



LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

COVID-19 RESPONSE COMMITTEE

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WITNESSES:

GOLDING, LARA, Branch President, Australian Education Union
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135 The CHAIRPERSON: Welcome to the meeting. The Legislative Council has given the authority for this committee to hold public meetings. However, due to the current situation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee has resolved to exclude strangers from the gallery. A transcript of your evidence today will be forwarded to you for your examination for any clerical corrections. The uncorrected transcript of your evidence today will be published immediately upon receipt from Hansard, but the corrected transcript, once received from you, will replace the uncorrected transcript.

I advise that your evidence today is being broadcast via the Parliament of South Australia website. Should you wish at any time to present confidential evidence to the committee, please indicate and the committee will consider your request. Parliamentary privilege is accorded to all evidence presented to a select committee; however, witnesses should be aware that the privilege does not extend to a statement made outside of this meeting. All persons, including members of the media, are reminded that the same rules apply as in the reporting of parliament.

Again, we would like that we acknowledge that the land we meet on today is the traditional lands for the Kaurna people and that we respect their spiritual relationship with their country. We also acknowledge the Kaurna people as the traditional custodians of the Adelaide region and that their cultural and heritage beliefs are still as important to the living Kaurna people today.

Welcome. My name is Tammy Franks. I am the Chair of this COVID-19 Response Committee, which is a committee of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of South Australia. To my left I have the Hon. Kyam Maher and the Hon. Emily Bourke. To my right are the Hon. Dennis Hood, the Hon. Dr Nicola Centofanti and the Hon. Connie Bonaros. If you would like to introduce yourselves, make a brief statement if you have that and then we will move into questions.

Mr SEIDEL: I will lead off perhaps. My name is Glen Seidel. I am Secretary of the Independent Education Union, the South Australian branch. I had a 27-year career as a teacher and now I have had a 20-year career as a union official, so I have a foot in both camps.

I think it's important to understand the structure of the non-government sector before we start to talk about the way that the sector responds to things. Essentially, one student in three in South Australia and nationally will attend a non-government school. In South Australia, there are about 46,000 students attending Catholic schools; that's about 17 per cent of students. In independent schools, there are about 50,000, so that's about 18 per cent, which is about 35 per cent of students who are going to be in one of those 200 schools.

There are about 100 Catholic schools, and that sounds like it's one nice tight ship, but there are actually 16 separate employers in that group. The largest employer is the Adelaide diocese, or the Catholic Church Endowment Society, with probably in the order of 60 or 70 schools, and then other schools are run by specific orders or organisations. When we talk about the Catholic Education Office or whatever, they do not directly control, although they do have a strong oversight for advice.

The Association of Independent Schools is much more of an umbrella organisation. All of the schools in that group of roughly 100 are separately governed and make their own decisions and will take advice from but are not directed at all by the AIS. Within that group, there are about 30 schools which are run by the Lutheran Schools Association, but again they are all separately governed.

When we start to talk about non-government schools and how they respond, we have so many different levels of decision-making and response, depending on the governance of the school but also the SES status of the communities they serve, because there will be a very wide range of those. They are not all leafy green foothills schools. There are lots of Catholic and

independent schools in the northern suburbs, the southern suburbs, everywhere from Ceduna to Mount Gambier to Roxby; it covers the gamut.

This means that any definite response about how schools will respond for term 2 is very difficult for me to say. I don't think they actually know how many students are going to be coming back. Sacred Heart College, for example, runs on two campuses. At the end of last term, they stood down 60 staff and consolidated all of the activities on one of the campuses. I understand now, as of a day ago, they are opening up the other campus again because it would appear that more students are coming back than were expected, but they have actually totally shut the boarding house.

I don't know what the scope for that is, and I don't know if there is any specific health advice about whether boarding houses must be open or must be closed. That still is a big chunk of the learning for those students. If those students have gone back home some distance away, they are going to need to be able to do online learning. But, if it all becomes face to face, how do you do both, or do they need homestay arrangements in Adelaide instead of the boarding house? It gets really quite messy.

