

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 3 – EDUCATION

Friday 27 August 2021

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

CORRECTED

The Committee met at 9:30.

MEMBERS

The Hon. Mark Latham (Chair)

The Hon. Catherine Cusack
The Hon. Anthony D'Adam
The Hon. Wes Fang (Deputy Chair)
The Hon. Scott Farlow
The Hon. Courtney Houssos
Mr David Shoebridge

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:

**Budget Estimates secretariat
Room 812
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

The CHAIR: Welcome to this virtual hearing for the inquiry into budget estimates 2021-2022. Before I commence it is the custom of this Parliament to acknowledge the traditional inhabitants of this land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I say that with all due respect, as well as acknowledging the other important contributors to the history of this site, we acknowledge and thank them all. Today the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolios of Education and Early Childhood Learning. Today's hearing is being conducted as a fully virtual hearing which enables the work of the Committee to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic without compromising health and safety.

I would ask for everyone's patience through any technical difficulties we may encounter today. I apologise also for the late start due to technical difficulties in my Parliament House office. Thank you for your perseverance and thank you to the witnesses appearing today, led by Georgina Harrisson from the Department of Education. We congratulate her very much on her appointment as Secretary. She is appearing before our Committee for the first time in that very important role. I also thank all her staff and Paul Martin, the head of NSW Education Standards Authority [NESA].

Before we commence I would like to make some brief statements about the procedures. There may be some questions that a witness could only answer if they had more time or with certain documents to hand. Please take those on notice as we have done in the past. All witnesses in budget estimates have a right to procedural fairness, as we have noted in the past. Today's proceedings are being broadcast live from Parliament's YouTube channel and a transcript will be placed on the Committee's website once it becomes available.

Finally, a few notes on virtual hearing etiquette to minimise disruptions and assist our Hansard reporters. Could I ask Committee members to clearly identify who their questions are being directed to and that everyone please state their name at the beginning of their presentation so that Hansard knows who is speaking. Could everyone please mute their microphones when they are not speaking. Please remember to turn your microphones back on when you are getting ready to speak. Please do not speak over each other, because it is hard enough as it is. To assist Hansard, may I remind witnesses and members to speak directly into the microphone and avoid making comments when your head is turned away. All witnesses will be sworn prior to giving evidence.

GEORGINA HARRISSON, Secretary, Department of Education, sworn and examined

RUTH OWEN, Acting Group Deputy Secretary, School Improvement and Education Reform Group, Department of Education, affirmed and examined

DAVID WITHEY, Chief Operating Officer, Department of Education, affirmed and examined

ANTHONY MANNING, Chief Executive Officer, School Infrastructure NSW, Department of Education, affirmed and examined

MURAT DIZDAR, Deputy Secretary, School Performance, Department of Education, affirmed and examined

PAUL MARTIN, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Education Standards Authority, affirmed and examined

YVETTE CACHIA, Chief People Officer, Department of Education, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Today's hearing will be conducted from 9.30 a.m. to 11.00 a.m. and from 11.15 a.m. to 12.45 p.m., with questions from the Opposition and crossbench members only. If required, an additional 15 minutes is allocated at the end of the hearing for Government questions. As there is no provision for any witness to make an opening statement before the Committee commences questioning, we will begin with questions from the Opposition.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Good morning to everyone. Ms Harrisson, can I start with you. The question that everybody wants to know is: When will our children return to school?

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you for the question, Ms Houssos. The Premier has indicated her intention to make announcements about the return to school by the end of this week. If those announcements occur during this hearing then I would be happy to provide further information to the Committee at that time.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrisson, it was reported on Channel 7 and Channel 9 news last night that this may happen this year; that kindy, year 1 and year 11 students may be prioritised and that it may be part-time. Can you provide some clarity to this Committee about the work that you have been doing in relation to that?

Ms HARRISSON: Certainly I understand the call for clarity from the community. As a working parent myself, with children at home, I understand the challenges that families across the State are experiencing at the moment. As I have indicated, the Premier has said that she will make announcements about the planned return to school and once she has done so I will be happy to provide you with further information.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Perhaps, Ms Harrisson, you can provide some clarity on whether—it was reported earlier this week that the return to school will be contingent on the rates of community vaccination reaching 70 per cent. Will that be the case?

Ms HARRISSON: I am not sure it would be helpful for me to comment on speculation in the media prior to what the Government announces in terms of its back-to-school plan.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrisson, is there any insight that you can provide to us before 11 o'clock this morning about the plans that the department has been working on to return our children to school?

Ms HARRISSON: I can assure the Committee that the department has been working very closely with the Department of Health and is being led as ever by the Health advice in terms of our response to the pandemic. I can provide information to you once the Premier has made her announcements.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Alright, I might move on. Ms Harrisson, can you provide any clarity on the work that is being done to improve ventilation in New South Wales schools?

Ms HARRISSON: Mr Manning will have some further detail on this. We have continued to work with NSW Health on the most up-to-date guidance in relation to ventilation as it pertains to the current COVID situation. We have taken that advice and shared that advice with our schools, and Mr Manning can provide you with some more detail on that.

Mr MANNING: Yes. As the Secretary said, throughout the COVID pandemic we have been led by the expertise of NSW Health in terms of the most appropriate response to operating our schools in a safe manner. This position will continue and is evidenced by the fact that we have made significant increases in cleaning of schools and environmental cleans along with direct provision of hand sanitiser and personal protective equipment [PPE]. The ventilation level in classrooms is just one of a number of layers of things such as vaccinations and

wearing masks, and we will continue to follow the advice. The current advice from Health is to maximise ventilation where possible and, if possible, enhanced by mechanical means.

The vast majority of our schools have classrooms with openable windows that allow for natural ventilation to occur when open. These classrooms are sized to not need to be cross-ventilated, so the ventilation can come from a single elevation. Our maintenance program has always included an element to ease and adjust windows to ensure that they are operable. We will work with schools to ensure that windows are able to be opened and will remain open during the day. There is a limited number of schools that are fully air-conditioned and therefore mechanically ventilated. We have already undertaken a clean of any filtering systems and will continue to monitor these filters and clean and replace them as necessary. I would also like to add that many of our classrooms are fitted with ceiling or wall-mounted fans to assist with airflow within classrooms. Again, this will work in conjunction with open windows to improve the ventilation. They are the components that are all recommended by NSW Health.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Sorry, Mr Manning, I will stop you there. Essentially what you are saying is you have cleaned the air-conditioning units, as they should be cleaned, and you are encouraging people to open windows. There is a lot of work that has been done internationally around monitoring air quality control and around monitoring the rates of carbon dioxide in classrooms. Have you done any of that preparatory work or are we just telling schools to keep their windows open?

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order: The witness had not actually finished his answer. I think that it is vitally important, particularly during these virtual hearings, that witnesses are permitted to complete their full answer before members ask for an elucidation.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: To the point of order: These Webex hearings are difficult enough. I think the member in this case allowed quite a lengthy answer to go on and then indicated at a reasonable point where the member wanted to move on. If we are going to have repeated points of order on Webex, this will really potentially melt down. I think the member was perfectly within her rights to do what she did in the respectful way that she did.

The CHAIR: It is very hard in these virtual hearings to do anything other than ask people to move on. We are always short of time, so could the witness please finish the answer and then Ms Houssos can resume her questioning.

Ms HARRISSON: I refer the member to our previous answer. We have sought Health advice and followed the Health advice in relation to ventilation for our schools.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Perhaps you could provide a copy of that advice on notice, if that is possible. I will move on to schools that have actually had positive cases of COVID recently. How many schools have been deep-cleaned in the past week because they have had COVID cases on their grounds?

Ms HARRISSON: I would like to give credit to every member of our school community who has experienced these cases and these requirements in their schools. Mr Dizdar will be able to provide you details of the numbers.

Mr DIZDAR: I do not have the last week in front of me, but it might be helpful if I tell you what I do have in front of me. From June to 27 August, which is as of this morning, we have had 88 government schools that we have had to make non-operational for a day or two at a time because there has been a positive COVID case in that school community and we have had to work with NSW Health to undertake close contact tracing and thorough cleaning in line with health requirements.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thanks, Mr Dizdar. Do you have a breakdown of those that have occurred in August?

Mr DIZDAR: We could provide that for you but, like I said, the data in front of me is from June to this morning.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Do you have the number of students who were affected?

Mr DIZDAR: Do you mean by way of close contacts, Ms Houssos?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Yes.

Mr DIZDAR: That is health data that I do not have.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I will move onto the question of the \$337 million tutoring package that was announced by the Government last year. Ms Harrison, how is that currently being provided while students are learning at home?

Ms HARRISSON: Our schools have done a phenomenal job this year in recruiting and deploying additional tutors to support the intensive learning support [ILS] for students following last year's interrupted pattern of learning. Our schools have continued to provide that support through the learning from home restrictions, and Mr Dizdar can give you some examples of ways that schools have been approaching that through this learning from home period.

Mr DIZDAR: Ms Houssos, the \$337 million COVID intensive learning support program is being really well received by our school communities. I just note for the Committee that it is additional funding on top of the funding that a school would normally receive. I have a fine example at Taree High School with Allison Alliston, our principal. They received an additional \$472,000 for this year and they have identified 150 students in their school who are behind in their stage level of literacy and numeracy. They have employed six additional teaching staff at that school to develop and enact individual learning plans that are focused on literacy and numeracy for these learners. For the Committee, with the challenges of learning from home, these support classes are quite pleasingly still being conducted online at Taree High School for those 150 learners. The school is monitoring their progress in line with syllabus outcomes. I have numerous examples like this, but the money is being really well received.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thanks very much, Mr Dizdar. I too pay tribute to the many teachers who are working across the sector at the moment, going above and beyond to provide their lessons in a very difficult environment. I also pay tribute to the parents who are trying to juggle homeschooling and work and of course our students, who continue to make the best of it. Ms Harrison, what central oversight is there of this COVID support package?

Ms HARRISSON: We have had a detailed program plan and support provided to schools in relation to the intensive learning support program. We have an additional 7,336 educators and tutors supporting our students at this time. Ms Owen can give you some further detail on the monitoring of that program through the system.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Do you have a breakdown of how many of those are qualified teachers?

Ms HARRISSON: For the Committee's benefit, there was a clear set of guidelines for the recruitment of those tutors and educators. Again, we would be able to provide that detail and breakdown on notice. If you wanted further advice on the monitoring, to your first question, Ms Owen can provide that.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Can I just clarify that you will provide that on notice?

Ms HARRISSON: Yes, I will provide the breakdown on notice.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Thank you.

Ms OWEN: I can provide that information, if the Committee would like me to, while we are on record. Ninety per cent of those additional tutors are qualified educators: either current teachers, retired teachers or future teachers working in universities. Ten per cent were student learning support officers [SLSOs], who in term two we included as part of our tuition program. Just to come back to your earlier question, Ms Houssos, we have a COVID intensive learning support program team who continue to work with all the schools across the State to monitor their delivery of the tutoring, to continue to understand where there are challenges and to support every school in making sure every student who needs that catch-up small-group tuition gets it. That group also reports to the Executive every month, providing us with updates on progress against the hiring of tutors, the provision of tuition and the spending of the stimulus funding.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, I just have one more question before I pass over to my colleague. Can you tell us the latest on the plans for New South Wales schools to implement rapid antigen testing?

Ms HARRISSON: I can assure you that we continue to work with NSW Health on all the appropriate measures to ensure our schools are safe places. I do not have any specific details on plans for rapid antigen testing in schools at this time.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Just to be clear, there are no plans to implement rapid antigen testing on school sites at the moment?

Ms HARRISSON: There are currently some pilots underway in some schools, largely in the independent sector. We are monitoring those trials closely and, should it be something that Health advise we should be implementing more broadly, we will take that advice and follow that advice.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Okay, but it was announced by the New South Wales Premier that there would be rapid antigen testing in government schools. That is not currently underway and you do not currently have any plans for that. Is that correct?

Ms HARRISSON: I think the commitment from the Premier you are referring to is around the year 12 return. Following the initial announcement by the Premier, planning was undertaken by the public school system, the independent school system and the Catholic school system in partnership based on Health advice. From that advice we were able to put in place a series of other measures and restrictions around that return so that it was a safe, controlled and managed return for year 12 to support their essential learning and wellbeing needs. In those circumstances, the rapid antigen testing was not a requirement of Health for that return.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Thank you, everyone, for your appearance today. I might first place on the record just a couple of things before I start my questioning. Firstly, my partner is employed in the COVID tutoring support scheme. I would also like to declare that my son is currently undertaking the HSC. I just wanted to place those two items on the record. I want to ask Ms Harrisson for some clarification about the implications of the current public health orders in relation to the requirement for vaccination for disability and early childcare workers. Education runs a number of on-site preschools and there are also student learning support officers employed at schools. Are those SLSOs or those teachers that are engaged with supporting students with a disability captured by that definition of disability support workers? Will they be required to be vaccinated?

Ms HARRISSON: I note for the record that your family is probably feeling it is much as any other in this case, with a year 12 student and someone trying to support learning from home while delivering learning from home. I appreciate those strains. The requirement under the public health order for early childhood and disability support workers came into effect—I think the public health order was published on Wednesday or Thursday night. We have provided guidance out to our schools on how that impacts on them. I would indicate for the Committee's benefit that the best protection we can provide young people unable to be vaccinated at this time is to ensure that the adults that surround them and support them are vaccinated. Ms Owen can provide you with some specific details of the requirements for education department staff.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Before we go to Ms Owen, can I just ask that the advice that has been circulated to schools be provided to the Committee?

Ms HARRISSON: I am very happy to provide that information on notice.

Ms OWEN: I think it would be worth showing on notice the specific details of how we have categorised which members of our workforce are captured by the public health order. As you are suggesting, there are a number of members of our workforce who work with early childhood in our preschools and with students with disabilities. We have given very clear advice to our schools on which members of staff that applies to, mostly for those who are providing direct support, direct tuition or direct supervision for those students. That will include, for example, classroom teachers in our support classes. It will include student learning support officers or SLSOs—as you identified—preschool teachers, teachers within our schools of special purpose [SSPs] and a number of specified other roles which I will provide to you on notice.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: The effect of that is that those workers will be required to be vaccinated.

Ms HARRISSON: Can I just clarify that is within the current 12 LGAs of concern. Those workers will be required to be vaccinated; that is correct.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: So that is workers who enter that LGA or workers who are living in that LGA who go elsewhere?

Ms HARRISSON: It is both: whether you live or work in that LGA.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I see. Obviously this is a significant issue in terms of the current public debate around mandatory vaccination, and it is fair to say there is concern amongst the teaching workforce that the Government will move to mandate vaccination for teachers. Can you provide some information about your intentions in relation to that question?

Ms HARRISSON: Firstly, I can provide the Committee some information in relation to the teaching workforce and current vaccination rates across the State. We carried out a survey of our staff last week and asked them about their current intentions around vaccination. We had around 57,000 people respond. Of those, just over 68 per cent had already received a first dose of vaccination. We are delighted to report that our teachers are tracking above the general population in terms of accessing a vaccine, because I will reiterate that the most important thing the adults in the community can do to protect our children is to get vaccinated.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Can I draw you back to my original question, which is about whether the intention of the department is to extend the requirement for mandatory vaccination to its entire teaching workforce?

