

**Public Accountability Committee**  
**Inquiry into the NSW Government's Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic**  
**Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning**  
**Questions Taken on Notice**

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**QUESTION 1 - Pages 3 & 4**

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Minister, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], across New South Wales we have over 34,000 households with children with no internet access at home, yet the New South Wales Government provided just 4,200 devices—computers, modems, internet dongles—to students needing assistance. Victoria, in contrast, provided 26,000 internet dongles and loaned 48,000 laptops for their 21,000 similar households. Given my students have been remotely learning for five weeks full-time and the vast differences in digital access, parental support and capacity, what resources are you giving to schools to allow teachers to assess what students have actually learnt during their time at home?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I will get the secretary to provide a bit more comment in a minute around the actual numbers because I actually think it is higher than the 4,200 figure that you mentioned, but I will get him to clarify that. What we have done is worked with our school communities in New South Wales and we know that connectivity is an issue in a lot of our communities. We have worked with the school communities to procure devices that we have provided—that includes things like laptops and iPads, internet dongles—but we have also made sure that students have the work in whatever format they need.

I know of schools that have sent out physical packs of work for children to do and if people do not have connectivity to the internet we have had USB sticks that have been pre-loaded with work that has gone out. We have certainly worked very closely with our school communities and our principals to say, "What are the needs of your children in terms of that technology?" Yes, it is a part of the way that we have been doing learning from home, but there is a range of other resources that we have been providing to schools as well. I might get the secretary now to talk through some of those figures, just to clarify those numbers, if that is okay.

**Mr SCOTT:** Thank you, Minister. I may have to take some of that on notice. I believe the figure that you are referring to, there was an earlier figure. More dongles and computers have been provided this term and also more have been ordered by us for distribution as well. Also, what we have been able to do is we have been able to release the computers from schools and make them available to be available at home on a long basis. But, as the Minister said, this has revealed a level of inequity that exists not only in the provision of computers to schools but in the provision of computers that have been available or technology that is available for students at home being accessed as well. We have done the best we can to provide additional material and support to them, but many schools have also prepared packs of work, units of work, that have been available for pick-up from school and return to school.

In fact, there were schools in rural and remote communities that were doing drop-offs to individual homes as part of this activity as well. I will be able to get some precise detail on numbers on notice for you.

**ANSWER:**

As part of the Department's response to provide devices to students at home, schools in NSW have loaned out a significant number of their school devices to students in need.

This was supplemented by the Department with an additional 7,313 computers for students to use at home and 7,830 internet devices as at 2 June 2020.

Teachers have continued to assess their students, as part of their professional teaching practices. Now that students are back in the classroom, this will continue and teachers will make any necessary adjustments to learning plans.

**QUESTION 2 - Page 5**

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Minister, I wanted to come to the question of access to resources for schools and, in particular, at the beginning of the remote learning period. You talked specifically about New South Wales being in a better position than other States because we have Aurora College, the online selective high school. Can you tell me how many schools were given access to their resources?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I will get the secretary to respond to that.

**Mr SCOTT:** We will take that on notice.

**ANSWER**

From the beginning of the remote learning from home period, Aurora College teachers provided live professional learning sessions to in excess of 1,700 teachers. The live sessions were recorded and are available on the Technology for Learning site for all teachers and schools to access.

### QUESTION 3 – Page 5

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** I would appreciate it if you could take on notice any specific learnings that CESE did, any specific papers, and then provide that to the Committee. We have obviously got very limited time today, but I think that the experience of certainly teachers who have spoken to me, and there has been broader discussion about this, has been that they were left juggling ourselves. So I would be interested for the Committee to be informed about that research that was happening.

**Mr SCOTT:** Can I make a comment on that? We have, as you know, 60,000 teachers out there operating in [inaudible] schools. The feedback that we have had overwhelmingly has been gratitude for the creation of that learning from home website. The traffic around that has been absolutely enormous; there has been more traffic to the learning from home website and the education website than there has been for the NSW Health website in the heat of the pandemic because of the quality of the information that has been provided, the standard of the support material for teachers—

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Mr Scott, I thank you for that. I think the request was for you to take it on notice.

### ANSWER

The Centre of Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) provided the following papers to the Department of Education's Executive:

**A framework to guide an education response to the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020** Authors: *Fernando M. Reimers*, Global Education Innovation Initiative, Harvard Graduate School of Education; *Andreas Schleicher*, Directorate of Education and Skills, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

#### **Education International Guidance on Reopening Schools and Education Institutions**

Author: *Education International*

#### **Visible Learning Effect Sizes When Schools Are Closed: What Matters and What Does Not**

Authors: *John Hattie*

CESE is also developing Remote Learning Snapshots to share effective learning from home practices.

