

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

**NSW GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

CORRECTED

Virtual hearing via videoconference on Wednesday 11 August 2021

The Committee met at 12:30.

PRESENT

Mr David Shoebridge (Chair)

The Hon. Scott Farlow
The Hon. John Graham
The Hon. Courtney Houssos
The Hon. Trevor Khan
The Hon. Peter Poulos
The Hon. Penny Sharpe

The CHAIR: Welcome to this second virtual hearing of the Public Accountability Committee's inquiry into the New South Wales Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before I commence, I acknowledge the Gadigal people, the traditional owners of the land on which the Parliament sits, and pay our collective respects to Elders past, present and emerging. Today's hearing is again being conducted as a fully virtual hearing, which enables the work of the Committee to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic without compromising the health and safety of members, witnesses and staff. As we break new ground with the technology, I would again ask for everyone's patience through any technical difficulties, which we hopefully will not encounter today. If participants lose their internet connection and are disconnected from the virtual hearing, they are asked to rejoin the hearing by using the same link as provided by the Committee secretariat. Today we will be hearing from Government witnesses, including the Hon. Sarah Mitchell, Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning, and senior departmental witnesses. Later this afternoon we will also hear evidence from the two key teachers' unions.

Before we commence I will make some brief comments about the procedures for today's hearing. While parliamentary privilege applies to what witnesses say in their evidence today, it does not apply to material that is distributed or repeated outside of the hearing. Committee hearings are also not intended to provide a forum to make adverse comments against people and I would urge witnesses and Committee members to stick to the issues. All witnesses have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. There may be some questions that any one of the witness cannot answer immediately, in which case they are permitted to take the question on notice and there will be 21 days to provide a considered answer and response. Today's proceedings are also being broadcasted live from Parliament's YouTube and a transcript will be placed on the Committee's website once it becomes available. Whilst we are speaking about the YouTube, I note that the upload ends at some 47 minutes from yesterday's hearing. I can assure you that Parliament staff are doing everything they can to get a full upload on the YouTube channel as we speak.

Finally, I make a few notes on the virtual hearing etiquette to minimise disruptions and critically to assist our Hansard reporters. I ask Committee members to clearly identify who questions are directed to and I ask everyone—Committee members and witnesses alike—to please state your name when you begin speaking. It may seem repetitive, but it is of great assistance to Hansard. Members should also utilise the "raise your hand" function when raising points of order, and everyone should mute their microphones when they are not speaking. That includes witnesses and members of the Committee. Please remember to turn your microphones back on when you are getting ready to speak. If you start speaking whilst muted, please recommence your question or your contribution from the beginning once you have managed to get it off mute. Members and witnesses should also please avoid speaking over each other and show each other courtesy so we can all be clearly heard. Finally, to assist Hansard, may I remind members and witnesses to speak directly into the microphone where they can and avoid making comments when their head is turned away. I now welcome our first witnesses.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL, Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning, before the Committee

GEORGINA HARRISSON, Secretary, NSW Department of Education, on former affirmation

MURAT DIZDAR, Deputy Secretary, School Performance—South, NSW Department of Education, on former affirmation

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

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

LEANNE NIXON, Deputy Secretary, School Performance—North, NSW Department of Education, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much for that. We do have a number of witnesses so I would really stress to Committee members if they could direct their questioning as far as possible, and I might now go to you Minister. We do only have a short period of time but if you thought it was of benefit to make a very brief opening address, you are entitled to do that now.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thanks, Chair. I will and it will be brief. Can I also just in advance apologise to Committee members and also Hansard about the very timely lawn mowing that is happening outside my window at the moment, which is the joys of working from home. I will not confirm or deny that it is my husband who is doing that. So, sorry, everybody, if it is noisy but hopefully it will not be too bad. I will firstly say thanks for the opportunity for us to appear here today. I think it is important that we acknowledge that, throughout the pandemic both this year and last, our school community—that is, our teachers, our principals, our school support staff and also our early childhood educators—has been doing an incredible job to adapt to evolving circumstances in keeping our students at the centre. I think it is important that we all acknowledge that at the beginning of this hearing and thank them all for the work that they do.

I also think it is important that Committee members are aware that of course the safety and wellbeing of our students and staff continue to be of the highest importance to me as Minister, to the department and to the Government. Our purpose in the education system, and particularly for me as Minister, remains to deliver the best possible education outcomes for our students, and that is my job. But we know the best teaching and learning occurs when we are face to face. We know that for a lot of our students, school is a very safe place for them, and at times the safest place in their community and, therefore, plays an essential role in terms of our students' wellbeing as well. For our HSC cohort, of course, this is the year—thirteen years, that culmination of 13 years of schooling and a period full of preparation, and major works leading up to the exams in October as well. As the COVID-19 situation has evolved, we have had to adapt. We have had to maintain an appropriate balance between those elements of safety, teaching and learning and also access to wellbeing supports.

I do want to thank and acknowledge the department, many of whom are on the hearing today, Mr Chair, and our schools for the amazing level of preparation that has gone into this latest outbreak. The ability to adapt to learning from home, the capabilities, the technology and the way that our school communities have responded has been nothing short of amazing and I think all Committee members would agree with that. And of course responding to the pandemic remains a whole-of-government effort. I know that you had health officials here yesterday. We have been working really closely with Health and with our stakeholders in developing our framework in relation to how our schools are operating on those four levels and also in terms of our return to school, particularly for those majority of students across Greater Sydney from 16 August. As Committee members would be aware, it is not a full return as we would have known it pre-COVID, but rather an approach to allow a limited, essential face-to-face learning to occur for those students who need it most.

I also want to say that we have had a good take-up with the priority vaccination program that Health has led in our sector, including for teachers and early childhood educators in hotspots in mid-July and then the current program to vaccinate our year 12 students in those areas of concern in south-western Sydney, which is underway this week. So, Mr Chair, I am very happy to be here with the secretary, with our officials and with Mr Martin to provide clarity and information to the Committee, and once again I reiterate the incredible work that our school communities are doing through this really challenging time.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Minister. We do appreciate your cooperation with the Committee. You are here to answer questions and to appropriately direct questions to the senior bureaucrats as needed. We appreciate that. We do want to start by acknowledging, at least on my behalf and I am pretty certain on behalf of the whole Committee, the extraordinary work of teachers over the last year and a bit. They have adjusted to an extremely challenging time and risen to the challenge as best they can, with all of the hurdles that the digital divide

provides, and credit to all the teaching staff within the department. With that I will now hand over to the Opposition to commence the first round of questions.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Firstly, Minister, thanks for those comments and I would like to, on behalf of the Opposition, join with you in thanking you, your staff and teachers and school staff right across New South Wales. Minister, the Premier announced her initial plan for return to school for year 12s on 28 July. When were you first informed of that plan?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thanks, John, for the question. Obviously I have been working very closely with all of my colleagues throughout the pandemic and particularly over the last period of time this term when we have had that learning from home period. It will not come as a surprise, I'm sure, to anybody on the Committee that, of course, I am advocating for a return to school for our students. I think it is important as education Minister that that is the case I put forward. Like I said in my opening remarks, we know that the best teaching and learning happens in the classroom and we also know—and many of you on this call are parents—and understand the challenges of learning from home. It is tricky and I am very cognisant of that having had the personal experience last year and knowing that many of you are also going through that at the moment. I have been in constant contact with my colleagues in relation to the plans for education. That includes the Premier as well and my other colleagues who sit on Crisis Cabinet in relation to those matters and I am very comfortable with the approach. I think what we are doing from 16 August strikes that balance in terms of following the health advice but also returning in a safe and sensible way our students who really need that extra support.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you for that answer, Minister. With respect, you have not answered the specific question. Education officials have been reportedly blindsided by that announcement. When were you first told about return-to-school plans?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I take a bit of exception to your question that education officials were blindsided by that announcement. We have been working, as I said, with our colleagues in Health and other agencies in terms of return to school. I am certainly very aware of decisions that have been made and that feedback and input in terms of Crisis Cabinet. I am not going to talk about the specifics of that and you will understand why, given that it is a Cabinet subcommittee, but what I can say is that we have been very much involved in that return-to-school process throughout the entire preparation and stakeholders were informed before any public announcements to that effect. Ms Harrison might want to comment further on that as well.

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you, Minister. As you indicated in your question, the Premier indicated her intention for the return to school from 16 August for year 12 and from that time we have been working in partnership and continue to work in partnership with Health, seeking their advice on the way we can achieve that safely. We have agreed a COVID-safe plan for that return in a limited and managed way for year 12. It is a Health-endorsed plan, a COVID-safe plan for the return of our year 12 students, so we can provide them with the support the Minister has outlined. We are working in strong partnership with Health. We will continue to do so and I think, as many people have commented on through these hearings and in the public domain, we continue to be led by health advice in the decisions that we are making.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Minister, I appreciate there has been consultation since that announcement. Prior to the Premier's announcement on 28 July, were the teacher unions consulted, were the secondary school principals consulted, were the P&C associations consulted, prior to the Premier's announcement?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thanks, John. Obviously, as I think I might have said earlier, we have been working really closely with stakeholders all the way through, particularly this term. I have had several discussions with representatives from the Teachers Federation, the Primary Principals' Association and the Secondary Principals Council. Department staff have also been having regular contact with those stakeholders and with the P&C, as has my office. There has certainly been a lot of consultation and discussion with those stakeholders about a return to school. As I said, a lot of our focus has been on our year 12 students given the importance of where we are at, particularly at this time of the year and I think that is worth noting. Last year when we had our learning—

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Minister, I might just stop you there. It is very specific question. Did any of that consultation that you are referring to, or Ms Harrison has referred to, occur before the Premier's announcement?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I am happy to say we have certainly been continuing to talk to our stakeholders about what return to school will look like. Can I also say in this instance we have been very much guided by public health advice as well, as you would expect in the middle of the pandemic. I am aware that the

stakeholders were certainly told of the decision prior to the announcement being made public by the Premier and I know Ms Harrison was involved in those conversations, so she might want to elaborate a little further.

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you, Minister. Yes, we were able to talk to our stakeholders and alert our school communities of the decisions of Government ahead of them being announced publicly. I have been in regular and often daily contact with our stakeholders since the first measures around schooling in relation to this pandemic were announced, and we continue to have discussions with our key stakeholders and across all sectors pretty much daily as these issues—

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you, Ms Harrison. I might just ask you one—we will talk to the teacher unions later. When, for example, did you specifically talk to the teacher unions ahead of the Premier's announcement about this return to school?