Ms HARRISSON: I would note that the requirements for mandatory vaccinations are led on Health advice and provided by Health public health orders, and so it is in part really a question for Health in relation to whether or not they would deem mandatory vaccinations a requirement for the safe operation of schools.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Have you had discussions with Health in relation to that?

Ms HARRISSON: I am in discussions with Health multiple times a day, as I am sure the Committee would expect me to be.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I understand—

The CHAIR: At that point we need to move to Mr Shoebridge and keep moving along.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Thanks, everyone, for coming today. I acknowledge the work of all the teachers, in particular, but also the work of the staff in the department. It has been an incredible time of uncertainty and extraordinary efforts have been made, and I acknowledge that on behalf of The Greens. Ms Harrison, do you accept that when parents send their children to school there is a fundamental duty of care and an obligation on the school to ensure that the parents know that their kids will be safe and will be looked after, particularly at a time of crisis like this?

Ms HARRISSON: Certainly, Mr Shoebridge. I think it is important for all of the community to know that our schools should be and are as safe as they can be at this time in relation to the risks that are present across the whole community. We have put in a series of additional measures across our schools. No school is operating as any of us would remember. We have teachers wearing masks across Greater Sydney. We have no external visitors arriving into our schools. We have no external provision. We really have taken a series of measures and a layered approach to protect our students at this time.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I presume that is based upon written advice from NSW Health?

Ms HARRISSON: We have developed a series of guidelines—you may have seen them on our website—that talk about the specific levels of protection we have for COVID-safe operations. They run from one to now four plus in the 12 LGAs of concern. Those levels have been developed in consultation with Health and agreed by Health through the State Emergency Operations Centre as part of the State Government's response to the overall pandemic.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Do you have written advice from NSW Health that you have used to put in place the arrangements you have in schools at the moment, and I assume for future arrangements? Have you got written advice from Health?

Ms HARRISSON: Health have provided advice on all of the guidance documents that we have provided. They have of course asked questions about the appropriateness of different measures and provided us with advice on where we should strengthen measures or otherwise. It has been a joint process to develop those guidelines for our schools.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, I am not trying to be tricky here. Have you got that advice in writing from NSW Health?

Ms HARRISSON: I will refer you to my previous answer. As I have said, we have developed guidance for our schools in conjunction with Health. They have commented and provided their endorsement of those levels and of those guidelines for our schools.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, I do not know why you are avoiding answering this question and I will ask you to answer the question. Have you got written advice from NSW Health that you have acted upon in response to COVID-19 and the measures you have put in place? Have you got written advice from Health?

Ms HARRISSON: I understand the line of questioning and I note that it is a line of questioning that has been provided to other witnesses in other estimates hearings. The Health advice is provided to crisis cabinet. I am not at liberty to comment on the advice provided to crisis cabinet. What I can assure the Committee and the parents and students of New South Wales is that we have put in place COVID-safe operational plans based on Health advice, developed in conjunction with Health, in order to ensure that our schools are operating in a COVID-safe way.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, you say it is based on Health advice and you give the reason for not providing any actual details about the nature of that Health advice as Cabinet-in-confidence. Is that why you are resisting telling us whether or not the advice has been provided in writing; you are relying upon Cabinet-in-confidence?

Ms HARRISSON: Certainly the Health advice provided to the Government on which it bases its decisions is Cabinet-in-confidence. I would reiterate, because I think it is really important, we have developed the guidelines for schools in partnership with Health. They have endorsed those guidelines, they have reviewed those guidelines and they have approved them for use in safe schools. I am not sure what else I can add at this time.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, if you want the parents of students who are very anxious about their kids' health to accept that New South Wales Department of Education is following the Health advice and is guided by the Health advice, surely the best way of doing that is to be transparent and provide to the people of New South Wales the Health advice. Why will you not do that? Is it because there have been compromises, negotiations and an acknowledgement that the reality of the situation [disorder].

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order: I understand the line of questioning by Mr Shoebridge, and certainly the first part of that question was robust and appropriate. But I think when he starts going into the monologue about "Is it because" and then starts to expand on what he believes it may be, that is outside the line of questioning and becomes more of an opinion. That is not permitted.

The CHAIR: I will rule that these have been questions. I say to Ms Harrison that for the purposes of budget estimates it is really not acceptable to this Committee to think that advice that is provided from one department, Health, to another, Education, can somehow be regarded as strictly confidential. If it is coming directly from Health to the education department, I think Mr Shoebridge deserves, the Committee deserves and the people of New South Wales deserve a transparent and straight answer as to the nature of that advice.

Ms HARRISSON: Apologies, Chair, if I was not clear. Our advice is transparent because it is reflected in all of the guidelines that we have published for the safe operations of schools. They are documents we have developed in conjunction and partnership with Health. Those documents have been commented on by Health officials. They have been reviewed by Kerry Chant. They are absolutely endorsed by Health and reflect the Health advice for our schools.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: So provide us with the evidence that shows any of that. Show us the advice from Kerry Chant that says it is endorsed by NSW Health. Show us the comments from NSW Health that allow people to assess for themselves, rather than simply taking you at your word. Why will you not provide that material, Ms Harrison?

Ms HARRISSON: As I have indicated, that material is transparently available in the guidance that we have provided for schools because that has been worked on with Health. I am not sure that there is anything further that I can add to this line of questioning.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, this is about as transparent as a brick. We are in a public health crisis. You will be asking tens of thousands of parents to send their kids back to school on the basis that you have got the Health advice and acted on the Health advice. The only way you will satisfy people's concerns is if you provide the Health advice. Do you not accept that transparency is essential at a time like this?

Ms HARRISSON: I understand the calls for transparency. I am indicating that I think we have been transparent. We have made our guidance publicly available from the beginning. Parents can see the additional measures that we have put in place. They are in line with the measures across the community that are guiding all of our current interactions with other people under stay-at-home orders. We have done that; we have provided that advice. It is transparent. [Disorder].

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, it is simply untrue to say that you have provided the advice. You have put the department's guidance on the website. You have provided the department's documents. You have not provided and you are refusing to provide to this Committee the advice from NSW Health. It is simply untrue to say anything different. You are refusing to do it.

The CHAIR: I am sorry, there needs to be a question.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Why do you persist in telling this Committee that you have been transparent and have provided the advice when in fact it is exactly the opposite: You are refusing to do it? Why do you say that?

Ms HARRISSON: I am sharing with the Committee and trying to assure the parents of New South Wales—I appreciate the challenges—that we have developed advice in line with Health guidance, supported by

Health, reviewed by Health and published on our website. That is what we have done and so that is the position we are in. Ms Owen might be able to provide you some more details in relation to the advice we have engaged in and the conversations we have engaged in with Health. I would also refer you to Dr Chant—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: If Ms Owen will provide the advice, I am happy to hear from Ms Owen. Otherwise I have further questions to you, Ms Harrison.

Ms HARRISSON: If I could finish the sentence I started, Dr Chant, in her evidence earlier this week, indicated that we had been working very closely between the Department of Health and the Department of Education. I think you are hearing that from both myself and from the government's Chief Health Officer. Ms Owen might have further details to provide.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Only if Ms Owen will provide the NSW Health advice. Ms Owen, will you provide the NSW Health advice?

Ms OWEN: Mr Shoebridge, I will just draw the Committee's attention to the documents that are on our website, which are jointly Health and Education advice for our schools, for our parents and for the whole school communities. The Health advice is within the advice that we have published on our websites. It is jointly branded between NSW Health and New South Wales Department of Education. If you refer to them, you will see the health conditions which are provided by NSW Health and the educational settings which are provided by New South Wales Department of Education. They are joint pieces of advice, which are transparent on our website for all of the community.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, in some of your answers to Ms Houssos you said you had received advice from NSW Health about ventilation. Do you accept that there is a huge number of challenges, given the variety of different classrooms across the public schools in New South Wales, in relation to ventilation?

Ms HARRISSON: I accept that we have a very varied State in relation to our schools. I will simply reiterate the advice I have provided to Ms Houssos. We have sought Health advice in relation to ventilation and we have provided that advice to our school communities.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Can you provide the— [*Time expired.*]

The CHAIR: I will commence my questioning, please, with Ms Harrison. It is great to hear that you have had 57,000 responses to your teachers' survey and that 68 per cent of the teachers are already vaccinated at least once. What do the other 32 per cent of the teachers say?

Ms HARRISSON: Ms Cachia will have some further details. We also asked our teachers whether or not they were intending to get vaccinated in the next month and so we have some further details in relation to that, which Ms Cachia can provide.

Ms CACHIA: Yes, as the Secretary said, 67 per cent of respondents had at least one dose. Thirty-nine per cent of those respondents had two doses and 28.2 per cent of those respondents had one dose so far. Thirty-one per cent had no doses so far. But it is important in that context to then look at intent. This survey was voluntary. It was anonymous, so all identification was redacted. Seventeen per cent of respondents had zero doses so far but do intend to get a vaccination in the next month, and 9.4 per cent of respondents had zero doses so far but did not intend to get a vaccine within the next month, bearing in mind that that 9.4 per cent is of the respondents, not of the total workforce. Out of the respondents to the survey, 1.1 per cent said that they are unable to get vaccinated. They would fall into one of the exemptions in the public health order.

The CHAIR: How does the department plan to handle the 9.4 per cent who do not intend to be vaccinated within the next month, and assuming there is a significant group of those who are not intending to be vaccinated at all, would the department support mandatory workplace vaccinations?

Ms HARRISSON: I would just comment on that percentage that we asked the question based on intentions to get vaccinated in the next month. We know that across the community many hold appointments in October for vaccinations, based on when the supply and appointments are available, so I am not sure we are able to draw any conclusions from that percentage. Ms Houssos asked some similar questions around mandation of vaccinations. As I commented at that time, that is a decision for the Government and if required will be a public health order, so therefore a Health issue that we will need to respond to.

The CHAIR: Do you acknowledge, Ms Harrison, it is also a big privacy, work health and safety and also employment issue? What is the attitude of the Department of Education as the employer?

Ms HARRISSON: I think Mr Reardon gave some advice on this issue earlier in the week. Obviously the community debate around mandation of vaccinations is evolving. I would reiterate my evidence from earlier that the best thing that adults can do to protect our children and ensure that our schools are safe is to go and get

vaccinated, so we strongly encourage all of our staff to access an appropriate vaccination for them as soon as they can.

The CHAIR: Does the department accept the advice that has been issued by the Fair Work Ombudsman about the rights of workers? In this case, according to the advice, they are quite substantial rights.

Ms HARRISSON: We obviously recognise the rights of our workers. I would point the Committee in the direction of existing public health orders in relation to mandating of vaccines. They provide a legal basis for vaccinations for the workforces they cover. If there is any move—and I reiterate "if"—by the Government to make a decision to mandate vaccines for teachers, obviously that legal basis would also be required.

The CHAIR: Can we raise the question of student vaccinations? In the Parliament on Wednesday the Prime Minister, waxing lyrical about returns to freedom and what it means, raised the possibility of a return to school as a freedom for the vaccinated. Will we ever get to the point in New South Wales where only vaccinated students can go to school?

Ms HARRISSON: I am not sure it is helpful for the Committee or the community of New South Wales to hypothesise on statements made by the Prime Minister on this issue. I would note that public education systems are run by the State Government and the State Government will take appropriate decisions in relation to how those systems operate.

The CHAIR: Is it your view that, in a universal public education system, no student should ever be locked out of the school for their vaccination status?

Ms HARRISSON: I certainly agree that public education should be available for every student in New South Wales. It is at the very core of what public education is about. I would note that for many of our students there is no opportunity to be vaccinated at this time because there is not a vaccine available worldwide for children under 12 years old.

The CHAIR: Can you rule out mandatory student vaccination in New South Wales?

Ms HARRISSON: I am not in a position to rule anything in or out. As I have said, we are being led by the Health advice and we will continue to be led by the Health advice. It is fair to assume there would be no mandatory requirement for students, particularly where there is no vaccine available for a large number of students.

The CHAIR: At the moment there is a large and obviously significant public campaign for vaccination. But there is also the promise issued by our Premier and also the Prime Minister that in a couple of months' time, when we get to 70 per cent or 80 per cent vaccination rates as outlined by the Doherty report, we will as a society across the board be treating COVID-19 as the equivalent of the flu. Is that also the expectation of the Department of Education as to where we will get to before the end of this year?

Ms HARRISSON: I note the comments by both the Prime Minister and Premier on that, and I will reiterate that we will continue to be led by the Health advice in relation to how that applies to schools across the State.

The CHAIR: Okay, but they are pretty important statements from our New South Wales Premier and also the Prime Minister leading up the National Cabinet, of which we are a part. Is the Department of Education planning around that expectation from the Premier, the Prime Minister and the Doherty report that in a couple of months' time we will as a system of school education be treating COVID as the equivalent of the flu?

Ms HARRISSON: I am not sure it is helpful for me to deal in hypotheticals at this time. I have indicated that the Premier has indicated her intention to talk through plans about the return to school before the end of this week. Once she has done so, I would be very happy to provide further information to the Committee.

The CHAIR: Ms Harrison, you are saying it is not helpful for you. But the Premier of our State has outlined a clear expectation that every parent, student and citizen would be following and expecting to be implemented. In your forward planning, why are you not implementing the Premier's statement—backed by the Doherty report, adopted by the New South Wales Government—that in a couple of months' time COVID will be treated as the equivalent of the flu?

Ms HARRISSON: We are of course involved in planning, we are of course involved with NSW Health in following the health advice and we are of course following the decisions made by crisis cabinet as they relate to education.

The CHAIR: How many schools do we close because of the flu?

Ms HARRISSON: I am not aware that we have closed any schools because of the flu.

The CHAIR: How many students do we ever keep at home because of the flu?

Ms HARRISSON: I will ask Mr Dizdar to provide some further guidance. We would of course ask families generally if children are unwell—especially at this time, we are very clear we would not want anyone with any symptoms coming to school and generally would suggest that it is not in the best interests of a child suffering from flu to attend school. But Mr Dizdar will have some specific details on those requirements.

Mr DIZDAR: I can only add to what the Secretary said by way of saying we have always, in public education, encouraged the health and wellbeing of all our children and students. Anyone that is unwell, we would encourage them to seek medical attention and not be at school.

The CHAIR: Mr Martin, how many HSC subjects have ever been cancelled or exams delayed into November because of the flu?

Mr MARTIN: To my knowledge, there have never been exams delayed or cancelled because of the flu. Though individual schools for other reasons have had exams cancelled for a range of other reasons—bushfires, floods and various other issues—but to my knowledge, not because of the flu.

The Hon. MARK LATHAM: Mr Martin, my last question is: Is the New South Wales Education Standards Authority and its work around the HSC working on the forward planning statement of the Premier, supported by the Doherty report, that in a couple of months time we should be treating COVID as the equivalent of the flu, once we get to the 70 per cent or 80 per cent vaccination rates?