**QUESTION 4 – Page 10**

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Minister, in 2018 \$75 million was cut out of cleaning contracts. Now the Treasurer has announced that \$250 million will be put towards cleaning of government facilities, including schools. Can you give us a sense of how much of that \$250 million is being put towards cleaning at schools?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you for the question. I might ask probably the secretary or, potentially, Ms Harrison, to respond to that. They have been the ones driving the cleaning in schools and the procurement around that. Mr Scott or Ms Harrison?

**Mr SCOTT:** Ms Harrison might comment on that.

**Ms HARRISSON:** The additional cleaning that we have provided has been in two phases. The first phase of enhanced cleaning was to increase the number of cleaning hours at every school site by 25 per cent and then, in preparation for the return of students this week, to add to that with additional cleaning throughout the school day in line with those AHPPC guidelines. The specific dollars, I will need to take notice, but the 25 per cent increase and those intra-day cleans have all been done through the public works contract in order to give access to that funding that you referenced from the Treasury.

**ANSWER**

The Department of Education estimates enhanced cleaning in schools will cost approximately \$62.3 million in 2019-20.

**QUESTION 5 – Pages 11 and 12**

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Minister, there has been quite a few high-profile schools in the electorate of one of my colleagues that have been calling out publicly due to lack of supplies. What has been done in that space? Murrumbidgee High School was asking parents for second-hand soap pump bottles. Coleambally Central School was doing a similar thing. Broken Hill was asking students to bring in their own hand sanitiser. Can you give us an update as to whether those issues have been resolved in terms of getting supplies to those schools?.....

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Thank you, Chair. I was just about to ask whether she could clarify those schools I have mentioned. Do they have the supplies that they were seeking?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** As I said, all of our schools were sent out supplies this term, but what I will do is take those specific schools and tell you what has been distributed to those schools. We will take that on notice.

**ANSWER**

The following supplies were despatched to the schools identified.

**Murrumbidgee High School**

Hand sanitiser, disinfectant wipes, paper towels, toilet paper, safety glasses, non-contact temperature monitor, aprons, face masks, spray paint, disposable gloves, barricade tape and soap.

**Broken Hill Public School**

Hand sanitiser, disinfectant wipes, hand sanitiser, toilet paper, paper towel, safety glasses, non-contact temperature monitor, aprons, face masks, spray paint, soap, disposable gloves and barricade tape.

**Coleambally Central School**

Hand sanitiser, disinfectant wipes, paper towel, toilet paper, safety glasses, non-contact temperature monitor, aprons, face masks, disposable gloves, spray paint, barricade tape and soap.

## QUESTION 6 – Page 15

**Mr SCOTT:** The numbers that you have identified I think do not reflect the latest information and it is important to set the record straight on this. Our advice is that, as of Monday, 78,000 bottles of hand sanitiser has been distributed to New South Wales schools, so that is on average 35 bottles a school. Some schools are tiny, they only have one classroom, other schools will receive much more, and this is the supplies on top of—

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Sorry, Mr Scott, can I just stop you there, because the figures that I was quoting were the figures that the Minister provided to the House on Tuesday. Can you then tell me the updated list, then, for toilet paper, hand soap, bars of soap and paper towel? It sounds as though you needed to update the Minister's House notes before she went into the House on Tuesday.....

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If I could answer for a moment, because there was an assertion towards figures that I gave in the House, my understanding is—and I am happy to check Hansard—but as at the end of April 2020, that is where those figures came from. Obviously, as I said in an earlier answer, we are now in the middle of May. We have spent the last two weeks sending out significant supplies on top of those figures. I am very happy to provide the Committee on notice with a list of the full amounts that have gone out. In fact, as I said, I have already got an agreement with Ms Houssos that we reached this week to send her within the next two weeks a list of all the supplies that have gone to every school. We are happy to be transparent about amounts here, Mr Chair, but we have already said that publicly.

## ANSWER

The Department of Education is continuing to work with schools to ensure they have access to the hygiene supplies they need.

To date over 1.3 million items have been dispatched, including:

- 147,300 rolls of toilet paper
- 29,100 rolls paper towel
- 24,000 bars of soap
- 8,500 litres of liquid soap
- 207,750 litres of hand sanitiser
- 154,100 litres of surface spray
- 112,600 packets of disinfectant wipes

In addition to supplies provided by the Department, schools have and will continue to procure hygiene supplies locally.