Ms HARRISSON: I will need to check the specific dates of the call but it was either the evening before or the morning of that I was able to give them a call to alert them to the specific announcement that was coming up that an intention to return to year 12 was being announced and that we would work with them in partnership in the plan for that delivery. And that is what we now have. We have a COVID-safe plan for the return of year 12 in a limited and managed way. We have tested that plan with school principals across all sectors prior to its release. We have taken on board all Health comments and advice in relation to that plan and it is why it is a joint plan for us with Health. We are really pleased we are able to support our year 12 students who need that support most to come back in that safe, controlled and managed way and that is the position we are in as we head towards 16 August.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you, Minister, the concern of the sector is that they were taken by surprise. This is not my suggestion but reports of the sector's response. This morning there are further reports of a departmental memo that back-to-school planning will be led by consultants from KPMG. The memo reportedly says they will "take the initial lead on scoping this piece of work". Aren't you repeating that first error with this decision? Why do you not ask some of the thousands of senior educators in New South Wales to lead this work rather than outsource it to KPMG consultants?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I will offer some initial comments and then get Ms Harrison to also provide some further clarity. Can I firstly say in relation to the premise, John, that the sectors were blindsided, you might be aware that we have had a statement come out from the Catholic, the independent and the government schools last week saying that everyone is very much on board with the return-to-school plan on 16 August. As Ms Harrison said, we have worked through that with the sectors, with the COVID-safe plan that has been co-designed by Health and Education to do that. So we are all very much on the same page when it comes to that year 12 return, what it will look like and how we can do that in a safe and sensible way. In relation to the comments in the media reporting today, which I think has been misleading, can I say at the outset that the return-to-school plan has not been outsourced to KPMG. That is not the case. There is a large amount of work being done within the department in relation to the return to school and our COVID committee, which is doing that work, is being headed up by Dr Paul Wood, who is an executive director in the department. He is a former—

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Minister, I will just interrupt to say I accept that, but this memo is reported as saying KPMG will take the initial lead on scoping this piece of work. Is that wrong?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: What I am saying to you—and Ms Harrison will be able to provide further comment in terms of the work that KPMG has been engaged to do. The inference that an external or the plan to school has been outsourced is not the case and I will get Ms Harrison to speak about the role of KPMG and how that will work.

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you, Minister. I will start with the relation to the KPMG question but I am very happy to provide some further context to the Committee on how we are managing the COVID response across the department. We have seconded four members—

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Ms Harrison, if you could constrain yourself to the KPMG memo, that would be helpful.

Ms HARRISSON: Yes, very happy to start there but if Committee members are interested also happy to provide further advice. We have seconded four staff to set up a program management office from KPMG. As part of that, they are helping us identify and scope the workstreams that need to occur for the safe return of students when and as Health tells us that it is a safe and appropriate thing to be doing. There is no plan for KPMG to be providing advice to Government on the return to school. That is absolutely being led by departmental officials and by our senior educators across the department. I want to thank my educator colleagues in the department, who are working above and beyond to support their colleagues in schools with the learning from home hub, where we have online resources available for teachers designed by other teachers to lessen the workload and pressure on the

front line. We are making absolute use of our expertise from the teaching workforce in our response to COVID. What we have done is supplement our program management capacity at a time when across Government, you will appreciate, the public service is stretched and pulling in numbers of directions. We have staff supporting contract tracing, as do other agencies, and this is for staff to help support a program management office and nothing more.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Minister, can I just ask you, when will the KPMG report be due? When is it due to be reported?

Ms HARRISSON: Can I just clarify there will not be a KPMG report. That is not what they have been instructed or employed to do. We have four members of KPMG staff on secondment to the department who will be directed and led by department staff and Dr Paul Wood as the head of the task force as the Minister indicated. They are not here to write a report. They are here to provide program management office support.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: How long will they be in place for?

Ms HARRISSON: We have provision for them to be in place for up to eight weeks but we will review that as we go depending on how far along we get on our journey in the meantime, but we have—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Are you expecting that they will be there until schools return or are they only until the date that they return is—

Ms HARRISSON: Sorry, Ms Houssos, what I am trying to say here is in their contract they are with us for up to eight weeks. It has no bearing on the kind of school return. That is not what they are employed to do. They have been seconded to us under the direction of our teams to provide a program management office at this point in our COVID response planning. That is all.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Minister, can I come back to you? When will students return to school? I am going to ask the question that all parents would like to know.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you, and it is a very good and pertinent question. Obviously, as you know, from the sixteenth we are going to have our students across Greater Sydney in year 12 with the exception of those hotspot local government areas [LGAs] return. It is also important to note that we do have students who are at school across New South Wales now. Many of our regional communities have had schools continue in the normal ways who have not been impacted by the current outbreak. I think we have made it clear that the learning from home provisions of the other year groups across Greater Sydney will exist until 28 August. We are currently working in terms of a return-to-school plan from beyond that date, talking to stakeholders about what that might look like.

We have not made those decisions yet, Ms Houssos. As the Government and the Premier are saying quite strongly, of course we are looking at what we can do after 28 August. We will continue to do that in consultation with Health. As I said in my opening remarks, I am really cognisant of the fact that learning from home is tough and, despite amazing efforts by our school communities and our families, it is challenging. I am very aware, particularly for our younger students—our kindergarten, year 1 and year 2—that those formative years are really essential. I will always advocate for students to be back in the classroom as soon as we can in a safe way. At the moment we are working through what those return to school plans will look like, but I am not in a position to hypothesise about dates or when that will be because that work is still underway, as I am sure you can appreciate.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: The Premier said this morning at her news conference that the lockdown was likely to be ongoing until the end of October. Is that a likely time frame for when our students are going to return to school?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: The Premier has also said that a return to school continues to be a key priority of the Government and I think the fact that we have got our year 12 students coming back in the limited way but still having access to a school site in Greater Sydney that they do not currently have is a good step forward. We will continue to have those conversations with Health about what a return would look like. I know Ms Harrison has already started conversations with key stakeholders again about what that plan could involve and we are continuing to do that. I do not want to pre-empt decisions that are still yet to be made. Obviously it will be done based in conjunction with Health and their advice as we have done throughout the pandemic, and again I just reiterate that we do have students who are still at school across regional communities, so we are dealing with different levels of impact of COVID right across New South Wales at this point in time.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Yes, but, Minister, the parents in particular across Greater Sydney and across the affected LGAs want to get an indication. Are you working towards the rest of this term being from home? Are you working towards the end of the year being from home? What indication can you give them more than just that the conversations are happening?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Can I say certainly my understanding of how most of our parents are feeling is that they are pretty keen to have their children back at school as soon as they can. That is a view that I share. I have been quite open that it is my responsibility and prerogative as education Minister to provide advice in terms of what I think is best for teaching and learning, and clearly that happens in the classroom, but we need to do it in a safe and sensible way. We need to do it in conjunction with Health. The Premier has already indicated that this is a priority area of Government. I am also looking at more broadly how things go in the general community, at those vaccination rates that we need to see increase. I think there are some really positive signs in that space as well, but what I do not want to do is give misleading information. We are absolutely actively looking at what our options to return to school are but the time frames in relation to that will be based on advice and consultations with others across all of government and in particular Health in terms of what we can do and when.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Yes, but, Minister, surely you understand the frustration of parents. Surely you understand that they too are keen to get an idea of how long this is going to go for and just for the Government to be upfront with them. Is it going to be another month? Is it going to be until October? Is it going to be until the end of the year? Surely you can give them more indication than "wait until 28 August" and "we are having conversations".

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I would just repeat what I said before in that I am very aware of how challenging learning from home is for a lot of families and that obviously as education Minister I want kids back in the classroom as soon as we can make that happen. I say that very openly and have relayed that on many different occasions publicly as well. We will be in a position to tell parents what to expect within the coming weeks. We are working on that with our stakeholders. We know that we are learning from home until 28 August. That is still 2½ weeks away. Like we have done in other instances throughout the pandemic, Ms Houssos, we have been able to provide updated advice to schools and parent communities in advance of those dates.

We will continue to work with Health and with our stakeholders to map out what a return to school might look like, and of course will be doing so based on the parameters and advice that we get from public health, which again I think is in line with community and parent sentiment. I think parents want their children to be back at school but they also want a safe return to school and they are the things that we need to make sure we work through. That is what we have done for our year 12 students coming back on 16 August and it is the same approach we will take for a broader return to school.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Minister, you have talked about a safe return to schools. Can I ask you then, is there any number of teachers—a proportion of teachers—that will need to be vaccinated in order for schools to return?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I will get Ms Harrison to talk about teacher vaccinations but I will just say, firstly, we in our public school system have about 51 per cent—I believe that is the figure I have been given—of our teachers who are aged 40 and over, so they have been eligible for vaccinations for some time. Of course with the updated health advice, anyone over the age of 18 can get the AstraZeneca vaccine. We are encouraging all of our teachers to go and get vaccinated with whichever vaccine is available to them and again I have made very public comments about that. Teachers that I have been speaking to are keen to get vaccinated. In line with the rest of the community, we want our teachers to go and get vaccinated. We are actively encouraging them to do that. I know Ms Harrison has been communicating with our workforce about that as well. But in terms of percentages and numbers of teachers that are vaccinated, I will just get Ms Harrison to provide a bit more information.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Before we go to Ms Harrison, can I ask you then, what are the criteria for schools returning? Is it a proportion of teachers vaccinated? What are going to be the criteria such that you will allow students to return to face-to-face learning?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I think there are a number of elements that we need to consider. First and foremost is the public health advice in relation to what a safe return to school looks like. Some of the Committee members will no doubt recall when we had to make the decision to move to learning from home, which was not done lightly and was not done easily. Part of the concern coming from Dr Kerry Chant and others is just a huge amount of movement that we have in our school system. We have literally every day across Greater Sydney hundreds of thousands of students and tens of thousands of teachers when you talk about the full cohort. Add the parents to that as well, as we have during normal times. So it was about minimising the movement in the community and I think Dr Chant and the Premier both covered that quite extensively in media conferences in relation to those decisions.

I think also if you look at what we have done in terms of our levels—the four levels we have set with our schools for how we manage schools in a COVID-safe way when we do have a return to face-to-face learning. That has been available to all our school communities across the State from the beginning of this term. It very

clearly sets out some of the extra measures that we will be putting in place that we have not had before. Things like mask-wearing, minimising extra adults on site, making sure that you stagger drop-off and pick-up times for our year 12 students next week and minimising the mixing between students, for example. So there already is a lot of information and work that has been done in terms of what a COVID-safe return looks like and how we do that. But obviously we will continue to be guided by Health in terms of a bigger return, what that might look like and how we can make it work for which student group. Like I said I am very cognisant of the early years and those students. But they are all the discussions that are happening as we speak and will continue to happen over the coming days as we work through what our options are guided by the health advice.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: My time has expired. Can I ask just one final question? You said that you understand the challenges, particularly for early primary school. Are you, therefore, looking at returning early primary school students as a priority over secondary school students, given the reduced risk of transmission and given the increased educational need?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: As I said, I think that when you take into account—obviously it is important for all of our students to be back in the classroom. It is something that we learnt certainly last year when we had our learning from home period and what that return looked like. I guess I am just speaking as a parent but also as Minister. The younger children, the five-, six-, seven-year-olds—it is much harder for parents to be managing working from home and overseeing their work. They do not work as independently, but are also in those really crucial early years where a lot of formative skills need come into effect that will impact or have a contribution to the rest of their time at school. I don't think it will be a surprise to anyone—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: We understand that, Minister, but will you be prioritising—

The CHAIR: Courtney, we will come back. Your time has expired and I am sure we will cover this later. Minister, had you finished your answer to that?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I was just going to say that I do not think it will be a surprise to anyone that we are very conscious of those groups but then also we have got vulnerable children in other year groups. These are all of the things that we are considering as Government and as an education system in terms of what we need to do on the return.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Minister. Do you accept, especially for HSC students and their families, that predictability and certainty and a lack of unnecessary stress is really important in the HSC year and that that should be one of the goals?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: David, I think that the HSC is a challenging time for any student. I think particularly this year's cohort, given that they had disruption in their year 11 studies last year as well—I am very conscious of the wellbeing needs of this year's class of 2021, absolutely.