Mr MARTIN: NESA is working on holding HSC written exams this year. We will follow the Health advice of the time, just as the exams are about to begin. We will follow any Health advice that is required.

The Hon. MARK LATHAM: So, you are following the Health advice more than what the Premier has said for forward planning?

Mr MARTIN: We note, of course, the Premier's and the Prime Minister's statements but in relation to conducting a safe high school certificate, it will be the Health advice that we'll follow on the days of the exam.

The Hon. MARK LATHAM: Thank you very much. We will now go back to the Opposition.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I want to return to this question about the survey on the vaccination status. Ms Cachia, you have indicated that the survey was voluntary and that there was obviously not a complete picture of the teaching workforce. What was the point of the survey if it is not going to be used for planning a return to school and looking after the health and safety of your workforce?

Ms CACHIA: I am not sure that I indicated that the survey was not being used for those purposes. Any time we survey our workforce, we do it with a specific purpose in mind. The survey, as I indicated, was voluntary and anonymous, but we did indicate its purpose clearly to participants when they received it since they could make a choice about whether they wanted to participate or not. In that survey preamble, we clearly indicated to potential participants that we would be using the information to give us guidance to see what is happening in relation to vaccinations in our workforce. Information is always useful for those purposes and, yes, that includes—to answer your question more specifically—a safe return to schools, which we are all vested in.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: But because you have chosen that the survey should be voluntary and anonymous, you do not have a very accurate picture, do you?

Ms HARRISSON: Mr D'Adam, if I may comment, I think anyone would agree that over 50,000 responses is a statistically significant sample of our workforce in relation to vaccinations. It is a very significant proportion of our school workforce and so those results do provide us with a reasonable basis on which to plan.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I will take you up on that point then, Ms Harrisson. Tell me then, how do you assess the risk, given that the spread of the virus is very much concentrated in particular geographic areas? You have not asked about geography. You do not actually know where any of the respondents are from. You do not know what schools they are from. You do not know local government areas they are from. How can you possibly assess the risk properly without that information?

Ms HARRISSON: We did ask some information around broad locations and so are able to give some breakdown of that and by school types. So, we were able to give some breakdown. We are also conscious of the time it takes for people to complete such surveys. We have kept it simple. It has given us good insights when added to the Health information about overall community vaccination rates that allows us to make statistical assumptions and use that for planning, moving forward.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I want to ask about the work health and safety dimension of this. Ms Harrisson, you have spoken about being guided by the Health advice, but I have asked previously in this

Committee about work health and safety obligations that the department has in terms of ensuring school safety and it has been confirmed in evidence to this Committee that the Work Health and Safety Act does apply in terms of assuring the safety of students and members of the school community. That obligation sits separate from the operation of the public health orders, so in the absence of there being a public health mandate around vaccination, there is still an obligation there under work health and safety law for you to take reasonable action to assure the health and safety of your workforce and those people who come into contact with the workplaces that are under your direction and control. Do you accept that that is correct?

Ms HARRISSON: I accept that we need to take appropriate and reasonable action. I would point to the Committee to the guidance we have for schools for safe operations at this time—a set of levels that we escalate through based on the Health assessments in different regions. We have seen regional schools operating at level 2 for a period. When that situation changed in Orange, we increased the level of operation of those schools to level 3 in our guidance to schools with tighter restrictions around their operations. When the whole State came under stay-at-home orders, all students are currently on level 4, which is the learning from home and the encouragement for parents to keep their students at home, wherever possible, as outlined in the Health orders. So, we have taken many steps to ensure the safety. I absolutely accept that, and as I have already given in my evidence today, the best thing adults can do to protect children is to get vaccinated. That goes for parents, that goes for the whole community, and it certainly goes for our teachers, which is why we are encouraging our teachers to take up every opportunity to get vaccinated.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Obviously, you are indicating that vaccination is a reasonable measure that could be taken to provide a safe working environment.

Ms HARRISSON: I am saying it is one of the measures, Mr D'Adam. It is one of the many measures of a layered response to this situation.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: It is a reasonable measure, on your assessment?

Ms HARRISSON: It is one of many measures that we can take in order to limit the transmission of COVID in our school communities.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: If you do not take that measure of ensuring that your workforce is vaccinated, are you not exposing the department to potential action under the Work Health and Safety Act?

Ms HARRISSON: I think we are in very uncharted territory on these issues, Mr D'Adam. I note the public debate and the advice from Safe Work Australia and other bodies in relation to the mandation of vaccinations. I note that for no other illness is vaccination mandatory for any of our workforce but I also recognise the current challenges we are in at this time. At this time we are strongly encouraging all of our staff to get vaccinated. We have, in those 12 local government areas [LGAs], increased the opportunity for teachers to get vaccinated to make sure that for those who live in those communities, Health has been very clear. That has been part of the approach to limiting transmission in those communities. We will continue to be led by the Health advice in relation to the role that vaccination will play in a safe return to school.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: The Work Health and Safety Act also has obligations around consultation. What consultation are you undertaking in terms of the response, the Health response, the work health and safety response in relation to the pandemic? How are you discharging your consultation obligations?

Ms HARRISSON: Certainly. I will let Ms Cachia provide some detailed advice on the formal consultation mechanisms we have in place. I would alert the Committee to the fact I am in daily dialogue with representatives from all school sectors, with our own principals, with our own teachers and with the New South Wales Teachers Federation—virtually daily conversations across all. Ms Cachia can provide some further advice.

Ms CACHIA: Yes, we have twice weekly meetings with the federation in addition to other communications that come in, in both writing but also telephone calls, to numerous executives in the department. So there is an ongoing and very frequent dialogue and conversation happening about issues as they arise, including issues that have arisen in the recent public health order affecting those 12 affected LGAs. I think it is important to be really clear about what consultation means in the context of decisions that have not been made, as the secretary has indicated. A lot of these decisions are matters for the Government. They take advice from NSW Health, as do we, and so consultation is discussing hypotheticals at times but, more to the point, the real consultation takes place when a firm decision has been made. Then we talk about the operationalisation of that decision and I think our colleagues at the New South Wales Teachers Federation understand that.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Thank you. I will pass to my colleague.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, I wanted to come back to you. At the moment NSW Health does not put up on its website if schools are sites of transmission. How are the 88 school communities that have been sites for transmission told that there have been positive COVID cases on the school sites?

Ms HARRISSON: I think it is really important for the community to know that they will be notified if there is a community case of COVID that impacts on the school community. We have communication protocols in place where we alert the community any time that we are made aware of a case and Health gives us advice on the level of impact on that community, the level of close contacts and the like. Mr Dizdar can give you examples and specifics of how that plays out any time that occurs.

Mr DIZDAR: Ms Houssos, in each of those cases we receive telephone contact from NSW Health to indicate to us that there is a member of our school community, whether that be a staff member or a student, a cleaner, a contractor or a parent who has tested COVID-positive. We immediately go into a teleconference with the NSW Health officials from the local health authority, with our school principal, with our director in educational leadership, with our Executive Director. NSW Health has interviewed the individual or individuals that are COVID-positive as to their movements [disorder].

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Dizdar, we have limited time this morning. Can you tell me how school communities are notified if there is a positive COVID case? How are school communities notified?

Mr DIZDAR: That is what I would like to unpack, and was unpacking, how each of these cases unfold. If you are just after the contact point, Ms Houssos, we are notified officially by NSW Health on each occasion there is a positive case of COVID-19 in our school communities [disorder].

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: How do you communicate that with parents and students?

Mr DIZDAR: Well, that is what I was trying to unpack, Ms Houssos. I was unpacking the process that takes place. What we do with NSW Health is then work on identifying any close contacts because there may or may not be close contacts. The individual may or may not have been infectious while they were inside the school. If they are infectious and there are close contacts, NSW Health contacts the close contacts and gives them advice; so does the school. We send out a communication to the entire school community via the principal provided by the department and approved by NSW Health that indicates that there has been a COVID positive case in our school community. The school will be non-operational. We say the length of time. The school will be cleaned. Contact tracing will occur and home learning will occur. We give advice from Health about where testing in the area is available and we provide that general health advice as well. On each occasion we communicate to our school community by way of an entire communication, as well as the communication that is required for close contacts. It is quite a thorough process, Ms Houssos.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So that communication goes out to the entire school community, to parents and to students, even if they were not onsite at the time?

Mr DIZDAR: Yes. It is incumbent on us to notify the school community of a positive COVID case whether their children or young people were at school, whether the staff members were all at school or not. It is incumbent on us to notify the entire school community. There is another layer of contact, Ms Houssos, for identified close contacts. They are given further individual contact by NSW Health and guidance as to what they need to do as well by way of isolation, testing, et cetera.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, can you guarantee that this process will continue, even when larger numbers of students return to school?

Ms HARRISSON: Ms Houssos, I can certainly guarantee that any time we are notified by NSW Health of COVID cases in a school community, we will follow this protocol.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Martin, is not holding any HSC exams at all a live option being considered by the NESA Board at the moment?

Mr MARTIN: The intention of the NESA Board, also of the Government, the Minister and the Premier, is that HSC exams occur in 2021 to make as normal as possible the experience of those students, given the experience they have had more broadly this year. So, at this stage we are planning for and preparing for the HSC written exams to occur as usual.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: But, Mr Martin, that might not be the case. Is that not correct? We have seen reports this week that some of the options that are being considered is just the English exam running. Is it true that the NESA Board is considering not running any exams at all at the moment?

Mr MARTIN: I would say that it is unhelpful to speculate based on the media reports. There has been a media frenzy around the HSC this year—virtually daily newspaper articles. A proportion of them managed to

get things correct or accidentally correct. We are going to follow the Health's advice at the time. We are planning to hold HSC examinations in 2021. We think that the best interest of the students is to keep engaged in school, to be focusing on their exams, to be preparing and using this time productively. So rather than speculate on the variety of potential issues that the papers may raise, we are concentrating on having the exams and making sure that we follow the Health advice as we get as close to them as possible.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Mr Martin, the question was very clear. It was about a question of fact. Has the NESAB Board considered this option? It is a really straightforward question.

Mr MARTIN: The NESAB Board has considered all options that relate to the conduct of the HSC this year focusing on the ways in which we can manage to deliver the written exams for those students or for as many students who can get there on the day. So, that is the primary focus of the NESAB Board and in fact it will be meeting again and consistently met—I think 13 times over the last few months—to work through all of the various options to make the experience as usual for students as possible. So, I am not going to speculate on whether this happens or that happens based on newspaper articles. I do not think it is helpful for the students. What we are doing is following the advice of Health and making sure that we can conduct safe and secure written HSC exams.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Martin, I understand that you say speculation is not helpful but surely you understand that HSC students are extremely concerned about the way that exams are going to be conducted, about whether it is going to be safe, and they see rising cases, and they want to know what NESAB is considering. I ask you again: Is holding no exams at all being considered by NESAB?

Mr MARTIN: At this stage, holding no exams at all is not being considered by the NESAB Board because the Health advice indicates that we can run exams based on a range of considerations and factors. We can deliver when the exams are due and the Health advice will follow and we will make sure that we can run the exams at the time. I would say that the problem that is arising for students in uncertainty is driven partly by endless speculation about whether the exams will occur or not. The best thing that students can do—and what their schools and the systems, both unions, and everybody involved in education, including the universities and the Universities Admissions Centre [UAC], are saying is concentrate, prepare, study and expect your written exams to occur. So, it is an unhelpful speculation and I cannot go any further than say we are preparing for the exams and all of those sorts of things are occurring as they would normally occur.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, I think some numbers were given earlier today about the number of public schools that have been closed because of COVID. Can you provide the number of non-government schools that have been closed because of COVID?

Ms HARRISSON: I can provide that information to you on notice. There have also been closures in both the independent and Catholic sectors. I am seeing Mr Dizdar lean forward. That may well mean that he has the detail for us now, Mr Shoebridge.

Mr DIZDAR: Yes, secretary. I can help there. Mr Shoebridge, over the same time period, June to this morning, 27 August, 22 independent schools have been non-operational because of a COVID case and eight Catholic schools.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: And that is since June of this year, Mr Dizdar?

Mr DIZDAR: That is since 1 June until this morning.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Can you give details over the whole of this COVID crisis that we have had since 2020 on notice, unless you have it there?

Mr DIZDAR: I do not have that with me. We can certainly see how we could assist the Committee with that, Mr Shoebridge.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, you heard Ms Cachia's response in relation to consultation with the Teachers Federation. Do you adopt that response that the consultation occurs after the critical decisions have been made?

Ms HARRISSON: I would note both of our evidence that I am in regular contact with the President of the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I am happy to provide my call records to the Committee to indicate just how often we speak. We have a lot of conversations around the issues relating to schools all the time, but particularly at this time, so we do seek advice and input in a range of formal and informal ways to scope and inform our plans. And, of course, once Government has made a decision and we need to work together to implement that decision in the best ways possible for our students and staff, we do so in partnership and through consultation with our stakeholders.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, Ms Cachia was quite specific and quite blunt. She said that the consultation occurs after the decision has been made by Government. Do you accept Ms Cachia's position? Has that come from you, as the head of the department, that style of—you call it consultation—with the union?

Ms HARRISSON: I would refer you to my previous answer to the same question, Mr Shoebridge.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, do you accept that if you want to make a good decision in something as complicated as the New South Wales education system, before you make a decision, you should consult with key players, and one of those key players has to be the Teachers Federation? Do you accept that that is the best way of making decisions for something as complex as the New South Wales education system?

Ms HARRISSON: I absolutely accept that good decisions should be well informed by those across the system. That includes the Teachers Federation, the Secondary Principals' Council [SPC], the Primary Principals' Association, our own principals, the independent sector, the Catholic sector, and we engage in conversations with all of those parties and we do so regularly to inform our plans. Then, once a decision is taken, we will work in partnership to develop the implementation proposals for those plans.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, your formal—you call it consultation—process with the unions is two half-hour meetings a week where you tell them things. That is what happens, is it not? It is two half-hour meetings a week when your executive team tells them things.

Ms HARRISSON: That is not my understanding of how our consultative forum works, Mr Shoebridge. I have not been in those consultative forums. I would note that members of the Committee have also not been in those forums, so I would suggest we are not best placed to suggest what occurs in those, but Ms Cachia certainly is and Ms Owen and can provide those details. They are a consultative forum to seek the views and share information. Ms Cachia, did you wish to provide some further details?

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Oh, they are twice a week. Are they twice a week? Are they twice a week for half an hour each?

Ms CACHIA: I can answer that question, Mr Shoebridge. As I indicated previously we have two formalised meetings. They are twice a week, those meetings. In between those meetings, both the Federation and the department can raise questions for an agenda and we also have, and are, in regular communication. So, the secretary has spoken to the communication she has with the federation and, indeed, to all of our external stakeholders, but we also have regular email, telephone communication. Issues are raised in between those meetings. We prepare answers and they are covered at those meetings and, where necessary, regular phone contact on specific issues.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Cachia, my question was about those meetings. Are they half an hour long each?