Most of the people in non-government schools who are being stood down—and there are probably hundreds; I don't know exactly how many because, as much as our enterprise agreements will require employers to consult with and notify the union about significant changes, there is a strong position taken, particularly by the Catholic sector, that that doesn't apply to this situation—they don't need to notify staff members of the content of a meeting, and they don't need to provide the right of representation. All the things you would normally expect with a decent, open HR environment, they are saying it doesn't apply, and generally people would be given a letter, fait accompli, 'You're stood down,' and that's it.

The Fair Work Act, section 524 and on, says that employers can do that if there is a stoppage of business. I don't know there has actually been a stoppage of business. The schools are worried that people may not be able to pay fees, that they may not come back, but there hasn't actually been a stoppage of business yet. It also has to be that for any people who are not able to perform their normal work there has to be a consideration of whether or not they can be deployed in some other meaningful way, either a different task or their same task in a different method. This hasn't been happening.

The IEU nationally has been challenging various schools around the place about whether the standdowns are actually legitimate or not. We've got a dispute with the Catholic sector at the moment over this, also over the consultation, also over the representation, and we've got also one over how they treat vulnerable workers.

Their view is that, yes, if you're worried about your health at work, by all means, stay home, but it comes out of your accrued leave. If we don't actually have any work that we agree for you to do at home, firstly take sick leave, then take annual leave, then take long service leave and then you are on leave without pay.

Our view would be that under the WHS Act, if the workplace is unsafe, you not only have a right but you have a duty to withdraw yourself from the workplace, stay home and make yourself available for alternative duties. If there aren't any, then all well and good and you are home on full pay, but that's not the way the system has worked. It is getting fairly tense industrially because the normal rules don't seem to be operated anymore.

The independent schools are treating things with a much broader range of methods. Some are holding back on stand downs, some are being quite brutal about it, some are in the middle ground making the right sorts of noises but still standing down 30 people. I don't think it would be fair to name individual schools here and now, because there is such a range of approaches.

One of the issues that is floating around is whether or not the JobKeeper allowance will apply to schools. Businesses would need to suffer a 30 per cent reduction in income compared with a year ago to qualify for the \$1,500 per employee subsidy. Schools have the government funding still flowing. They have to still have students on the books for the next census, which is August or September of whenever.

The Catholic sector has said nationally that they will offer fee remissions for any parents who are affected by job losses, etc. due to COVID-19. You actually have them refusing to

accept some fees for some of their services and still getting the government funding, but I don't believe that they have actually really suffered the loss yet. They are fearing suffering the loss and they are anticipating it, but we would say let's wait and see whether you do actually have that turndown and not just fear it.

Things have been fluid. You look back over a relatively short period of time and the issues that were relevant two weeks ago don't appear to be as relevant now, but we will continue to challenge the current stand downs and the treatment of vulnerable workers. We do want things to return to normal. Everybody wants to get back to normalcy. Everybody wants to get back to face-to-face teaching and economies picking up, etc., but we are not convinced that to rush back into face-to-face teaching in the next couple of weeks, which is what is being purported is going to happen, is a reasonable thing to do at the risk of the safety of the participants in the schools.

Most of the advice that I have heard has been about how safe it is for kids. The Prime Minister made the comment, and I paraphrase loosely, that teachers are more in danger in the staffroom than in the classroom. That means that there is actually a risk for adults in these environments. As much as students may not present as commonly as adults, it does not mean that the environment is totally safe.

What would give me confidence that the environment was safe is if the same standards of safety and the same restrictions that happen in the broader community actually applied to schools, but from my experience of schools, you can't make young people, whether they are six or 16, socially isolate. They are all over each other and that's just the nature of the beast. I don't know that you can run schools if there are lots of students returning and I think they will. I believe that parents are going to get very bored of this homeschooling sort of model; the novelty would long have worn off. Kids will be sent back to school to get some sort of normalcy back for the family.

I don't know, until we start to have relaxation of the restrictions in society, that I would be comfortable that the schools are actually safe. I think there's a modified set of health recommendations that has been influenced by a higher motive, or an ulterior motive, of some economic convenience, rather than even necessarily the education of children. It seems to be 'get them supervised and out of the way', particularly for essential services workers, but also governments are now saying, 'Everybody, come on back; everything is normal.' I am not convinced by that.