The CHAIR: Minister, I join you in your concerns there and it is why I suppose there has been a lot of criticism. I have had many, many parents and teachers contact me very concerned about the somewhat chaotic announcement that the Premier made about the urgent return of HSC students in Greater Sydney on 16 August. Were you part of the decision-making to prioritise that return of HSC students in Greater Sydney on 16 August? Did that come out of your office?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: As I said in response to questions from Mr Graham, I have been very much involved in whole-of-government decisions around things that relate to education and I have absolutely been pushing for our HSC students to return, particularly given the importance of this year but also the time that we are at in the year. I have absolutely been involved in that.

The CHAIR: The Premier announced that there would be this priority vaccination program for year 12 students in the eight most affected local government areas in order to get those students back on from 16 August. But that position has now been completely contradicted by the NSW Health guidelines, hasn't it? Completely contradicted.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I will say that decision to vaccinate those year 12 students is one that I support. It is the decision of the Government through the Crisis Cabinet process, again as members of the Committee would be aware. But obviously that rollout is happening this week. We have had good numbers of students turn up in the first couple of days with more time to come for those vaccinations. But we have continued to adapt to the health advice and I think that is important. Certainly the conversations that we have been able to have with Health around that return to school and what it would look like—it was always going to be in a way that was different to what we would normally have in non-COVID times. I think the fact we have had those four-level settings in place means that our school communities have been aware that we will be returning in a different way to usual. Again that is in line with community sentiment and public health advice. I think the

decisions around those eight LGAs to get those vaccinations done and to then look at what opportunities there might be for those students is sensible and it is based on the advice coming from Health, which is what we need to follow.

The CHAIR: Minister, the Premier was indicating very clearly that students would be returning from 16 August across Greater Sydney, including in the eight local government areas once they had been vaccinated. But do you accept that the written advice now from NSW Health is that no students are to be returning from 16 August—none at all in the eight affected local government areas—because of the COVID risk?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: As I said earlier I am not going to refer or comment on advice that might have been provided through the Cabinet committee process, but what I can say is that we have got the settings in place in terms of those areas outside those eight LGAs. Within those eight LGAs we are following the guidance from Health and again the secretary might want to comment on that. I know she is having very frequent conversations with Dr Chant and others. And I will say too, Mr Chair, it is also in line certainly with what our principals and communities expect. I had a roundtable last week with a group of principals from south-western Sydney talking through the impact on their communities and the way forward and I think getting the vaccination rollout happening is really important. I am pleased by the numbers that we are seeing so far this week. That is going to give us an opportunity to look at what more we can do for those eight LGAs in the future and that is really important. But Ms Harrison, do you want to comment—

The CHAIR: I will go to Ms Harrison in a second but I just want to—in case you are proceeding on a misapprehension—read to you from the NSW Health guidelines that you have distributed to all schools. Under the heading "Attendance" it says:

All students in identified LGAs—

and they are the eight most affected LGAs—

must continue learning from home until advised otherwise.

Now that is directly contrary to what the Premier was suggesting about a return to work once vaccinated. I am not asking about Cabinet-privileged material. I am asking about the material you have distributed to all schools and teachers. It is directly contrary to what the Premier put.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: The advice that has gone out to schools, Mr Chair—and again I will ask Ms Harrison to comment on that because she obviously oversees those operational elements—is consistent with how we have planned for the return to school. Ms Harrison?

Ms HARRISSON: Yes, thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to comment. The Premier announced an intention for the return of year 12 and also announced some additional safety measures that would make it possible for those students in those eight LGAs to return to learning at an appropriate time. I think one of the things we have all heard Dr Chant comment on repeatedly is the fast and evolving nature of this pandemic and so we continue to take up-to-date advice from Dr Chant every day. As we settled and finalised the COVID-safe plan, it was the Health advice—and we have followed the Health advice—that at this time it is not appropriate to bring year 12 students back in those eight LGAs. We maintain though that it is a valuable exercise to continue to get those year 12 students vaccinated. One of the key public health measures in managing this outbreak of COVID-19 is vaccination. Enabling our year 12 students in those areas to access a vaccination helps protect them, their families and their communities, and will enable them when they are fully vaccinated to have a better chance of a return to learning and to complete their HSC as they have all be working so hard to do.

The CHAIR: Minister and Ms Harrison, I don't think anyone would push back against the idea that it is hugely beneficial to get year 12 students vaccinated. The proposition I am putting to you is that nowhere in the current health advice that the department has does it say that once students in those eight local government areas are vaccinated or reach a level of vaccination there will be a return to school. That is just not contained in the public health advice, is it?

Ms HARRISSON: As I commented previously, this is an emerging and evolving situation that we are managing and we continue the conversations with Health and will update the health advice as the positions in those LGAs evolve as well. I do not want to hypothesise about what may or may not be possible based on health advice in a few days, in a week, in a month's time. What I do want to focus on is that we are really trying to support our year 12s to have the best opportunity to complete their HSC. For those students, that is including access to a vaccination and we are delighted with the uptake of that opportunity so far. We are also glad that it is part of the overall public health support in those communities to limit transmission and spread of the virus in south-west Sydney.

The CHAIR: Yes. But let's be clear. Is there any public health advice you can point to that has been provided to you, Minister, or you, Ms Harrison, that supported the Premier's announcement of the return to school—

Ms HARRISSON: I'm sorry, Chair, I can't—have you finished your question? I have frozen on my end.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: We have lost the Chair.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Courtney, your time to shine.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I thought I had frozen as well. Given that it is crossbench time and we don't have any other crossbench members, I might just perhaps encourage David to turn his video off and then I will just give him a moment to try to rejoin. No, I think he is going to have some difficulties so he might have to jump off. We might pause his time there and then come back to Labor questioning. Minister, can I ask you—David, I think we've got you again.

The CHAIR: My internet is mucking up. I fear it is multiple access due to working and schooling from home on the NBN so I apologise for that. Thank you for stepping in.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I think we are all juggling that. My pleasure. I will hand back to you for questioning.

The CHAIR: Actually, my internet is still a little unstable so what I might do is I might hand over to you, Courtney, for five minutes and I will log off and log back on again and see if that corrects matters. Thank you for taking over, Courtney.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Excellent, my pleasure. Minister, can I come back to the question about the vaccinations. Are you able to provide us with a number of students who have been vaccinated at Qudos Bank Arena over the last two days?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I will ask Ms Owen to provide the information that we have but also just note that, as you would appreciate, the vaccine rollout is being done by Health so any sort of specific questions would be better directed to them. But I know that Ms Owen has an overview certainly from the last couple of days so I am happy for her to provide that.

Ms OWEN: Thanks, Minister. Ms Houssos, the number of students vaccinated as at close yesterday was 6,500.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: What proportion of available appointments was that?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: We can probably take that on notice but it might be a question better directed to Health because, like I said, they are controlling all of the vaccine bookings and appointments, not us. I understand you had them here yesterday. You have got an opportunity to put questions on notice. Health is doing the rollout at Qudos Bank Arena, not Education. So we are not in a position to provide that level of detail. That is my understanding.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Owen, is that the case?

Ms OWEN: Yes, the booking system is operated by Health so they would be able to give you certainly that detailed information about the proportion of booking slots. I do know for sure that Monday was completely booked out and yesterday was almost fully booked out and bookings go through for the rest of the week through to the end of Saturday.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Do you have, Ms Owen, any indication as to what they are like for the rest of the week. Are we fully booked? Are we close to that?

Ms OWEN: No, I don't.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Do you know what percentage of students who are eligible across the nine LGAs—I understand Penrith students are now eligible as well—have now booked in?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Again, in relation to that, we would have to go to Health in terms of the numbers because they are running the vaccine rollout, not Education.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Owen, did you have any further information?

Ms OWEN: Again, Health will have the most up-to-date information. Students are going through in large proportions. This is a high, large-scale operation over six days so Health would give you the latest, up-to-date information. I know as of last night over 50 per cent were booked in.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Over 50 per cent were booked in. Minister, can I ask if you will commit to releasing the data by LGA of what percentage of HSC students were vaccinated this week, once it is completed?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I am happy to take that on notice. As I said, we would have to do that in consultation with Health, and I am not sure in terms of private personal information of students as well, but I appreciate the intention that the Committee would like to get an understanding of roughly how many students have been vaccinated and the percentage, so we will take that on notice and see what we can provide, noting of course that we are on day three of what I think is a six-day rollout, so we will be in a position to provide more information to the Committee on notice and happy to give you what we can.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That would be great.

The CHAIR: Thanks for stepping up, Courtney. I hope I'm back.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You are back. We can hear you.

The CHAIR: Had you finished that line of questioning, or can you come back to it in a bit?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I have just got—

The CHAIR: You finish your line of questioning and then indicate when you hand over.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thanks, David. Will the vaccinations be available if students are unable to attend Qudos Bank Arena this week?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I will ask Ms Owen to provide a bit of clarity around the ways that we are supporting schools for students who might have difficulty getting to Qudos Bank Arena. Obviously we have found that for many of our students and families, they preferred to make their own way there; they felt more comfortable doing that. But we do have some students where that has been a concern. I will acknowledge I have had local members in those communities reach out to me in relation to that as well, so we are working to accommodate students who might not be able to get to Qudos Bank Arena for a range of reasons. Ms Owen can talk about that now briefly for you.

Ms OWEN: We are expecting the vast majority of students to make their own way to the Qudos Bank Arena but there are two cohorts of students for whom separate arrangements are being made. Firstly, as of now the department has made arrangements for students who cannot use their own transport or are not confident using public transport to go to the Qudos Bank Arena via a taxi service. That was put in place yesterday and students are using that service arranged by their school. Their principal makes that arrangement for them and that is funded by the department just to make sure people who are not used to using public transport can avail themselves of that service and maximise the number of students getting the vaccine. The second cohort of students are those students for whom it would be very difficult to access the Qudos Bank Arena, mostly due to different forms of disability. And we are working with Health right now on putting in place more personalised arrangements at a local level for them. So the vaccine will be available for them but not through the Qudos Bank Arena mass vaccination centre, which I think is appropriate for that cohort.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Minister, can I come back to you? Are you looking at schools' individual percentage rates of vaccination? Will they be prevented from allowing students back on campus if they do not reach a certain percentage?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: What we are doing at the moment is encouraging all of our students in those eight LGAs who are eligible for the vaccine to go and get the vaccine. I think, as the health Minister said earlier this week—or it might have been late last week—it really is a golden opportunity to go and protect yourself, your family and your other student cohort. So that is what we are focusing on. We want our students to go and get vaccinated. I cannot hypothesise on what those final numbers will be because, as I said, we are only a couple of days in. It is encouraging, the numbers so far. We will continue to work with Health in terms of what return looks like in those areas, but for now the messaging to those students, to their families, has to absolutely be take that opportunity now to go and get vaccinated. It is the best thing for you to do. We just cannot get that out strongly enough to those students and their families, that they need to be making their appointments and going this week and getting those jabs in arms. It is just critical.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: We certainly welcome the ability to provide those individualised arrangements. I know my colleagues in Campbelltown and Macquarie Fields were really advocating very hard for those logistical issues to be addressed. We want to be reducing those barriers to getting those into year 12 students there.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: And if I can say too, I really appreciate the contacts that I have had from local members about that; it has been really useful. And also principals, again, in that area of south-western Sydney have reached out, and that is why we have been able to address those issues. It is important that we keep doing that. We have all got to work together to get the best outcome for the community. So I do acknowledge those members for their advocacy.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I have asked about students being vaccinated. I do not think we quite got an answer before. Are you now tracking the number of teachers who are vaccinated, the actual proportion of teachers who are vaccinated?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I will get Ms Harrison to comment in relation to what information the department has about that.

