

TRANSCRIPT

PANDEMIC DECLARATION ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Review of Pandemic Orders

Melbourne—Tuesday, 29 March 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Suzanna Sheed (Chair)

Mr Jeff Bourman (Deputy Chair)

Mr Josh Bull

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr Enver Erdogan

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Vicki Ward

Mr Kim Wells

WITNESSES

Mr Robert Boucher, Principal, Swifts Creek P-12 School; and

Ms Pitsa Binnion, Principal, McKinnon Secondary College.

The CHAIR: Welcome. It is terrific to have you both here to talk to us about the quarantine, isolation and testing order, which is predominantly what we are looking into at the moment.

I will just read out some housekeeping for you. All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected in the same way.

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Welcome. I thought it would be good if we had a 5-minute presentation from each of you in relation to the issues that we are here to discuss today. Would you like to start with McKinnon Secondary College? Thank you.

Ms BINNION: Sure. Do you want me to talk a little bit about McKinnon Secondary or—

The CHAIR: I think so, and then just broadly some of the challenges. Then we will come to questioning you more specifically on what we are looking for.

Ms BINNION: I am the principal of McKinnon. It is a school of 2500 students and this year two sites, so a bit more complex than last year. It is a school with 200 staff, both teaching and admin staff. It is in the south-east suburbs of Melbourne and is a highly sought-after school.

It has been probably one of the most challenging times being a leader of a school that I have ever faced and that many of my colleagues have faced. I am also the deputy of the Victorian association of secondary school principals, so I sort of have that context, and also I am the president of Southern VASSP, which brings together principals and assistant principals from about 40 schools, so I have got different hats. But as a leader of the school community, I think we have seen the best and the worst of situations come our way.

The CHAIR: Look, I will launch straight into questions. From the perspective of the quarantine isolation and testing orders, one of the things that we are keen to look at as a committee is around issues of privacy and collection of information. I understand that as an educational institution you have had a role in terms of collecting information, it being passed onto the department and the like, and I am just wondering if you can tell us what procedures the school adopts in relation to the collection of and the passing on and how you implement the necessary privacy around that in that process.

Ms BINNION: Of people's information? It is very, very strictly governed. We have very strict rules around the collection of information from people and the use of that information and when it is appropriate for it to be passed on. In terms of whether people were through this process vaccinated, information around their personal needs and wants was really carefully managed. We have a really strict policy around the protection of their information when they sign up to come to the school, and also the government department requires us to make sure that we have processes in place to protect people's personal information.

The CHAIR: I was going to get an opening statement from both of you, but I might come back to you when I have finished my questions here. I want to actually move to a situation where you can both be answering the questions.

Mr BOUCHER: Yes. Grill Pitsa, and then I will relax. That is good.

The CHAIR: And I think I want to actually move to a situation where you can both be answering the questions, too.

Mr BOUCHER: Pitsa is very wise, so she is the one to get the knowledge from.

The CHAIR: Right. I am sure you know a lot as a primary school representative. Could you outline the sorts of information that under the current order you are required to collect—more around the quarantine, close contacts, those sorts of things—and what you are required to do?

Ms BINNION: If a positive case was reported to the school, then we would need to give information, without disclosing anybody's information to particular families, to say who was in close contact with that person—what other class members, staff members—and they would all have to go and get tested. We do not have to do close contact tracing now, but that is what the order was when we were doing tracing of individual information. At the moment what it requires you to do is to inform a class that there has been a positive case, but you are under no circumstances required to disclose who that is—to protect the individual. So you have to be really careful, because you have to protect at all costs both the staff member and the students implicated in this, in terms of their health and wellbeing, and make sure that they are not targeted in any way because of it. All we would have to do at the moment is update on eduPay any staff member that was a positive case, and for students we would have to inform the parents and make sure that that was reported but keep it very general in terms of information we would give to our community. Does that make sense?

The CHAIR: Yes, it does. It is really trying to tease it out. So if a child was then needing to isolate, you would have to track from day one to day—

Ms BINNION: Day seven. Our attendance officer does that at the moment. We would use the Compass system and we would put down when the first day of the positive case was reported and then we would track from that moment and say when their return date is expected, in coordination with their parents, and make sure that online provision of work was provided for them while they were at home. So that is information kept on our attendance system.

The CHAIR: I am going to go to Rob now because I feel like we will be out of sync if I do not. Rob, could you just tell us a bit about your school and where it is located, students and some of the challenges you have had?

Mr BOUCHER: So we are an absolute contrast to Pitsa. We are a multicampus school and have been that way for 10 years. We have got a primary campus and a secondary campus, separated by the Great Alpine Road. We are halfway between Lakes Entrance and Mount Hotham, so we are in East Gippsland. It is a beautiful part of the world. It is a part of the world which is in declining population, so our school population of 110 students is really different because those 110 kids come from five different communities. One of the challenges we have is sharing information without breaching privacy. It is very easy to say, 'The phone call this morning, a girl in year 7 had a positive RAT this morning. Was she at school yesterday? No. That's good. So we don't have to inform the bus travellers'. Once you identify the bus that she travelled on and her cohort you identify the student, because there are—

The CHAIR: So few.

Mr BOUCHER: smaller numbers. So the challenge around respecting privacy and meeting our obligations, which are so very clearly set out in the operation guide, is one of the great complexities and juggling acts of the principal class officer in a small setting.

We have also during the last two-and-a-bit years—we had those fires during the 2019–20 summer, so we had from late November through to January of watching and waiting. We had a number of days where our little community had a horseshoe of fire around us. Is it going to be our turn or not? And we evolved out of that into the world pandemic. Fortunately we have been blessed with the experience of previous floods. We had the plague locusts in 2011, I think, and a couple of fires, so we have had some different experiences of pivoting to the next issue or challenge, and the last two-and-a-bit years have been really complex and draining as a principal leading a small school.