As far as the stand downs go, I think that all the ones that have been initiated should be rescinded until we go through the proper process. Of course, schools will need to have all the PPE, sanitisers and all that sort of stuff that they need, just like you would expect anywhere else.

136 The CHAIRPERSON: Are you confident that non-government schools have been provided with that material?

Mr SEIDEL: The various letters that I have seen from schools to parent communities are claiming that they are going to obey all these sorts of restrictions, etc. I think that some will and that some won't. Not all school communities have been communicated with. There are people who don't know what's happening next Monday, when they go back. They don't know what their mode of teaching is going to be. Whatever it is, we are of the firm view that there should be one mode at one time. You can't expect teachers to be doing online and hard pack and face-to-face.

Initially, it may be that, as there are less than perhaps half of the students back, you might be doing it online, but there will be a tick-over point when it becomes face-to-face and no online. The parents who have withdrawn their kids have made a choice: they have chosen not to take the standard model of education, and that's going to have to be something that they have to bear. Teachers and schools should not have to run two models of teaching. They didn't before and, once this is over, they shouldn't have to again.

A role that we do have for government, whether it's state or federal, would be some financial support for schools so that they don't need to lay-off people. If schools form the very valuable social function of allowing society to continue, etc., they should actually be given some sort of industry support, just like an airline or any other industry might ask for, because it does actually fit in with the government's plural agendas to have schools full and operating. If they are so important, fund them so that they can work properly—and that's with PPE, staffing, etc. I have tried to be as quick as I could.

137 The CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Ms Golding.

Ms GOLDING: My name is Lara Golding. I am the President of the South Australian branch of the Australian Education Union. The Australian Education Union represents thousands of teachers, leaders and support staff in schools, preschools and TAFE across South Australia. Hundreds of our members have been contacting us in recent weeks to ask questions and express their strong concerns about their health and safety and that of their students. Children seem to be at risk in public places like shops, barbecues, playgrounds and aged-care facilities, but they seem not to be a risk to teachers, somehow. Educators feel as if their safety is not considered as important. They are told that they are essential workers, but they do not have the equipment, training or support to manage a health crisis.

The contradictions and confusing messages have continued this week. The announcement of one person per four square metres distancing does not apply to schools, yet social distancing of 1.5 metres away from each other still applies to schools. We have been told that schools are safe but that they need to take extra precautions because they are not quite safe, like cleaning and social distancing, and they cannot hold assemblies.

There has been no leadership or detailed advice provided to enable teachers, leaders and support staff to manage this crisis. As a teacher myself, I cannot understand or see how I might be able to manage a class full of 30 students and keep them 1.5 metres away from each other in a small classroom, and I have not heard anything today that might reassure me that that is not going to be the case for Monday.

Yesterday, without consultation with teachers or leaders and without consideration for the countless hours they had already put in to set up remote teaching, the government encouraged parents to send their children to school. It's unfortunate that we have had to raise our issues publicly, though we have not been afforded the opportunity to have direct and detailed discussions with the Minister for Education, the Premier or even Rick Persse.

Our members are professionals but they are also humans. They want the best for their students but they are feeling highly anxious, frustrated, undervalued and ignored. They do not know what conditions they will be walking into on Monday and they do not know how they will be able to safely manage the education of those in attendance while also supporting students at home. Principals and preschool directors have been left to manage the situation as best they can without clear direction or additional funding for staffing.

The following is an outline of the key areas that AEU members need to see addressed in order to manage the crisis based on the evidence and advice available to us. Firstly, schools and preschools need class sizes that enable students to stay 1.5 metres away from each other and the teacher within the classroom. The evidence for this is as follows: Dr Nicola Spurrier in a press conference on Tuesday this week stated that social distancing of 1.5 metres does apply to schools. In her letter to parents yesterday, she said that schools are safe because of good hygiene and social distancing.

The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee advice also supports social distancing of 1.5 metres between students and recommends suspending activities like group work if they bring students into close contact with each other or the teacher. Social distancing in schools would also be consistent with expectations of the general community. It's unfair to expect staff in schools to ignore the rules that apply to the rest of their lives when they walk within the school gates.