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you, Ms Houssos, for the question. I think, as is the case for all other health information, it is personal information held by the individual, not by the employer. We do not have records of vaccinations of teachers. What we do have is some understanding from the three local government areas where we are able to offer priority access to the Pfizer vaccine before the broader vaccination advice relating to AstraZeneca changed. We were able to get a sense of how many teachers in those LGAs booked in. It was a very strong proportion, and I can provide the details of that on notice. But at this stage we are not tracking vaccinations of teachers. The appointment booking process does not capture that information and enable us to do that.

We continue to encourage all of our staff to go and get vaccinated at the first opportunity they have. We are continuing to communicate to our year 12 students through their schools, directly in the community and through public health channels to really go and get those vaccines that have been made available to them in those eight LGAs.

The CHAIR: Minister, I think we should be very clear about this so that those students in year 12 in those eight affected local government areas know what the future is for their return to school. There is currently no target that you have been given by NSW Health of a vaccination rate that will safely see those students back at school. Is that right, you do not have a target?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: What we have, as I said in response to a question from Ms Houssos, is an opportunity for a take-up of those vaccines now. We will continue to be guided by Health in terms of what a return in those eight LGAs may look like. Obviously that vaccination program is important for a range of reasons—I think, as the Premier said, to provide some certainty around the written exams in October—but also, more broadly, we have had conversations with Health. But the focus at the moment is about getting that vaccine rollout done, getting as many students taking up that opportunity that is available to them this week. It is a massive logistical exercise, to vaccinate thousands of students. I think Health are doing an amazing job to make that happen. And then, as I said, we are hoping for a very good take-up and that we will be able to then determine further discussions and decisions with Health in relation to schooling in those eight LGAs.

The CHAIR: But, Minister, the Premier directly linked the vaccinations with a return to school. There is an expectation amongst those HSC students that that link is there, but it seems [audio malfunction].

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You are having the same issues again, David. I will give him a little bit longer. David, I know John Graham has got one question on this issue. I might hand to John and see if then we can come back to David.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I was going to ask on the question of returning to where you were heading with student vaccinations. There have been some reports about the cancellation of vaccinations that had been booked in by schools, particularly as the transport was no longer on offer. Are those reports accurate? Have schools or students cancelled vaccine appointments that otherwise would have proceeded out of the nine LGA areas?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I will ask Ms Owen or Mr Dizdar if they can comment on that. What I will say in response first though, John, is that obviously we have made it clear to principals in those areas that if you have students who are not able to get to Qudos Bank Arena—we have actively gone to principals and said, "You tell us if there's an issue with any of them getting there," which is why we have done that opportunity for taxis that Ms Owen has spoken about.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I appreciate it.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: They are also for those students with additional needs. I am not sure whether Ms Owen or Mr Dizdar have any information in relation to what you have raised.

Ms OWEN: No, I am not aware of students cancelling their appointments. As you have seen, the take-up has been very high in the first couple of days. As the Minister says, we have put out and refreshed information over the last 48 hours about the alternative transport arrangements for students, which I think may have made people change the day that they choose to take up that vaccine. That would be my only explanation for anything you could have heard.

Mr DIZDAR: Mr Graham, I have personally liaised with many principals across those eight LGAs and the suburbs in Penrith that are part of the vaccination program. We have also liaised with them in mass meetings with their directors and their executive directors, and we continue to work with them daily. We have not had reports of cancellation of appointments. More to the point has been what has been described. Principals have been acutely aware of those students with significant disadvantage, family complexity, limited transportation access [inaudible].

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you. I think we have got the Chair back, so I might—

Mr DIZDAR: And they have been really heartened that we have solved for that—

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I will hand back to either the Chair or the Deputy Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Graham. I appreciate that. I have hotspotted off my phone to try and avoid those issues. I apologise to everybody for freezing. I thank you all for directly stepping up; it is really appreciated. Minister, when it comes to the HSC students returning outside of those eight affected LGAs in Greater Sydney, it is true that the health advice you have now is that it can be for no more than two hours a day, it is only where it is essential for the learning or wellbeing of a student, it cannot be for five days a week and it cannot be at a class level—it should be either in individual or very small groups. That is the situation, isn't it?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Yes, that is correct, Mr Chair. That is part of the COVID-safe return to school plan that we have put in place in conjunction with Health. I will also take the opportunity to say I think your current internet situation is a great example of why a return to school is very important. It is very timely that that is happening during this hearing, Mr Chair.

The CHAIR: I think we will get onto the digital divide in a bit.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Happy to.

The CHAIR: You are pushing against an open door in that regard. Minister, we are now in the situation that on 16 August there will be no return of HSC students in the eight affected local government areas, and only a tiny, tiny proportion of HSC students in other affected areas in Greater Sydney are coming back. There has been this great deal of anxiety, concern and stress amongst parents, students and teachers created by the Premier's announcement. Do you accept it has not been well communicated and it has not been a good announcement for students and teachers?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: No, I do not agree with the premise of your question, Chair. I think the fact that at the moment, as we speak, the access to school sites outside of those eight LGAs is only for students who need to go because their parents are working and there is no other option. Schools have remained open to any student who needs to attend, but obviously our attendance rates have been very low, as you would understand. But from next week what we have on offer for our year 12 students across Greater Sydney is a return, and I accept it is in a limited way in line with health advice, but it is access to a school—to teachers, to equipment—that they do not currently have. So it is an improvement on what we have now. It is important for essential learning activities. It should not be a surprise to the Committee that we are doing it in a way that is safe and sensible—smaller groups staggered across the day, minimising impacts and interactions between students. I think that is sensible.

But if you have students who, for one reason or another, might be struggling with a particularly important learning concept from home and they need to go in and have a bit of one-on-one time with their teachers, they can do that. If they need some mental health or wellbeing support, or reassurance from a teacher or an educator that they trust, they will have the opportunity to do that. That is not insignificant. It is actually really important that we provide that and we are doing it in a way that is COVID safe, that minimises the risk but also recognises how important it is to let students have that face-to-face access in the best way that we can.

Ms HARRISSON: Chair, if I could just add—

The CHAIR: I will come to you in a second, Ms Harrison. I will read to you what the public health advice says, and it is quite clearly not an HSC return. It says:

Students will be limited in their access to schools for essential curriculum and wellbeing activity, where it is essential for the student to engage with the teaching or wellbeing staff or school facilities, and only individually or in small groups.

There is this pretence that this is consistent with the Premier's announcement and it just simply isn't, is it?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Again, I do not agree with your question or the sentiment that you are putting. We have made it clear that we want to provide that opportunity for students to have that interaction. They do not currently have it; they will from next week. It has been done with Health to limit the risk but provide that opportunity. I think that certainly the feedback that I have had from across the sectors and from our principals groups is that they think it is a measured and a balanced approach. Everybody recognises, like I said, that learning from home is a challenge. For some of our students in particular, as I said in my opening remarks, schools can be their safest places. It is important that we provide that opportunity for them. That is what we have done. I think we have struck the right balance in terms of a safe and sensible return, and I think that would be backed in by many of our stakeholders.

The CHAIR: Minister, this proposed return, which is extremely limited—it is far from what the Premier announced and now has the underpinning of public health advice—I think has been welcomed and supported by the teachers unions and by teachers, as well as by students. But why did you not sit down with the Teachers Federation at the very beginning and negotiate this kind of safe return and get rid of all that uncertainty and anxiety that has happened over the last two weeks?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Like I said earlier, Mr Chair, we have been continuing to engage with key stakeholders right throughout this term. Of course, that includes our parents, our students, our teachers organisations, our principals groups. That will continue. The Premier very clearly announced our intention to have HSC students return from the sixteenth. From the sixteenth, we will be having HSC students back on site in a COVID-safe way under health advice. We have worked through how that will work in a practical sense over the last period of time with our school communities. That is exactly what we have delivered.

The CHAIR: Minister, don't you think it would be sensible for future planning to sit down and do the planning together with the teachers unions, which have such a wealth of knowledge about how schools actually work? It was really the teachers unions who came out and forced this rethink about the HSC return, wasn't it? Don't you think it is better to work with them in advance?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Like I said, we will continue to engage with the wide range of stakeholders that we have in education in terms of the issues related to COVID. I think the most important people that we need to sit down with, with all due respect, are our health experts in terms of what a COVID-safe return to school looks like. As I said earlier, we are engaging with our key stakeholder groups—our parents, our students, our teaching representatives, our principal representatives—and we will continue to do that. Ms Harrison can comment a bit further on some of the work that she and the team have been doing in this space.

We will continue to talk to everybody in education about the way forward, noting, of course, Mr Shoebridge, that different stakeholders also have different views. We are talking to the Catholic and independent sectors as well. We will do this in collaboration, but the people that we have got to put first in all of our decisions are our students. We have to do what is best for them and their education, and I do not apologise for that.

The CHAIR: The initial proposal from the Premier—you say the best interests of students need to be considered. There was no public health advice to say that the return to school from 16 August was going to actually be safe for students or teachers. Indeed, the current public health advice suggests that the Premier's original plan would have been very unsafe. I am asking you if you are going to have better future planning going forward so that we do not have this kind of flip-flopping and uncertainty.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Like I said in earlier questioning, Mr Chair, Government decisions, which are whole-of-government decisions based on advice from many people, including the health experts, have certainly been to plan for that return for 16 August. That is what we have done. That is the work that has been underway, and the position that we have landed in terms of how that return will play out from next week has been done in consultation with Health and our stakeholders. Of course we will continue to consult with them, that is what we do. I think, as Ms Harrison said, there are very frequent conversations with all of our education stakeholders—with myself, with my office, with key members of the department, with NESAs. I note that Mr Martin is here. We are all working together on this, recognising that it is very important that we get this right in terms of returning students to the classroom, and that consultation will continue.

The CHAIR: If there is public health advice that was available to you as at the Premier's initial announcement a fortnight ago, will you provide that advice to the Committee and, more importantly, will you provide that advice to students and teachers? Will you provide the advice that underpinned the Premier's initial announcement?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Probably to echo comments made in your hearing yesterday, obviously those considerations that are whole of government or through a Cabinet process, I am not at liberty to go into those details. But what we do have in terms of health advice is the return to school COVID-safe plan, which is co-branded, co-designed between Education and Health for our year 12 students. That is available. It is available for all our schools. It is publicly available and very clearly states what we need to do in terms of that return. You yourself, Mr Chair, have read out some of that advice in terms of how schools need to manage that going forward. So that information is already publicly available.

Ms HARRISSON: Chair, if I could add on this line of questioning, when the Premier announced her intention, and we spoke to stakeholders ahead of that announcement, one of the things we made clear was that we would work with our stakeholders in determining the best way to do that from here, as we have done through the last 10 days and ended up in a place that I think everyone is supportive of for both students and staff across Greater Sydney, where they are able to return in that limited and controlled way. Could I also just add, for those year 12 students who are returning in that limited and controlled way, they will continue to be supported with learning from home. I want to make sure that we are recognising and acknowledging that work that teachers are doing at the moment in that ongoing support of year 12.