We have been really well supported by what has come out of the system, but one of the challenges of significance during a pandemic is recruitment of staff. You still have people leave during a pandemic, and so you have got to be able to replace them and induct those people. It is really difficult to induct people into a school setting when you do not get to see them—you see them on a screen. It is not the same as walking and

talking and sharing. The pandemic has allowed so many of our families, students and staff to show their best selves, but they are tired. This term has gone very quickly, and it has been fantastic. We have had a number of events that we have not had for two years run, which is terrific, but we are nervously planning each one of those events, waiting for ‘No, that can’t go ahead’.

Having watched what has gone on in the metro setting, we are now experiencing a number of people within our community being impacted by COVID. So we have gone from being spectators to now being participants, and that becomes really complex. Currently we have got one of our bus drivers—and he is a relief driver—not able to drive, and so the nervousness about ‘Are there enough drivers in our community so our bus network can run?’ starts to become one of the interesting challenges around how we look after our students, given the long period of time in which people have been operating in a not anxious state but extremely alert state.

The CHAIR: Rob, thank you for sharing that. I think all of us would want to acknowledge what an incredibly difficult time it must have morphed into for you, having come through the bushfires and then before any chance of recovering hitting COVID and all that that meant, and probably not feeling that you were able to get the supports you needed at that time too. I think for all of us it has been extraordinary to consider what you would have gone through and how you have managed as a small community. So well done. I think there is no doubt that the tyranny of distance places a whole other layer across the sorts of challenges that you have had. We are already hearing a slight difference, I think, there because of that isolation and distance that you have had to bear as well. So well done, and thank you very much for making the effort to be here, because we know it takes a long time out of what must be a very busy schedule for you. In some ways you have answered a couple of my first questions by giving that description, and I have taken enough time, so I will go straight to Vicki. Thank you, Ms Ward.

Ms WARD: Thank you, both, for coming in and, as our Chair said, for taking time out of what I know is a busy term. I live with a teacher. I know exactly how hard your last two years have been, how hard your teachers have had to work, the changes they have had to make—the late hours trying to come up with interesting content that is engaging and trying to work with kids when you cannot read their body language or understand what they are bringing in because their screens are often off. So I do understand what you have been through, and please pass on to your whole school community our gratitude for the work that they have done, both support staff as well as teachers. I have got family in Bairnsdale, so I know what you went through in 2020; it was pretty rough. So I can only imagine how challenging it has been for your particular school community—the last two years.

Going on with the challenges that you have got with adapting and responding to the challenges we have had with the pandemic and the way that you have got to record things, how has the department supported you in terms of this ongoing adaptation? I hear from my own school principals and so on that they have felt that the department has been pretty helpful in really helping them work through the challenges that they have got, and I know that you no longer have those endless spreadsheets that you used to have. How was that adaptation? This is a question for both of you.

Ms BINNION: Yes, I think not doing the contact tracing has really halved the workload. That was really difficult, trying to locate the child and then who they were sitting next to and contacting their parents and just doing all that with classes and classes of kids during a period of a day, because they change subjects all the time. That has been incredible, actually modifying what the requirements are, and I think that has been seen as a really favourable thing of the government—to be flexible in that way and to adapt their requirements of us—because it was not feasible to be able to deliver all that we were required to do. So I think that that has been seen as a positive, to reduce the workload.

We had the operational guides, you know, those operational guidebooks, and they are like little bibles. Again, what I like is the synopsis done by the regional staff, who would look at it and say, ‘Well, actually this is what has changed’, and they have adapted all of that. I think we felt very supported—

Ms WARD: There has been some distilling down for you.

Ms BINNION: Absolutely. And I think that when you are busy and you have got a myriad of things to do—

Ms WARD: Especially when you are working on a ridiculous amount of improvements at the school.

Ms BINNION: Yes. Well, it is just you are under so much pressure at a time when your community is feeling incredible despair and hardship, so you really have to be across it. I think for the first time ever we navigated, together, this sense of community leadership. We understood, because we lived it, what it was to be in a school and the responsibilities of principalship as a community leader and to try and help our families to navigate these difficulties. I felt the communication was clear. We lived by the daily briefings that the Premier or the Deputy Premier—whoever was making those—or the Chief Health Officer was giving. We lived by that, but then the ability to take the orders and then put them into the guidebook and then help us to navigate that in our own setting—I felt very supported. It was clear, and I really appreciated the information.

And then we had briefings. I felt that was really good as well—the clarity that it gave, to just listen to a webinar. And then if you could not meet that one, there were two on a day, straight after changes were made to what you had to do—you know, who was going into lockdown, who was going to need to wear masks, what rules were coming into place. You had to steady the ship. You had to be really calm, cool and collected and manage the changes really carefully, because the one thing you did not want to do was heighten a community that was already on edge.

Ms WARD: And for you, Rob, in a regional setting?

Mr BOUCHER: We were spectators. We were not involved in contact tracing. We were waiting, and it was going to be our turn. We did not have any students impacted by COVID until this year. We had some community members questioning why we were having to follow similar regimes, but it was really simple to say, ‘Hang on, we’re being looked after here by our system’, or from what we understood of COVID at the various times over the journey, ‘No, thanks, we don’t want it.’ So if we can do this to look after ourselves, that will be good. One of the great things—and this sounds like a contradiction—was to have access to a senior system leader on a Sunday with a briefing of ‘This is what next week will look like’, so that you could walk in if we were in a situation where we did have staff on site and say, ‘This was the message I got on Sunday. We’re okay. We’ve just got to pivot to this now. I have not read it; I have heard firsthand this is the change’, and that was quite reassuring for people. The documentation that is in the ops guide—there are a number of school council meetings where I shared the summary page so people could look and go, ‘Oh, we can do that now but we can’t do this; that’s great’. And having a summary page instead of a 37- or a 48-page document for people to read was really helpful. It was reassuring. For our community members who had put their hands up to be on school council, they felt that they were being well cared for by having access to that level of knowledge, which I thought was really good.