The concerning reality is that, for South Australia, attendance could be up to 100 per cent from the start of term 2. If the majority of children attend, in most classes students will be sitting right next to each other. There will be no physical distancing within classrooms. No additional funding has been allocated to schools to hire additional teachers in order to reduce the class sizes and mitigate the risk. Teachers have been left to work out how to do this for themselves.

Secondly, we need all vulnerable employees and employees who live with vulnerable family members to be supported to work from home. That advice is clear from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee. The reality is that this has been inconsistently applied across the state in schools, preschools and TAFE. The AEU continues to hear from members who have not been approved to work from home, including a 71 year old preschool director, teachers who have been approved to work from home for only part of the week and not the remainder of the

week, and teachers who have just now this morning been told that because of higher-than-expected attendance their previously approved work from home has now been denied.

The department has not been able to answer our questions about what will happen to these employees when their personal leave entitlements have been exhausted. In addition, it's a real loss to the system for expertise to be ignored while employees are on leave rather than working from home.

Thirdly, we need risk assessments on physical and mental safety to be conducted in every site in South Australia. This is because every site is unique in its physical surroundings and staff and student cohorts. The reality is that the Australian Education Union has not been provided with any evidence of any comprehensive risk assessments being conducted by the department of education at either a system or a site level. AEU member concerns about safety have not been adequately addressed.

In addition to health and safety risks faced by educators in general, AEU members are calling for PPE and non-invasive thermometers to be available for all employees and special classes in schools as required. These educators face particular risks due to personal assistance they may be required to provide to students. All sites also need regular cleaning during the day to be provided by government-funded cleaners, adequate hand sanitiser and hand wash to be provided to all schools and preschools.

Members report variable cleaning services and access to sanitising products being provided at the end of last term. In many cases, these were insufficient and did not meet AHPPC guidelines. The AEU has asked the department for detailed written information on the cleaning being provided to schools and preschools and this has not yet been provided.

Thirdly, schools and preschools need additional release time funded by the department to allow teachers to continue to adapt to the rapidly evolving situation. This is because teachers have spent excessive amounts of time preparing for online delivery for term two, but there is now likely to be higher student attendance at school than previously anticipated. Teachers want to be able to provide a high-quality education to all their students, but that requires time, planning and individual support. They cannot suddenly change their planned teaching methodologies overnight, as the government might seem to expect.

Schools can only be expected to provide a single mode of delivery. Many schools are currently trying to provide online learning, remote learning via take-home packs and face-to-face teaching. This is simply unsustainable without additional time and funding being provided. The department must also fully resource ICT capabilities for schools, preschools and staff and support students by providing loan equipment. In many schools, these resources are not reliably provided.

Lastly, but by no means least, it is critical that this government provides financial certainty to the many temporary and contract employees in TAFE, schools and preschools that they rely on to provide a high-quality curriculum. The AEU has heard from many educators in insecure work who have lost contracts, lost bookings or lost expected hours. These employees are not eligible for JobKeeper payments and are facing a very uncertain future. Some other state and territory governments have provided their casual educator workforces with assurance about payments or guaranteed work in the face of this crisis, but our government has left their temporary workforce to fend for themselves.

138 The CHAIRPERSON: Thank you, both. My first response to that is that's not quite what we have just heard from previous witnesses. I would like to start with one of the specifics. You said, 'I raised with the department whether or not risk assessments had been done, particularly for vulnerable workers.' That is actually one of the primary AHPPC directions.

What evidence do you have that that has been done? And the specific you have given us this morning that workers who have previously been found to be vulnerable workers allowed to work from home having that rescinded as of today due to anticipated additional enrolments next week back on the campus, as opposed to at home?

Ms GOLDING: So, in response to the vulnerable workers, we have received contact from our members this morning where they have contacted us to let us know that that is their situation, that they have now just been informed that they are no longer approved to work from home.

We haven't received that data from the department in terms of a system level; they have not provided that to us. We rely on our members and our members are contacting us to tell us when they have not been approved to work from home and seeking our support. When that occurs, we contact the department to ask for their support and we have a long list of outstanding cases that we have not had resolved.

139 The CHAIRPERSON: In those cases, has a risk assessment actually been done by the department or the site or has it been done and found that they are not vulnerable and not entitled to work from home?