**QUESTION 7 – Page 15**

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Given the Minister's answer, I will move on to another issue. Minister, I wanted to ask whether you have considered installing automatic hand sanitisers at schools? I mean, given we have seen them a New South Wales Parliament, we have seen them in shopping centres, we have seen them in public hospitals, have you considered installing those at New South Wales schools?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I might ask Ms Harrison to respond to that.

**Ms HARRISSON:** Our primary focus has been making sure that schools have the appropriate supplies that they need up to this point. I am very happy to take on notice any information on that that we may have back at the department.

**ANSWER**

All schools currently have access to hand sanitisers.



**QUESTION 8 – Page 18**

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** The health advice states the cleaning products that are able to be used in any sort of cleaning during this time and it talks about two in one. Going through some of the products that are being used by your contract cleaners: RSS are using a product called "Taskforce"; JOS are using a product called "Biolex J-FLEX 2"; Broad Spectrum and Facilities First are using a product called "Stride Citrus". If you look at the material safety data sheets on any of those products, none of them fit or match the NSW Health guidelines or even the Federal health guidelines about being a two-in-one cleaning product. I would strongly urge that you might need to take a closer look at and the bit more micromanagement of these cleaning contractors, because they are not adhering to the guidelines.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you, Mr Banasiak. I do not know whether Ms Harrison wants to provide any further clarity. Obviously, as she mentioned earlier, Public Works are doing this work around the contracts for us. In terms of those specific products, I have to confess I am not overly familiar with the difference between all of them—I am happy to say that—but what we can do is take the bulk of your question on notice and provide some clarity around those particular products that those cleaning contractors are using and, again, how that tails in with the Public Works contracting and advice that comes from Health.

**ANSWER**

Each cleaning service provider engaged by the Department of Education and Public Works Advisory to prevent COVID-19 infection in schools, has confirmed it is using an effective 2-in-1 product that meets current Australian Standards.

A range of other cleaning products are also used on school sites for cleaning. Products such as Taskforce and Virex, the latter used by Joss, are also on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG) for use against COVID-19.

**QUESTION 9 - Page 20**

**The Hon. MARK BANASIAK:** Minister, in your opening statement you spoke about your concern for the wellbeing of students at boarding schools. Given that you have said there is no more money for Yanco Agricultural High School in terms of improving the conditions that the girls dorm room is in, are you looking to rethink that given the conditions have been described as "Nauru detention centre style" conditions? Will you reconsider that and find some money for that school, given that you have just expressed concern for the wellbeing of students in boarding schools and their living conditions?

**Mr SCOTT:** I think the Minister might be having some technology problems, so we might take that question on notice, Chair.

**ANSWER**

The Department of Education works closely with Yanco Agricultural High School to maintain the current infrastructure and carries out regular maintenance at the school.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the NSW Government made some significant adjustments to the structure of the boarding facilities in order for all students to return to face-to-face learning whilst still complying with health guidelines. This included the expedition of pre-planned upgrades, alterations to unused demountables and partition walls in larger dorms.

Any proposed future major capital works at Yanco Agricultural High School would be considered in the context of the education needs across the state and will be prioritised accordingly.

## QUESTION 10 - Page 22

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Minister, NESA has announced that schools do not have to teach the entire curriculum this year. What direction have schools been given about what is essential? What protection is there for a year 6 student, who is starting high school next year, that they will cover all of the ground that their colleagues will, or a student who changes schools in the future that they have not missed out on a crucial part of learning? .....

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Mr Dizdar, can you tell me whether there have been specific guidelines that have been issued?

**Mr DIZDAR:** Yes, we have, Ms Houssos. On day one, term 2 we issued guidelines for learning from home and school. The example you gave, for year 6 students, a year 6 student had been stage three in one of our fantastic public schools. We have indicated that they should be 45 to 60 minutes of English learning occurring, 30 to 45 minutes of mathematics learning, 60 to 90 minutes across other key learning areas—

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Mr Dizdar, I think every family is familiar with those particular timetables. I asked you specifically about whether NESA has issued guidelines about what concepts or where the focus needs to be. Given that they do not have to teach the whole curriculum, were there specific guidelines that were issued to say, not the amount of time that they are spending on each subject, but what concepts and subject matter must be covered this year?