Ms WARD: So the changes you are saying that we have had with the current settings have made life easier for you. You will still need supports, you will still need templates and that kind of thing to help you continue to work through. Do you feel that you have got all of that in place—that support is continued from the department? There is a grin there, Rob. What does that mean?

Mr BOUCHER: So it is great—

Ms WARD: But?

Mr BOUCHER: So Monday morning I had a staff member test positive, so he is out for seven days. ‘Okay, we are juggling that, but no-one else is allowed to get crook this week, because we haven’t got someone to cover you.’ I cannot go and say that, but with that workforce—which is not about the pandemic, it is about so many industries across Australia—we just need more workers to fill the changes that we are facing. So, yes, it is really helpful that there is a process where our department knows the staff that are not able to be at work because of COVID, that there is a process for reporting the number of kids impacted. That is really helpful. When you are still trying to run your VCAL camp, your VCE camp, you are juggling—which is the absolute pleasure of the principalship—but if I could wish for anything, it would just be a few more people to cover those gaps. When I talk to my colleagues, they are having that issue too. Has the pandemic made it worse? Maybe. But in terms of the supports, the feeding back, what we are being asked to do this year I think is really fair and reasonable.

Ms WARD: Yes. Thank you.

Ms BINNION: I reflect back on what the department did last year that was so well received, and it was modifying the things that we have to do for our accountability in light of the difficulties schools were

encountering and the pressures we were under. We continue to have about 20 people absent per day, which is very different from normal. There are a lot of people that are close contacts or household contacts. All of that is still having a major impact on schools as per normal. Even though we are in a very populated area, we cannot get CRTs either because every school is needing them to cover absences of their staff. I think about the template letters, the communication that is coming out. I think back on the handling of the vaccination mandate—you know, the fact that the department took that off our hands and they were chasing up the people involved. That meant that therefore our work was more about managing critical incidents at school or dealing with families at school—special needs kids at school. It sort of helps you to navigate what has been a very difficult, complex situation. But I think that the communication from the department—I have not seen anything like it in my 39 years with the department. The communication over the last few years has been second to none, and I cannot recall a deputy secretary ringing and speaking to us personally.

The CHAIR: I have got to stop you. We have got to move on to the next person who has got questions, to be fair. Ms Crozier.

Ms CROZIER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, both, for being here and for travelling from Swifts Creek, Mr Boucher. Can I go to the points that you made, Ms Binnion, about the systems you have in place for when kids test positive and how that is monitored in your school environment. The fact that you were talking about the privacy of those children and being COVID positive—why does that matter anymore?

Ms BINNION: Well, I suppose you just have to be careful not to disclose information about any child at any stage that is not relevant to other people. I am not really sure, but the way I understand it is that we have to make sure that everything we do is risk averse for that particular individual, and I would say it would be more about harassment of that individual than anything else.

Ms CROZIER: That is what I am saying. This is my point. We should not fear what is going on. No-one should judge anyone because they are COVID positive. Nearly everyone I know has had COVID or is getting COVID. It is ridiculous. We are in this situation just as you describe that kids have been harassed because they are COVID positive. Don't you think government needs to do more to calm that fear down, to stop all of that rubbish. As you said, Mr Boucher, your kids at your school have just got COVID this year but have not for the last two years. But in Melbourne we have been living it for two years, so government needs to do more surely to stop that harassment or that view and fear that just because you are COVID positive you are treated differently. If they are sick, they are sick.

Ms BINNION: Well, that is how we regard it: if they are sick, they are sick. And we provide opportunities for ongoing learning. But the reality is you cannot micromanage people in any community, and I think government has put in place processes not to restrain what we do but as a protective measure, because as you know, Ms Crozier, we have seen some pretty ugly behaviour from people in community. That is not because the government or anybody has given them permission to be like that. We have actually lived it in schools in terms of the information and the harassment of principals by anti-vaxxers. I am just giving you an example. Now, they do not know me, they do not know my families. I would want to do anything and everything possible to protect my families, not because there should be a stigma. I have had COVID too. Everybody in my family has had COVID.

Ms CROZIER: My question is: don't you think government needs to do more to reduce that stigma because it is so widespread? I will come back to the vaccination, if I may, because I have got a question about that.

Ms BINNION: Yes, absolutely.

Ms CROZIER: But this is about people having COVID-19. Why are we even fearful of it anymore?

Ms BINNION: Well, I suppose the fear of COVID is around the health risks more so than anything else. When you are dealing with people's children, I think every measure has to be taken to protect them.

Ms CROZIER: Well, I will take the point, if I may.

Ms BINNION: Yes.

Ms CROZIER: We are highly vaccinated. We have got antivirals. We have got different treatments and screening tools so we can detect. The latest variant is transmissible but it is not as deadly, and we have got all those tools in place. Therefore it is a different environment to where we were two years ago, and my point is: do you think government needs to be doing more to stop what you are describing as stigma or harassment of these kids who are positive? It is quite normal now; it is not abnormal for somebody, especially a child at school, to test COVID positive.

Ms BINNION: I think the government has provided air purifiers, masks, sanitiser, RATs and, you know, provided systems to enable the health and safety and protection of everybody in a school community to the best of its ability. In terms of the protection, I do not think there is a stigma because the government per se or people in government are not doing what they are meant to be doing; I think it is just some pretty underhanded information that is out there about—

Ms CROZIER: Sorry?

The CHAIR: Robert wants to answer too.

Ms BINNION: About COVID—sorry, Robert.

Ms CROZIER: Thank you.

Ms BINNION: Sorry.