Ms GOLDING: The AEU has not been provided with any evidence of any risk assessments. In some cases, people are supported to take leave, but we have not received any assurance about what happens when their personal leave entitlements are exhausted.

140 The CHAIRPERSON: Indeed. Do other members have questions at this point?

141 The Hon. E.S. BOURKE: Just to quickly follow on from that, in the AHPPC report it states that students' work being handed to a teacher for feedback rather than feedback being provided immediately by the teacher in close proximity to the student. I can imagine that a five year old handing in a note to say they want to have a discussion with a teacher at some point without coming into close contact with them probably would not be a practical solution as recommended. How are your teachers approaching that in the classroom? Have they been given guidelines about how to format the classroom, set the classroom up to have restrictions around their work area between them and the students or has that not been provided?

Ms GOLDING: I am not aware of any guidelines being provided. Our members are contacting us to ask us for advice because they haven't received any advice from the department. They haven't got that sort of level of detailed information about how they're expected to operate on Monday or how they're expected to ensure their safety. As far as I am aware, the guidelines have been provided to principals and principals are expected to implement them, but without any additional resourcing and without any additional information about how that might occur.

With the example specifically that you raised, myself as a teacher—I am a high school maths and science teacher and I spend a lot of my time supporting students to move onto the next part of the problem by giving them individual assistance. If I have a class full of 25 students and each one is going to patiently wait at their desks for me to give them feedback, I would be very surprised to see that.

142 The Hon. E.S. BOURKE: In regard to vulnerable staff and also vulnerable students—mainly more so vulnerable staff—with regard to COVID-19 support, is there any special leave that's available to employees during COVID-19 that they can take?

Ms GOLDING: Yes, there is COVID-19 special leave available. The guidelines for that seem to change every week, but at the moment there are 15 days' special leave available, which provides three weeks of leave, but our concern is what happens when that is exhausted?

143 The Hon. E.S. BOURKE: In regard to the number of casual employees and contract employees, how many are we talking about?

Ms GOLDING: According to the data available to us at the AEU, only 67 per cent of employees for the education department are permanent. For example, 68 per cent of preschool teachers are permanent, but only 26 per cent of early childhood workers in the department are permanent; only 46 per cent of school support officers are permanent; only 56 per cent of Aboriginal employees are permanent; in TAFE, we know that about 6.6 per cent of the TAFE budget is spent on hourly paid instructors. So there are within that thousands and thousands of employees who are in temporary or casual employment who face an uncertain future.

144 The Hon. E.S. BOURKE: Has any guarantee been offered to them about what the future of their employment looks like?

Ms GOLDING: So far, the only guarantees or information that we have are that if temporary or casual employees are impacted by COVID-19 they will be paid for rostered or booked shifts where they fall ill themselves, where they need to self-isolate, where they are directed away due to a site closure or where they need to care for a family member, but there are no guidelines in

terms of what happens if they lose bookings or lose shifts because of changes in attendance or because of other related COVID issues that arise.

We have also sought details about how members might be able to access those payments, and that hasn't been provided to us. We have heard from a number of contract employees who have not had their contracts renewed for term 2, despite what Mr Persse might have said earlier.

145 The Hon. E.S. BOURKE: It is highlighted many times in the AHPPC statement that communication is key, and you have highlighted a number of times through your evidence today that you were unaware of some of the findings that were either said just previously or as an ongoing basis. What has the relationship been like between the union and the government?

Ms GOLDING: We have been seeking a meeting with minister Gardner. We have sought a meeting with Premier Marshall. They have not afforded us the opportunity to meet with them. I have had fairly regular discussions with executives within the department, but not with the chief executive himself, and often what we want to discuss is outside the bounds of the level of officer that we are speaking with. But it is minister Gardner who is making the decisions and he will not afford us the opportunity of a meeting.

146 The CHAIRPERSON: Just on that, the Premier, I think around two weeks before the end of the last term—and noting that there were some then pupil-free days, so I think I might be fuzzy; it might have been three weeks from the end of the last term—said on ABC radio in the morning that every school would have sanitiser and all of the hygiene requirements that they needed that very day, on that particular Monday, two effective weeks from the end of the term.