When I have spoken to principals, they are making personal phone calls to individual students to check on their wellbeing, to check they are okay. They are looking forward to being able to see some of those students in coming weeks and to check on their progress and study, and to check on their wellbeing, as well as then continuing to deliver that online and remote learning support as those students learn from home.

The CHAIR: I apologise to the witnesses and Committee members for that somewhat interrupted line of questioning. I am now hoping to hand over, effectively I hope, to John Graham.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Minister, I might ask about students in year 11 who are doing their HSC exams this year. This applies, as I understand it, to some students. The particular group I want to ask about are Tamil language learners. They are in year 11 at their main school. They are in a hotspot. Across a range of schools, they are due to sit their Tamil language oral exam on 4 September, their written exam on 19 October. These students are in a hotspot, they have got their exam in less than a month, they are in year 11 and they get vaccinated. At the moment, they have not been able to find a way to do that.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I might get Ms Harrisson to comment on that one.

Ms HARRISSON: We have some very explicit eligibility criteria for the vaccination. You will appreciate that we continue to manage within constrained supply of the Pfizer vaccine, and that is the only vaccine available for use in that age cohort. It does include, though, anyone aged 16 and above sitting part of their final examinations this year. If there are examples you have where we have not been able to gather the information necessary to contact individuals, please send that through and we will be very happy to follow up. If someone is eligible, there is a vaccine there for them, and we want to make sure they are getting the chance to come forward and get that vaccination.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: That is much appreciated, and we will provide those details. I would like to follow on from where you were asking about this amended return to school. Minister, this question is to you. I acknowledge this is a step forward but I have to agree with the Chair it is a long way from the Premier's return to school. Originally there were more than 50,000 students from Greater Sydney who were going to return to face-to-face learning. All their teachers would have had to go back, their support staff. Parents might have had to drop them off, given we were on the Sunday timetable. It was a large number of people moving around Sydney. Now more than 20,000 of them in those nine affected areas will stay at home. Of the remaining 30,000, they are only turning up to school when it is essential. How many students are we going to see moving around Sydney under these new plans?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Again, I might get Ms Harrisson to provide some more comment in relation to that. What I will say is that we are continuing obviously to work with our school communities, with our principles, to make sure that we provide that opportunity for access. I think it is really important too, and I know that you would all appreciate this, that we have got very diverse school communities across New South Wales and even across Greater Sydney—differing numbers of students doing certain exams, different subjects and the take-up of those. All of that is part of what we need to consider and what schools will consider in terms of their student need when they look at scheduling and rostering who is coming into school on what day and for what reason.

There is some really, really great work being done by our school communities. And I know that Mr Dizdar and Ms Nixon could comment further on that, about how they are making it work in their local school context. That is important because, like I said, we have got to give flexibility. We have got to recognise that our

school communities are different, that each student's personal situation is different, and that is why I think this plan strikes the right balance.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Given those complexities, Minister, perhaps Ms Harrison could tell us how many students will be moving across Sydney. That is clearly the challenge that the Chief Health Officer was identifying, this mobility challenge. How many students now under this dramatically scaled back return, if you can call it that, will be moving across Sydney? Do we know that?

Ms HARRISSON: What I can tell you, Mr Graham, is that we have worked with the Chief Health Officer and her team. We have adopted all of the public health advice into the COVID-safe plan for the return of year 12. We accept that it is in a limited way that we are able to safely bring year 12 back. I think the whole community would only expect us to operate in a way that is COVID safe at this time, and that is certainly what we are doing. We, in conjunction with the public health team, feel that we have got the balance right between those mobility issues that you raise and the benefits to our students of having the opportunity to connect with their teachers. So I do not have specific—

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Ms Harrison, when you say "we have got the balance right", do you know how many students will be moving across Sydney?

Ms HARRISSON: I do not have specific numbers. It will depend vastly on individual and local school plans and the way they intend to bring those students back in those very contained and controlled measures, as are set out in that plan. We also know that—

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Understood. So the answer really is at a central level we have no idea how many of those students will be moving across. We know it is less than it would have been, but we do not know how many centrally.

Ms HARRISSON: We do not know centrally but what we do know is that, in preparation for any additional movement, we need to make sure we are providing additional provision for transport. So we are working with New South Wales Transport to make sure additional bus routes are available to support students who use that method of transport to get to school to maintain their COVID-safe operations. We are putting in place every sensible and practical measure that we can to support our year 12 students to get back to school in some form, to get the support they need and—

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you, Ms Harrison. I think you have answered my question. Can I move on to the KPMG report? You may object to that term, but the KPMG consultancy docs.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: It is not a report. We answered that earlier, Mr Graham.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes, the KPMG consultancy. Ms Harrison perhaps—although, Minister, feel free to answer this—what is the cost of that work?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I will get Ms Harrison to respond to that one.

Ms HARRISSON: I think, as I indicated in my answers earlier, we have seconded four staff from KPMG for a period of time into the organisation. We will use that resource over the coming weeks and I will be happy following that, once we have that final cost, to share that back with the Committee. At this stage I do not have the specific costs on what will happen in the future but I will, when that has completed, be able to provide some advice on notice.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: That is appreciated. I have a question then for the Minister. I am returning now to my first set of questions about the initial announcement about the Premier's preferred return to school model. I took Ms Harrison's answer about when the teacher unions were informed as to say they were informed after the decision was made by crisis Cabinet but before the announcement was made by the Premier—that is, they had no input into the decision. Is that when you were informed, after the crisis Cabinet made the decision and before it was announced by the Premier?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: As I said in response to your earlier questions, John, I have been in constant consultation and have been able to provide input and work with my colleagues in crisis Cabinet for all matters that relate to education in relation to the pandemic.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: You are not answering the question, Minister. Is that when you were informed?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I am, John, as I have said earlier, I am not going to into the specifics of a Cabinet subcommittee process. They are very common, to have Cabinet subcommittees, and Ministers who have input, who have responsibility for portfolio areas, absolutely have the opportunity to be involved in those

discussions. I am not going to go into the detail; it is not appropriate. But what you are inferring is that I was not involved or was not aware, and that is just not the case.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Do you agree that the teacher unions, all those principals, they were informed after that decision was made—they had no input?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I do not agree that they have not had the chance to have input. They have been able to talk to me, to my staff, to the secretary, department staff throughout the pandemic, and often do. There are lots of conversations and meetings that have taken place with a range of stakeholders, as you would expect. But ultimately the Government makes decisions, Cabinet Ministers make decisions, and that is the way that these processes work. As Ms Harrison said, we take the advice particularly in relation to the advice coming from Health in relation to these matters.

Stakeholders were made aware of the Government's intention in terms of bringing our year 12 students back on the sixteenth. They were made aware before that announcement was publicly made, and they have been involved and consulted in terms of the plan where we have landed. And that is across the sectors, the Catholic and independent sectors as well. That is important. We have got to make sure we are looking after all of our school students in New South Wales.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Minister, when did you provide that information to the independent and Catholic sectors? Was that at the same time as the unions were informed?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Yes. Ms Harrison was the one who had those conversations. I think she said earlier it was either that evening or the morning of. But yes, they are also a part of the stakeholder group that we speak to about Government decisions.

Ms HARRISSON: Ms Houssos, I can confirm that I spoke to the head of the Teachers Federation, the head of the Secondary Principals Council, the head of the Catholic education sector and the head of the independent schools sector in relation to that announcement ahead of it being made.

The CHAIR: Ms Harrison, you said that four people have been seconded from KPMG to work on the return to school plan, to address the COVID safety return to school plan. Is that right, four people?

Ms HARRISSON: I did not say that they had been seconded to work on the COVID-safe return. I have been very clear they have been seconded to work in a program management office and to help us keep track of all the number of work streams we have underway in relation to the COVID response. They are not working on the plan. They are seconded to manage and lead for us the setup of a program management office.

The CHAIR: Do any of them have public health or teaching experience, because it has been widely reported that, in fact, some of the experience comes from being British parachute officers? Do any of them have public health or education experience?

Ms HARRISSON: They have been seconded to work in a program management office, and they all have experience in program management. That is the skill set they are bringing to us. They will not be providing education or public health advice, so I am not sure that is a relevant skill set for us to be looking for in them. We are asking them to provide program management support. That is what they bring experience in, and that is what we will be utilising in our response.

The CHAIR: So I take it from that that none of them have public health or education experience. Is that right?

Ms HARRISSON: I do not have the details of all of their résumés with me, but I think that is a fair assumption, given that they are not being asked to come in and provide public health or education advice. They are coming in to support a program management office on secondment from an external firm.

The CHAIR: If you have got any more details, if you could provide that on notice—including the cost—that would be very useful. Minister, could I ask you about the digital divide? We have experienced a little bit of that in this inquiry. It is a very serious matter for thousands and thousands and thousands of students, not least those in south-west and western Sydney, where we have that relative economic disadvantage. Do you have any data on the number of students who are logging in by school, by postcode or by region that gives you a sense of how the digital divide is going?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Yes. I can certainly ask Ms Owen to see if she has got any advice around that. A couple of points I will make, Mr Chair, are obviously that as a department we are also working closely with schools to provide devices, internet dongles for students who do have limited access to technology. I am sure all Committee members will be aware we did that last year, and we have also procured additional devices and dongles that have gone out this year. I am happy to provide those figures either now or on notice. It is also

important to make the point that a lot of our schools are doing different ways to provide and engage that education for their students. Many of them are using online technology. Many of our schools are using packs and getting some material out to their students as well to make sure that they are accommodating for all of the needs.

I met, as I said earlier, with a group of principals, particularly from south-western Sydney, last week. They were all extremely grateful for the internet devices and technology that had been provided to them and their schools. Schools are also able to loan out existing devices that they have got. And we are still saying to school communities and parents now, "If there is more that you need, let us know. We have stock. We can provide more. We can procure more as well." So there really has been an amazing amount of work done to support students where there are concerns around access to digital technology. I do not know if Ms Owen can comment.

The CHAIR: Let's see if we can get some numbers, Minister, which is what I was looking at. Proportions and numbers, do we have that?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: In terms of devices that have gone out, so far this year we have provided 6,250 devices and 5,629 internet access devices, which are dongles and SIM cards, as of 5 August. This builds on last year's devices that we had, which were 13,666 devices and 8,517 internet access devices, so literally thousands of tablets, of notebooks and also dongles and SIM cards available to students who need them.

The CHAIR: Minister, on those numbers this year, that is to less than 1 per cent of the student population, isn't it?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: What we have done—and, again, Ms Harrison might want to comment—is say to schools, "You tell us what you need." Of course, as I said earlier, David, a lot of schools or students will have their own devices. Schools can also loan out their existing devices to their school communities to use as well. So I would caution the Committee in making the assumption that this number of devices and internet access devices are the only ones that are available because they do not also take into account ones that schools can loan or also devices that students themselves may have as well.

Ms HARRISSON: I can provide some further information. We went out to schools ahead of the end of term two and asked them explicitly what they needed support with in preparing for potential learning from home, should we be required to use it. That included an ask, if they had one, for devices and dongles. We sent out devices to everyone who requested them. We have then sought to send out further devices to increase the ratios of devices in our schools, particularly in south-west Sydney, based on the socio-economic modelling that we have around communities to make sure we are getting as many devices and dongles into the communities that need them. I have spoken to a number of our principals in south-west Sydney. One of the things that they come back to us with is actually that technology is not always the thing that is going to help them, that the students that they are supporting need support learning at home.

They may not have space or a quiet room at home in order to do that work. So, for them, making sure that they can safely return those students in line with the COVID-safe plan is a really important part as we move forward for them to be able to support those students. I think we are really clear that we need to get more devices out. We have done so. With dongles, we reactivated every dongle we sent out last year. So we have provided internet access for just over 15,000 students across the State, with a large proportion of that in south-west Sydney. I am very happy to get you further details on notice, but I think in terms of the responsibilities of the education department here, we are doing everything we can to get the technology in the hands of those that need it.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Mr Chair, I think Ms Owen has got some download data as well, which might be useful to you as well.

The CHAIR: That would be helpful. Thanks, Ms Owen.

Ms OWEN: I will provide the Committee with the download data on notice. But to address your question, Chair, in terms of understanding where the demand is, we are tracking the download of all the different websites and resources that we have put on our learning from home hub. Those are in the hundreds of thousands. There are hundreds of different pages, so not appropriate to give you the detail here, but we will provide on notice how our schools have been downloading those key resources, which are the most highly downloaded data and downloaded resources, which shows how they are accessing the information online, as well as the information we have about how they use multiple channels between downloaded information, online videos and paper packs as well.

The CHAIR: I think that would be useful. And if it could be broken down by school community, postcode or LGA, that would be useful.

Ms HARRISSON: I do not think we would be able to download the data in that way, unfortunately. We will be able to give you global figures for the downloads of information, but I do not think we would have that broken down by geography.

The CHAIR: I think it would be difficult to use that to understand how the digital divide has really impacted if it is just global figures, but we will get what we get. You do not have any data then about the number or proportion of students who are logging on to Google Classroom or to Zoom sessions so that we have some understanding about what the differential is between different socio-economic parts of the State? You do not have any of that data?

Ms HARRISSON: We can certainly look and see what of that data is available to us. I am happy to provide what we can find on notice. I do want to draw the Committee's attention to the fact that we are supporting learning from home, not learning online. Our schools are going above and beyond in providing support for students in multiple forms, both addressing where there may or may not be adequate access to technology or suitable internet speed, but also matching the needs of students in their classes and how they work. We are seeing many schools offer both options. We are seeing many schools go to exceptional lengths to make sure that their school communities can safely collect and engage in learning in a paper form, with really exceptional resources being prepared by our teachers for students to take home. Again, I really want to reiterate that thanks to the teaching workforce for all they have done in supporting those students. They are working exceptionally hard at the moment to make sure that those students are well supported in their learning, no matter whether or not they have access to a device.

The CHAIR: Could we go back quickly to the vaccination of teachers? Is it true that the department has no actual program and there is no prioritisation for teachers to get vaccinated as part of the return to school plans? Is that the case, there is no prioritisation of teachers?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Obviously, David, you would be aware that the vaccine rollout is not done by Education. But I think I have been pretty clear in my public comments about this. Anyone over the age of 18 now in New South Wales is able to get a vaccine, and that is what our teachers should be doing. We are very strong on our messaging in relation to that. We think it is important that everybody in the community, but particularly our teachers as leaders, are the ones that go and get vaccinated. We were able to provide that priority access, as Ms Harrisson said, to our educators in those first three LGA hotspots in western Sydney for Pfizer. That was before the health advice changed in relation to AstraZeneca. But as we speak to you today, anyone in New South Wales over the age of 18 can go and book an appointment, can walk into many pharmacists, many of the vaccine hubs, and get vaccinated. That is what they should be doing.

The CHAIR: I think you gave a figure that some 51 per cent of teachers aged above 40 had been vaccinated. Was that one dose?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: No, sorry. My understanding—and I am happy to be corrected—from the figures that I have seen is that 51 per cent of our teachers in the public system are aged 40 and over, so therefore have been eligible for a vaccine for some period of time.

The CHAIR: Do you know what proportion of the teachers have been vaccinated?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Ms Harrisson did address this a little earlier in a question from Ms Houssos, I think, when you were not online, David. But I am happy for her to respond.

Ms HARRISSON: Vaccination data remains a personal form of data collected in your Medicare. It is not part of the booking process. We do not capture people's professions as part of their booking for a vaccine, so we have no way in the Department of Education of centrally knowing whether or not a teacher has been vaccinated.

The CHAIR: And there is no policy of requiring teachers to inform the department about their vaccination status?

Ms HARRISSON: No, there is no such policy at this time.

The CHAIR: Are you intending to sit down with the unions and work through these very difficult issues? Have you got a process to work through those issues?

Ms HARRISSON: I have had an initial discussion with the union already around vaccinations of teachers and how we might look at that moving forward—a very initial conversation—and we have our joint consultative committee in operation through this time. They met yesterday. They will meet again and continue to meet, and we will discuss all the issues that are important to our teachers in terms of planning for a future return to school when it is possible to do so.

The CHAIR: My final question is to you, Minister. It is about whether or not there is a coherent plan that will get HSC students safely sitting down to do their HSC exams by mid-October. I think we can all agree the 16 August deadline will come and go and will not actually be a real deadline. But there is that hard deadline, isn't there, in mid-October for the HSC? Is there a coherent, safe plan to get HSC students back for that?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: I might ask Mr Martin to make a bit of a comment on this, given he has been with us for the hearing. I would hate to deny him the opportunity to provide some of his expertise. I will just say more broadly, of course we are working with Health in terms of designing what a COVID-safe HSC exam period looks like. It is absolutely our intention for those exams to go ahead. NESAs have already pushed those exams back a week, which is what we did last year. Looking at things like extra venues, extra invigilators, what is the public health advice we need to be able to do those exams safely—that work has begun and will, of course, continue. I will ask Mr Martin to make a brief comment about that as well, Chair.

Mr MARTIN: As people may be aware, we have a COVID emergency committee comprising the three heads of sectors and two senior NESAs board members. We have been sequentially making decisions right across the course of this year, meeting twice, sometimes three times a week. Yes, of course it has been on the agenda of that committee to take into account all the health considerations to make sure that the exams can run as smoothly as possible based on what we are given as health requirements on the day. Last year people may remember we were able to do that by having ready alternative venues, additional invigilators and supervisors, COVID-safe entry into exams et cetera, et cetera. So, yes, various plans are being thought out and considered at the moment.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately our time has expired. On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister, her staff and the staff from the department for the very productive and useful exchange we have had today. The cooperation has been noted. I think, on behalf of all of us, we really appreciate it. Minister, you will not get away without one more question from Ms Houssos. I am sorry. It may be that you take it on notice.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Given the technological difficulties today, I have one final question for you. I assume you would need to take this on notice, but are you able to provide a breakdown of the attendance rates for schools either by LGA or by postcode of some description—just a snapshot of some point whilst we have been learning from home?

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Yes, absolutely. We can provide that on notice. What I will say is that broadly we have seen a very low attendance rate. It has averaged roughly about 92 per cent, 93 per cent of students learning from home across that whole Greater Sydney area. Obviously we have seen less attendance in those eight LGAs as well. And then as our regional communities have been brought in and out of lockdown that has had an impact too. But, by and large, we have had a very good response from our families to keep their children at home where they can. We have seen consistent numbers in terms of our overall attendance rates, but I am happy to provide some more detail on notice to the Committee.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Can I share our thanks to the Minister for the manner in which she has answered questions as well? It has been very much appreciated.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL: Thank you. It is lovely to see you all again.

The CHAIR: We should try and come together sometime, when it is safe to do so. Minister and all of the team at the department, thanks again. We will have a short recess and come back again at a quarter past two.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

ANGELO GAVRIELATOS, President, NSW Teachers Federation, affirmed and examined

MARK NORTHAM, Secretary, Independent Education Union NSW/ACT, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome to the afternoon session of the Public Accountability Committee's COVID oversight hearing, focusing today on education and schools. First of all, I ask any witness or Committee member who is not muted to do so. That will ensure we do not get feedback. Our two witnesses this afternoon are Mr Angelo Gavrielatos, President of the NSW Teachers Federation, and Mr Mark Northam, Secretary of the Independent Education Union NSW/ACT. Welcome to both of you and thank you for taking the time to join us this afternoon. Would you each like to make a brief opening statement if you have one prepared. We will then go straight to questioning from the Opposition. We have very limited time, so if the statements could be brief, that would be really appreciated. We might go to Mr Gavrielatos.

Mr GAVRIELATOS: Thank you, Mr Shoebridge. Before I start, can I please acknowledge the traditional custodians of the many lands upon which this hearing is taking place and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I really need to start by putting on public record our deepest respect and admiration for the entire teaching service—our teachers and principals and support staff—who continue to perform over and above the call of duty during the second wave of this pandemic. I say that because quite often when there is discussion and deliberation about the impact of the pandemic on education, it is seen through the prism or prosecuted through the prism of the impact on students, as it should, but it is often forgotten that there is another important component part of education; that is, teachers, principals and our support staff, who coincidentally—and I know that you do not need to be reminded of this—are also parents, are also grandparents, are also brothers and sisters, and are also uncle and aunts. Therefore they are impacted by this not only on a professional level but also, like every other member of the general public, on a personal level as well.

I want to make these very brief points. As a teaching profession we have always said in the context of the pandemic, that we will always observe the health advice and we will always seek the consistent application of the health advice across all settings in impacted communities. We have always said that what we will do and how we will contribute will always be informed by the need to put the health and safety of our students, the teaching service and our families first. Therefore I need to put on record how shocked we were to learn through the media, on the evening of 27 July, of the Government's decision to announce what is now clearly the premature, ill-conceived return of year 12 from 16 August as had been intended by the Government. It defied logic, it defied the health advice, it defied science and, I repeat, that decision was taken without any prior consultation with the profession. We learnt of it through the media at about 6.30 p.m., 7.00 p.m. that evening and it was followed by a phone call at approximately 8.30 p.m. that evening.

We were shocked and appalled because only a few days earlier the Premier had announced a national emergency against the backdrop of ever-increasing cases and, of course, those cases continue to increase and, very disturbingly, the cases are impacting our young people—27 per cent of all infections are amongst people under the age of 19. We want our students back. No-one wants them back more than teachers—after their parents, of course—but we want them back when it is safe. We were therefore further appalled a couple of days later, on the same day that there were 239 cases, to read in the media a comment from the Minister saying:

I find it disappointing that organisations who should put the interests of students first are effectively lobbying for the HSC cohort in Greater Sydney to stay at home and missing out on the opportunity of face-to-face teaching.

I put it on record that that offends us to the core. We became teachers because of our belief in the transformative power of education and what it means to each individual child, their families and communities. We are offended by such comments. I will finish with this. I know you are trying to wind me up, Mr Shoebridge, and I know we will no doubt come back to some issues. We have said this repeatedly: We remain ready to work constructively, noting this is a pandemic. There is no rulebook; there is no blueprint. We have indicated repeatedly our willingness to work constructively with the Government on that necessary roadmap to see the return, in one form or another, of our students when it is safe to do so.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. I apologise for giving you that indication but we do want to get to questioning, and I think it will be really fruitful.

Mr NORTHAM: I am joining today's meeting from the land of Birapai people in the Newcastle area and acknowledge the traditional owners and their leaders past and present. I would like to firstly thank you for the opportunity to address this Committee because I think it is important work. It is now widely accepted that keeping schools open is as much an economic decision as it is an educational imperative. Teachers understand this and I can assure you the profession stands ready to do its bit. What our members do not understand is why significant decisions about how schools operate are being made without meaningful and effective communication with the profession.

Throughout the pandemic there has been a consistent and disappointing pattern of teacher unions being marginalised and the voice of teachers being excluded from decision-making processes. This was in evidence last year when the community was grappling with the closure of schools at the commencement of the first lockdown. Teachers spent their Easter break preparing for an extended period of online learning, yet within weeks of school resuming they were thrust back into face-to-face teaching as business interests insisted schools remain open, despite many school workplaces being ill-equipped to do so. The lack of meaningful engagement with the profession at this time created a considerable amount of unnecessary stress for students, staff and families and the school communities they serve. Now in this most recent debate regarding the HSC trials, teachers and teacher unions have been accused widely in the media of being obstructionist. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As any HSC teacher knows, running the trial HSC exams as originally scheduled was both unnecessary to satisfy NESA assessment requirements and entirely unfeasible from a logistical perspective given the pressing health advice at the time. Yet this position was stubbornly pursued with an increasing sense of alarm and confusion. Meanwhile, school principals and staff were finding out about decisions which intimately affected the day-to-day running of their schools through media releases. Teachers are tired of hearing their concerns dismissed with the phrase "with the benefit of hindsight". Twelve months ago the union quite reasonably predicted the next inevitable outbreak would result in school closures and further pressure on teachers, students and families coping with online learning. Yet our call for school staff to be prioritised for vaccination has consistently fallen on deaf ears throughout that time. In recent months this position has gained some support. Non-government school employers; however, have shown little appetite to facilitate this process by providing easily accessible and understandable vaccination leave.

After Monday's disappointing comments by the Premier implying that teacher hesitancy was somehow responsible for low vaccination levels among school staff, our social media platforms lit up with teacher and support staff telling us that many of them continue to be excluded from the priority lists, and where they were eligible supply issues made it almost impossible for them to obtain the jab. Teachers living on the Central Coast and other areas of the State but who work in one of the eight hotspots, reported having their appointments abruptly cancelled as the vaccines were redirected to students—the very students that these unvaccinated teachers would be sharing a classroom with in the following week.

For more than 12 months our members have been going above and beyond, as they always do, to support all students, especially those going through the HSC. What we ask is a respectful level of engagement with the profession which will allow a greater understanding as to why decisions are being made and, where necessary, provide us with an opportunity to explore and suggest more suitable alternatives. It should not have taken this current public embarrassment for teacher unions to be finally given a place at the table. Teachers and their unions know how schools operate and how to get things done. We are asking that you talk to teacher unions about what you want to achieve and we will help them find the solutions to get it done..

The CHAIR: Thank you. I just want to give my own appreciation of the work of your members. Anybody who did not love and respect the teaching profession before the lockdown and homeschooling, I can tell you now it is uniformly acknowledged the extraordinary work that teachers do. I will hand over to the Opposition.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I second that particular observation. My name is John Graham and I have a question to you both—you have answered my very first question about consultation in your opening statements. We were really informed that you were not consulted; you were simply informed after this decision had been made. You have reflected on that already but perhaps you might like to respond to this. Are we not in danger of repeating that same mistake again with the news today that instead of asking the thousands of senior educators across New South Wales, the department is bringing in KPMG and a former British paratroop regiment officer with a specialisation in financial services operating models, rather than our educators, to deal with this return to school? When the Minister was asked about it, her view was KPMG is not leading this work but the departmental memo says clearly KPMG will take the initial lead on scoping this piece of work. Can you shed any light on this? What is your view about this development?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: Our knowledge with respect to what you are referring to, Mr Graham, is based on what we have read in the newspaper. I will respond in this way, if I may. The experience can be found within the teaching service. The answer lies within when it comes to the development of a roadmap for the return of our students—whether immediately or in a staggered approach or whatever the means may be, depending on the health advice. The answer and the experience and the expertise lies within. It is found within our teachers and principals, all of whom know a thing or two or three or four about how to run a school and the intricate operations, the complexities of running a school. It beggars belief that we are seeing this approach taken in relation to the roadmap. The roadmap can only be developed in consultation with the profession and—of course, the other important part of that is—that is so necessary with respect to trust and confidence in moving forward in what is a very difficult set of circumstances with the pandemic.

Mr NORTHAM: I found it incredulous as I read the press this morning. We had one of our member principals at the Parramatta dioceses. You have got a picturesque school where he is at Stanhope Gardens. It has 1,800 students and 186 staff. This is a small town that operates every day. It is complex running a school, but the skills and knowledge are embedded in the profession and they should be involved in whatever the steps the Government is planning to make it work. You just cannot park accumulated experience that is so easily obtainable and leave it on the shelf.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thank you for your time this afternoon. I too express our unbelievable appreciation for what teachers and parents are doing to go above and beyond at the moment. We certainly recognise that is particularly during this remote learning period but has been over the course of the pandemic. So, thanks very much for that. Mr Gavrielatos, you said in your opening that obviously we want our children and our students back at school but we want it to be safe. A key part of that is going to be vaccinating our teachers. We have learnt this morning that the department is not tracking numbers of the rates of teacher vaccinations and we know as well that they have refused to give teachers under the age of 40 access to Pfizer except in very limited circumstances. Can you provide a reflection on both of those? How important is teacher vaccination going to be going forward to allow students to return and what do you think of the Department of Education's admission that they are not tracking the rates of teacher vaccinations?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: The union started making representations about the prioritisation of teachers with respect to a vaccination rollout in August of last year. In February of this year we acknowledged and we congratulated the New South Wales Minister, Minister Mitchell, who also made representations to Canberra with respect to the prioritisation of the vaccination rollout for teachers. Had it not been for the monumental failure on the part of the Federal Government, we would have all been vaccinated at the end of March—but I think we all know how that has gone. We continued to make representations and finally we got a breakthrough. We acknowledge the Government, Minister Mitchell and Premier Berejiklian for having announced a prioritisation of all teachers and thereafter education workers and thereafter early childhood education teachers working in the Fairfield, Liverpool and Canterbury-Bankstown LGAs. We applauded that announcement to prioritise those staff. We saw that as an important breakthrough but always as a first step.

Regrettably, that prioritisation was not extended beyond those three LGAs and certainly not across the eight LGAs that are now part of the hotspot, nor to the eastern ward of Penrith which has been added to that prioritisation. That is causing us deep concern. As Mr Northam already said, against that backdrop of not achieving a prioritisation across the board—certainly across those hotspot LGAs, the Greater Sydney area and all of the State—we saw the circumstances unfold on the weekend of 31 July and 1 August where our teachers in the Hunter were having their appointments cancelled but, worse still, if I can put it in those terms, our teachers on the Central Coast, which is part of the Greater Sydney as defined by the public health order, also having their vaccinations cancelled. There still remain significant issues with respect to access and supply. With respect to supply if I can refer to Pfizer, 48 per cent of teachers are under the age of 40; 80 per cent of them are women. Do the maths in terms of how many are pregnant. Do the maths in terms of immunocompromised teachers. All of whom are finding it very difficult to access vaccination rollouts in terms of supply with Pfizer, but also access in terms of the timely appointments for AstraZeneca as well. That is reflected across the State in terms of issues of supply and access.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Northam?

Mr NORTHAM: The angst and anxiety amongst our members around this issue is palpable. As Mr Gavrielatos indicated, we did welcome that news initially. We thought there might be a planned rollout for teachers and support staff in schools but it has not eventuated. Teacher vaccination in recent days—yesterday afternoon I met with 60 Sydney principals across what is known as the Archdiocese of Sydney, the largest Catholic diocese in Australia, and a week prior to that with Parramatta principals. The absolute and fervent belief of those principals and educational leaders is that they want to get back to teaching and learning but believe the only way forward is for the teachers and support staff, workers in schools to be prioritised.

As Mr Gavrielatos pointed out, both teacher unions have been advocating not to queue-jump initially. We were inordinately careful not to go into that space, and nor should we have. But in recent times we understand that our Queensland counterparts have moved into some sort of planned rollout, and I think New South Wales has got to give serious consideration to that. I will not answer the second part of your question about the Department of Education but just point out that the Independent Education Union deals with a multiplicity of employers—literally hundreds in the early childhood and long day care, all the way through to English colleges and anything in between; it is a really mixed bag—but it is the way forward. It has to happen for our members in schools to feel safe and be able to return to some form of teaching and learning. Thank you.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Gavrielatos, I want to ask a specific question to you. Part of the announcement on the return of year 12 students was based on the introduction of rapid antigen testing. How realistic do you think this is in actually being introduced in our New South Wales public schools?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: The suggestion of the use of rapid antigen testing coincided with the Government's premature announcement for the return of year 12s on 16 August—the premature announcement without a plan. We have not heard anything since—well, certainly not in the last week—about rapid antigen testing following the Government's reversal of that premature announcement. We do understand that the Therapeutic Goods Administration has not to date approved the use of the rapid antigen testing certainly with respect to self-administration. Logistically, whilst we suspect it is not on the table at the moment—we would not know; there has been no consultation with us—the consideration of it, the mere thought of it, would be an administrative nightmare. I would ask the inquiry, the panel, to appreciate that some of our schools are very large operations and Mr Northam has already given one example. We have a school that has a year 12 of 500 students. When you add a hundred teachers to that, you are talking about 600 people on site on any one day. It is mind-boggling to try and work out how rapid antigen testing each day would work in our environments. These are serious logistical issues that if we are brought to the table we could offer advice about given, as I said, we know a bit about school operations because we live it and experience it, unlike others who graduate from schools of finance and accountancy.

Mr NORTHAM: I would just echo that. I am in Newcastle. The closest Catholic systemic high school to me, a couple of kilometres away as the crow flies, has approaching 500 HSC students in it. Now to suggest that you would be rapid-testing these students 15 minutes at a time, as I understand it, and a teacher observing it, what do you do if someone turns up with a positive result? Just the mechanics of it beggar belief. I do not think it is a reasonable way forward. It might be with small numbers of students but on a large scale across New South Wales I just do not think, again, it is the way forward because it is unachievable.

The CHAIR: Mr Gavrielatos, have you had the opportunity to have a face-to-face meeting—almost certainly via either Zoom or Webex—with the Minister to discuss these issues?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: No. I will say it again, no.

The CHAIR: Mr Northam?

Mr NORTHAM: Absolutely not.

The CHAIR: I assume you are both willing to have that meeting and, if the Minister or some of her staff are listening now, the invitation is well open to have that constructive meeting to talk through some of these issues?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: The Minister's office is well aware, as is the Minister, that we are ready to engage at any time.