**Mr DIZDAR:** I will have to take the specifics in relation to NESA on notice, but we gave guidelines to our staff, to our leadership teams around minimum requirements across the syllabus, because they teach to the syllabus, as you would know, Ms Houssos, in schools and in at-home learning environments. We gave them guidance and guidelines around that, but the specifics you are asking about the NESA guidelines, we would have to take on notice.

## ANSWER

From the start of Term 2, schools and teachers were given the authority to decide which syllabus outcomes and content they can teach and assess for Kindergarten to Year 10 in 2020. This means that the educational programs do not need to address all outcomes or all content of the syllabuses.

Teachers know their students best and are best placed to determine what outcomes and content they teach this year. These decisions will be made by considering the needs of their students, such as where students are in their learning, and the context of the school.

NESA has provided advice to teachers on its website, with suggestions on how they can modify their teaching in 2020. This advice emphasised the importance of developing literacy and numeracy skills.

**QUESTION 11 - Pages 22 and 23**

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** I appreciate that. Minister, I ask this on behalf of many parents: Who made the decision to use Google Classroom as the platform for remote learning? What consultation did you undertake? Did you have a tender process? What were the criteria for that tender process?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I will ask the secretary to provide some comments about that. Obviously, my understanding is, and I am happy for him to clarify this, that Google Classroom is one platform that is being used in schools. I know from personal experience from my daughter's school that they are actually using Microsoft Teams. I will ask the secretary to elaborate further in relation to that.

**Mr SCOTT:** Yes, a full suite of options is being used by schools: Microsoft Office, we have used Microsoft Teams, Adobe Connect, we have used Zoom as well, a range of options. We have had procurement exercises with these IT providers over a period of time. Often what schools have used have been the IT systems and infrastructure that they have been using up until the time of the great disruption and they have built on top of that. One of the things that we will do—

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Mr Scott, sorry our time is running out. Would you be able to provide for the Committee on notice any information about which numbers of schools are using the different platforms?

**Mr SCOTT:** Yes, absolutely.

**ANSWER**

Since 2006, the Department has provided schools with a suite of technology platforms including Google G-Suite for online learning.

All third party providers have been engaged in accordance with the Department's procurement guidelines.

Schools are able to determine which platform/s best meet their teaching and student's learning needs.

At the peak of learning from home:

- Over 120,000 users from 2,103 schools used Microsoft Office 365 (Teams) in April
- Over 550,000 users from 2,071 schools used Google G-Suite (Classroom) in April
- 1,240 Schools used Zoom in April
- Over 20,000 Adobe connect sessions were held in April.

**QUESTION 12 - Page 24**

**The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM:** I might just square the circle on my earlier line of inquiry. I will start with Mr Scott. In terms of the NCIRS report, were you or any member of the department's staff consulted about the timing of the release of that report?

**Mr SCOTT:** No, I just knew that it was coming and that it was available and then it was going to be released. I was just aware that the report was being finalised and it was coming, but that finally was a matter in the hands of NSW Health.

**The Hon. ANTHONY D'ADAM:** Minister, I will put the same question to you. Were you or any member of your staff aware of the timing of the release of that report or consulted on the timing?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** As I say, obviously we were aware, as the secretary was, that the work was underway. My recollection is—and I am happy to check—I know that some of our stakeholders were briefed in relation to the report a couple of days before it was released. I think I was briefed the following day, which I think, from memory, was a Friday, but I will take that on notice. And I think the report was released on the Sunday, so that all happened within a matter of days.

**ANSWER**

My office was aware of the release of the NCIRS report when it was imminent. There was no involvement in the timing of its release.

**QUESTION 13 - Page 28**

**The CHAIR:** Minister, when it comes to early childhood, have you kept track of the number of early childhood centres that have closed over the last three months? In answering that perhaps you could tell us whether or not you are satisfied that there is capacity in the early childhood sector to ensure that as the economy hopefully starts kicking back in places will be available for parents?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It is a good question and it is good to be able to talk about early childhood in this hearing as well. I will be able to get some specific data for you in relation to any services that may have closed over the three-month period. The deputy secretary responsible for early childhood is not on this teleconference but I will seek that advice from him and give that to the Committee.

**ANSWER**

The Department has been keeping track of the number of early childhood centres that have closed due to COVID-19. As at 29 May 2020, of the approximately 5,500 services in NSW, 266 services have notified the Department of closure due to COVID-19 in the last 3 months, with only 38 services currently closed. Based on these figures, I am satisfied that there will be capacity as the economy starts improving.