Today, the Minister for Education on ABC radio said that 15 schools that he was aware of did not actually have the required hygiene requirements but that this had been addressed. Can you shed some light, perhaps, on which 15 schools the minister was referring to, why the Premier was so certain that every school would have hand sanitiser and other hygiene requirements and indeed what on the ground was going on in our schools when those things were being said?

Ms GOLDING: We were certainly contacted by more than 15 schools to let us know that they didn't have adequate supplies. In many cases, what occurred was that large containers of sanitiser were provided but no way of distributing them within the school or there were perhaps some small bottles provided that might last a classroom a single day. While I understand that there were difficulties with supply, our concern is that schools were expected to operate without the proper safety equipment.

147 The CHAIRPERSON: Is it concerning that the minister and the Premier both had incorrect information about what was happening in our school classrooms in regard to the very important public health requirements that we currently have under this pandemic?

Ms GOLDING: Yes, it's highly concerning. They are responsible for ensuring the safety of staff and students in our schools, preschools and TAFE, and they need to be fully aware of the situations and the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

148 The CHAIRPERSON: In terms of maximum safe class sizes, it was raised with the Chief Executive of the Department for Education that he stated that South Australia wouldn't be having a maximum safe class size, yet this seems to be one of the areas that other states have certainly implemented. To me, looking at that, you would have the plans for each school. We raised a particular situation, myself and the Hon. Emily Bourke, both thinking of the exact same classroom in our personal knowledge where you would have the plans of the schools, you would have the number of children in those classes, you would have the square metreage. Is there any documentation of how many classes in South Australia would not be safe if they were classes in Victoria?

Ms GOLDING: Sorry, could you repeat the last part of your question?

149 The CHAIRPERSON: Yes. There are recommendations for maximum class sizes, and that's to ensure student safety, but of course staff safety. You would think it would be reasonably easy to use the documentation that we have. We have the numbers, we have the square metreage, we have the plans of each school. We were given answers that people might perhaps have half a

class out at the oval, certainly not in this rain. Perhaps they are going to take students to the library to accommodate what is safe, physical/social distancing for these particular classes.

Would it not be an exercise simply in calculation to identify where our problem hotspots are, if you like, in our schools currently? We have those maps, we have those numbers. If everyone turns up, we would know exactly where those unsafe spots were to be and to have contingency plans to ensure that those particular situations aren't then breaching what are the accepted public health directions across the board for the state.

Ms GOLDFING: It would seem that simple to us. We can see that, based on our enterprise agreement, the expected class sizes—and in many schools those class size averages are what is occurring in schools or sometimes higher—are going to be large classes. The government might say they don't know what attendance to expect.

In that case, I would say that they need to plan for 100 per cent attendance because that is the likely possibility. There is nothing that Mr Persse said today to reassure me that, in fact, there might not be 100 per cent attendance. There is nothing that I can tell my members today about what they can do on Monday when they walk into a class of 25 or 30 kids about what they are expected to do with those children to ensure their safety.

150 The CHAIRPERSON: Are you aware of any schools that are having staggered start and finish times as of next week?

Ms GOLDFING: I am not aware of any schools that have told us that they are doing that at this stage.

151 The CHAIRPERSON: Are you aware of any schools that are having staggered recess and lunch times as of next week?

Ms GOLDFING: I am not aware of any schools doing that. I do know that those sorts of operational things take a great amount of organisation for a school. For a principal or a leadership team in a school to turn that around in a single day the day before school starts, I imagine would be an extremely difficult thing to do.

152 The CHAIRPERSON: Do other members have questions at this point?

153 The Hon. C. BONAROS: I have a couple. One of the questions that I put to Mr Persse was the AHPPC statement guideline in relation to influenza vaccinations for children, staff, parents and school personnel. We know that there is no mandatory requirement at the moment for teachers or staff to have the influenza vaccination. What is your position on a mandated requirement to have the influenza vaccination?

Ms GOLDFING: We don't have a union position on whether or not there should be a requirement. I can let you know that members did contact us last term where they were hoping to get the influenza vaccination because that is something that largely our members want and, in some circumstances, the planned vaccinations were not able to go ahead because of shortages of vaccinations.