Ms CROZIER: No, that's okay. If you—

Mr BOUCHER: These ladies from the big smoke, you have got to give them the floor. It is very important.

Ms BINNION: You have come a long way!

Ms CROZIER: What is your view on what I am saying?

Mr BOUCHER: My view is it is not by accident that we have that resource material called Respectful Relationships. One of the things that I said earlier on is we have seen the very best of some people, but we have also seen some things that have been disappointing as a community. Our little school has a disproportionately large wellbeing team. We have a mental health practitioner who joined us last year. We have increased her time fraction, so she is with us two days a week. We have got a doctor, we have got a psychologist, we have got a social worker, we have got a speechie. Those people are all flat out because there is a need because of the anxiety that some people are feeling as a culmination. When you see the impact that the Respectful Relationships work is having, there is potential I think down the track for our understandings around COVID to be far greater, but whilst it is relatively new we are not quite there yet—

Ms CROZIER: We are two years in though.

Mr BOUCHER: Yes—

Ms CROZIER: That is my point: you are dealing with all those issues from parents and the kids that have come in with anxiety—and I am sure Emma will have a lot of questions for you around the mental health impacts. We know that. So what I am trying to ask is: should we as a community start talking about the issues that you are saying are impacting your community, your kids, and start to talk about it in a different way to help them?

Mr BOUCHER: I would say with the rollout of the mental health practitioners, the Respectful Relationships content material, the new whiz-bang thing that we get a little bit more cash for—what is that called, Pitsa?

Ms BINNION: The teaching learning initiative?

Mr BOUCHER: No. That new thing that is really good—the mental health fund, where we will be able to tap into other resources to further complement what we have already got. I think there are actually some good strategies there. Again, my worry is the workforce. We have been a little bit lucky that we have somehow

managed to recruit some people to fill some of those roles, but our great challenge will be postcode being a predictor of whether your kids get supported or not because of the capacity to recruit staff. So the thinking around how we emerge out of the pandemic is really interesting. Given the different fire events that our little community has been through, each time you have another one of those natural disasters you know that disposition around hope and optimism is absolutely essential. You have got to create, and as a school you can normally do events. We have not been able to this time.

Ms CROZIER: I know my time has run out, because I have seen it go. I just need a couple more questions—and I take all of that on board. I grew up near where Emma lives, in far western Victoria. I understand all of those impacts, and you do a remarkable job—no question about that. It is quite different from the curfews that were in Melbourne that kids had to deal with here.

The CHAIR: I need you to ask the question.

Ms CROZIER: I am going to ask the question, but Ms Ward had quite a bit of time, if I may, Chair. The question I have for you both is: how many of your kids are vaccinated?

Ms BINNION: We would not know.

Ms CROZIER: Do you know?

Ms WARD: It is not a requirement to know.

Ms BINNION: It is not a requirement to know. I would not know.

Ms CROZIER: That is all right. That is the answer I want.

Mr BOUCHER: So my parents would know staff would be all vaccinated, because that has been very public. It is fascinating what kids will freely share, but—

Ms CROZIER: Bit easier in your school probably than—

Mr BOUCHER: Yes, yes—certainly not in a position. And so one of the great things was the way in which our local health service was able to work with schools to provide the opportunity—

Ms CROZIER: Would it be easier for you if you knew?

Mr BOUCHER: I have got a pretty small brain, so do not give me too much stuff to think about. I do not need that, I just need, ‘Let’s work together, and here’s an opportunity that you can—’

Ms BINNION: When we were contact tracing it would have been easier to know. Then I would not have had to ask that question—because I actually had to ask that question, ‘Are you vaccinated?’. I know in fact who is not, because they cannot attend the formal in year 12, so there are certain events that—

Ms CROZIER: It is a bit of a nonsense then, isn’t it?

Ms BINNION: Well, they are excluded not because of me but because of the venue requirements, so you sort of find out that way, and kids will share that information.

Ms CROZIER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We will come back if we have got more time at the end. We need to keep moving, so I will go now to Mr Bull.

Mr J BULL: Thank you very much, Chair. And thank you both for being here today to present to the committee and most importantly for your commitment and your contribution to education in our state. I think you both said in your introductory statements just how difficult and how challenging managing and delivering education has been over these past couple of years. It would be greatly appreciated if you could pass on our thanks to staff, friends, the students, of course, and families within your school settings, because it has indeed been an incredibly challenging couple of years. I have got a range of questions that I do want to have the

opportunity to get to in the time that is allotted to me. I just wanted to start with rapid antigen tests and the role that they play within each of your school settings.

Ms BINNION: We have had more and more being delivered, and I think that has been a really great preventative measure. Kids test two times a week, and we have mandated that they please do it at home and not at school, because I do not want hysteria in the middle of a corridor, but they have done it at school and then they act on that. So then we get information straightaway from them saying, if they have tested positive, that that has been the case, and then we put measures in place to be able to give them access to the learning and continue and say to the teachers, ‘Well, such and such has tested positive, and could you please provide the work so that that can continue’. So I think they have been incredibly well received by the families. Initially there was this, again, anxiety around whether we would be doing the testing and whether it would be done at school, but I think that families have really appreciated that level of care, as they see it.

Mr BOUCHER: We made the mistake of suggesting that Monday and Wednesday nights would be good nights for RAT testing because it would not clash with pre-season football and netball training. The problem with that of course is you do not get to remind people on Sunday—‘Don’t forget to do your RAT’. So the first lot of parents that had a positive RAT had to ring me that night and tell me, ‘What do I do?’. Once we sorted through that, it has been really good. One of the frustrations, though: we had a staff member that used a RAT three times and came back negative. He did not want to come to school because he just did not feel well. He went and got a PCR and was positive. That got shared amongst staff, so staff were really concerned about the reliability of the RAT. However, there have been a few that have said, ‘No, no, no. I’ve done a RAT. Things are okay. It’s just a cold. I’m good to be at work, because I don’t want to create more work for my colleagues if I’m away’. So the RATs have certainly helped. However, we have had some families that have said, ‘I’m not taking them. I’m not doing them’, because they have not understood what the RATs are about. And it has not mattered how I have explained that—‘No, I’m not having anything to do with that’.