Ms CACHIA: Those meetings are, with the agreement of the federation, twice a week for 30 minutes each with matters to be actioned and carried over and dealt with in between those meetings.

Ms HARRISSON: And, Mr Shoebridge, if I could add—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, I do not think—

Ms HARRISSON: —as I look here across my team—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: No, Ms Harrisson, I would really like to move on. We have limited time. Is it true that teachers across New South Wales are going to find out about significant changes to their work over the next three months from that chaotic 11.00 a.m. press conference from the Premier today that there has not been any communication with the teaching staff before what will be announced at 11.00 a.m. today so that they know what is going to happen to their future? They have to rely on upon that chaotic 11.00 a.m. press conference. Is that your plan?

The Hon. WES FANG: Point of order: Chair, I think the opinion that it is a chaotic 11.00 a.m. press conference is somewhat confrontational and opinionated and probably is not suitable for the questioning. I think we could ask the questions without the additions.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I would have added [inaudible].

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: To the point of order—

The CHAIR: Anyway, it does not really add to discuss the nature of the press conference. If Ms Cachia could provide an answer, please?

Ms HARRISSON: I am happy to answer that question, Chair. I would share with the Committee that I have engaged with our school principals to inform our workforce of the changes that impact on them throughout this pandemic actively and in a timely fashion through direct emails to our staff, to our school leadership, through our internal communication channels, through weekly webinars with our principals. We will be holding one of those webinars later today. We have a number of forums in which we engage and inform our staff of the changes that impact on them. Obviously, when Government decisions are made and they affect the whole community, the Government takes decisions about the way it wishes to manage those announcements.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, it is true, is it not, that tens of thousands of public school teachers are going to find out about the future of their health, safety and the future of their employment through this chaotic 11.00 a.m. press conference this morning and you think that is fine?

Ms HARRISSON: I note that it is your words, not mine, in relation to the press conference and I note that the Premier has indicated all week her intention to announce details of a plan for a return to school before the end of the week. There has been good forewarning of that throughout this week. I would note again that I am in regular contact with our principals—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, there is not time for you to repeat things twice within the course of three minutes in this estimates hearing. Ms Harrisson, we want the executive director of health and safety from the department to come to this estimates hearing, but we have been told that that critical position—critical especially in a COVID crisis—has not been filled for months and months. Why was it not filled?

Ms HARRISSON: Mr Shoebridge, they are not the facts and I would ask that the Committee gives us the opportunity to provide the facts before it provides assertions on those facts. We have a current Acting Director of Work, Health and Safety in position but the permanent holder of that role is on extended leave for personal reasons that are not of interest or relevance to this Committee hearing. We have filled that role on an acting basis, as is appropriate. Ms Cachia is here as the deputy secretary, who leads that area and can provide any details the Committee needs.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Have you told that deputy secretary—

The CHAIR: Sorry, I have to interrupt there. [Disorder].

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Have you told them in the last 24 hours that they will have to reapply for their jobs? [*Time expired.*]

The CHAIR: We will have to come back to that after the morning tea break in the next session, Mr Shoebridge. In the time remaining through to 11.00 a.m., could I bring you, Ms Harrisson, to a matter that has come up out of online learning? Earlier this year in mandatory teacher training for child protection purposes [audio malfunction], a scenario was issued to teachers. Scenario five from the Department of Education's *Child protection update 2021* for a hypothetical year 5 boy called Ben reads as follows: "You have a remote learning session with your year 5 class today. During interaction with the students you notice that in the background of Ben's session there is a crack pipe on the kitchen bench. You also noticed yesterday Ben's mother briefly appeared in the background and was slurring her words and appeared intoxicated." It goes on to say, "Because Ben is quiet and perhaps anxious [audio malfunction] online learning, this is a matter where Ben may be at risk of harm and there needs to be a child protection report." My question is to the department: Is this a realistic scenario? Is this really something that teachers are expected to do during an online learning period we have had for every school in the State?

Ms HARRISSON: Chair, firstly, could I flag it was quite difficult to hear you through that question, so could I just confirm that I think you have asked whether a particular part of our child protection training was appropriate and reflected real-life situations our teachers might need to interact with. Is that correct?

The CHAIR: Yes, regarding the sighting of what is supposed to be a crack pipe in this hypothetical scenario. [Audio malfunction] kitchen bench. [Audio malfunction] also noted that Ben's mother briefly appeared in the background the day before and was slurring her words and appeared intoxicated and that this is a matter for a child protection report.

Ms HARRISSON: Mr Dizdar can provide details on that training and the responsibilities of teachers in relation to mandatory reporting of child protection issues. Mr Dizdar?

Mr DIZDAR: Chair, it is a good question. I have been on the child protection committee of the department for a number of years. What we try and do with our annual update training—it is a mandatory training for all our teachers across our system—is to look at real scenarios that have been lived and de-identify them and provide scenario learning for the workforce of what they may come across and encounter. Our workforce has asked us, Chair, for stronger guidance with last year's experience of COVID and learning and teaching from home

around their obligations when conducting Zoom or Teams or Google Classroom lessons synchronously where they may encounter wellbeing or welfare concerns for the young person while they are undertaking the lesson. So I can confirm that the scenarios are generally drawn from real examples that our teachers, our workforce, have lived and can live. It has been a new role for our workforce since last year, teaching and learning from home, and that guidance has been well received in the training.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask with this online learning mechanism if there has been an increase in the number of child protection reports overall by teachers and the department?

Mr DIZDAR: Chair, what I—

Ms HARRISSON: Yes. Can I just confirm what I think I heard was if we could provide advice on the rate of child protection or number of child protection reports the department has made during online learning? Is that correct?

The CHAIR: That is right.

Ms HARRISSON: We can certainly provide those details on notice.

The CHAIR: Can I come to another part of this teacher training module for child protection? In scenario one a boy called Alex in year 3 [audio malfunction] specifically identified that his father is a miner and a farmer and because of a weekend where Alex spends time with his father, Alex has come to school and has hit another child, and for that reason there needs to be a child protection report. Why are farmers and miners being singled out here apropos nothing as a scenario that is good for teaching [audio malfunction] that seems to indicate there is a heightened risk of family violence?

Ms HARRISSON: Chair, I am sorry, you broke up a bit there for us again. We are having a little bit of trouble with the sound but I think, if I can just confirm, the question is that you are referring to another part of the child protection training in which someone has been identified as a farmer and a miner and it is your assertion that there are parallels being drawn in relation to that person's employment status and the content of that guidance. If that is the right question, Mr Dizdar can provide some further information.

Mr DIZDAR: Chair, I do not have the scenario in front of me, but the purpose of these scenarios is to elicit staff discussion around what would be reportable and what would not be reportable. So, I would just take the scenario as you read it. I do not have it in front of me. The primacy of that scenario would be why the child hit the other child. You would look at the welfare and wellbeing around that and the possible discipline around that. It would be irrelevant, the occupational status et cetera that you referred to and that may well be a scenario—again, I do not have it in front of me—where the upshot is that that is not a mandatory reporting requirement. It is simply handled at the school level as a welfare and discipline matter. The purpose of these scenarios, let me repeat, is to elicit discussion in the workforce to know clearly when they should report and when they should not report. The first case you referred to sounded to me like one where the reporting would occur and the second one sounded to me like where the reporting would not occur.

The CHAIR: Thank you. It is now one minute to 11.00 a.m. Given that my audio sounds a bit suspect from what I am hearing in feedback, we might adjourn until 11.15 a.m. to resume questioning and, of course, in the interim listen to what sounds like an announcement about the future of the schools and the HSC. Thanks everyone for your participation. The meeting is adjourned until 11.15 a.m.

(Short adjournment)

The CHAIR: I declare the meeting recommenced after our brief adjournment and we will go to the secretary, Ms Harrisson, to go through the plans announced and the extra clarifying information about the COVID numbers.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Chair, before we proceed with that, I am happy to indicate that we will not be asking any Government questions so that Ms Harrisson's time can be taken as effectively the Government's question time at the end.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That will take us through to 12.45 p.m. Ms Harrisson?

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you. Mr Dizdar, would you like to start by confirming those COVID case numbers that were requested earlier?

Mr DIZDAR: I think Mr Shoebridge asked us the number of schools that have been non-operational from 2020 onwards with COVID. What I can tell the Committee is since 1 March 2020 until this morning there have been 154 schools across all three sectors in total that have been non-operational for face-to-face teaching

and learning because of a COVID case. The breakdown is 107 Government schools, 30 independent schools and 17 Catholic schools.

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you, Mr Dizdar, and thank you for the opportunity to provide a statement on our return-to-school plan following the Premier's announcement just a few minutes ago. Can I say at the outset that this plan has been developed in close partnership with NSW Health and led by our expert education staff within the department. This plan seeks to ensure the safest return to face-to-face learning for our staff and students. We know our students learn best in the classroom and we know parents and schools are anxious for clarity about the weeks ahead. We have put students and staff safety at the centre of our decision-making in developing this plan which enables a staggered return of students to school sites under COVID-safe conditions. In Greater Sydney and other areas currently operating under level 4 restrictions the NSW Health advice is that it is safest for students to return in stages. Students in kindergarten and year 1 will return first, given the importance of developing their foundational learning in their early years and their disrupted experience to date.

Year 12 and HSC students will also be prioritised as they prepare to complete their final year of schooling and transition to further education, training and work. Schools will restrict activities in relation to other established student cohorts. This may be in class, grade or stage groupings, depending on the size and organisation of the school. Schools will consider, where practical, physical distancing and limiting interactions between groups at entry and exit points, transitioning between classes and during recess and lunch breaks to reduce contact between student cohorts and staff. In line with broader community milestones and settings, student cohorts, starting with kindergarten and year 1, will begin face-to-face learning from Monday 25 October under what we are terming level 3-plus operations as long as the appropriate community transmission and vaccination requirements are achieved. Other cohorts will then return to school sites under the same COVID-safe conditions in the following order: years 2, 6 and 11 from 1 November; years 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9 and 10 from 8 November. Year 12 students and those completing the HSC are already able to return in a very limited way and this will continue for the remainder of term 3. From 25 October these students will have full-time access to school campuses and their teachers.

Importantly, if stay-at-home rules are lifted in a local government area or region before 25 October, all students living or learning in that area will return to face-to-face learning under the department's existing COVID-safe level 3 settings as previously established. For instance, if stay-at-home orders are lifted in parts of regional New South Wales from 11 September, we would expect schools in those areas to return to face-to-face teaching and learning for all cohorts at level 3 settings from Monday 13 September. In relation to the HSC exams, these will be delayed until 9 November with a revised timetable and guidelines for a COVID-safe HSC to be released by NESAs in early September. All students sitting their HSC will receive priority vaccination if they are eligible and we will be encouraging all year 12 students from today to be booking in through the new availability with GPs from the Commonwealth part of the vaccination program. We know that this is a particularly challenging time for our year 12 students who are operating under a variety of circumstances across the State. Can I reiterate that NESAs has arrangements in place to ensure no student is disadvantaged due to the impact of stay-at-home orders.

A special illness and misadventure process will ensure equity and fairness for all students. We have confidence in the remarkable resilience being shown by our year 12 students and teachers and we take confidence in what we saw last year. But despite disruption, HSC students still achieved results consistent with previous year groups. In relation to vaccinations, they are a critical element of our plan alongside mask-wearing, reduced mingling between cohorts and staggered start and finish times. We have heard loud and clear from principals, stakeholder groups and school communities that this is fundamental to ensuring confidence in any return to school. For this reason the Premier announced that, as with the aged care and health sectors, mandatory double doses of vaccination will be required for all public school and preschool staff from 8 November and from 25 November for those supporting the staged return of student cohorts onsite. From surveying our schools, we believe around two-thirds of our school-based staff have had at least one dose of the vaccine and more want to be vaccinated as soon as possible. This is ahead of the general community vaccination rates and we applaud and support our staff in this regard.

We are working hard with NSW Health to make sure staff can access an appropriate vaccine regardless of where they live or work across the State. NSW Health will provide priority vaccinations at the Qudos Bank Arena for Greater Sydney school-based school and preschool staff in the week beginning 6 September. School-based staff are also encouraged to make use of the GP network, the pharmacies network and other avenues to be vaccinated with whatever vaccine is available to them and is appropriate for them as soon as possible. Eligible students aged 16 and over are also strongly encouraged to get vaccinated and will be enabled to do so before they return to school. We are also monitoring Commonwealth and State discussions on how the vaccine rollout, following the Prime Minister's announcement just before the break in relation to 12- to 15-year-olds, will commence and be supported for our students. Can I be clear that strict conditions of COVID-safe operations will be required to enable face-to-face learning. The New South Wales return to face-to-face learning for schools under

stay-at-home restrictions has been informed by the *Doherty Institute Modelling Report for National Cabinet* and ongoing advice from NSW Health.

For a return to face-to-face learning at level 3-plus, the following health conditions will need to have been met. Where a local government area has reached required levels of adult double vaccination rates and required levels of community transmission, students return-to-school in cohort groups, with students in kindergarten, year 1 and year 12 as well as those completing their HSC are prioritised and other cohorts to follow. Start and finish times will be staggered with no mixing between cohorts. Any staff member returning to school sites will be required to present evidence of two doses of vaccine from 25 October. Vaccination will be mandatory for all school staff. Priority will be provided to them at the Qudos Bank Arena and in other opportunities across the State to support their access to vaccinations. Eligible high school students will be strongly encouraged to have received two doses of vaccine before they return to face-to-face learning. Areas across New South Wales that are removed from stay-at-home orders will return to school to level 3 settings. Local government areas and suburbs of concern, currently in the south-west and western Sydney, will continue to learn from home until they are removed from being areas of concern.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the delivery of education in New South Wales and around the world. Our students, educational leaders, teachers, staff and families have shown remarkable resilience, capability and flexibility through this time. But while the pandemic has affected everybody differently, there are some clear learnings and common themes emerging from New South Wales and around the world, including the need for students to return to school as soon as it is safe for them to do so because nothing can replace face-to-face teaching in a classroom. Being at school with their teachers and peers is vital for our student wellbeing, social and emotional development as well as their academic achievement.

I am sure the Committee will join me in thanking our hardworking teachers and school leadership teams for their ongoing support of students learning from home. In these unnerving times, teachers and principals have provided our students and one another with remarkable support. Their efforts have taken place in the face of great uncertainty and anxiety and are sincerely appreciated. I want to also thank our staff in the department for their support to our teachers to enable them to provide the best possible learning-from-home experience for students. Teachers have told us that the support provided through professional development resources, webinars and guided learning packages has been critical to support them in serving their communities. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to outline the details of our return-to-school plan, which has been created to provide for a staggered return of face-to-face learning under COVID-safe conditions. I note that we will be working through the public health orders over coming days in relation to some of these issues but will seek to answer the Committee's questions as thoroughly as possible.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Harrison. We will now go to the Labor Opposition, please.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thanks very much, Chair, and thanks for the opportunity to ask these questions. Ms Harrison, I wanted to ask you about two terms that you used in your statement then—"appropriate community transmission" and "vaccination targets". Can you just outline what that will mean for schools?

Ms HARRISSON: Yes. Firstly, we are working with Health in relation to the appropriate definition of low community transmission. We are looking at evidence across the world for definitions that have been applied. I note the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] in the United States have provided some definitions. We are also working with them around the vaccination target. If you look at the current rates of uptake of vaccinations in New South Wales, if we continue on this trajectory we will exceed 70 per cent double-dose vaccination by the time we are looking at this return-to-school plan.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So the 70 per cent double-dose vaccination is the prerequisite for schools to return. Is that correct?

Ms HARRISSON: It is expected that it will be at least that by the time schools return.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: And if we do not?

Ms HARRISSON: The individual circumstances by LGA will be the decision-making basis for that return to school. Our strong message to communities is for parents to get vaccinated, clearly for teachers to get vaccinated and to ensure that we can have students return to school safely.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Just to be clear, irrespective of whether the 70 per cent vaccination rate is within the LGA, that will not be the applicable thing that will cause students not to return; it will be the community transmissions.

Ms HARRISSON: As I indicated we are continuing to work with Health on the specific definitions. We would expect a number of communities to be way above 70 per cent by the time we get to 25 October and I am happy to provide further detail of that on notice.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Okay, but this is a very significant announcement that you have just made. You have said that students will be back in the classroom from 25 October but it seems to me that you have said that students in the local government areas of concern will not be returning on 25 October. Is that correct?

Ms HARRISSON: Any LGA that is identified in the public health orders as an LGA of concern will not be returning under this plan until they are removed from being LGAs of concern.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So as it stands at the moment, if the current 12½ local government areas of concern remain areas of concern then those students will not return on 25 October.

Ms HARRISSON: That is correct.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Then what is the criteria for those students to return back to school?

Ms HARRISSON: The first threshold will be that they are no longer classified as an LGA of concern.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Okay, so that will be NSW Health advice?

Ms HARRISSON: It is NSW Health advice in relation to the public health orders and how LGAs are categorised, yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, you would accept that these are some of the most disadvantaged areas in New South Wales that are going to remain learning at home. What additional efforts are you putting in place now to support those students?

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you for the question because I really do want pay tribute to our teachers across those LGAs who have done absolutely exceptional work in supporting their students and families. They know their students and communities exceptionally well and they are providing broad support for all of their needs. Mr Dizdar can give you some specific examples of the way those communities are being supported in their learning.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Before Mr Dizdar answers, Ms Harrison, I am not asking about the incredible efforts of teachers. I am not asking about the teachers who are going above and beyond. I am asking what additional resources will the Department of Education commit to today, given that today's announcement as it stands will not apply to some of the most disadvantaged areas in Sydney?

Ms HARRISSON: Certainly. As I said, we are providing that support now and will continue to provide that support. Mr Dizdar can provide examples if the Committee is interested in what is happening in those communities. We are also providing, via our department teams, guided learning packages for all students from kindergarten through to year 6. We have as recently as yesterday added to those resources with support for preschool learners and are seeking to build up further resources for those in high school. They provide both online and work packages that can be printed by schools to support that additional learning. Mr Dizdar, as I said, can provide examples of the learning being offered in those communities.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, we have very limited time. I would like to just ask you another question. Does that mean that HSC students in the local government areas of concern will not be able to return to school at all if they remain local government areas of concern?

Ms HARRISSON: Yes, their access to school will be limited if they remain LGAs of concern.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Sorry, HSC students will not be able to return to school if they are in a local government area of concern.

Ms HARRISSON: I am sure the Committee will appreciate, and I note from our earlier questions, just how fundamental and central the health advice is to our plans in terms of safely returning students to school. The current advice from Health is for us not to allow HSC students in those 12½ LGAs back onto school sites so we are not doing so. That position is unlikely to change unless the overall community health position in those communities also improves.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: How will they sit the exams?

Mr DIZDAR: I might just add, Secretary, this might be of benefit to the Committee, Ms Houssos. The identified LGAs—our schools are providing HSC continuity of teaching and learning. It would be remiss to think

that the HSC course for those students is not continuing. It is the face-to-face component on site that is not the case. [Inaudible] also running synchronous lessons of the timetable. Many schools that I have come across in those identified LGAs have safety net welfare and wellbeing structures that are being provided for those year 12 students. Many have pivoted around the trial examinations and either run them online or run alternative tasks.

I also just remind the Committee that it is week seven of term three and many of the HSC courses in many of our contexts have actually been completed by way of teaching and learning to meet the syllabus outcomes. Our students and teachers are in the throes of revision, refinement and practising for the actual HSC exams. I just want to call out the remarkable work of the profession on the ground in those identified LGAs because every secondary teacher in this State puts the primacy of HSC students first and it is remiss of the Committee—remiss of society—to think those children are not having continuity of teaching and learning. We as a department recognise that it is not quite the same. Every educator recognises it is not quite the same as being on site and face to face but we have connected with these year 12 students through the schools, we have connected with teachers and leaders—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Dizdar, I am going to stop you there. I understand about learning at home. I too—

Mr DIZDAR: [Disorder].

The CHAIR: Mr Dizdar, because of the time constraint we need shorter answers. You are now covering old terrain. Ms Houssos and Mr D'Adam had an important question as to how those students will sit the HSC.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That is exactly what I was about to say. Ms Harrison, how will students in local government areas of concern sit their HSC exams if they are not allowed to attend school?

Ms HARRISSON: Firstly, we have been working hard to give access to vaccination for those year 12 students to give them the best chance of sitting their HSC safely at that time. Mr Martin can provide some further advice in relation to the ongoing work with NSW Health to ensure that we have COVID-safe plans in place for examinations.

Mr MARTIN: The date of 9 November is predicated on students having access to vaccinations and teachers being fully vaccinated. The timing of the ninth is related around the vaccination program. The first HSC exam, which is generally the English exam on the ninth, some 70,000 students will be able to go for their English exam because we will anticipate the vaccination rates to have reached what the targets are. We will have really strict protocols in place for those students at the exam rooms—numbers of students in rooms, the invigilation, mingling before and after, mask wearing. Whatever the health requirements are of that day and of that time, we will follow. The students in the lockdown LGAs with the capacity to be vaccinated by that time will be able to sit those HSC exams. That is the plan we are working to.

Ms HARRISSON: Ms Houssos, if I may clarify those targets. It is our expectation that communities where schools open will have a minimum double dose vaccination rate of 70 per cent. The information we have from Health based on current trajectories is that by 25 October we will have exceeded that 70 per cent double-dose rate in the community. I think the Government has been clear throughout that its plans for reopening are contingent on vaccination rates and so we urge everyone to therefore go out and get vaccinated.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: On that point, Ms Harrison, can I just clarify—that is 70 per cent of the adult population. Is that the metric that you are—

Ms HARRISSON: That is correct.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: So it does not necessarily cover the student population being vaccinated at anything like those numbers.

Ms HARRISSON: Yes. You would appreciate that it is only as of today that the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation has approved the vaccination for 12- to 15-year-olds, so at this point that is not factored into the modelling around the 70 per cent vaccination rates.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I ask about the accommodation requirements in social distancing, in particular, for the K-1 cohort? How is that going to be facilitated? How are you going to maintain social distancing? We know that young kids are susceptible to contracting the virus. They will not be vaccinated. We know that even vaccinated adults can still contract the virus, so there are clearly health and safety risks associated with that proposal. How do you mitigate that?

Ms HARRISSON: Some of our younger learners pose these risks for a range of issues. This is no different to that. I would add that we are staggering start times and finish times to reduce mingling between cohorts and groups. We will be encouraging primary school students to wear masks as part of this return. We think that is

an important part of what we can do. It is going to be encouraged because we recognise the challenges of securing a mask onto a kindergartener throughout a day but our intention is to provide for that wherever possible. I would also just say that these risks must be balanced against the other risks posed to this cohort of students. I have a kindergarten child at home myself. The lack of social interaction, engagement with a teacher, however strong—and I am fortunate that she is receiving exceptional learning-from-home support from her school—poses our kids a different set of risks. So certainly with the health advice we are seeking to balance all of those risks in an appropriate and safe way back to the classroom. Mr Dizdar can give some more information on the social distancing.

Mr DIZDAR: Mr D'Adam, as you would know, the staggered return is a great advantage here for our primary context in being able to space out kindergarten classes across the school and then year 1 across the school. You would also know, Mr D'Adam, as would the Committee, that the class size policy which is in agreement with the NSW Teachers Federation has class sizes of no more than 20 and 21—20 in kindergarten and 21 in year 1. So it is not like a classroom of 30 year 6 students. That enables with the younger learners solidifying the concept of distancing.

The staggered return also gives us the opportunity to distance the adults in their staffroom and in their staged spaces, alongside the other health settings and health requirements that the secretary outlined. When we are full school population, hopefully, with the right health settings in place and we are on top of COVID hopefully, that allows us to utilise our experiences last year where we stagger pick-up and drop-off times, we stagger recess and lunch times and we have got good history of being able to do this particularly in a large context. We have got large year groups being able to do that in a practical way and in a contextual way in the school context. Where my child attends kindergarten, for example, there are four entry points to that school and last year that school used all four of those entry points during COVID to stagger the year groups' entry, for example.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Mr Dizdar, surely you would appreciate—

Mr DIZDAR: The schools have good identified ways.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Surely you appreciate that the parameters that applied last year and the kinds of measures that were effective last year clearly do not cut it with the Delta variant. How have you changed up to take account of the enhanced risk? The risk is much greater now in the transmissibility of this variant and it seems that the department is intent on relying on the same approaches that were applied in a completely different context.

Ms HARRISSON: Mr D'Adam I do not accept the premise of—

Mr DIZDAR: That is a very good point but I do not accept that I am saying the same premise. I am saying schools can rely on some of those learnings from last year to put them into action this year. The secretary has made quite clear what will be ramped up health requirements for that return to school. So I am not proclaiming it is the same; I am saying some of those learnings are fruitful when we work on a staggered return in a school context.

Ms HARRISSON: Mr D'Adam, if I may, the differences from last year are that we have a vaccination for the adult population. The differences from last year are that we are requiring masks to be worn in all high school settings, indoor and out, in primary schools by staff and for primary school students to be encouraged to wear masks. These are different settings that we are dealing with. I would also note that it is really important that people refer to the experts in relation to the transmissibility and seriousness of the illness for children. That is certainly what we will be doing and have been doing and we will continue to do.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Ms Harrisson, what happens to those teachers who are unable to be vaccinated? What is your plan for them?

Ms HARRISSON: Obviously we are aware that for some individuals who may have reactions to vaccines or medical reasons why they cannot be vaccinated we will need to put measures in place to support them. The best support for them in a school environment is for all of their colleagues to be vaccinated, if they are unable themselves to be vaccinated. So it is for their protection also that we will be requiring the rest of staff to be vaccinated. For those who refuse to be vaccinated it will not be possible for us to maintain their employment in a school setting under this public health order.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: For those who are unable to be vaccinated, can you give them an assurance that they will not be medically retired and that they will be accommodated within the system?

Ms HARRISSON: Certainly if someone is unable, for medical reasons, to be vaccinated they will be supported in their school environment by their colleagues being vaccinated in the same way that they are currently

for other illnesses and they will be supported by the system with non-classroom-based duties as and when and if that is appropriate for them.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, can I just press you on the local government areas of concern. You said in your statement that you are looking across the world for definitions and then you said it was if local government areas were removed from the areas of concern. So what is the criteria as it stands at the moment and will that change?

Ms HARRISSON: Firstly, it is NSW Health under public health orders who determine whether an LGA is of concern in relation to the spread of COVID or not. That is not my area of expertise nor my area of decision-making. In relation to the return-to-school plan we will be looking out for all those other LGAs under existing stay-at-home orders outside those areas of concern, for high vaccination rates and for low community transmission, initially looking—and we are confirming with Health—at the CDC definition of community transmission of 50 cases per 100,000 head of population.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Fifty cases per 100,000 head of population. What happens if those local government areas of concern do not ever reduce to fewer than 50 cases per 100,000 head of population?

Ms HARRISSON: That will depend on a number of factors—firstly, the health advice and whether or not Health determines that those areas no longer need to be considered LGAs of concern. I would note this is an evolving situation and it will continue to evolve and I am sure the health advice and understanding will continue to evolve. And that will be the advice that we will be led by for those communities.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Is Mr Martin online?

Ms HARRISSON: He is, yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: He is having some difficulties connecting so I might come back to him. Ms Harrison, this CDC definition of 50 cases per 100,000 head of population, how often is that and over what period?

Ms HARRISSON: I will need to confirm that with NSW Health as it will be their measure of community transmission that we rely upon.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Sorry, I just wanted to be clear. Ms Harrison, perhaps you can answer this. Are HSC students in lockdown LGAs allowed to attend the English exam only if they are vaccinated?

Ms HARRISSON: We have not mandated any vaccination requirements for students. We have simply tried to ensure that every student in those LGAs who is sitting their HSC examinations this year has had an opportunity to get vaccinated, as part of the broad community health response but also to ensure that they are best placed to be able to sit their exams safely come November.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Is it the expectation that the full HSC will occur in November?

Mr MARTIN: I should answer that, Secretary. As indicated by the Premier today, the new exam timetable will be produced by NESA by mid-September. I know that it will be not necessarily welcomed but I am not going to speculate at all in relation to that exam timetable. The students need a level of certainty. We have given them 9 November. We will give them an exam timetable after the committee has met. We will have a look at the logistics of the 70,000 students who have to sit the exams and we will produce something that gives them certainty as soon as possible. But rather than speculate on the media reports, et cetera, I prefer to say, as the Minister and the Premier did, mid-September new exam timetable.

The CHAIR: Because of the wi-fi problems in Parliament House I have stopped my video but hopefully my audio is still okay.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: My question is to either Mr Dizdar or Ms Harrison. Mr D'Adam was asking about the health advice and the safety of having kindergarten and year 1 students back on 25 October and he was concerned about how you could ensure social distancing and the like. The answers came back that there were expected to be higher vaccination rates among students and there would be mask wearing for primary school and above. Neither of those respond to the concerns Mr D'Adam had about kindy and year 1 students. What does the health advice say about the risk of transmission amongst that cohort on and from 25 October?

Ms HARRISSON: I think that would have to be a question for NSW Health, Mr Shoebridge. What I can say to the Committee today is that our advice remains the same: The best thing anyone can do to protect our youngest population at this time is for the adults to be vaccinated, which is what I referred to in my answer to Mr D'Adam. That is critical. The social distancing of kindy and year 1 students is of course difficult but we are looking at layers of measures of protection in our schools to provide the safest environment possible. And the

safest environment possible is one where all those adults are vaccinated in order to help stem any transmission of COVID. I would indicate that, of course, that will be as safe as, if not safer than, some of the other community settings that those young people might be in. I think it is really important we put this in the context of the broad community and the risks overall to our young people. Of course, if you wish to follow that question up with Health I am sure they will be able to provide you with some information.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, I want to be clear. My question is to the education department. You will be asking parents to send their kindy and year 1 students back to school. I think all of us are desperately keen to see the earliest possible safe return to school. But those parents deserve to know what the risk of transmission is of COVID amongst their kindy and first class kids. I am asking you now. What does the health advice say is the risk of transmission when those kids return on 25 October?