154 The Hon. C. BONAROS: Are teaching staff provided with that vaccination free of charge?

Ms GOLDFING: In some circumstances. I think in a lot of schools they do arrange for that to happen.

155 The Hon. C. BONAROS: I just want to put the dilemma we are facing here. I think all of us are parents, we have now noted. We all have kids and are all in the exact same dilemma, and there is a great deal sympathy for our teachers at the moment. The problem that we have I think is that we have two very distinct issues, and I hope you agree with me here. We have employment conditions on the one hand and then we have safety on the other hand, and the risk categories for teachers.

We have received advice. We may completely dismiss the advice of the Prime Minister, the Premier, the Minister for Health and Wellbeing, and Mr Persse, but we also have advice in front of us from our state controller, Professor Spurrier, who says to us (there is written correspondence here): 'Please don't be afraid, send your kids back to school next week.'

There are a lot of confused parents out there at the moment who don't know what to do on Monday. I don't agree that teachers are babysitters and I don't agree that they are responsible for cleaning their classrooms, but one of you made the point that you don't think we can have this shared online and in classroom model and that it is not a viable option.

We are not dealing with normal circumstances—these are exceptional circumstances—and everybody is working in a completely different manner; parliament is running in a completely different manner. So, why do you make the comment that our schools shouldn't be required to adopt that same sort of different model in this situation when absolutely everybody else in the community has been forced to work in a different set of circumstances? That was a very longwinded question, sorry.

Ms GOLDFING: What we know, based on the input provided to us by our principals, is that, if we have small groups of students attending, we are able to provide a good level of supervision in schools and provide a good level of support for students at home, because then that means that we can supervise them. It is quite labour intensive to provide that online support. We are not saying that schools should be closed entirely, but we are saying that, based on the funding arrangements that have been provided to us and the staffing levels we have in schools, we can cope with a small number of students and we can provide everyone with a good level of education in those circumstances.

What our principals are telling us is that, once we hit over 50 per cent attendance, each teacher will need to be in their own classrooms mostly, which means there is no staffing left over to be able to provide that phone call home to the students who are at home or the direct online contact for the students who are at home. It is a matter of staffing arrangements and what is physically possible within the course of a school day and what they can actually provide.

156 The Hon. C. BONAROS: Would you like to add to that? I thought it was your comment.

Mr SEIDEL: Yes, I probably started that. Essentially, the emphasis has been on student safety in the advice. If we go back to the risk assessment for vulnerable workers, the Catholic system has simply said that the advice is that schools are safe, you are not a vulnerable worker. That was the depth of the individual treatment, and it is a standard pro forma letter that people would be given when they present the pro forma hazard notice about their condition. You get a very simple response, a one-liner, out of it, and that is taken to then apply all the way through.

If schools were safe, presumably it is because they are obeying all of the standard restrictions we have in society—that is, your four square metres, your 1½ metres and all that sort of stuff—and I don't think that, once you get a reasonable number of kids in a school, you have enough space to do those normal social restrictions. That was my point in the beginning.

When schools are obeying the same restrictions as society, if it is safe for society it is safe for schools, and hopefully they are being relaxed so that schools can relax a bit and you can get a few more kids in there, then I am convinced that schools are safe for everyone, rather than just safe for kids who don't present as often with COVID as other people.

157 The CHAIRPERSON: Did you look at the New South Wales Premier and education ministers' press conference earlier this week with some envy, given that they are staggering the start, rostering the attendance, until they can build up safe processes?

Mr SEIDEL: I'm glad you mentioned that because that was one of the things I overlooked from my notes. I think that there will be an emphasis to get year 12s back face-to-face sooner than anybody else because the end of their secondary career is only about that far off, so they do need the individual attention to get face-to-face. I can imagine that if the year 12s are back with 50 per cent or more, then the online will be switched off and they'll just be doing it for year 12s.

The 11s might still be online. The boarding house people might be treated differently, early learning centres might have different kick-ins, so I reckon that there is going to need to be some transition. It is not the whole school necessarily flipping over but there will be cohorts where the best way to give them their education is the face-to-face, and it is not just difficult to operate in two modes. You end up doing neither properly. You've got to do one and do it properly, and ultimately that has to be face-to-face.