Mr J BULL: We did hear evidence earlier today about RAT testing and the efficiency and effectiveness of it as well, so I think you make a really important point about community awareness and people having just an ongoing conversation about the way that RAT testing works and the way that we continue to use it within the community to keep people safe. I acknowledge and thank both of you for the work that you do in that space.

I just wanted to go to air purifiers—how they are managed within each school setting.

Ms BINNION: So we have 197 currently and are about to get another 70. But I think that again it is a sense of calm. It is seen as a positive measure, to purify the air, and it is seen as a measure and an attempt to keep us safe. I think they have been very well received. I initially thought that kids would play with them and ruin them, but nobody has done anything to them. They are on, and now we have got to get to a stage where we clean them. So that is the next bit around air purifiers. But I think they have been very well received, especially when winter is coming and you cannot necessarily ensure that the doors and windows can remain open as well. So I think that the message around ventilation has been very, very well received, and it is seen as an investment that people have appreciated.

Mr BOUCHER: Yes, so we have got a dozen of them. I was really impressed with the staff who said, ‘I’ll get it out of the box, I’ll look after it, I’ll clean the filter. It’ll be right. You don’t have to worry about this’, and again the kids have been really, really good—another symbol that we are being looked after in a very different time. And they will be really handy when we have the next bushfire event and we are looking for some clean air. So in terms of a long-term strategy our little community is appreciative of it.

Mr J BULL: Well, it is forward thinking, but let us hope we do not have another bushfire like that again. Robert, I just wanted to ask you: you spoke about the mental health fund. It is a \$200 million fund that prioritises rural and regional schools such as yours, and it was based on the back of the royal commission into mental health. I wanted to get a sense from you about whether you had turned your mind to that in terms of a practical rollout within your school.

Mr BOUCHER: So we have a psychologist who works with us two days a week. It is not enough time. We have got a social worker in a day a week. She spends a little bit of time at school but the majority of the time in families’ homes. The mental health practitioner who we have got has increased her time fraction this year. What is she doing with that extra day? She is actually running fitness programs for students in our gym. Why?

Because if kids engage in physical activity, they release endorphins. There is research that says that that is not a wacky idea, it is true. We are really conscious that with our small number we need to try a range of strategies, so the physical activity is one. The ability for our psychologist to sit down with kids, meet with them one on one and engage mum and dad in that conversation is absolutely essential. We know we are seeing more kids who are anxious about being away from home. We know that some of our kids are really keen to be away from home and come to school, they are just not so keen on being in the classroom. And it is not just our school. I talk to some of my other colleagues. They are facing similar challenges getting back to the routines and rituals of being at school. We will have a good year where we will not have any disruptions this year, and we will return to that. But that will take time, and part of that will be supporting individuals with the additional care measures that they do need.

Mr J BULL: Indeed, it will take time, I am sure. Just as a final one, Chair—I am sure I am nearly out of time: you have both been very complimentary of the relationship that has existed between both of your schools and the department. There was a bizarre line of questioning from a previous member of the committee in relation to the government running some sort of scare campaign around COVID, which is frankly, as a member of the government, not what the government is doing at all. So I just wanted to ask you both about that relationship with the department and learnings from the government, the department, your school and your school community. How do you see that evolving as we navigate through the back end of the pandemic, and what do you both think the learnings are around that engagement and making sure that collectively government, community and both of your schools are working together to counteract some of the really fearful, hateful, horrible messages that we hear in the community around anti-vax and many of the anti-health messages that we know are just frankly lies?

Ms BINNION: Look, I think we have seen some of the best relationships because of the adversity. There was a need for us to work very quickly together. We were really frightened. I have to say, I have never been so scared as I was when this all started two years ago. I think that it became very apparent that we needed each other. I have to say, it has really helped me be very proud of the system that I am a part of, and I have never really been one to be that proud of the system. But I have been because we have actually overcome some difficulties where we have had trust. We have navigated some really difficult situations, but we have had this ability to communicate freely with people, where people were willing to help you, where there was that sense of urgency around it. I think that that has been really evident through this pandemic. The speed with which people would come back to you if you had a question to navigate a difficulty that you were experiencing at your school—even though you are on your own, you actually do not feel that you are actually on your own. You feel that you are part of a system and being well supported by both central staff and regional people. They are there to assist. But at the end of the day, you are sort of the public face to your school, and you are answerable to your school, and the buck stops with you.

The CHAIR: We will go to Robert now. I think you have answered the question.

Mr BOUCHER: Josh, we-ness matters. We are in this together, and we are all being impacted. Never before has there been a reality around ‘We are all being impacted by this; we all need to respond to what is in front of us’. I think there have been some unwritten ground rules voluntarily established during this pandemic. It is fascinating how the different national disasters I have been involved with in our little part of the world change the way in which you operate with system leaders. This pandemic has just magnified that. It has been on everyone’s mind, and each individual’s experience of the pandemic has allowed them to connect so much better regardless of where they are in the hierarchy and that sense of ‘If we do our little bit, we’ll actually be okay here’. I think that is a cultural norm that has been established.

Ms BINNION: Can I just say, the online way we operate has given us accessibility that we never experienced before, because before you actually had to physically go to some meeting, whereas now through a Zoom, through a Webex or through a Google Meet you actually can connect with people all over the place. It gives you that ability to communicate very quickly with a broad range of people and navigate a difficult situation, so I think that has helped.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Josh. That is your time well and truly. I will move now to Ms Kealy.

Mr J BULL: Thank you, Chair.

Ms KEALY: Thank you both for your time today. Rob, ‘I am the bookend of the state’ is what I say to your local member, Tim Bull. I am in the far west and cover a lot of very, very small schools which have faced many challenges over the pandemic. I think there is a unique set of challenges when you have a smaller staffing pool to draw from in the community. However, they do do things differently and pull together in a very positive way also. I would like to ask a question in regard to the RAT testing. The minister made the announcement on 23 January that all students were recommended to have two RATs—teachers as well, and staff; I should say ‘staff’. Teachers were back on 28 January. I had overwhelming feedback from schools in my electorate that those tests were not available at the school on 28 January. Did your schools receive RATs for your students, your educators and all of your staff before 28 January?

Mr BOUCHER: That is a really good question. I reckon we were pretty close if we were not there. I know the air purifiers—I was getting pretty cranky because of the air purifiers: ‘They are supposed to be here; I have got to set them up’. And they got there late Friday afternoon, and they were good to go when we had kids on the Monday. So the air purifiers were timed some would say almost perfectly, some would say timed to create a little bit of anxiety for the principal.

Ms KEALY: Surely not.

Mr BOUCHER: However, they were there. The RATs, I reckon we did get them—

Ms BINNION: Just in time, and not enough for two for each family—everybody got one. And then we got the second lot—

Ms KEALY: Early that first week.

Ms BINNION: early that first week.

Mr BOUCHER: Yes. Because the RATs—actually one of our kids tested positive, and both their parents worked for a government department in town and were, ‘Can we use one of the RATs from the kid to make sure we are right to go to work? And you go, ‘Well, they can’t use them anyway for 30 days, so they are going to sit there; it makes sense’. But then we had the other—was it the second or third transfer? We had a ridiculous number of RATs turn up for our school.

Ms KEALY: The supply came into Australia. We had schools that did not get them until week 3, so it was very hard for the schools—

Mr BOUCHER: I know. We were good to go.

Ms BINNION: Yes.

Ms KEALY: Can I ask another question? Did you lose any staff due to the vaccination mandate?

Ms BINNION: I lost one.

Ms KEALY: Lost one. Rob, did you lose any?

Mr BOUCHER: No.

Ms BINNION: It was not a teaching staff member. It was a newly appointed office admin person, and she felt that she could not carry through with a mandate. Her belief was that the vaccination was not safe, and she chose to leave. That was it.

Ms KEALY: Can I ask another question, which is around the screening of children at the moment. I have heard from many younger people who have been home for remote schooling. They have seen every day the daily presser saying that we need to do these things because otherwise they are going to die of COVID. And now as part of this screening program they are not getting that sick but they are testing positive. And just last week I spoke to a mum whose eight-year-old boy had tested positive. She had to hold his hand all night because he was in tears because he thought he was going to die. What support is in place for students? You know, generally in all of the research—you look at the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, who have done an enormous amount of work when it comes to kids; they are global leaders; they are excellent—they say that

there is no long COVID really. These kids are not getting that sick, but they think they are going to die. What support has the department given to you to be able to better support those children who are testing positive and scared out of their minds?

Ms BINNION: I think we have seen an increase over the last two years in the mental health practitioners that Rob spoke of earlier. I have got a team of eight people: I have got three psychs, I have got two wellbeing coordinators who are student counsellors and I have got care dogs that come in. And it is all about reducing anxiety. I would never have thought that I would hire care dogs into the school, but that is a provision under the mental health budget line where we are able to access those services. Also the ability of our counselling staff to actually—they were given permission to be able to counsel via a screen, whereas before they were not allowed to do that; you had to actually do it face to face. And that enables connection via a screen from home to try and help navigate those difficulties. I think the anxiety level in young people is absolutely as you say. It is quite profound at the minute, and we have seen a continuous escalation, not only pre COVID but it has continued.

We have got year 7 camp that left yesterday, and a mum was crying—first time in years that this child was actually off on a year 7 camp. I have never seen a mum cry on year 7 camp. Usually it is like, you know, ‘Take them’. But it is that sense of anxiety around ‘Will they be okay?’, and they are really worrying. So I think the more we can do in terms of providing them with those services the better. But teachers are having to do that psychological wellbeing professional learning, and that has been availed to us through professional learning opportunities. All of that helps.

Ms KEALY: Students are one of the few cohorts—and young students as well; they are really young kids—in our community who are screened. They are really the only ones that are screened. And yet you are saying that this is actually increasing the anxiety and therefore we need more treatment. Wouldn’t it be better to not expose our children to that level of anxiety in the first place, given they are one of the few groups in our society that are being screened?

Ms BINNION: I think by screening you are actually preventing other people from getting COVID. You are trying to limit the amount of staff and students that are COVID affected. I do not think it is the screening—

Ms KEALY: Is it more important to protect staff than it is to protect kids, because—

Ms BINNION: Well, no. You are protecting students as well, because if you are—

Ms KEALY: Kids do not get that sick, though. You look at the research from Murdoch, as I said. They do not get that sick.

Ms BINNION: Schools are places where people engage, and what you want to do is protect everybody at the school to be safe and sound. I do not necessarily believe that it is anxiety just based on COVID. It is the disconnection, it is that lack of sense of belonging, and I think that is what is coming into play now that is helping the wellbeing of our young people. We are getting to a more normal state.

Ms KEALY: Rob, did you want to add to that?

Mr BOUCHER: Yes. One of the great things about being in a P–12 setting is you see some kids first day of prep and you know that kid you are never going to talk to because they are going to be fine, they turn up on time. That kid you are worried about, because on the very first day school they do not make it on time. As the kids progress through the school, that activity in year 9, that Morrisby questionnaire that kids do that helps kids shape to their career aspirations, some of our kids are absolutely excited about what that is bringing them. But for more of our kids, they are, ‘Oh, yeah’. They have lost some of their aspiration, but I genuinely think that our community, the fires followed by the pandemic—kids are going, ‘The world’s changed’. I am not quite sure what impact the activities in Ukraine are going to have on our kids’ thinking, but I would suggest that for our kids in our little community you put together the fires, the pandemic and now the crazy stuff they are seeing on the news when they actually watch the news, there are some kids who are concerned about what their future is.

I do not believe your language around screening is impacting on that. I think for some of our parents they actually feel really comfortable sending their kids to school because they are aware that there is testing for COVID and we do not have kids at school, as best we know, with COVID. ‘As best we know’ is a slightly ambiguous statement because I do not get to stand at the gate and say to each kid, ‘Show me your RAT. Yep,

you're good to come in'. That is not the way we are operating. So one of the things that has happened during this pandemic, I believe, is the genuine effort to build trust between school and family. Now, that might be just my naive perception, but I genuinely believe that there is a greater level of trust: 'Here are your RATs. You do them at home. If there's a positive, let us know, but we won't be checking that you are using the RATs. We won't be checking that they are ending up on eBay'.

Ms KEALY: Yes, good point. Can I ask one more question? Just in regard to the Victorian School Nurses program, there are schools in my electorate that have not had that through for four years now. Have your prep students been—Rob, it is really for you—checked, and when was the last time the school nurse came through?

Mr BOUCHER: We are really lucky. We have access to a doctor once a fortnight through the Doctors in Secondary Schools program and of course you cannot have a doctor in your school unless they have got a nurse with them.

Ms KEALY: So you have had your checks?

Mr BOUCHER: So we have got access to that through that program. But for the last two years we have not had a nurse in secondary school that we are entitled to because we have not been able to recruit. That is just the challenge about that highly skilled workforce. Would we like one? Yes, please. And so it is another part of our puzzle that we have not got right yet. One of the things that would be great to come out of this committee is that all highly skilled practitioners, whether they are educators or health people, have to go to the bush for two years and then they get to work in the city.

Ms KEALY: I like that one, and I think your local member would support that too. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: I think we might have time for one more question from each member, should we like to. So I will go first.

Ms KEALY: Kim?

The CHAIR: Kim, sorry, I had better go to you—I was getting excited that we had finished early.

Ms WARD: But then that is three questions there and we have only had two lots of questions. They have had two lots of questions and we have had two lots of questions. We have been doing one, two, one, two.

The CHAIR: Okay. I have not kept track of that very well, so we will go to Kim.

Ms WARD: We have not got Harriet here, so we would normally step in—

The CHAIR: You would normally step in at this point? Yes, okay. Well, we have got just under 15 minutes, so if we can divide that up.

Mr WELLS: So am I going first?

The CHAIR: No, it is back to Vicki after Emma.

Mr WELLS: Cheers.

Ms WARD: Thank you. I know from my own community that having kids being screened has given a lot of relief to people because they have got certainty around sending their kids to school and they know that COVID is not coming home—it is not infecting bus drivers, grandparents, the rest of it. So I think that gives more security than it gives anxiety, is my experience in my community. But I just want to talk to what you have been saying around challenges with teachers and so on, around the tutor learning initiative. About half a billion dollars has been put in to help students with their missed learning. How is this working out at your schools? Is it helping your kids?

Ms BINNION: Absolutely. I am so glad it was rolled over for another term because we have seen a number of kids disengage, especially in the second year of COVID. The first year was a bit of a novelty a little, and people kept on screen. But as you mentioned before, people were just turning off their screens, and no matter what you did they were not connecting as you wanted them to. So it really has enabled us to target the kids with

gaps in their learning and really to provide that one-on-one care. I hope it continues to be an investment that government make, because I just think that smaller, targeted approach really helps kids who have got gaps in their learning and doing it in a big class is not always as effective as you need it to be. So I think that is an initiative that we would absolutely support going forward. It has been very effective.

Ms WARD: Thank you. Rob?

Mr BOUCHER: Yes, for far-flung joints it is fantastic that you can run your race around what your community needs. So one of the great strengths of that initiative is it is school driven—‘This is what you need, this is what you can do’. Again the challenge is the workforce, but yes, it has been extremely beneficial, and it will be nice when it is just part of what we do regardless of who is in government.

Ms WARD: Yes, thank you. Thank you, Suzanna.

The CHAIR: Right. I will go to you, Kim.

Mr WELLS: Thanks. And thanks, both, for being here today. I was not here for the presentation, so if I am asking a question, you may have already covered it, so I am sorry about that. But, Rob, to you first: I am guessing there was a lot of frustration that they would be locking down the entire state when in East Gippsland there were no cases of COVID. Was there exceptional frustration from the families around Swifts Creek and the surrounding areas towards you as principal: ‘Why are we shutting down when there are no cases and the nearest cases are Melbourne driven’?

Mr BOUCHER: Last year we were that short of staff they let me do a little bit of teaching, and I had a full teaching load. I came out of class one day, and the builder that was renovating the pool said, ‘Are you here tomorrow, Robert?’. And I said, ‘Of course I am, mate. What are you talking about? Why wouldn’t I be at work?’. And he said, ‘No, no, they’re shutting down’. I said, ‘What? How would I know that? I’ve been flat out teaching all day’. Staff were really good at switching to the next thing. The frustration from parents was never expressed to staff or me; they were accepting that we are one state and this is how we are going to protect ourselves. I did not have any correspondence from parents, from staff or from kids that was aggressive: ‘This is not fair, the way we’ve been treated’. Yes, there were probably some people that thought the football and netball should still have been able to run on the weekends even if school was not, but I did not have any aggression from our school community around that. They just accepted that this was what we are doing. If we were to go into periods of lockdown this year, I do not think that would be the case. I think people would say, ‘Hang on. We’ve had enough of being told what to do’. But during 2020 and 2021 there was: ‘We’re not too sure about what’s coming next. We’ll accept it’.

Mr WELLS: Okay. So in regard to Swifts Creek being P–12, I am guessing you would have some composite classes, and there is a certain limit for who wears masks and who does not wear masks. Do you have an example of a class where you have a crossover between the two, where some are required to wear masks and others are not?

Mr BOUCHER: We run a prep, 1, 2; a 3, 4; and a 5, 6. So some may say that was a masterstroke of management to align with what the government’s expectation is or ‘You just got lucky again, Robert’. Maybe we just got lucky again. Fascinating, though, is the dual campus—how we have evolved from ‘Little kids, you’ll be right. You don’t need to wear a mask. Big kids, you do’ to ‘Now, big kids, those masks, you don’t have to wear. Little kids, you do’. And so again, the challenge is around ‘This is for everyone’s protection’. It is really interesting to try and encourage that consistent wearing of the masks for all of our kids at different stages, so it will be good when the mask wearing is no longer part of what we have to do. Being able to see someone’s smile is so important. Walking past kids and smiling at them, you go, ‘You idiot, you’re wearing a mask. What are you doing?’.

Mr WELLS: So with some of your colleagues, maybe Omeo, are they as lucky as what you have been in regard to the composition of classes—say, at Omeo?

Mr BOUCHER: No. They have got some odd combinations because of their numbers, and so, yes, they have got challenges around that. But again, it is the compliance and cooperation. I was part of a school review at Cann River—they are a P–12 school—and it was absolutely ‘This is what we’ve got to do’ in terms of mask wearing. There were kids that just said, ‘Yep. This is what we do. These are the rules’—so that language we

have heard from the department. I think in 2020 we pivoted to show our best selves. Last year it was switching. This year we are adapting. So people are getting that notion of flexibility and doing things differently, with the great hope that everything will go back to normal sooner rather than later because we have been compliant.

Mr WELLS: Just to follow up a question that Emma had: city students and country kids, especially around Cann River, Omeo, Swifts Creek—are they as accepting of receiving mental health help, or do you have to do, as principal, other assistance to try and encourage kids to come forward to accept that help?

Mr BOUCHER: Our psychologist has a therapy dog. She tells me it is trained. But that dog enables kids to have a conversation with the dog, then with her. Our kids, I would say, would be less trusting than their city counterparts, so it takes a little while to build that relationship. We have been fortunate that our psych has been working with us for a number of years now. Relationships, I think, matter more so in the rural perspective, and we have got that in place. I know some of my colleagues are not as lucky, though.

Mr WELLS: And the support from the parents in regard to having the mental health facilities at Swifts Creek? I mean, is that something that they are hesitant about or reluctant to accept, or they are over time accepting it?

Mr BOUCHER: Absolutely accepting it and valuing it, and in times of added complexities for those families absolutely welcoming them into their homes to sit down over the kitchen table and have some very different conversations. Five years ago as a school we just were not able to provide that support, but now we can.

Mr WELLS: Just a last couple of questions. When the school was in lockdown—I am guessing this has been covered earlier—obviously with the connectivity, with students trying to work from home when they are on farms around the district, there must have been some cases where students just simply were unable to get that level of service to be able to work from home.

Mr BOUCHER: Yes. So if you can have a chat to Telstra to improve their connectivity, that would be much appreciated. The reality is we had some kids that even when they were given the dongles to increase the access, that did not work, so for some kids, particularly our younger kids, we did hard packs. So, ‘Hang on, Robert, if you’ve got hard packs, then people have to come in and collect those packs’. That was against the spirit of how you were supposed to be operating, but it was another one of those shades-of-grey decisions you made, that met the learning needs, that maybe slightly went outside of that ‘Don’t travel’, but that addressed that challenge of ensuring there was learning material. The frustration of telecommunications is a frustration shared across rural Australia. So, yes, when Telstra improve that, that will be really good.

Ms BINNION: But also even in metropolitan schools, Mr Wells, it would be an issue. It was an issue with some of the schools where the infrastructure in the school level was not up to scratch, and therefore connecting from home was going to be problematic. We have a one-to-one Chrome device which is up in the cloud with the work and so on, and so it was easy because we had made investments. We were in a position to be able to make investments over a period of time. But other schools were not in that situation, so there was inequity and therefore devices had to be sought to be given to families where there was no device in the family home and things like that. That added an additional level of requirement of schools to make sure there was equity and access for every family and make the various allowances that were needed in order to be able to continue with the learning. That was our big mantra: ‘Let’s continue with the learning as best as we can’.

Mr WELLS: Thanks for that. So just I guess for Telstra to improve, not just for educational purposes but for bushfires as well.

Ms BINNION: Yes, too right.

Mr WELLS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will just go back to Mr Bull for a final question.

Mr J BULL: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you again for all of your commitments and efforts and for presenting to the committee. I just wanted to touch on the \$113 million Positive Start initiative, which will help make up for much of the disruption that the pandemic has caused across primary and secondary school

students. I understand it is available to government schools, and I just wanted to get a sense from either of you whether you have had any contact with the department or discussion about that program.

Mr BOUCHER: You can go first, Pitsa.

Ms BINNION: Not at this stage.

Mr BOUCHER: I have been doing well, Josh, just to get things underway this year, and I am fully focused on what we are doing. I have not got time to be chasing extra stuff, sorry.

Mr J BULL: That is fine. Thanks so much again for presenting to the committee and for all the work that you have done. It is very much appreciated.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That does bring our time to an end, so thank you very much for attending before the committee today. Before you go I will just let you know that you will receive a copy of the transcript of the hearing within the next week for you to review. I do not think you had any questions on notice, but you would get them if indeed there were. Thank you very much for attending today.

Witnesses withdrew.