Mr NORTHAM: The same response, Mr Shoebridge. We tried to reach out to no avail.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask when you saw that initial announcement for the return to school on 16 August—I know that you had multiple concerns and I have seen the correspondence that you sent, Mr Gavrielatos, and I have seen your reported concerns, Mr Northam—how soon after that announcement did you communicate those concerns to the department and when did you start talking?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: On 27 July, which was a Tuesday evening, as I have already said, we learnt of this through the media. I think it was a tweet by journalist Chris O'Keefe at 6.30-ish, or between that time and 7.00. Thereafter there was a story in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Almost immediately thereafter I made contact with the Minister by message saying surely our views would be sought. After that I was contacted at about 8.30-ish by the secretary of the department to advise me of what was already in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Mr NORTHAM: Mr Shoebridge, we are probably in a weaker position as far as consultation of that level goes. There has been no strong history of it and no reaching out on this occasion to us to seek our views. I reiterate the reality that we have a multitude of employers, not just one, which probably does not assist that process.

Mr GAVRIELATOS: Mr Shoebridge, just in case I did not answer part of your question, from that moment we communicated most directly our views in relation to that announcement or that decision by the Premier which was thereafter announced publicly at the 11 o'clock press conference the following day. I think there is plenty on record with respect to our views about that.

The CHAIR: Mr Northam, the public health advice that has been provided to the department about any return to schools in the Greater Sydney area, has that also been uniformly provided to all of the teachers that you represent and the school systems that you represent?

Mr NORTHAM: I understand I can answer that in the affirmative. The three sectors appear to be working quite reasonably well together at that peak level. I think the breakdown from this union's perspective is that we have never been invited to an employer briefing of any sort. There are two major systems: There is Catholic Schools NSW, obviously, and the Association of Independent Schools, who would have the capacity to do that but I guess they elect or choose not to do that.

The CHAIR: Do either of you have any understanding about what proportion of HSC students you expect to be returning on 16 August in the Greater Sydney region, given the extremely tight restrictions in the public health orders? Are we talking 1 per cent, 2 per cent, 10 per cent of HSC students? Have you got any understanding of what that is likely to be?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: Well we cannot put a figure on that, Mr Shoebridge, although what our reference point is is the very clear advice, both in letter and in spirit and intent, with respect to what is to happen from next Monday the 16th. The advice is very clear where it says that where schools choose to run trial HSC exams, noting that they are not mandatory but they are practised in many schools across all of Greater Sydney area, they are to be conducted remotely. That is clear. It thereafter says that with respect to students who live and/or study in the eight-plus tighter lockdown LGAs, if I can express it in those terms, those others, they are not to return to school. Thereafter for the rest of the Greater Sydney area, it is very clear the language which says that it is only for essential reasons for curriculum and wellbeing and, if it is deemed essential, that it would be under very strict conditions, including the fact that students would attend individually or in small groups.

Given the numbers and continuing cases—they are rising, the cases—we would anticipate that numbers would be very, very low, remembering that Dr Kerry Chant has made it very clear repeatedly that one of the ways critical to reducing the spread is to reduce mobility. You can only reduce mobility by ensuring that that travel is kept to an absolute minimum. That is another reason why the announcement of 12 days ago was beyond comprehension because it would have seen literally 50,000-plus students from across the Greater Sydney area criss-crossing suburbs, let alone the thousands of teachers at the same time.

The CHAIR: Mr Northam, did you want to add anything or did that cover it?

Mr NORTHAM: No, I think that covers it. It was that mass mingling of students that certainly caused our members, particularly principals and school leaders, to seek union assistance on a scale not known to us previously.

The CHAIR: If the Government was to reach out and offer a prioritised vaccination program for teachers, would you be willing to sit down with the Government and talk about ensuring that the schools then got the numbers and the data about vaccination so as they could assess the public health risks as part of a return to school? Obviously the proportion of students, the proportion of teachers who are vaccinated would be relevant to the decision-making about a return to school.

Mr GAVRIELATOS: Noting that with respect to any vaccination program, individuals should always seek the advice of their GPs. Noting that were the Government to announce a prioritisation of a vaccination program for teachers, we would actively promote and encourage the highest possible take-up rate of the teaching service.

Mr NORTHAM: Our sector would echo those sentiments. Our members are saying to us uniformly, "Please get us in the vaccination queue and then we can get back into work." We understand the significance of schools and the service they provide to their community. It would be a huge step forward. It started in a small way in Sydney in those three areas and it needs to spread out in a medically approved sequential manner as quickly as possible.

The CHAIR: I think we have had a fair amount of commentary on the somewhat chaotic proposal for 16 August. Do both of you think that there is a credible pathway to get the vaccination levels right, to get the safe systems in place at schools and in examination centres so as we can see the HSC exams start in mid to late October? Are you hopeful that that done well, done cooperatively, done with advance planning can happen?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: We would certainly hope that that would be the case. I think, like every member of the general public, we want to see the back of this as quickly as possible. We want to see a return to normal or a greater normal as soon as possible. None of this will be without its challenges, but all I can say to this Committee and this inquiry is that on our part the goodwill is there to sit down and work through all these complexities in the interests of looking after the educational and emotional wellbeing of all students. All students and their wellbeing

are of concern to us, but there is no doubt our year 12 students have always had a special place. We have invested 13 years in them. They were impacted last year and again this year. We want the very best for them and their parents who live vicariously through their children re-sitting the HSC. So this will not be without its challenge. There is goodwill on our part, but at the end of the day we have to act on the health advice before us because that is what we have done right from the beginning.

Mr NORTHAM: The health advice, as Mr Gavrielatos just mentioned, is critical; it is the key. But I think if the Government stepped into this space in a consultative mode—that was the way or the prism that they looked through the matter—you hopefully could get that HSC underway. There is a period of time there, the window is there if it all falls into place. I think it is achievable, subject to COVID getting worse et cetera, but if you had a cogent plan this union would step up and do everything within its power to ensure that it worked.

Mr GAVRIELATOS: It comes down to case numbers, Mr Shoebridge—case numbers, vaccination rates, all those objective metrics which no doubt would inform, or we trust would inform, the health advice. As I said, we have always acted in a manner that is consistent with the health advice that is available to us.

The CHAIR: And, of course, developing a COVID safety regime with the people who know the most about how your schools operate. That would involve your members, I would expect.

Mr GAVRIELATOS: Yes. You would think that was a pretty obvious proposition, wouldn't you?

The CHAIR: I will pass back to the Opposition now.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I might just pick up on that question about students moving around the city. I agree the guidelines are clear. I do not think it is surprising that either of you are unable to predict the number of students who might be moving around under these new guidelines. I did think it was concerning that the department does not seem to have an idea about how many students moved around. Clearly it is the key concern of the Chief Health Officer. She was clear about that yesterday. Dr Chant, in giving evidence, said she would not approve anything which was boosting mobility significantly. Is it of concern to you that the department does not seem to know how many of those students might be moving around and is this something that we need to watch very closely next week as these new guidelines come into place?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: Mr Graham, the question obviously relates to the Greater Sydney area and those areas outside the eight-plus LGAs. I do not believe—I have got to be careful here. In defence of the Department of Education, I do not think—well, we certainly do not expect them to have such numbers at this point in time but we certainly expect, as is the practice, for those numbers to be very closely and carefully monitored such that if there are any suggestions of levels of attendance that are of concern that we are able to work together to put in place the necessary communication strategy to reinforce the importance of people staying at home. It is very hard to get ahead of this, but the department has shown previously throughout the pandemic that there is a close monitoring of numbers for appropriate interventions to remedy situations as best we possibly can.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Northam, did you want to add anything to that?

Mr NORTHAM: Not on that one because we do not have the same structure.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That is fine. The Labor Opposition has tried to take a constructive and bipartisan approach during this pandemic. One of the things we have been calling for is the release of the health advice as the basis for the Government's decisions that are being taken. Would you support calls for the health advice to be released that was the basis of the decision for the ill-fated return on 28 July, that announcement? If we called for the health advice to be specifically released for that decision, would you support that call?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: We would support a call for all the health advice to be released because in this pandemic our view is that one of the most important things to grow and deepen trust is transparency, and consistent with that would be the release of health advice laid bare for all to see. As I said, one of the big concerns for us—and Mr Northam also reflected on this—is what appears from time to time to be incredibly contradictory messages. Dr Chant said that the greatest contributor to transmission and infection are work sites and human interaction, yet we were told to return 600 people to a work site called a school where the key business was human interaction. Releasing that health advice, such transparency would go a long way to build trust and confidence.

Mr NORTHAM: Ms Houssos, I think what you described, the notion of a constructive and bipartisan approach to this, is possibly the way forward because what you have described there has been the missing element all along, and that is when our switchboard lights up. Why would they take that decision? How was it taken? Why was it taken? Do they understand what a school environment is? That is where our members' heads were and still are. I think what you have hit upon is the missing element and if people could access that advice, we would echo

the call for all of the advice but that one in particular, I think, would shed some really interesting light on how things unfolded so quickly and in such a negative way.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thanks very much. I think our time has expired, so I will hand back to the Chair.

The CHAIR: My final question is this and it may be impossible to answer briefly, but your members must have been reporting back to you about the reality of the digital divide— those students who are able to connect and do online learning and those who cannot. Do you have any observations about how that is playing out, particularly as we are likely to see weeks or months more of lockdowns?

Mr GAVRIELATOS: Mr Shoebridge and members of the Legislative Council, we often read reports that reference online learning. It is not a term that we use in education because we do not do online learning. We do something that is called remote teaching and learning and various other forms. One of the reasons we do not do online learning is because we are never trained to be online learning deliverers, but we also recognise that there are many assumptions made with the reference to online learning—assumption that students have access to multiple devices, assumption that students have space in their home for this remote teaching and learning. Regrettably, that is not the case and that is not the lived experience of many students, some of whom who do not even have a desk to work at in their homes.

Whilst many students have access to multiple devices and various platforms, a lot do not. There are efforts, of course, to extend technologies to many students. I heard earlier today references to dongles and the like. The fact is, that is not the lived experience of many. That is why we see in so many locations across New South Wales—and it is probably happening right now, at this minute of the day—the photocopying of reams of paper and stuffing envelopes, getting ready to dispatch those envelopes either through the post or delivering them to the community centre down the road or driving cars around streets delivering material for our kids. That is the commitment of our teachers and our principals, who will continue to do that to provide some level of educational continuity for students for as long as this pandemic requires this social distancing.

Mr NORTHAM: Mr Shoebridge, those equity issues exist in the Catholic and independent sector, as you could well imagine. We have certainly taken calls as recently as today with HSC trials potentially online: How do you bridge those equity issues where students just simply do not have access to the technology to help them do, say, a timed online task and submit it across a particular platform? It is a very real issue for many students and I am not sure of the answer to it because the notion that you can get devices into so many students' hands would be such an enormous task. It is certainly not the preferred way of delivering education but at this point it is the best. I have also noticed that drive-through notion of picking up your schoolwork in a weekly batch is evident in the Catholic sector as well.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately, time has beaten us. I thank you both for your work, the work of your members and also your contribution to the Committee's deliberations today. You may or may not have noticed there has been a shadow of online learning passing back and forth across my camera as the day has progressed. I think we are all feeling the stresses and the reality of online learning—learning from home and learning remotely, as we will say, Mr Gavrielatos, but it is a particular burden on the teaching profession. I know that my own letterbox has received some of those parcels from teachers who have just gone above and beyond to keep students connected, so thank you all for your work. That will conclude today's hearing. I thank the Committee members and all of the witnesses today. I do want to appreciate the constructive way in which all members of this Committee—crossbench, Government and Opposition—have cooperated. I think it has been very worthwhile and I am grateful [audio malfunction]. That will conclude today's broadcast.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned 15:03.