Ms HARRISSON: Mr Shoebridge, I appreciate and understand your question. I am sure you will also appreciate how challenging a question that is to answer because in different communities the rates of transmission will be different, which is why we have put in a threshold of low transmission of cases in a community in order to support this return. The transmission rates in any given school community will be correlated and related to the levels of transmission within the broader community. So I cannot provide you today a breakdown by LGA of those transmission rates and what the prediction will be as far out as 25 October or even what that prediction might be today.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: If you cannot predict what the transmission rates will be at 25 October, why is it that you keep saying that there will be this return on 25 October? Are you saying there will be a return on 25 October but only if the transmission rates are lower than that CDC figure that you gave. Is that your position?

Ms HARRISSON: I am not sure if you heard my previous answer but, yes, it is our intention that schools will only return in communities where vaccination rates are high and community transmission is low.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: You have been given advice from Health about what the risk of transmission is of COVID-19 for kindies and first class kids, I assume? You have been given that advice by Health?

Ms HARRISSON: We have been given advice by Health on the best ways to mitigate those risks that are present across the community for our young people. We have taken that advice to the extreme of mandating vaccinations for our staff because we think it is so important for the adults around those students to ensure their safety and the best way we can do that is to ensure that the adults around them are vaccinated.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: You will not tell us what the health advice is about the risk of transmission, though, of unvaccinated infants, kids in kindy, first and second class. You will not tell us what the NSW Health advice is about the risk of transmission. Can you understand how utterly frustrating that is?

Ms HARRISSON: I can certainly sense your frustration.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: No, let me finish, Ms Harrisson. For parents who will be sending their kids to school they want to know what the risks are. They want to take those responsible decisions as parents and you are not giving them the information. Can you understand how frustrating that is?

Ms HARRISSON: Mr Shoebridge, I understand the frustration you are voicing. What I also understand is that parents want to see their students back at school in a manner which is safe and as safe as the rest of the community. We are putting measures in place to ensure that safety. We are putting measures in place to ensure that the adults around them when they are at school will be vaccinated. We are putting measures in place to ensure that cohorts do not mix. We are putting measures in place that require mask wearing by our students. We are putting measures in place across the board to minimise those risks in our school settings and maximise the educational opportunities for our students. If you wish to get further advice on the nature of community transmission, I am not the expert in that and it would be inappropriate for me to try to provide—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, I am not asking about community transmission; I am asking about transmission in the workplaces and the spaces that you control, which is the classrooms of New South Wales schools. And you are not giving me the answers because you say it is Cabinet-in-confidence. Is that right?

Ms HARRISSON: I have already indicated that the community transmission and any potential risk of transmission in schools are inextricably linked, Mr Shoebridge. It is not possible for me to comment on what may be a risk in a school unrelated to the risk in the broader community. But I can assure parents of New South Wales that we have a layered response in place to protect the wellbeing of our students and to ensure that our school systems have the most appropriate settings in place. I would say to the Committee that there is no jurisdiction in the world who will have achieved the vaccination rates that our community will have achieved before our students go back. We are in an incredibly positive position. We are looking at very low community transmission rates in

order for those school communities to return, again to ensure that the environment in which students are going to school is absolutely as safe as we can make it.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, have the team in the health and safety directorate, who have been working 18 hours a day trying to come up with health and safety solutions for schools, been told that they have to reapply for their jobs?

Ms HARRISSON: Firstly, I would reiterate that department staff across the organisation are working exceptionally long hours in support of our school communities and that is exactly what we think the Department of Education is here to do. Yes, we are looking at some changes in relation to our corporate services structure that Mr Withey can provide you some further details on.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: No, Ms Harrisson, it is a very simple question. Have you told the health and safety directorate in the middle of this—the people who have been working 18 hours a day to try to deal with this health and safety crisis—that they all have to reapply for their jobs? Have you done that?

Ms HARRISSON: I just indicated that Mr Withey can provide you with some further information, Mr Shoebridge, if you would allow him to answer.

Mr WITHEY: The answer to that, Mr Shoebridge, is, no, they have not.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Have they been told that their department is being restructured and that they will have to reapply for their jobs? They have not been told that. Is that right, Mr Withey?

Mr WITHEY: At the moment there are a number of things happening across the corporate services parts of the department. As we discussed at the last estimates hearing in March, the rest of the department undertook a realignment process in September 2020.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I am sorry, Mr Withey, our time is limited here. I have asked you about the health and safety directorate, so if you would limit your answer to that. I will then ask you about the IT directorate.

Mr WITHEY: As my previous answer pointed to, Mr Shoebridge, nobody in the health and safety directorate has been asked to reapply for their jobs.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Have they been told that it will be restructured and they will have to reapply for their jobs? And has the same happened in relation to IT? And if not, what is happening in that space?

Mr WITHEY: As my previous answer started to unpack, we are undertaking a raft of work at the moment across the corporate services of the department to look at ensuring we are well set up to deliver good and effective support to our schools, our principals and our teachers. As part of that we continue to look at the structural aspects of corporate services and within operations group, which to be very clear does not include the health and safety directorate—the health and safety directorate sits in the people group under Ms Cachia. Within Operations Group we are undertaking a process at the moment where we are looking at a placement process for public service senior executive roles.

That does not include the health and safety directorate. There will be some changes to reporting lines that result from those changes which will see some changes to the reporting responsibilities in relation to how we build resilience across the department and across our workforce. That will mean the creation of a new resilience team within the operations group but again, to repeat, it will not require any changes to jobs within the health and safety directorate.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Can you provide the written advice that was given to—

The ACTING CHAIR: Mr Shoebridge, I advise that Mr Latham has had connection issues again so as Deputy Chair I will be taking over chairing the meeting at this time.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Will you provide on notice the advice given to staff this week about those restructures and changes?

Mr WITHEY: We are currently engaged in a consultation process about some of those changes. That process will kick off on Monday. The conversations this week have taken place with the public service senior executive cohort within the operations group and people group and I am very happy to provide some of those details on notice.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I am not sure who is the best to answer what the number of COVID outbreaks have been in early childhood centres in New South Wales since the outbreak of this COVID crisis. Ms Harrisson, I will put it first to you and you may direct it where appropriate.

Ms HARRISSON: I would note firstly that our early childhood services have continued throughout this pandemic to serve their communities and families. They have kept open their doors and we thank them for the support that they have provided to communities across the State. Ms Owen can give you those details.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Owen, my question was about the numbers.

Ms OWEN: Yes, the numbers of early childhood centres that have closed due to a positive COVID notification. From 1 June forward we have had notification of 314 early childhood centres closed due to a positive COVID case and 52 family day care centres. So in total, 366.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Owen, is that from 1 June this year?

Ms OWEN: From 1 June this year to this week.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Do you have details on the numbers for the whole of this crisis? I think Mr Dizdar gave numbers coming from 1 March last year in relation to schools. Do you have those numbers?

Ms OWEN: No, I will have to take that one on notice.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: With more than 350 childcare centres closing, how many centres have indicated to you that they are in such financial distress that they are likely to not reopen? What is the state of the sector, Ms Owen?

Ms OWEN: As Ms Harrisson said, we are talking very regularly to the sector and I hear genuine concerns from the sector about the stress that they are under for a variety of reasons, from attendance rates, from participation and from workforce stresses. We are working with them to ascertain what support we can give them. As far as we have been actually notified, only three services have notified us that they do not intend to reopen.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Owen, given that there have been notifications and closures in some 350-odd early childhood centres, I assume you are taking steps to ensure that the staff in those centres have priority access to vaccination. Is that the case?

Ms OWEN: That is the case, Mr Shoebridge, yes. As you might be aware, during the time we made vaccinations available to our teaching population in the LGAs of concern. That offer was extended to early childhood staff in the same LGAs and as we move forward—as we prioritise teaching and school workforce—early childhood workforce will be included in those prioritisations, including the Qudos Arena vaccination prioritisation that Ms Harrisson mentioned earlier. We recognise the importance of the early childhood workforce in looking after children across New South Wales.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: So the early childhood workforce will be included both in the week of priority access for teachers and also in the day at the Qudos stadium. Is that right?

Ms OWEN: In all offers to school workforce, in terms of vaccine prioritisation, early childhood workforce will be included.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: What is the current rate of vaccination amongst the early childhood workforce?

Ms HARRISSON: I think the Committee would appreciate we do not employ the early childhood workforce and do not have available to us information in relation to their vaccination status. I would reiterate that even in those LGAs of concern our early childhood services have remained open and that the number of cases in those areas reflects the fact that they have been open. We are strongly encouraging staff—and have been for a number of weeks—to get vaccinated. We have provided priority access to vaccinations in south-west Sydney. We are extending that prioritisation for a week at Qudos Bank Arena from 6 September.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: So from 8 November it will be mandatory for teachers to be vaccinated. I am assuming that includes teachers across all systems, government and non-government. Is that correct?

Ms HARRISSON: That is correct. It is a requirement for all teachers in all settings.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Given we have had some 350 early childhood centres closing because of COVID, is the same directive going to be issued in relation to early childhood workers?

Ms HARRISSON: Firstly, I would note there is already a mandatory vaccination requirement in place for early childhood workers in those 12 LGAs of concern and, yes, that is being extended to the whole workforce.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Is that from the same date—8 November?

Ms HARRISSON: Yes, from the same date.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Are there arrangements in place if teachers have an adverse reaction to vaccination that they will have paid leave or access to workers compensation from the department?

Ms HARRISSON: I will refer to Ms Cachia on this matter. I would note that it is an emerging area of legal consideration. Ms Cachia might be able to provide some further detail.

Ms CACHIA: I will take it in two sections because you have raised the liability issue in terms of the insurance—just so that I am clear on the question—but you have also raised the issue about people taking sick leave or leave if they have an adverse reaction. On the first piece around leave, recently the department issued guidance to employees to say that in order to facilitate their vaccination there were two hours of special leave available. There is also other flexible leave that people can take to go and get vaccinated. If they were to have an adverse reaction to a vaccination, they obviously have sick leave available to do that as well. In relation to the issue about public liability, as the secretary indicated, this is new terrain. I think all agencies across the New South Wales Government are very much seeking guidance, looking at the health advice, considering the risk and getting legal advice on these issues. The issue of public liability is a matter for, in many respects, with relation to insurance—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Cachia, it is simple question. If teachers are required to be vaccinated for their work and then have an adverse reaction and there is any kind of significant health issue, will they be protected? Will they be protected under either workers compensation or under other departmental policies? It is a very simple question.

Ms CACHIA: Yes, and I was actually getting to the answer but I just needed to explain some context, Mr Shoebridge. Just to polish that off or finalise the answer to the question, they would be able to apply for workers compensation. The issue of how that claim is determined and the liability questions, that is a matter for icare.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: So the department has not got advice and you cannot tell teachers that if there is an adverse reaction they will be covered. You are not in a position to do that. You say, "You can make an application but whatever happens to that application is a matter for icare."

Ms CACHIA: Mr Shoebridge, that is not what I am saying. You asked me to give you a view about liability and I am respectfully just simply pointing out that I do not know what icare is going to decide or determine in relation to that. I absolutely want to make it clear that of course the department will look after its staff. Of course the department will take claims if there is an adverse reaction to a vaccination. Those are general matters that we take very seriously, but I cannot make a determination as to how icare is going to treat—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I am not asking you to be icare. We will move on. Ms Harrisson, one of the key indicators under your school success model is attendance. Is that right?

Ms HARRISSON: That is correct, yes.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Can you tell me what the attendance rates have been for schools during this lockdown period or during last year's lockdown period?

Ms HARRISSON: Certainly, Mr Dizdar will be able to give you a breakdown. We have in place additional monitoring of attendance, given we have students learning from home. Mr Dizdar will be able to provide you with some further detail on that.

Mr DIZDAR: Mr Shoebridge, what I can indicate to you is at the moment—and this has been quite stable—95 per cent of our students across New South Wales in public schools are learning from home. In the 12 priority LGAs, Mr Shoebridge, 98 per cent of our students are learning from home. If you want me to give you a breakdown for primary and secondary I can. For primary schools it is about 8 per cent of our student population that are on site. For our secondary schools it is about 1 per cent of our student population that are on site. And for our special schools it is about 13 per cent of our student population that are on site.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Mr Dizdar, at the Public Accountability Committee hearing you told us you had no visible data on the number of kids who are online at any point. Can you tell us what this attendance—*[Time expired.]*

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrisson, referring to the teachers' survey of vaccinations, did casual teachers participate in that survey?

Ms HARRISSON: I will ask Ms Cachia to provide details of who was asked to contribute to the survey.

Ms CACHIA: I believe so but I will confirm that and take it on notice.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Would you be able to come back to us today if possible?

Ms CACHIA: I will endeavour to do that, Ms Houssos.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, I just wanted to come back to the question of the criteria for students learning at home or learning face to face at school. You have said that, at the moment, local government areas of concern will be the criteria for students learning at home. You also talked about the CDC requirements—50 cases per 100,000 population. I have just had a quick look. That is over a 14-day period. With some rough calculations, at the current rates that would mean that the children in Burwood, which is a local government area of concern, do not meet that CDC criteria but the students in Camden do. They have over 100 cases per 100,000 people in the community. Will this be an additional requirement on top of the local government areas of concern or will it simply be the local government areas of concern?

Ms HARRISSON: For clarity for the Committee and the community, can I say that there are a number of factors at play here. First, if you are in a community and a stay-at-home order is lifted, you may return to school fully. If you are in a community where stay-at-home orders remain and you are not an LGA of concern, the staged return to school will occur. If you live in an LGA that is an LGA of concern, and remains an LGA of concern, we will not be returning to face-to-face learning in those LGAs until the public health order changes and they are removed from being LGAs of concern. That is based on the health advice and Health is the institution that determines and provides advice to Government on whether areas should remain local government areas of concern.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: When you say a staged return, does that mean a full-time return from 25 October or 1 November or 8 November?

Ms HARRISSON: So for kindy and year 1 it is a staged return from 25 October. We will be providing schools with flexibility to stagger their start time and pick-up times to minimise mixing and mingling between cohorts and between adults at the school gate and then in the subsequent weeks those additional year groups will be able to return.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That is to full-time learning?

Ms HARRISSON: It is expected to be close to full-time learning, with those caveats that I just provided around the flexibility provided to schools to stagger their start and finish times accordingly.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Let me be clear, it will be five days a week with staggered start and finish times?

Ms HARRISSON: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: We talked about the local government areas of concern.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I just wanted to clarify, Ms Harrison, in terms of the vaccine mandate, that is all sectors? Is that correct?

Ms HARRISSON: That is correct.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: And it is the whole workforce? It is not just teachers?

Ms HARRISSON: The whole workforce, yes. It is anyone who is working in and around students. As I said from the beginning of this hearing, the best protection we can provide for the youngest people in our community is for the adults to get vaccinated. And along with Health, we think that is a really important prerequisite for the safe opening of schools.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Just on that point, I want to come back to the issue that Mr Shoebridge raised about adverse reactions and casual employees. Casual employees will be mandated to be vaccinated. They can often work across sectors. How will that work in terms of workers compensation liability? Who is actually liable in relation to an adverse reaction in that circumstance? What advice would the department provide in relation to the impact for casual teachers?

Ms HARRISSON: Can I just clarify the question, Mr D'Adam? You are asking: How would the adverse reaction to receiving a vaccination be considered under work health and safety provisions for staff?

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: They are required to do it for their work, they have an adverse reaction—it might be a mild one; they might be unable to work for a couple of days—who do they lodge a workers compensation claim with in that circumstance?

Ms HARRISSON: I would ask Ms Cachia to respond. I would just flag that we are in an evolving area and that we will, of course, be referring claims in the public system through to icare. Ms Cachia can provide some further information.

Ms CACHIA: Ms Houssos, I have confirmation that casuals were part of that vaccination survey, if that is of assistance. Mr D'Adam, in relation to your question, when a casual teacher is asked to get vaccinated under a public health order it would follow that if there is an adverse reaction to that that they would be able to avail themselves of a compensation scheme. That is my understanding. As the secretary noted, this is new terrain and I think we would need to take on notice the decisions that arise as a consequence of that. But that would generally be broadly in line with the expectation that follows from a mandatory vaccination.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I appreciate that, but obviously there is a time frame here and so there will be casual teachers who are meeting that advice in a very short period if they are going to go out and seek vaccination and could be facing this situation tomorrow perhaps.

Ms HARRISSON: Mr D'Adam, we certainly appreciate that and we are working very closely with Health and you also understand with other professions, having had mandated vaccinations; this is not only an issue in Education. I would also note that the number of people who have an adverse reaction to either vaccination is very low at this time. So I hope that this small level of uncertainty is not enough to put anyone off getting vaccinated at this time. It is in their interests, it is in their family's interest and it is in the students' who they want to work with interests that they access a vaccination. I hear your question. We will certainly take it on notice and come back with any detail as soon as we are able.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I want to come back to an issue that Mr Shoebridge raised around the health advice on potential risks. I suppose under work health and safety obligations those obligations are still in place irrespective of the overarching public health framework. Don't you have an obligation, where you have identified a risk, to consult with workers about how you are going to manage that risk? I suppose, while it is not explicitly clear in the work health and safety legislation, don't you also have an obligation to consult with parents in terms of the health and safety of their children?

Ms HARRISSON: I will ask Ms Cachia to provide some further information on that. Firstly, I would give some context to that question. We have been engaging with our staff regularly throughout this pandemic. We have responded to the questions they have raised with us—both to me personally, to colleagues on this call and more generally through a number of channels. We continue to do that. We have also been heartened by the strong and positive feedback we have received from parents in relation to their learning from home experience, with the majority of them expressing significant confidence in the learning from home support that has been provided by our schools.

I would say that in these unprecedented times we have to take what are reasonable and practical steps to ensure the work health and safety of our staff when we are also living through a once-in-a-100-year pandemic. That is what we are seeking to do. We are putting in place a level of protection that is at, or higher than, any other jurisdiction in the world. We are doing that because we think it is really important. We have looked at the international best practice and we have ensured that we have followed that in every one of our restrictions that we have in place to secure that safety in our school communities. I will let Ms Cachia answer the specific elements of your consultation question.

Ms CACHIA: It is a really important question, Mr D'Adam. I would reiterate everything that the secretary said. I would also probably point out a nuance that there is in relation to consultation. If it is a mandated vaccination rather than a direction from the employer—so this would be a mandated vaccination the likes of which we saw in the construction industry—the consultation is very much focused on how we can minimise risk, how we can provide ways for teachers that would fall within an exemption to operate in that system, how we can advise schools how to operationalise all of the issues that flow from that order within school settings in a COVID-safe way.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I will reiterate my question, which is about consultation with parents. I will go back to you, Ms Harrison. You indicated earlier that parents have a desire to return their kids to school but obviously there are safety concerns there. I do not really see where you are actively engaging with parents, and perhaps you could address that question. How are you engaging with parents on these issues?

Ms HARRISSON: Firstly, our schools are engaged with their parents regularly on a variety of issues, including the wellbeing of their students. We have seen that on show throughout this period as well as for an extended period of time before. In relation to those families who have continued to send their children to school during these times because they have needed to, there is regular communication between the school community and the school in relation to those matters.

Obviously, as we look towards 25 October, schools will be having dialogue with their communities in relation to the return-to-school plans and that will continue through to 25 October and beyond. We recognise that there is a lot of anxiety in the broad community at the moment. That is there for parents and non-parents alike.

These are unprecedented times and our schools are there to support their communities, and they have been doing an exceptional job of doing so throughout this period. But that consultation will continue right up until 25 October and beyond as parents will share their concerns with their school community with their principal and directly with us.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: I have one more question and then I will hand over to my colleague. In a press conference there was mention around discussions that had occurred with the university sector. I wonder whether you could elaborate—perhaps, Ms Harrison, or Mr Martin—in terms of the nature of those assurances that have been provided by the university sector?

Ms HARRISSON: Certainly. I will ask Mr Martin to comment. I would just flag that we were not necessarily able to watch the press conference so we probably will not comment on specifics that were raised there. But Mr Martin can certainly answer questions around the engagement NESAs have had with the university sector and the support for our HSC students this year.

Mr MARTIN: The Chair of NESAs, Professor Peter Shergold, who happens to be the Chancellor of Western Sydney University, has convened meetings between myself and him and vice-chancellors. We also met with UAC on a number of occasions. I believe that there will be press releases issued by universities today indicating their support for HSC students, given that there will be some delay to the publication of exam results. We have assurances that the universities will be able to take into account this year's HSC to make sure those students feel safe and comfortable if they wish to go to university in 2022.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Are you able to provide a little bit more detail in terms of the nature of what the universities are proposing to do?

Mr MARTIN: The Universities Admission Centre—UAC—basically use HSC data to turn that into an ATAR. Really it is a timeline issue: Can they get the data from NESAs and turn it into an ATAR and provide university offers in a suitable time for students to feel that they are ready to go in 2022? So it is just about whether their capacity to deal with our data, given it will be slightly later if it is released.

Ms HARRISSON: If I could add, the advice we received from UAC indicated that, following last year's experience in Victoria, UAC have continued to work on contingency plans to support the admissions process for university through the COVID pandemic. They have been certainly been doing that and are ready to respond to us and the situation here in New South Wales accordingly.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, you have talked about a week of access to vaccinations for teachers. That is obviously going to be largely for teachers in Greater Sydney. What are you doing to allow regional teachers access to vaccinations now that it will be mandatory? They have only got about two weeks to actually make that deadline that you have announced today.

Ms HARRISSON: Firstly, I would flag that our teachers have more than two weeks to meet that deadline. I think it is really important for our teachers that they understand the opportunities available to them. The current requirement between vaccinations of the Pfizer vaccine is three weeks and for the AstraZeneca vaccine it is four weeks, so there is ample opportunity between now and 25 October. I would also add that NSW Health and the State Government are only responsible for part of the vaccine rollout. GPs and pharmacists, particularly through the Commonwealth in terms of the GP network, are also providing vaccines. The Commonwealth has made more vaccines available for 16- to 39-year-olds to now book in through their GPs from next week for access to Pfizer.

So overall the access to vaccine across the community and across the State is increasing. We will, of course, monitor the vaccination rates in regions carefully between now and then. We will be working with NSW Health and seeking support from the Commonwealth to ensure that all of our school workforce can get access to the vaccinations they need.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You can understand a number of regional teachers who had their vaccinations actually cancelled to allow HSC students to be vaccinated have now found out that they will be required to have vaccinations as well but they are still waiting.

Ms HARRISSON: I certainly can understand the frustration of any community member in the regions. Of course, I would seek to support our teachers in that as far as we are able to do so. The vaccine program and those decisions to reallocate vaccines were not made by the Department of Education and, therefore, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on those specifically. I do understand the frustration people are feeling. I do also acknowledge that those vaccines were returned to the regions. My understanding at this time is that those vaccination bookings have been remade. I do hope for all our teachers that they are able to access a vaccine that is

appropriate for them. I ask them to seek medical advice on which vaccine is appropriate for them. We will, of course, support getting vaccines to our school workforce across the State with our NSW Health colleagues.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, what options will be available for parents who decide to keep their children learning at home after 25 October?

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you for the question. Obviously there will be limitations to what we can provide in terms of both in-person and at-home learning. This will be a situation we need to monitor very closely. We do have, and will continue to have, support available from the Department of Education. I referenced earlier the guided learning resources that we have available through our website. Ms Owen might be able to provide some further information on those for you.

Ms OWEN: It is really important that all parents feel supported by the department in terms of supporting their children in learning from home. We have made available all our learning resources on our public website. We have run webinars for parents to make sure they understand the resources that are available and the support that they have to support the education of their children at home. That will continue after 25 October—all those resources—to be available. As Ms Harrison refers to, we have been developing a week-by-week pack for parents and teachers to keep up with the lessons that they could be running at home, the sort of materials—whether that is online or printed materials—they can run through with their children, including some wellbeing activities to make sure they are looking after the social and emotional wellbeing of their children and their educational needs. Those all will remain available for parents after the time we start to return to schooling face to face.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, you are probably aware that several provinces in Canada have actually given parents the option of online learning for the new school year there. They can actually opt for in-person or at-home learning. Are you looking for a similar system here in New South Wales?

Ms HARRISSON: We are certainly looking to ensure that we can support parents, no matter what their choices are, here. We will be doing that in a way that ensures our current teachers who will be returning to face-to-face learning—I am sure you will appreciate the importance of this, Mrs Houssos—are only asked to do one job, and that job will be to teach the students in front of them. Certainly at departmental level, and through other channels, we will be looking to provide every support we can to parents. But we are going to be encouraging our teachers and our parents and our communities that when we meet these thresholds, in line with broader community settings, that we think that face-to-face learning is the best opportunity for their student, for their child, and that it balances the risk in the community with the educational needs, social, mental, wellbeing needs of our students.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I am certainly not implying that teachers should be doing remote learning and also teaching in class.

Ms HARRISSON: I just wanted to make sure I clarified that. I would not want our teachers to hear that and think we are asking them to do two jobs. I am sure you will appreciate.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: No, I am asking about what support the department will provide for parents— [*Time expired.*]

The ACTING CHAIR: Mr Latham has been unable to rejoin us at the moment. I will pass the questioning to Mr Shoebridge for the crossbench. Should Mr Latham return, I will direct questioning to him.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: If I see him come back I will hand it over myself. Ms Cachia, your answers to my colleague the Hon. Antony D'Adam about coverage if teachers are required to be vaccinated and have an adverse reaction, do I understand you to say that you would expect they would be covered under workers compensation?

Ms CACHIA: If they are acting under a public health order in the course of their employment, yes.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Cachia, I firmly believe that should be the law and I want to be clear about that, but unfortunately the advice publicly issued by icare as recently as this week does not say that. Are you aware of icare's advice?

Ms CACHIA: I am not aware of their advice in relation to that cohort of people.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Don't you think it would be important to be aware of the advice given by icare before you make statements like that in budget estimates and also before you give what may actually be false confidence to teachers that they will be covered?

Ms HARRISSON: Just before Ms Cachia replies, I think she has been quite clear. Icare has not given us advice at this point in relation to the vaccination of teachers so she said in terms of the cohort currently being considered. I just want to make sure that we have clarity in what has been said. Ms Cachia might like to respond.

Ms CACHIA: Mr Shoebridge I am not trying to duck and weave the question, nor am I trying to mislead anybody. I am simply saying, as the secretary said earlier, these are untraversed, uncharted waters. I am not a part of icare; I do not set their advice. I have not been given the advice to date on the cohort that you mention. I am not sure whether the advice covers casual teachers or whether it is just general advice. So I am simply saying that I have a view, but that is my personal view. We will have to wait for the advice, Mr Shoebridge, in order to be able to answer that question with certainty.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I might just persist here and tell you what icare say. They say—and I am reading from their fact sheet published just this week—the link between the vaccine injury and the worker's employment is easier to establish where a worker is influenced by their employer's requirement to get vaccinated or is subject to a New South Wales public health order. In these circumstances, there is an increased likelihood of the vaccine injury being covered under workers compensation. Ms Cachia, that is a long way from a guarantee, isn't it?

Ms CACHIA: Mr Shoebridge, I do not think what I said is at odds with the advice that you have just read out.

Ms HARRISSON: Mr Shoebridge, we really want to provide assistance to the Committee in this matter. Of course we want to make sure that our teachers understand the issues. That is the advice icare has currently provided. As and when we receive updated advice we would be very happy to share that with this Committee on notice. Of course, we will be communicating it out to our teachers.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: You say that is the advice icare provided. I am reading to you from a fact sheet that I am now telling you about. Are you saying that you have some advice from icare in addition to that or that is consistent with advice icare has given you or have you just heard about it now?

Ms HARRISSON: We are aware that icare has released some information in relation to the work health and safety compensation issues related to Monday to vaccinations. You have just read that from a statement of a fact sheet from icare. I do not have that in front of me but I agree that that is in line with the advice that I have received on the matter. I would suggest that the most useful thing for the Committee here and for our staff is for us to continue those conversations with icare around this issue now that we know that teachers are going to be required to be vaccinated and to provide that certainty and clarity back to the Committee as soon as we have it.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Is it true that PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC] has been engaged to develop a mid-career entry model for teachers by the department?

Ms HARRISSON: The Committee would be aware that the Government announced its plans to co-design a mid-career entry route for teachers into the teaching profession earlier this year. That is a specific program that we are currently working through with stakeholders to design. Ms Cachia can provide you with further details on the specifics of your question.

Ms CACHIA: You will have seen recently the Government announced that we are looking at ways to develop a mid-career program as part of a teacher supply strategy. We are working with PwC because, as you can imagine, that with a system of our size we want to make sure that we are coordinating an approach that takes account of a really wide range of stakeholders, looks at best practice across the world and coordinates that in parallel with the department.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: So you have engaged PricewaterhouseCoopers to do the work with the department on this mid-career entry work? The answer is yes. Is that what I am to understand from those two long responses—yes?

Ms CACHIA: Mr Shoebridge, it could be that PricewaterhouseCoopers is working on a piece around attraction to teaching and is also talking to us and working with us on the mid-career piece.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I do not understand what you mean by "could be"? I am asking you what PricewaterhouseCoopers is doing for the department. What do you mean by "could be"? I do not understand.

Ms CACHIA: Mr Shoebridge, I believe I have answered the question. I am not trying to be difficult. I am trying to answer our question. I am not sure what the context of the question is. It would assist me if you could provide that.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I have just asked a simple question: Has PricewaterhouseCoopers been engaged by the department for the work on the mid-career entry into the profession?

Ms CACHIA: And I answered, Mr Shoebridge, that they are working with us in the initial phases of a mid-career entry point for teachers as part of the supply strategy.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: How much are they being paid?

Ms CACHIA: I will have to check and take it on notice for now, but I will come back and indicate the exact figure in a moment.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: How many PwC staff are working? Do any of them have education experience? In which case, how many of them have education experience?

Ms HARRISSON: Mr Shoebridge, I think Ms Cachia will take those elements on notice. I would like to say that leading our school workforce directorate in the department is Mark Barraket, who is an experienced educator, former primary principal. Throughout the department and throughout that—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, we do not have a lot of time and long digressions that go beyond the question are really not helpful.

Ms HARRISSON: I am not trying to digress. I am trying to assure the Committee, based on your line of questioning, that we have the profession informing our work on the development—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, I am asking about the consultants that you are paying for. I really think it is unfortunate that you hijack the hearings for your own additions like that. It is not helpful.

The ACTING CHAIR: Mr Shoebridge, you have asked a question. I note that it was not directed to Ms Harrisson but she has elected to take it and is providing you an answer to that question. I ask you to allow her a little bit more leeway to provide that answer before you interrupt her.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Acting Chair, the answer is unresponsive. I asked specific questions about the consultants from PricewaterhouseCoopers and Ms Harrisson's answer is not responsive to that.

The ACTING CHAIR: I believe Ms Harrisson was getting to the point where she was responding to your question.

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to answer and I understand your frustrations, Mr Shoebridge, with the limited amount of time to ask questions. PricewaterhouseCoopers are assisting us in relation to some strategic advice on our overall workforce strategy. They are working with and alongside professionals in the department who are providing insights from the teacher workforce.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: How much did the department spend on consultants last financial year and how many different projects are there currently where the department is working with consultants at the moment?

Ms HARRISSON: We spend a very small proportion of our budget on consultants. I believe that in the financial year 2020 to 2021 it was around 0.03 per cent of our budget. Mr Withey will be able to give you the specific figures on the total amounts.

Mr WITHEY: The total value of consultancy arrangements in the 2020 calendar year, as we report in our annual report, was \$4.96 million. As Ms Harrisson said, that is 0.03 per cent of our total budget over that period. I think you also asked a question about the number of engagements that that encompassed. That was 39 total engagements.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Thanks, Mr Withey. The question you may not be able to answer now is how many current projects are there where consultants are engaged? If you do take it on notice, what is the contract value?

Mr WITHEY: I will have to take that on notice.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrisson, the department had a target of 20 per cent reduction of the administrative burden on teachers by 2022. Are you going to achieve that target by 2022?

Ms HARRISSON: We are working hard across the department to reduce the administrative burden. The Minister has made clear her expectations and the Government's expectations for that target to be achieved. We have been putting in place—obviously current circumstances have disrupted all of the way education is delivered across the State, and we have supported our teachers directly in the delivery of that provision with guided learning packages provided on line to take that workload and burden off our teachers where we can. Mr Withey can give you some further advice on our plans to achieve that target.

Mr WITHEY: The reduction of the administrative burden in our schools is a really core component of the School Success Model. It is one of the key work streams. It is one of the work streams that we hear most regularly from our colleagues in schools—our principals, our teachers and our administrative staff—about the importance of that. As you alluded to in your question, we have set very clear targets in respect of that reduction—20 per cent reduction for teachers and principals by 2022. Those targets are now firmly embedded within the performance agreements across the department as we are all leaning to that effort.

You asked whether we are on track. We believe we are on track at the moment. As Ms Harrison said, there have been some disruptions over the past few months in terms of the rollout of particular initiatives and in terms of some of the efforts we were making to track some of those administrative burdens within the school environment as we have been unable to attend school and support those efforts. We have realised really significant benefits already, particularly in relation to principals, which has been the early focus of this piece, with an estimated 115 hours a year saved. We have more to do on the teacher side—and we recognise that—and that is absolutely the focus for the work that is happening within the team at the moment.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: To reduce the teachers' administrative workload by 20 per cent would be a 40 hours a year reduction. The last time the department reported in terms of the so-called success of this program there was less than five minutes a week being saved by teachers. Can you tell me what the current saving is? Are you anywhere near 40 hours a year?

Mr WITHEY: I do not recognise those figures. I think they assume calculations that I am not privy to. But in terms of the targets I am very happy to talk to how we have calculated those targets around the 20 per cent reduction. As you say, that equates to 40 hours of reduction every year. That is based on an OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey [TALIS], which suggested that teachers spend around 4.1 hours a week on general admin tasks. It is worth being clear here about what we mean when we talk about "administrative tasks" because—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Mr Withey, rather than a long digression on this and a definitional argument, I simply want to know that you agree with me it is a 40 hours a year reduction. What have you achieved?

Mr WITHEY: As I said in my previous answer, we are working across both principals and teachers at the moment. We have delivered 50 systems process improvements over the last three years. As I said in my previous answer, we recognise that many of those responses in the early phase were aimed more squarely at principals. But we have in 2021 delivered a number of improvements for our teachers as well.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: What are the hours? You have a target. What is the point of a target if you cannot report on it? You are meant to reduce 40 hours of admin work a year. I am asking you where you are up to and I do not get a single number. What is the point of a target if you cannot report on it, given it is meant to be in place in a few months' time in 2022?

Ms HARRISSON: Mr Shoebidge, I would just like to say that when I talk to teachers across our system and I talk to our principals the thing they have asked most strongly for in relation to relieving the burden from them is additional support from the department. I would just like to flag that that is absolutely what we have been providing, particularly through this pandemic but more so in relation to the professional development and the quality of the professional development the department has been offering, the support provided by directors' educational leadership to their schools. We are looking at all of the ways that we can—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Mr Acting Chair, Ms Harrison's answer is now non-responsive. I would ask you to draw her to order.

The ACTING CHAIR: Mr Shoebidge, I believe Ms Harrison was coming to the point. I will give her a little more opportunity to provide the response and come to a direct answer for you.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Remembering the question was about where they are in terms of getting to the 40-hour reduction and where they are on the target and a number.

Ms HARRISSON: I would note the 40-hour target is your number, based on figures that I do not have in front of me. I think Mr Withey mentioned that and pointed to that.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: No.

Ms HARRISSON: We are very happy to provide on notice further details of our plans and progress in relation to that target.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, 40 hours is the department's figure. You are not aware of that?

Mr WITHEY: The previous conversation related to your description of that target in minutes. That was the number I was—

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Mr Withey, you and I are not disagreeing the 40 hours is the department's target. You and I agree on that at least, don't we?

Mr WITHEY: In terms of progress towards that target, we recognise, as I said, that we have got more to do in that space. Your question about what the purpose of a target was if we are not going to report against that is, I think, unfair. We are clearly going to report against that. That is why we have created that target to report against it. We have got more to do to work in the teacher space. I do not have a number for you today, Mr Shoebridge. I think we are probably about a quarter of the way there. But we are happy to come back with some more detail on that on notice.

The ACTING CHAIR: I want to point out that if people talk over each other it makes it very hard for Hansard to transcribe it with the Webex. I ask members to ask the question and allow witnesses to finalise their response.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, you say that when you talk to teachers now they give you a lot of feedback. When I talk to teachers now they are telling me about how their work hours have massively increased. They never seem to have enough hours in the day. All of the online care, the care for students' wellbeing, the lesson preparation, their hours have expanded and expanded and expanded this year. Are you keeping track of what the hours are of your workforce—what hours they are putting in a week?

Ms HARRISSON: Firstly, Mr Shoebridge, I would note that our teachers have always worked exceptionally hard. They are incredibly committed professionals and they do an exceptional job. We are of course regularly seeking feedback from our staff in relation to their workload. I joined a statewide staffroom just yesterday of science head teachers across the State and talked about a number of issues—in particular, the ways that they were supporting students with assessment tasks in the HSC and the workload that had placed on them in relation to the changes that we have had to put in place for the HSC. This is really important work for us here in the department. We all know the most important work teachers do is with their students every day. We are committed to making sure that they have more time to spend doing the thing that they signed up for, that they want to be doing every day.

We are doing that through a number of ways. We are providing additional support to our teachers. We are providing additional curriculum support. We are providing additional learning materials, particularly for this learning from home period. We will continue to provide that support and build upon it. I can assure you, Mr Shoebridge, I want nothing more than our teachers to be able to say to me that they are loving their work and they are doing the thing that they signed up to do as professionals in our system. That is what we will be continuing to work towards.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Ms Harrison, if you could answer my question: What is the current workload of teachers? Have you made any efforts to work out the number of hours teachers are working now? The reports that have come through to my office—and I am sure to many other MPs—is that teachers' workload has massively increased. Are you tracking it? What is the number?

Ms HARRISSON: We do not have a specific tracking mechanism for working hours. We obviously have management structures in place throughout our system where teachers are able to engage with their line managers in schools around their workload if they are struggling with that. I note that a number of external reports commissioned by the likes of the Teachers Federation have given comment on this issue. I think Mr Withey has clearly articulated that we have a strong focus in relation to this issue and that we want to see our teachers spending the time doing the thing that they chose this vocation in order to do.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: How many hours a week are they working?

The ACTING CHAIR: I will allow that last question.

Ms HARRISSON: As I said in my previous answer, we do not have specific data on the hours per week worked by a teacher at this time. I am happy to take on notice providing any further information that we do have in the department on that issue. But at the moment our teachers are not required to clock in and out in relation to their employment.

The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM: Mr Martin, you would be well aware that the educational landscape is not an equitable one and that the areas of south-west Sydney and western Sydney are areas of particular disadvantage. And given that those areas are also the areas that have been subjected to more stringent lockdown requirements, have you or NESAs made special representations to the universities for special consideration for

those HSC students in those areas that have been subject to the greater restrictions in relation to how their applications for university admission might be treated with some special consideration?

Mr MARTIN: Yes, we have. The first thing we have done is to try to make sure that the students' disadvantage is taken into account in terms of the results they get. That is why we have allowed, for the second year and expanded it somewhat, teachers to mark the major works, the performances, the oral language tasks because they know best what disadvantage has been faced by those students, particularly in the LGAs that have been locked down quite hard for a long period of time. So the first thing I would argue that we are doing to try to address the question you have raised is to give the students the best chance of producing a result that most approximates what they would have received had not COVID occurred.

But in terms of the specifics of your answer, yes, as I said to one of your previous questions, we have meetings with UAC, vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors [DVCs] around how they might accommodate the specifics of the particular students who are most disadvantaged. There is a range of early offers going out to schools. I think that some of our universities—I was talking to Professor Shergold as recently as yesterday; he is Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney that obviously has candidature of a lot of the students in the lockdown areas—are sending out and being encouraged to provide appropriate early offers that take into account disadvantage. The universities run those processes themselves but we are in dialogue to try to advocate on behalf of the students as much as we possibly can, given what they gone through this year.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, I will return to the question about local government areas of concern. They are home to more people than the City of Perth yet they did not rate a mention in today's press release. How will students in the local government areas of concern, if they attend school outside of those areas, will they be allowed to attend? What about vice versa—if a student lives outside of a local government area of concern but attends school inside a local government area of concern, will they be allowed to attend school?

Ms HARRISSON: We are aware of the issues that are created by boundaries within a mobile city like Sydney in relation to LGA areas. Ms Owen will be able to provide you with some further detail on that.

Ms OWEN: Again, Ms Houssos, I recognise the context and the question that you raise. These are a large number of important students who we want to get back to face-to-face schooling as soon as we can. We can only do so when the health advice allows us to do so. So at the moment students who either live or study in those LGAs are required to learn from home and we will be awaiting health advice on the conditions by which that advice changes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: What about if the student— *[Time expired.]*

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: Mr Martin, I would like to go back to the issue about how the obvious disadvantage for those students in western and south-western Sydney, especially for the HSC, is going to be taken into account. Is that going to be taken into account if the lockdown continues in a form of scaling advantage? How will it be taken into account?

Mr MARTIN: The specifics of the moderation and the scaling I will provide on notice because I am not a psychometrician. What we are doing is, by allowing the teachers to mark their own students' work against marking rubrics and advice that we provide, we are, as we did last year, getting the teachers to provide marks that fall within a reasonable band for the expectation of that student had not COVID occurred. It is a difficult task but it was done, as I said, last year and it is done in Victoria and other parts. We then scale against the exams that they sit for those particular subjects. We have specific other illness misadventure procedures for those students who are disadvantaged on the day or before the exam. There may well be the opportunity to do more, given the nature of the situation.

I would just make the point that last year we were able to provide processes because the lockdown was the same lockdown across the whole State of New South Wales. In this particular case, we have got all parts of New South Wales in different areas of disadvantage, lesser or greater. So our methodologies need to accommodate the differences in the lockdown. I am confident that we will have the advice from assessment experts and our own internal processes to make sure that we reduce the disadvantage as much as possible. I am not sure if that has answered your question.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: It was really helpful, thank you. So there will be efforts made to have it that the adjustments are based upon a locality basis. Is that going to be based upon the severity of the lockdown and the duration of the lockdown? Will they be two criteria?

Mr MARTIN: We have already put in practice or put in place any part of New South Wales that has been in a level 4 lockdown, which is now the whole State. But within that there is variability in relation to the disadvantage that the students have faced. We are relying on the teachers and the principals to make the judgement

about their own students in terms of the level of disadvantage faced in relation to the HSC because we cannot do that centrally.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: What we do know is that local government areas of concern in western and south-western Sydney have faced this extreme disadvantage—a really heightened disadvantage—as a result of the lockdown. Surely all the students in those areas deserve an allowance for that. Is that going to be factored in?

Mr MARTIN: I would not comment particularly on that option. What we will factor in is what we need to and can do. Going back to the first part of your point though is that whole-of-cohort processes will be put in place. I do not want teachers or principals trying to make multiple applications for students when the whole school has been in a difficult position.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I think that would clearly be preferable. What kind of transparency will there be on this? When will students and the community be able to see what the criteria are and how they will apply?

Mr MARTIN: We hold the processes of the HSC and the scaling processes—particularly something that is referred to as the "cut scores"—very close to us because we do not want to publicise issues that can be used to game the system, I suppose is the shortest possible way to describe it. We will provide as much advice and transparency as we can, given the processes that we put in place. We have got ranges of people including, as I said, senior psychometricians and assessment experts. Our priority is to look after the young people who are most disadvantaged.

Mr DAVID SHOEBRIDGE: I think my time has expired. But I think particularly for those students in western and south-western Sydney the more advice you can provide on the record the more comfort you can give to them, their schools and their communities, and the sooner it can happen I think the better.

The ACTING CHAIR: We will take that as a comment—I have always wanted to say that. Thank you to all the government officials for your attendance today. The Committee secretariat will be in touch in the near future regarding any questions you have taken on notice and any supplementary questions. That concludes our hearing today.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.