Ms GOLDING: We've looked with envy at a lot of the other states. In fact, in Victoria as you outlined earlier, their Premier has had a very clear position about school attendance and ratios for classes. Queensland have also provided greater guidelines than ours have, and the ACT have also had very clear guidelines for parents and for staff as well. It seems to me that our educators are left to handle this for themselves.

158 The CHAIRPERSON: Following on from that, we heard that with Henley High School and Unley High School, the processes were top class in terms of closing those schools down where there were positive test returns and identified contacts. I remember watching the Unley High School news come through with interest. Was it the principal that called closing that school down at one point or was it the department? What was the process on the ground? Did you have any feedback from your members on the clarity of communication or how quickly things turned around? There were certainly rumours flying around that somebody had tested positive but the information didn't get back to the school until much later, either on the day or the next day.

Ms GOLDING: I don't have specific details about that process, particularly around that issue, no.

159 The CHAIRPERSON: Did you have any feedback from any teachers at schools where there were positive tests prior to the end of the last term about any of the processes of informing and then shutting down those schools, and the deep clean that is then required?

Ms GOLDING: I know that certainly when that occurred, it resulted in high levels of anxiety amongst staff and concerns about how they could do a self-assessment of their own risk in that situation. I know that initially Unley was closed for a day but it turned out it needed to close for a number of days. Staff members were highly anxious about returning to school, not knowing whether or not they might be placing others at risk by having inadvertently touched surfaces or otherwise being in contact with someone who may have had COVID. Certainly the mental stress that is caused in those circumstances is very high and really needs to be considered.

160 The CHAIRPERSON: Were extra supports given to those staff for that mental stress?

Ms GOLDING: Not initially. I believe at a later point there was some support provided but the members whom we spoke to in the days following the closures, particularly of Unley, were that those members were highly concerned about their safety and concerned about the safety of their colleagues.

161 The CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Do other members have questions?

162 The Hon. C. BONAROS: I have one final question. In relation to child protection matters, we had evidence today from Commissioner Stevens that he has received conflicting evidence about whether there is actually an increase or decrease in notifications. On the one hand he's been told that that is as a result of the inability of teachers—mandatory notifiers—to notify if they think someone is at risk; on the other hand, they think there is a slight increase. Given that teachers are the people who normally notify, if those students are not at school, are you satisfied that enough is being done or do you have any concerns about those at-risk children being potentially in a higher-risk environment?

Ms GOLDING: I don't have the details about all of the processes that the department might be using. Our position as a union is that schools should be open to essential front-line workers and vulnerable children because of our concerns about those particular at-risk groups of children. I would need to take on notice any further details about those situations but we know that those children particularly need a lot of support.

163 The CHAIRPERSON: I have got a final question; I don't know if other members have any further. In some of your statements, you have noted that non-essential activity should be discontinued, postponed, put off. In the evidence from the chief executive for the department, I raised the issue of the Springbank Secondary College current external review, which is putting enormous stress not just on students but of course on staff and that community.

In a COVID-19 environment, it leaves them unable to even talk to each other directly, which is in fact seeing a Zoom meeting happen tonight as their only way to communicate with each other. And yet they have got leaflets going out in letterboxes with false claims about the school's

enrolment data, and they have got year 7 and 8 selection going on now for feeder schools with complete uncertainty about the future of the school and teaching staff. With those kids living with that absolute uncertainty and those parents living with that absolute uncertainty, is there any need for the external review of Springbank to proceed at the moment?

Ms GOLDRING: We don't believe so. A number of weeks ago, we wrote to minister Gardner seeking a delay in that review because, certainly, there are high levels of anxiety amongst the staff there about that review, and, at the same time, to have high levels of anxiety about COVID-19 makes it a very difficult situation for that group of employees and that whole school community.

164 The CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Any further questions? If not, thank you for your time today. We understand that these are very difficult times for all involved and we congratulate you for your representation of those workers in these school spaces, and we certainly hope that we see safe workplaces in our schools in the future.

Ms GOLDRING: Thank you for your time today.

Mr SEIDEL: Thank you.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW