs, as you have indicated, that have been built up over recent years and are really now a critical part of our suite of programs to ensure that we are focused on that equity objective in our school system as well as excellence. But I will invite Deputy Secretary Bates to perhaps detail some of those programs and the funding provided through them.

Mr BATES: Thanks, Secretary. Camps, sports and excursions is a key one. As the members of the committee might know, that is to support students to, as the name would suggest, go on camps, sports and excursions. It is \$125 for each primary school student and \$225 for a secondary school student. In the 2020 school year we provided that support to just over 223 500 students—so about 128 000 primary and about 96 000 secondary or, if we cut it the other way, about 171 000 in government schools and about 52 000 in non-government schools—as we said, normally to support camps, sports and excursions.

During 2019–20 as COVID hit we also gave schools a one-off approval to use the funding for different things, to address different pressures, particularly because most of the camps and excursions were shut down. So there was a one-off approval that with the consent of families or carers it could be used to help with books, other equipment, materials for music, art technology. In the early stages while we were still doing the device rollout we also said it could be used to help with internet access for families who needed those sorts of things. So that spend in 2019–20 was about \$36 million or \$37 million all up.

In addition to that, we also did some special support for bushfire-affected communities, so there was a further bushfire camps, sports and excursions program. The amounts were a bit higher, about \$375 per student, which went to just over 9500 students in the main fire-impacted LGAs, so Alpine, East Gippsland and Towong. Then we had a whole lot of other things across the state, where we had families of CFA and other volunteers who had been off to the fires, so from Ararat, Ballarat, Glenelg, Golden Plains. Lots of places were getting those supports. So that is probably the most direct one we do.

From the 2019–20 budget update we also have recommenced the glasses in schools program. There is a rolling program of optometrists going out to schools and visiting and giving children access to eye tests. During the last school year—again, slowed down a bit because of the pandemic—31 schools were visited, a bit over 2000 students were screened and 422 students were provided with glasses under the program, so an important support there.

Another important one we do is funding to State Schools Relief for the affordable uniforms program. Again, in the 2019–20 financial year, assistance was provided to just over 70 500 students, and around 220 000 items of uniform and clothing were provided to families to help defray those costs.

The other big one in terms of the numbers, which is probably bigger than all those put together, Ms Richards, is the equity funding that we put into schools. Not everyone knows, and I sort of talk about this at dinner parties and barbecues, that we do an individual calculation for every child of the 640 000 at government schools. Every child has an individual calculation every year. There is lots of academic research that shows that it is the combination of parental educational attainment and family employment income which is a pretty strong predictor of how kids will go at school. So if your parents do not have high educational attainment and do not have high income—we have got a sort of grid—and if you are in what I will call the bottom left corner, then we send extra funding to support those kids each year. If I just pull that up, we spent in the last school year about \$381 million on equity funding going into supporting those students at an average rate—it varies a little bit depending on where they are on the matrix—of about \$2240 per child in the government system. That is, as I said, that socio-economic stuff. And then we have another line of equity funding, which depends on a child's NAPLAN results in year 5. If they are in the lower quartile, we follow them all through secondary school. Last year about 11 100 students got about \$19.2 million of further support. If you put it all together, it is sort of in the range of \$400 million of targeted support to low-income families and low-income students.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you so much. That is really important evidence that you are providing, and fascinating as well. I see that there has been funding allocated in the 2019–20 budget for the school breakfast expansion program on page 21 of budget paper 3 of 2019–20. I am interested in finding out quite specifically what that money has been spent on, and if you have any outcomes? Just at a pure data level how many breakfasts and lunches have been provided to students in the 2019–20 financial year, if you have that available?

Ms ATTA: Ms Richards, perhaps I could speak to that. For the breakfast clubs the 2019–20 budget provided \$58 million to expand the reach and scope of the school breakfast clubs to reach 1000 primary, secondary, P–12 and specialist schools to provide free school lunches and school holiday supplies to students requiring additional support and meal preparation and nutrition classes for parents and children at 100 disadvantaged schools. I might note that since the program was first established back in 2016, I think, over 12 million meals have been delivered to those children who needed it most—going up to 30 June 2020. By the end of term 2, 2020, 751 schools were participating in school breakfast clubs, and we were on track to meet that target of 1000 schools participating by the end of 2020.

It is worth noting that, as schools transitioned to remote learning during term 2, 2020, the breakfast clubs were able to continue to deliver supplies to students who really relied on the program—to ensure they could still access that service but also that connection, I guess, as schools transitioned to remote learning. This was done both through smaller breakfast clubs being run on school sites for those vulnerable cohorts and also a combination of school staff, and sometimes using school bus services, delivering supplies to student homes, and also parents and carers collecting supplies from the school.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you. I think that is just about my time there, so thanks very much.

The CHAIR: It is very close. I think it might be an appropriate time to adjourn for a break, so we might take a short 15-minute break and resume at 3.20 pm. Thank you.

I declare this hearing open again, and the call is with Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Secretary, and your team for appearing before us today. Can I just get some clarification about the school funding agreement with the federal government? That was reached in 2019, did that then commence from the 2019–20 financial period?

Ms ATTA: That is correct, and the 10-year transition period is out until 2028.

Mr HIBBINS: What is the reasoning behind the 2028 time frame? Because my understanding from looking at the various agreements across the country that puts Victoria, I think, as the second-last state to reach the 75 per cent mark. What is the reasoning behind that time line?

Ms ATTA: I am trying to remember, Mr Hibbins. I am not sure if Mr Bates can help me with that, the reason for a 10-year time line?

Mr BATES: I think that was pretty much the standard. It was that sort of period that the commonwealth was offering to all states, and we were the last state to sign. I think it is pretty much as simple as that. We held out to the very end, so the clock started from when we signed, which I think was around June 2019.

Ms ATTA: Yes. That is right. There is some different timing, but all bilateral agreements are entered into for a five-year period initially but with a view to that 10-year transition period and the commitment that is required to get there.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. Now, within the agreements themselves it allows for 4 per cent of the expenditure to be claimed on non-school-based expenditure. For the 2019–20 year what was the actual amount spent on the non-school-based expenditure, and did you go up to the 4 per cent?

Ms ATTA: I do not know if Mr Bates has that detail. There was about \$1.45 billion in school expenditure in the 2019–20 year, the overwhelming majority of which contributed to the state's targets with this agreement.

Mr BATES: Thanks, Secretary. That was the additional expenditure, so the 4 per cent is of the total spend. I do not have the non-school percentage at hand, but we could provide that on notice. It is things like the cost of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. There are a number of support services that are crucial to

the operation of the system that are not actually delivered from schools, so we can pull together some of the stuff that we have included in our return to the commonwealth for that year.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. That would be great. Thank you. I would like to ask some questions now about school cleaning contracts. If you can provide this information on notice, if need be, but just the list of current school cleaning contracts—I understand with the changes you have got about eight contracts—and the total value of those contracts?

Ms ATTA: Yes, Mr Hibbins. That is for metropolitan Melbourne, but I might ask Mr Keating if he can confirm that.

Mr KEATING: The way cleaning contracting is working at the moment is there are eight metropolitan areas for which five companies hold the contracts. In regional Victoria there are still contracts for each individual school, so in aggregate there would be a lot more. I think you are focusing on metropolitan Melbourne?

Mr HIBBINS: Yes.

Mr KEATING: We can provide an estimate of the total value. I have got to check whether there are commercial-in-confidence aspects, because each contract was competitively won and would have been awarded on a competitive basis. So we could give an estimate in aggregate, potentially we could not give you the individual contract values because it would be commercially sensitive.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. But then aggregate across the state?

Mr KEATING: I suspect that would be fine.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. Do you keep records in terms of just how many employees are actually employed cleaning in Victorian schools and then the status of their employment?

Mr KEATING: Yes, absolutely. So one of the key changes that was implemented for the metropolitan Melbourne cleaning reforms was to ensure that we had absolute information on every single employee of every single company to ensure they were getting fair pay, conditions—a very structured process to ensure every time they logged on to work it was recorded and we knew how many hours they were doing. So we have very clear information about the pay, award and conditions of each employee, making sure that we audit to make sure that they are paid in full every time.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. In terms of then measuring against making sure they are getting paid properly and all their industrial relations, was that performing in 2019–20? Were there instances where they did not meet the required standards?

Mr KEATING: No. I would say that the fundament of that reform was to ensure that we totally re-engineered the whole model to ensure that we could control it. When we had a model where schools were individually managing contracts, it was very, very difficult to ensure that. We audit every month, every quarter, every year to ensure that we have that in place. So over the duration of those contracts we are absolutely certain that we have not had breaches, and there have not been any raised to date.

Mr HIBBINS: How do you measure satisfaction among schools in terms of cleaning performance?

Mr KEATING: We do two things. So one, we run a hotline. Particularly in the early stages of the reform when schools were calling a lot, we would characterise every single call—about whether it was for information or concern or advice. Separate to that we also then have I think it is a monthly or it might be a bimonthly survey to get feedback on performance. In the early days particularly, given it was such a big change to the way schools operated, we were primarily using the actual queries from schools to really guide the levels of interest and concern.

Mr HIBBINS: If there is a survey, would you be able to provide that survey information to the committee?

Mr KEATING: Yes, we would be able to provide information coming out of the survey. Again, the only thing that I would probably just caution in advance is we do get survey information for individual providers.

Probably commercially I may not be able to provide the individual provider's performance, but in aggregate, probably.

Mr HIBBINS: Overall? Yes, that would be great. Just finally, it sort of does beg the question if you have got so much oversight, why you continued with the contract cleaning approach rather than the approach that, say, ACT have taken of insourcing the cleaners to have them actually as government employees?

Mr KEATING: We looked at a range of options. I mean, really the driving force with this was to make sure we could have certainty that proper pay and conditions were managed. We looked at options: the previous model where it was directly contracted by schools, where you may have put in more audit controls and a range of things. We really took the view there that with a huge number of schools, big to small, for the capacity for them to manage it in the way that we would want, probably it would be challenging. We looked at options of direct employment. That creates a whole other range of challenges. We are not a specialist cleaning company. The skills and the systems and the processes really are held quite tightly and appropriately by private sector businesses, and so the decision was that we were confident that we could achieve the certainty of pay and conditions while still contracting that, as long as it was done in a particular way.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. I would like to ask now just a quick one. The minister made a statement the other day in regard to when schools had to go back into learning from home, in that the dongles provided to students over the lockdown period were switched back on. Can I infer from that that the internet dongles that were provided to students to learn from home were then switched off once learning from home ceased?

Mr KEATING: Yes, Mr Hibbins. We switched them off at 31 December last year on the basis that schools were all back and they were not required. As you said, when the short lockdown was announced a couple of weeks ago, within 48 hours—so announced on the Friday afternoon—we had 14 000 of them reactivated by the Monday morning. We had done analytics on the devices that we had given out, and we actually found that about 10 000 of them were never really used. A lot of the time, I think as I might have said at earlier hearings, we were giving out iPads with 4G chips in them which were never activated. We knew which of the devices had been used last year, so we were able to reactivate all of those before the Monday morning when school was meant to resume during that short lockdown.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. All right. Thank you. I just want to ask some questions in regard to additional school costs. You referred to some various programs that the Victorian government are funding to address school costs incurred, but does the department actually keep data in terms of just what are the additional costs for public school students and families and in terms of also the overall funding received from schools for additional costs? I mean, I think there was an Auditor-General's report in 2015 that put the figure at around the \$300 million mark. Does the department actually keep those figures itself, and does it have them for the 2019–20 year?

Mr BATES: Yes, we do. We collect the information from all schools, in terms of what they have asked parents to contribute, so we know both what they have requested and what they have received. So we know that in terms of things like book lists and other payments that they put out, and we also separately collect other revenue that they get at the school level. A lot of schools contract out the operation of their tuckshop—tuckshops, hall rentals and basketball clubs, a lot of those things—so we also collect information on all of that revenue.

Mr HIBBINS: And are you able to provide that figure to the committee?

Mr BATES: Yes, I think we can on notice.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. Just on that matter as well, do you also aggregate the cost to individual families and parents in terms of what is the average additional cost for students at public schools?

Mr BATES: We do not do it at the family or student level. We collect that data at an aggregate level for each school, so we can see totals by school but not what is going down into individual children or families.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. Just finally—I think we have discussed this before at previous hearings—in terms of new schools and how you provide advice to the government in terms of 20-year and five-year priorities and the government makes its budget allocation, are you able to give the committee information in terms of the 2019–20 year on new schools funded, schools that were part of that five-year or new school

pipeline that were funded, schools that were not in the new school pipeline that were funded and schools in the pipeline that were not funded? Is that information that you are able to provide the committee?

Ms ATTA: I will just ask Mr Keating to confirm if we have all of that detail.

Mr KEATING: I will just make sure I understand your question properly. We do analysis every year—we work across local government areas, with our colleagues in DELWP in terms of their demographic projections—to provide advice about what the relative needs of different communities are, and in what sequence. That forms advice, and then through the budget deliberation processes there are decisions made in aggregate about what the holistic priorities are. The decisions about the aggregate budget and the components of that budget are part of the government's decision-making around allocations.

Mr HIBBINS: My understanding is often that, potentially, the government does have the ability to select schools that are not on that list or to not fund schools that are on that list. Are you actually able to provide that information to the committee?

Mr KEATING: My expectation is: probably that will be cabinet-in-confidence, in terms of the advice that goes into the budget process. What I can say categorically though is that the number of schools that we are building and the locations and the timing are the ones that are needed. We have enormous confidence in the analytics we do, and the actual investment that is provided to them meets the needs as and when they are required.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, great. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins, and I will pass the call to—I am sorry, bear with me—Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you all for being here today. I was wanting to zone in on NAPLAN results. I should refer you to pages 127–137 in the questionnaire, just so we have got the right area. Given that NAPLAN results are designed to reflect a point in time in terms of information regarding students, could you please briefly explain the longer term trends that sit behind the 2019 results? I think that would be quite interesting.

Ms ATTA: Yes, thanks, Ms Taylor. NAPLAN is a really important measure for all school jurisdictions. As you say, it is a point-in-time measure, so along with that we always do want to have a look at the underlying longer term trends and indeed, where we can, at how we are performing relative to other jurisdictions, both nationally and internationally.

There are a range of different measures of school performance that go to all of those things. But on NAPLAN I might ask Dr Howes if he could answer your question, going to trends from the recent NAPLAN results.

Dr HOWES: Thank you, Secretary, and thank you for your question, Ms Taylor. I would refer you to the presentation that the Secretary gave at the start, which included information about the trendline on one of the most important measures of NAPLAN, which is the proportion of students in the top three bands. NAPLAN results go over six bands, and the top three indicate those students who are achieving into the area of excellence as well as the level that will well equip them to move on to the next stage. So it is a very important measure for that. In 2019, which of course are the most recent results—since 2015 we have improved in the two key domains of reading and numeracy, which are generally taken as the proxies for literacy and numeracy; we have improved at every year level. We went from 76.2 per cent—so this is the proportion of the students who are in the top three bands—in 2015 to 78.5 per cent for year 3; for year 5, 62.2 to 69.7; for year 7, 59.5 to 62; for year 9, 50.2 to 52.3. So for reading, over that period of four years the trendline was up.

It is right that your question highlights access to trendlines rather than simple year-on-year comparisons, because data, as you would know, can fluctuate year to year, but the real question is: are we improving over time? What was very pleasing was that similar results were achieved for numeracy: so, year 3, from 66.4 to 71.8; year 5, 61.2 to 64; year 7, 56.4 to 64.2; and year 9, 54 to 55.4. So those trends across those key domains of literacy and numeracy, measuring our progress over four years, are pleasing. We are not by any means being complacent, but it is pleasing to see that progress.

Ms TAYLOR: Okay, good. Thank you. And just further on this topic, I note in the questionnaire, pages 129 to 131, there is a comment that reads:

NAPLAN results, as with any assessment measure, are subject to a small margin of error reflected in a confidence interval of ± 3.21 percentage points ...

Can you explain what this confidence interval is and what it really means for the results?

Dr HOWES: Confidence intervals are an important concept not only in education measurement but more broadly across the community in the use of statistics and in issues like NAPLAN. But the community is probably most familiar with the concept through the political polls that they see prior to each election, when there is two-party preferred with a margin of error of 1.2 or two point whatever per cent. The same applies to our measurement of NAPLAN results, and the confidence intervals indicate the margin of error that might apply around the precise level of achievement that is reported. It is very important when we look at the NAPLAN results—as it is when there is any other public reporting of a statistical measure—to look at what is the reported confidence interval.

Ms TAYLOR: Okay, thank you. I would like to also understand what the Department of Education and Training is doing to improve student outcomes in these areas as well.

Dr HOWES: Thank you for the question. Together with supporting our students' health and wellbeing, we have no greater focus than ensuring that every student has the literacy and the numeracy skills that are the foundational set of knowledge and skills that will equip them to be active and participatory citizens. Our focus on this is clear and unrelenting. I will go through a couple of the key initiatives that we have in place, one of which is supporting our school leadership teams, because we know that school leadership is critical to lifting the performance of the school as a whole and particularly on literacy and numeracy outcomes. So the 2019–20 state budget included \$41.5 million over five years to deliver a range of supports to support school leaders.

Beneath that, we have got a very strong program of professional learning communities which are designed to strengthen the capacity of our classroom teachers to be able to assess student work and diagnose student weakness and then determine the next stage required for progress. But we are also providing very direct support for lifting literacy and numeracy, and that includes literacy and numeracy toolkits, which provide our teachers with evidence-based, research-informed teaching and learning resources that ensure the quality of the instruction that is provided to our young people is of the highest possible standard. So we have got a wide range of initiatives that range from strengthening our school leadership, through to supporting our teachers to develop better collaborative teaching practices through to the very resources that they use in the classroom.

Ms TAYLOR: Okay. Thank you. I am particularly interested in Aboriginal student performance in NAPLAN, and I believe it is outlined on page 129 of the questionnaire. What trends are you tending to see with NAPLAN targets for Aboriginal students?

Dr HOWES: Again, thank you for the question. Our focus on supporting Aboriginal students through the overall *Marrung* strategy is again a very important priority for this year. So I am very pleased to be able to report that Aboriginal student achievement in NAPLAN has improved since 2015, and in 2019 six of the eight BP3 NAPLAN targets were met. The results in our primary schools are particularly pleasing, because that provides a stronger foundation then for students as they progress through schooling. Results in primary schools had achievement increasing in all year levels of reading and numeracy again between 2015 and 2019. For example, in year 3 the results have improved by 4.6 percentage points, which is a large leap, to 51.9 per cent in reading; and by more than 6 percentage points in numeracy to 44.2 per cent. Year 5 reading is again a stand-out, with an improvement of 9 percentage points; and year 5 numeracy also improved, to 33.2 per cent, an increase of 3.5 percentage points. So that again is pleasing. Again, we are not being complacent, but we feel that the foundations are there for further improvement.

Pleasingly, we have also seen improvements for our young Koori children, in kindergarten participation in particular. This is a fairly extraordinary piece of data, I think: in 2019, 99.9 per cent or 1570 Koori children attended four-year-old kinder. We all know that strong foundations in early childhood are one of the protective mechanisms for students as they move through schooling, so that is very, very pleasing.

And it is also pleasing to see what is happening at the other end of school, which is where we are beginning to see a lift in the attainment of Koori learners of completing year 12 or the equivalent. In 2019, 688 Koori students completed their secondary school certificates with a VCE, VCAL or a VET in schools certificate, and that is a significant lift from 560 students in 2015.

So again we are pleased that the efforts of those students themselves, their teachers and their communities are bearing fruit, but again we are not regarding that as in any way meaning we should slow down our efforts.

Ms TAYLOR: No. So I was just wondering how else student outcomes are measured. Are there other mechanisms that you use to measure student outcomes?

Dr HOWES: There are, and it takes us to an interesting place, because one of the commentaries around performance is around Australian performance on a range of international tests, and what that can do is disguise what happens when you disaggregate the performance of Australia and break it down state by state. One of the international measures that we have is the international assessment called PISA. If we examine the most recent results, Victoria was actually the lead state in Australia other than the ACT, and we understand the ACT's socio-economic circumstances. Victoria led Australia's performance on that. PISA assesses, in this case, literacy, 15-year-olds, and the percentage of students at both the low and the high proficiency levels.

We had 14 per cent of our students in that high-performance category. That was equal to or ahead of students in other states and put us on a level with Hong Kong, Finland and Canada. Places like Hong Kong are often regarded as some of the highest performing jurisdictions in the world, so that is an interesting point of comparison that does add a layer of nuance to the public commentary that is often made about Australian performance. Then of course we have the assessment resources that are available through the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, where teachers are increasingly able to access the digital assessment library and teachers are making their often daily assessments and observations of student learning progress as they go about their day-to-day teaching and learning.

Ms TAYLOR: Okay, thank you. Now, I just want to move on to mental health practitioners, noting that there has already been considerable discussion on this today, so I will not overlap what has been discussed. But I guess what I might direct you to is perhaps how findings so far in this program have informed any decisions, because I am not sure that that was discussed so heavily, in particular looking at page 116, which goes into evaluating the mental health practitioners initiative. But I do recall you saying that there is more to come, and we can only obviously operate within a fairly tight time period.

Dr HOWES: That is right. That evaluation, as I indicated, will provide four a year 2021 and 2022. But it was the power in part of the evidence that was being provided from the schools that were involved in the first rollout that gave us the confidence. There was the impetus around the demand that was generated by the impact of the bushfires and then of course by the pandemic, but feedback from those who were involved in the first rollout was certainly very positive. I think I mentioned earlier this afternoon the comment from one of our regional principals, who particularly pointed out what an impact it had made in terms of the proactive assistance that was being provided as well as the reactive counselling.

The answer I provided to Mr Riordan focused on things like professional learning for teachers. That does then flow through of course to the capacity of those teachers to support students who may be experiencing mental health distress. It is important to point out we are not expecting all of our teachers to suddenly become mental health practitioners, but we do want to skill up our teachers to be able to observe those warning signs and then know the steps that can be taken to refer them on. Especially as students have emerged out of remote and flexible learning and come back to school, I think principals who have a mental health practitioner are feeling very reassured by the presence of that expert who is able to play a role in making sure every classroom teacher is able to observe those indicators of where a student might be experiencing distress.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes, fair enough too. I am not sure; I am just trying to remember when the evaluation is concluded, so I am talking in a bit of a hypothetical space I guess, what the department is planning to do with the final data and findings.

Dr HOWES: As I think I mentioned in response to an earlier question, these evaluations are central to our work now, so we will obviously look at those findings on the way through. It is important to note that we have not commissioned an evaluation that will simply provide a final report. There will be these iterative reports that come through. That will enable us to make any adjustments to the program that the evaluation might throw up. It would be surprising, given this is new territory to have mental health practitioners installed as ongoing members of a school community, if it did not throw up some indications of where things could be sharpened, and we will take that on. Then obviously we will be very, very interested in the final evaluation to determine

the impact that that program has had, and that will no doubt inform future decisions about the future of that program.

Ms TAYLOR: Sure. I note that earlier you mentioned that one in three students were accessing doctors in secondary schools and that was related to mental health. How is the department of education supporting schools to remove the stigma that may have existed in the past to talk about mental health? I guess that has probably been quite a barrier historically.

Dr HOWES: Thank you for that question. I think that is one of the significant impacts that the employment of people called mental health practitioners in secondary schools will have and our mental health program of supporting primary schools, because it is naming mental health as something that is visible, something that should be discussed, and something where that prompts a student to think both, 'This is not unusual' and 'This can be addressed'. That then opens up the capacity to really meet that student's needs, so we think the very naming of this initiative plays a really important part in making mental health more visible and therefore reducing the stigma that, as you rightly point out, has been associated with mental health. I do not think that is by any means, as we would know, unique to schools. That is a challenge facing the community as a whole.

Ms TAYLOR: Absolutely. Absolutely. It would be great if it can be fostered in that positive way in schools for sure. I now want to move along to upgrades in schools. In section B of the questionnaire, pages 120 to 124, you provide a significant list of school capital investments that were delivered in the 2019–20 financial year. Can you please advise the committee how many school capital projects were completed during the 2019–20 financial year?

Mr KEATING: Thank you for the question. Sorry, Jenny.

Ms ATTA: You go, Mr Keating.

Mr KEATING: Throughout the 2019–20 financial year we spent \$1.3 billion delivering projects in that year. We had 25 new schools that were funded in that budget. We also had 59 upgrades and 44 schools starting planning in that budget, so throughout the financial year we had 123 school upgrade projects that were actually completed.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Sorry to cut you off, Mr Keating. The member's time has expired, and I will pass the call to Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Secretary, and officials for appearing today. I would just like to start off with the 2019–20 financial report at page 163. There is, it looks like, \$1.13 billion additional money drawn from the Treasurer's advance exclusive of COVID for essential maintenance and compliance. Can you provide a breakdown of this line by line and what it was allocated to?

Ms ATTA: I am not sure if we have the line-by-line breakdown with us, but Mr Keating might be able to comment.

Mr KEATING: We could definitely provide the breakdown. I do not have that with me, but it covered a range of things from maintenance to compliance to safety switches—a whole range of programs improving the safety and condition. But certainly we can provide the breakdown subsequently.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you very much. You referred to compliance. What sort of compliance? Is this something that was not budgeted for, is it that the budget had blown? Why did you need such an expansive amount taken from the Treasurer's advance for making sure our schools are compliant?

Mr KEATING: As the employers and managers of sites responsible for maintenance and essential safety measures, we did a lot of work with schools in the preceding years to understand—a little bit like cleaning—how able they were to manage those risks on their own behalf. So we did an assessment of what it would cost to ensure that we could guarantee that compliance was fully achieved and that schools were not being required to move money out of educational programs to cross-subsidise the maintenance or compliance. The types of things are in any building having exit lighting, having things tagged and tested, all those basic routine things that you are required to do, ensuring they were done appropriately.

Ms VALLENCE: I 100 per cent agree, and if they are having kids into state schools, I know how important that is. I am just intrigued to understand why some of those—as you say, your words—basic safety measures, why we would need to draw down so expansively from the advance for that. Are you able to tell the committee that now or, if not, take that on notice?

Mr KEATING: The decision around the advance is something that I probably cannot comment on in terms of the Treasurer's decision-making there, but certainly we had provided advice about the opportunity to provide significant additional investment through advice of, 'Here's what you might need to spend'.

Ms VALLENCE: So that was not budgeted for originally? You had not sought a budget allocation for basic safety standards in schools?

Mr KEATING: Every year through the budget process we provide advice around what the funding standards might be, what the risks in the portfolio might be, and it is effectively that information that was drawn upon to make decisions about that investment.

Mr BATES: Ms Vallence, can I just check the reference, because I think Mr Keating might be confusing a couple of different—

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, sure. It is the financial report 2019–20, page 163. So it is the Treasurer's advance, exclusive of activities attributable to COVID—and I appreciate getting the breakdown on notice. But it is just really around seeing that that is for essential maintenance and compliance. What briefings had you provided to the minister? Could you perhaps provide that to the committee? And costings: was that not fully taken up in terms of the budget allocation?

Mr BATES: So that is the \$112.6 million amount.

Ms VALLENCE: Pardon?

Mr BATES: On page—sorry.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, so it is the top line item.

Mr BATES: Yes, so \$112.6 million. I think that is the maintenance blitz. Sorry, I thought you had read out a much larger number.

Ms VALLENCE: If you could provide that breakdown, and also what is the nature of the works engaged. And if there is any briefing that you had provided in terms of those basic compliance and safety measures that were needed in schools—whoever is appropriate to take that—could you provide that to the committee? Is it a matter that that information and advice that you had put forward to the minister was not then included within the 2019–20 budget?

Mr BATES: So I think as Mr Keating said—

Ms VALLENCE: To rephrase my question: is it that you had done your audit, you sought to conduct that basic audit and you blew the budget, or you needed to do more than was provided for within the budget? I think that is really what I am getting at.

Mr BATES: So that additional funding became available after we signed the bilateral agreement with the commonwealth. That is why it has come as a Treasurer's advance and was not in the original budget, because we did not sign the agreement until June. That \$112 million was announced in the budget update, so it is not a question of we suddenly discovered lots of broken doors and windows; the additional funding became available from the commonwealth agreement.

Ms VALLENCE: So that is commonwealth funding?

Mr BATES: Well, it is a combination of state and commonwealth funding. There is a matching requirement. So it is mainly state; it is a 75-25 or—

Ms VALLENCE: Great. So on that then, to add to the breakdown of where all of that money was allocated, if I could have a breakdown of what was commonwealth and state, that would be great. Is that okay?

Mr BATES: I think we can—

Mr KEATING: We can absolutely provide a breakdown of what the money was for in terms of programs, the intent of the programs and what it delivered in terms of where the money came from—

Mr BATES: It all goes into the one appropriation pot, so at the school project level we do not distinguish between commonwealth or state.

Ms VALLENCE: That is fine. Now, we have heard a little bit about this already, but as part of the COVID response we know that there has been a rollout of tutors across government and non-government schools in need to help students to catch up, I guess. How was the school-based need assessed?

Ms ATTA: Yes, this was an initiative in late 2020 and announced just in advance of the 2020–21 budget—

Ms RICHARDS: On a point of order, Chair, I just want to check that that is in scope with these outcomes or if it is the year after.

The CHAIR: Could you repeat the question, please?

Ms VALLENCE: Yes. I am just wanting to know: for the children that were identified as needing additional catch-up tutoring, how was that need assessed?

The CHAIR: In relation to the financial year 2019–20?

Ms VALLENCE: Well, okay. In the period, because of course schools went into remote learning, and I think it was well ventilated that some students were needing assistance through that time. What sorts of assessments were made? Was that criteria developed and assessments made up to 30 June? And if you could make that available to the committee.

Ms ATTA: Yes. Really the development of this particular program was following that period, so up until 30 June, the first half of the 2020 year, we were really focused on that feedback from schools in terms of what they were seeing with their students and whether—

Ms VALLENCE: So had you developed any of that criteria or assessment to 30 June?

Ms ATTA: Not specifically for this program. It was in the second half of the 2020 year, particularly following that second period of remote and flexible learning, when our minds really started to turn to the potential impacts of some discontinuity obviously of teaching and learning and how we could mitigate that risk.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. I mean, really I wanted to know about the assessment, and it was not done to 30 June. Now, in 2019, well before COVID came into play, we understand there were students who were struggling and challenged. I am referring you to the report in 2019 on government services from the Productivity Commission that stated that students were underperforming in science and maths as compared to international students. Can you explain to the committee why?

Ms ATTA: Sorry, Ms Vallence, could you just give that reference again?

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, it is the *Report on Government Services* from the Productivity Commission back in 2019.

Ms ATTA: So the recently released report that included commentary on the 2019 year? Was it the recent ROGS report or a specific Productivity Commission inquiry report?

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, the *Report on Government Services*—a third time—from the Productivity Commission.

The CHAIR: In relation to 2019–20?

Ms VALLENCE: No, 2019.

Ms ATTA: The 2019 year. And with apologies, the particular question was?

Ms VALLENCE: Well, that students were underperforming—this is obviously prior to COVID kicking in. Students were underperforming in science and maths particularly as compared to international students. Can you explain to the committee why? If you need to take that on notice, that will be fine.

Ms ATTA: I will ask Dr Howes if he can provide any detail on that.

Dr HOWES: Thank you, Secretary. And thank you for the question. I note that there was a range of data provided in the ROGS report, including that Victoria had the highest attendance rate in government schools across years 1 to 10 at 91.5 per cent, above the national average of 90.7—

Ms VALLENCE: I appreciate that, Dr Howes. I appreciate that, but my question is not about attendance. I did not ask about attendance. I specifically asked about underperformance in maths and science. And I noticed—just picking up from what Ms Taylor was asking and your commentary there around the program for international student assessment that you mentioned earlier—I think you were describing how Victorian students compare. How did Victorian students compare in the last assessment? Wasn't it the worst ever?

Dr HOWES: No, it was not the worst ever.

Ms VALLENCE: It wasn't?

Dr HOWES: No, not if you look at NAPLAN data. It was not the worst.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. So perhaps to help the committee as we undertake an assessment of the evidence in these hearings, could you provide—and I am happy for you to take it on notice if you do not have it in front of you—an assessment of that performance against NAPLAN and against international standards?

Ms ATTA: We can follow that up, Ms Vallence. I did want to make the point that it is not accurate in any way to say it was the state's worst performance in 2019, and there are specific measures in the *Report on Government Services* that show us improving on different measures of learning outcomes.

Ms VALLENCE: If that is the case, and hopefully it is, if we can have that provided to the committee specifically in relation to the PISA data—

Ms ATTA: In relation to PISA data, which—

Ms VALLENCE: Not NAPLAN, PISA. Can we have that provided to the committee?

Ms ATTA: We certainly will provide the analysis of our PISA results. I am not sure if that was referenced in the ROGS report, but in any case we can certainly follow that up and provide you with that.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. We know that there is obviously a lot of weight put on hiring retired teachers to help in the effort to bring our kids back up to scratch.

Given that we have just discussed that—and we look forward to receiving the data provided to the committee on notice—and given that there have already been falling standards prior to entering the COVID period and remote learning, based on the Productivity Commission's report, do you think that hiring retired teachers is going to actually meet that challenge, that it will actually be sufficient to respond to uplifting the needs of students and getting them back on track?

Ms ATTA: Through the tutor learning initiative?

Ms VALLENCE: Yes.

Ms ATTA: The small group tutoring—

Ms RICHARDS: Sorry, on a point of order, Chair, I just think, returning to the previous request, that we stick to the 2019–20 financial and performance outcomes.

Ms VALLENCE: I am so excited about your government's plans, Member for Cranbourne, to bring children like my own back up to scratch, but obviously you want to not talk about it, so we will move on.

The CHAIR: I am pleased to hear your excitement, Ms Vallence, but this hearing is to discuss the financial and performance outcomes for 2019–20. So if you could keep your questions, as we have discussed on numerous occasions—

Ms VALLENCE: Well, I was giving the government an opportunity to talk about their plans and aspirations to—I will move on.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, if you could keep your questions to the relevant inquiry, that would be good.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Page 145 of your questionnaire, Secretary, ‘Transitioning students to remote learning’, and it has got there that around 61 000 laptops and devices were distributed to government schools. I understand—I think Mr Bates might have informed this committee at a prior time, but tell me if this number is still accurate—around 47 000 school-owned laptops or devices were provided to students. Have all those 47 000 school-owned laptops now been given permanently to students?

Ms ATTA: I will ask Mr Bates to continue on this one.

Mr BATES: The short answer is yes, Ms Vallence. Just on the different numbers in the questionnaire, we have recorded the number of devices that were given out to 30 June, which is the period of the questionnaire. So we gave out further devices in terms 3 and 4, which is why the numbers in this questionnaire will be different to what we talked about in the COVID inquiry.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, that is fine. How many devices have been given permanently to students? Is 47 the right number?

Mr BATES: So it is 47 000 school-owned devices—I think it was about 46 000—and there were a further around 24 000, 25 000 department-owned devices, which takes us to the total of around 71 000 devices, and all of those devices have been offered to the students to retain.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. All of them.

Mr BATES: Yes.

Ms VALLENCE: And were any of those devices on leases with a third party?

Mr BATES: Yes, a number of them were.

Ms VALLENCE: So can you take me through what happened there? Did the government pay out that lease, or were the families required to pay out that lease?

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, can I just remind you again that I suggest you are now referring to a period outside the 2019–20 financial and performance outcomes?

Ms VALLENCE: Is that correct? I think that I am referring to the questionnaire—the 61 000 laptops that were distributed.

The CHAIR: So your question is limited to that period.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, that is correct. As I said—and the time wasting is kicking in—on page 145 of your questionnaire you specifically refer to the devices given out to students. So I want to know—obviously you have said that some of them have been retained now—did the government pay for those leases or were the families required to?

Mr BATES: It is a transaction that has happened over the last couple of months, so it is a 2020–21 transaction. In the questionnaire they were on loan, and then in this current financial year was when the government made the decision to transfer the ownership. So it is a 2020–21 question. I am happy just to say, in terms of leases, parents or carers are not required to pay out the leases. The department is working with schools on a case-by-case basis to help resolve the lease issue, so for a number of schools we have made offers to either work with their lease company or to offer substitute devices. Our preference is that the leased devices are probably better to stay with the school, trying to get the government’s policy direction of letting children have a device.

Ms VALLENCE: So am I right in saying that the students have retained the devices but do not have ownership yet?

Mr BATES: On the leased ones they do not have ownership yet.

Ms VALLENCE: How many?

Mr BATES: I do not have numbers with me today.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, I think we have all been extremely lenient, but you are continuing down a line that is well and truly outside the period that we are talking about for this inquiry.

Ms VALLENCE: No, it is not.

The CHAIR: We are talking about data available from 2020–21, and it is reasonable to expect that those appearing have come prepared to answer questions relevant to the financial and performance outcomes of 2019–20 and not 2020–21.

Ms VALLENCE: And that is precisely why, because it was in the 2019–20 period that these were given out without being funded.

The CHAIR: I am sorry, Ms Vallence. Your time has expired, and I will pass the call to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Chair. I would like to return you to some discussion about the upgrades to the schools and capital investment and particularly refer you in the questionnaire to page 120 to 124. Previously I think Ms Taylor took you through some discussions about new capital projects. I am interested in pursuing that area a little bit further. Are you able to inform the committee on the total estimated investment of school upgrade projects that were delivered in the 2019–20 year, and I am further interested in understanding about architect appointments as well, how many architects were appointed for school upgrade projects? So there is a twofold question.

Mr KEATING: Sure. Thank you for the question. Throughout that financial year there was \$1.3 billion of capital expended. In addition to that there was about \$300 million of operating money expended to deliver school infrastructure. During that year—so not necessarily for those projects, because these would have been projects that were being awarded at the time, as opposed to being delivered at the time—there were 56 architects that would have been appointed. Keep in mind that a number of architects would work across a number of projects, and there were 22 builders that were also appointed. Now, particularly with the builders that number looks relatively low. Increasingly we are bundling contracts, so a builder might take on responsibility for a number of schools in one contract, but, yes, essentially that was the appointments throughout that year.

Ms RICHARDS: I am interested in understanding a little bit more about how schools can be involved in the planning of their capital works projects. It is something that is so incredibly important to school communities, the excitement that comes with that, so if you could perhaps give me a little bit more detail from the 2019–20 financial year and the response to the questionnaire about what methods you use to engage communities.

Mr KEATING: Absolutely, and thank you for the question. Victoria does take a different approach to this than other states. We really draw the school council and the school community into the decision-making. So what we do at the outset of every project is we spend about 12 weeks with that community doing consultation, engaging with school councils to make sure that their local strategic objectives—so what are they trying to achieve educationally, what are the aspirations of the school—feed into the brief that we put to an architect. So we will spend the first 12 weeks really not even talking about buildings. It is very much about educational outcomes, the needs of the workforce, the needs of the community. We get that documented, then we move into the phase of engaging an architect, where they take the vision of the school and the aspiration of the school and turn that into a specification, work with the school and progressively refine that within the budget to get to a point where they have got the outcomes that will best meet their community's needs. Then we go out to tender and deliver it. So depending on the size of the project, that will take about 64 to 68 weeks to go from the point of first speaking to the school, all the way through to a sod being turned for that project.

Ms RICHARDS: How many weeks did you say?

Mr KEATING: About 68 weeks.

Ms RICHARDS: Gosh. How does that compare to previous years? Over time has that changed or has that been a pretty static time frame?

Mr KEATING: Look, it has changed substantially. It has improved progressively each year, but if I go back to, say, four to five years ago, we were probably sitting at closer to a year and a half or a year and three quarters from that time. And most of the time that has been gained is not in that upfront planning with schools. We really treat that as sacrosanct, making sure they have got the time to engage appropriately. It has really been in the speed of my organisation, the Victorian School Building Authority, documenting processes, ensuring we cut out all the fat in the time line to make sure we get it to market as quickly as possible.

Ms RICHARDS: You have just mentioned the VSBA, so are you able to provide the committee with detail about how the VSBA delivers all government school works projects funded in the 2019–20 state budget?

Mr KEATING: Again the model that we use is different to other states. We still rely primarily on each project being designed bespoke for that school. So an architect will work directly with that school community to design something that is best for them. The model is that we set up, we engage with the school, we get the specifications, we engage the architect, we get to a point where there is a documented project. The school building authority and the school will then govern the project through to completion. So every month, as the project progresses, we will assess risks, cost, time—you know, provide communication, engagement, support so the school can engage with their community. Because often for communities this is an exciting time; they want to understand what is going on. We provide a lot of information in terms of photos and designs and opportunities for communities to come together to explore that. Moving all the way through to the point where the project is completed, we will throughout the project do independent assessments of quality and scope and get to the point at the end where it is signed off and handed over to the school. That is essentially our process.

Ms RICHARDS: And in that 2019–20 period that we are exploring today, I am interested in understanding how you work with contractors to make sure that they are delivered on time, with that great aspiration that we have now to get them completed.

Mr KEATING: Whilst it is a very soft and gentle approach on the schools, we are pretty firm with our contractors. We have a very strong team with a very extensive building and commercial background. You know, the first thing is having very strong contracts in place with very significant penalties for lateness. So we have very clear and unambiguous standards that say, 'This is being delivered on time'. High quality and to the scope that we agreed is important to the state, so that is very clear in the contractual framework.

We then, with every project, require that they report monthly—so that is on progress in terms of deliverables, risks, cost et cetera. Our team will then independently verify and check all of the reporting to ensure that it is tracking as we expected. At times things will happen. You might find that there is in the substructure of the building something that was unknown, and then you need to find more money. So we have a structured process to manage the contingency or risks as they emerge to ensure that the project is delivered in full. I suppose one of our key accountabilities, then, is reporting to Treasury and to government, to make sure that there is that monthly acquittal of how we are progressing in terms of all of our deliverables.

Ms RICHARDS: Mr Keating, I think I might move on, and I am not sure where. Secretary, if you would like to respond to an area of interest I have around the professional learning communities. I refer you to page 11 of the questionnaire, and I know you have reported that by 2024 all Victorian government schools will be participating in the Victorian professional learning community initiative. I am interested in understanding a little bit more, but also how it benefits schools.

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Ms Richards. The professional learning communities is a really important part of the suite of programs that go to building and driving improvements across our schools and for our students. It is an initiative where schools that are participating benefit from access to a high-quality evidence-based professional learning community program tailored to the needs and contexts of those teachers and students. The program provides every teacher and student with the skills and knowledge to improve their teaching and to do so, obviously, to improve outcomes for students. I might ask Dr Howes to say a little bit more about this program.

Dr HOWES: Thanks, Secretary, and thanks, Ms Richards. Professional learning communities are strongly advocated for by learning experts like Professor John Hattie, and again they mark a really significant shift in the practice of teaching as we move into the 2020s, compared to 10 or more years ago when teaching was primarily an individual activity conducted by an individual in the classroom. Now we see it increasingly moving to a collaborative model but also what the University of Melbourne describes as a clinical model, where individual teachers work in the way that medical practitioners work: as part of a team, being able to diagnose, in this case, learning challenges or the opportunities for extension, and exchanging knowledge, understanding and experience of what has worked in the past and what is most likely to be effective with student A in any particular year level.

The mechanism to do that is the professional learning community structure. So we are rolling this out across our schools. Eight days of professional learning is fully funded for the schools to attend, because this is not something that people can just walk into. Professional learning is required, and funding is provided to release teachers to do that. There are then ongoing opportunities to engage in the coaching and mentoring and networks that are provided through 34 regionally based professional learning community experts. We are pleased at the impact that we are starting to see in some of our schools as a result of the rollout of the PLCs.

Ms RICHARDS: I would actually like to explore that a little bit further. You were saying, 'We've already started to roll this out', and the questionnaire notes that there have been 208 schools that have been new to the Victorian Professional Learning Communities initiative and that that strengthened their ability to use student learning data to work through ongoing cycles of inquiry. Can you explain a little bit about how the Professional Learning Communities have used this data to improve student outcomes? It sounds like it has got a good, strong, scientific backbone to this.

Dr HOWES: Thank you for the question, because we are very interested in the impact that the Professional Learning Communities are having on student outcomes. We had the discussion earlier about NAPLAN results, so we are looking at the impact that it is having. The analysis that we have done on the results from 2017 to 2019—so using those two years we were then able to look at students who were in year 3 and who then progressed to year 5—is showing evidence that the students who have been in the first intake of PLCs are seeing greater growths. Some examples: Boneo Primary School have completed their training, and their 2019 year 5 NAPLAN writing results showed a 57 per cent greater improvement than the average non-PLC school; Swan Reach Primary School, their 2019 year 5 NAPLAN results suggested that students have an average gain that was 29 per cent or almost 30 per cent higher than the average for a non-PLC school; and Seaford Primary, a similar gain in NAPLAN writing—well, when I say 'similar', it was actually 59 per cent extra compared to those who had not been part of the PLC program. So it is an evidence-based program that in those schools that I have cited is giving us very encouraging signs that it is working.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you again for the insight. I am interested in understanding how the Professional Learning Communities have operated during the period of remote and flexible learning, as applies to the period that we are exploring today.

Dr HOWES: One of the learnings out of the remote and flexible period was not only how digital devices and connectivity can be used to support student learning, it was how—I think I mentioned before the surveys—we found other ways of being able to connect with principals and for teachers to collaborate as well. So teachers in the PLC schools reported that overall they were able to move pretty seamlessly to holding their PLC meetings in the way that many of us did, through Webex and the digital platforms. It was possible to transpose those meetings in part because one of the key characteristics of the PLCs is that the teachers are looking at actual artefacts of student work—so it might be a maths exercise that shows the student thinking, it might be the report on an experiment, it might be a bit of creative writing and artwork—whereas in what we kind of describe as the old days of 'face to face', people would sit at a table, look at that, say 'Here was the task, here's what a range of students have done. This was a really strong response, this was an average response and this was a weaker one', and do the diagnosis of that. Because student work was being submitted online through students doing it directly online, through students scanning their work and submitting that to their teachers, those artefacts then became available for teachers to use in a remote mode in the same way that they would have face to face. So those PLCs were able to maintain their momentum by and large through the period of remote and flexible learning.

Ms RICHARDS: I love the use of ‘artefacts’; I will add that to my vernacular at some point. Can you explain how they work at a school level? Do all teachers in a school participate? I am interested in understanding how participation is determined.

Dr HOWES: Well, participation will depend on school-by-school implementation. The benefit, as I said, of the PLC model is that it is bringing what we would describe as a more clinical approach in which teachers no longer rely simply on their own experience and their own expertise but are able to draw on that of others. So the way it works is that teachers agree on a task—that will be a lesson that will be taught, a period of lessons that will be taught and the kind of student work that will be produced that they can then look at. When that is done, that work is brought back and it is shared, and teachers talk about what worked well and what did not work for particular students, because of course that will differ.

And then teachers are able to share what they have tried in the past, what their experience would suggest is likely to be the most effective intervention, and that cycle then repeats. People have a go at that, come back and discuss: did that help that student crack that understanding of fractions or get that concept, a particular science concept around gravity or a particular historical understanding? What was effective and what was not? There is an inquiry cycle of identifying the intervention, testing the intervention, analysing the results and making decisions about future interventions for each student on that basis.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you again. I am not sure how much time I have got, Chair.

The CHAIR: Two-and-a-half minutes.

Ms RICHARDS: Okay, so I have got an opportunity to explore just a slightly different topic. I am interested in turning to the children’s facilities capital program that was mentioned on page 15. Could you explain—and I am looking to you, Secretary, to direct me to wherever or for you to take it up—how the children’s facilities capital program works in relation to the building of early childhood infrastructure and how it builds on previous infrastructure investments in early childhood.

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Ms Richards. I might go back to Mr Keating.

Mr KEATING: Thank you for the question. The 2019–20 financial year was really a transitional period in terms of investment in early childhood infrastructure. There has always been, or for a long period there has been, a children’s capital program. The 2019–20 year was really the first time when the three-year-old kinder rollout started. There were three major components of investment. There was the children’s facilities capital program, and that works by service providers, through a structured grant program, putting a bid into the department to say, ‘We’d like to deliver this’, and then there is complementary funding provided by the department to invest in that project. There was \$33.6 million in that financial year, and that was all fully awarded during that financial year. In addition to that, there was also significant additional capital funding and operating funding, which was over a longer period, to then start supporting the three-year-old kinder rollout.

Ms RICHARDS: Maybe in the short amount of time left, Mr Keating, you could provide some information on the Building Blocks program and how it supports the expansion of infrastructure needed to accommodate the rollout of three-year-old kinder. I know it was an initiative that was first expanded on at page 6 of the questionnaire.

Mr KEATING: We talked earlier about the children’s facilities capital grants program, which was in place for a while. The Building Blocks program was the new program, which was really framed much more fundamentally around the three-year-old kinder rollout. That was released towards the end of the financial year; I think it might have been May of 2020. That really then starts to set up across a range of streams—increasing capacity, increasing quality and increasing accessibility for students across a range of streams—so whether it be councils or service providers, they can apply through one integrated process for all the different streams of investment.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Keating. That concludes the time we have available for consideration with your department today. We thank you very much for taking the time to appear before our committee. The committee will follow up on any questions which we have taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee’s request.

We thank all secretaries and officers who have given evidence today and throughout these hearings. We also thank Hansard and the secretariat as well as the catering, security and cleaning staff who have assisted us. The committee has concluded its consideration in public hearings of the financial and performance outcomes, and we declare this hearing adjourned. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.