



PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

**Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Continuing
Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Preparation for the Return to School in February 2022**

Members of the Committee

Legislative Council

Hon Ruth Forrest MLC
(Chair)

Hon Meg Webb MLC

Hon Josh Willie MLC

House of Assembly

Ms Lara Alexander
(from 16 August 2022)

Dr Shane Broad MP
(Deputy Chair)

Mr Felix Ellis MP
(until 25 July 2022)

Mr John Tucker MP
(until 21 November 2022)

Mr Dean Young MP
(from 23 November 2022)

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Charter of the Committee

The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) is a Joint Standing Committee of the Tasmanian Parliament constituted under the *Public Accounts Committee Act 1970* (the Act).

The Committee comprises six Members of Parliament, three Members drawn from the Legislative Council and three Members from the House of Assembly.

Under section 6 of the Act the Committee:

- **must** inquire into, consider and report to the Parliament on any matter referred to the Committee by either House relating to the management, administration or use of public sector finances; or the accounts of any public authority or other organisation controlled by the State or in which the State has an interest; and
 - **may** inquire into, consider and report to the Parliament on any matter arising in connection with public sector finances that the Committee considers appropriate; and any matter referred to the Committee by the Auditor-General.
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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACARA	Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority
AEU	Australian Education Union
AHPPC	Australian Health Protection Principal Committee
CFLCs	Child and Family Learning Centres
CHaPS	Child Health and Parenting Service
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DoE	Department of Education
DoH	Department of Health
DPAC	Department of Premier and Cabinet
ECA	Early Childhood Australia
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EFA	Education Facility Attendant
FECA	fully enclosed covered area
FSG	First Secretaries Group
HEPA	high efficiency particulate air [filter]
HR	human resource(s)
IT	Information technology
KDC	Kindergarten development check
LiL	Launching into Learning
MLC	Member of the Legislative Council
MP	Member of Parliament
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy
NPA	National Partnership (on COVID-19 Response) Agreement
Omicron	COVID-19 B.1.1.529 variant
PAT	progressive achievement testing
RATs	Rapid Antigen Tests
SBM	School Business Manager
TA	Teacher's Assistant
TDERL	Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Lobby
UWU	United Workers Union (Tasmania Branch)
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VLC	virtual learning centre
VLT	Virtual Learning Tasmania

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic created enormous disruption to all areas of life and significant challenges for all governments. Previous inquiries into the Tasmanian Government's response to the pandemic are available on the Committee website.¹

In late 2021, the Tasmanian Government began preparing for face-to-face learning for students, the majority of whom had spent some time learning from home during 2021, for the 2022 school year.

On 23 February 2022, the Committee resolved to conduct an inquiry into the continuing response to the COVID-19 pandemic by State Government particularly preparation for the reopening of the Tasmanian border to other mainland States and international arrivals. This Report, one of three related Reports, focusses on the planning and preparedness for the return to school for the 2022 school year, and should be read in conjunction with the related Public Accounts Committee Reports.

The Committee notes the change to the title of the Department of Education (DoE) to the Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP).²

The importance of regular attendance at school and engagement with education is critical to student learning outcomes and future opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic created significant disruptions to the education system and the early education and care sector. Access to school education and early education and care were vital for essential workers who could not work from home.

The Report provides evidence related to the financial and public health measures taken by Government to prepare for return to school for students and staff for the 2022 educational year and the financial, social and educational impacts associated with the measures implemented. Areas covered includes the impact on students and their educational outcomes, parents and carers, teaching and ancillary staff, and the early education and care sector.

Prior to the transition to Tasmania's State borders reopening on 15 December 2021, there had been no cases of COVID-19 in Term 4 of 2021 and no community transmission occurring. School communities were required to adjust to significant change. This change was also significant for libraries, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs), which were impacted immediately, following the opening of borders with very little time to prepare for likely community transmission.

Whilst the then Department of Education (DoE) undertook significant planning from late 2021 to support the return to school in 2022, in close consultation with Public Health, there was little lead-time in planning for the ECEC sector.

¹ See Final Report - Inquiry into the Government's Economic Response to the COVID19 pandemic (No. 13 of 2021) 13 August 2021, https://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/58356/covid-1920inquiry20final20report20full20signed.pdf

² The new Department for Education, Children and Young People was established on 1 October 2022. It includes the Department of Education and some areas from the Department of Communities Tasmania, <https://www.decyp.tas.gov.au/new-department/#:~:text=The%20new%20Department%20for%20Education,the%20Department%20of%20Communities%20Tasmania> [Accessed 31 August 2023]

In the absence of a national definition of COVID-19 outbreaks for schools, the then DoE worked in partnership with the Department of Health (DoH) to develop a Tasmanian approach to school case and outbreak management. A range of additional transmission mitigation measures were put in place and additional funding was provided to support the purchase of air purifiers, other essential items and additional COVID-19 related cleaning.

The then DoE and DoH collaborated and provided oversight, support, guidance and advice for teachers, parents and students in preparation, during and after the return to school in February 2022, however some messaging was inconsistent and not delivered directly to all relevant stakeholders. These areas included ventilation, the use of air purifiers, COVID-19 related cleaning requirements and engagement of COVID-19 related Education Facility Attendants (EFAs).

Whilst assessments were undertaken in relation to ventilation, window functioning and air quality in classrooms, not all were complete prior to the return to school. An occupational physician and a certified occupational hygienist developed guidelines for school ventilation, however education stakeholders expressed concerns as to the different levels of expertise employed to assess ventilation between TasTAFE, state schools and colleges.

The absence of a centralised approach to employment, training and coordination of EFAs resulted in some school business managers finding it difficult to engage EFA relief staff to fill shifts.

The Committee notes the additional workload expectations placed on EFAs in terms of additional COVID-19 related cleaning. The EFA job security arrangements that underpin employment in state schools, has not been altered since 1997 and requires a review in light of the changed working conditions.

The then DoE *Principal Matters* newsletter intended to inform school staff of COVID-19 related changes and requirements was not consistently communicated to all levels of staff, including EFAs. Future communication frameworks and plans must ensure all staff have access to consistent and timely communication of relevant information.

The Virtual Learning Centre initiative was established quickly by the Department of Education to continue learning for students who were unable to attend schools. The Committee recommends this successful initiative be maintained and continually improved.

Impacts on student learning and attendance must continue to be assessed and any identification of lost learning addressed through evidence based approaches. Children with one or more disability are at greater risk of lost learning. Specific strategies to assist all students with lost learning or other negative impacts must be developed, implemented and assessed.

The additional challenges and impact on the early education and care sector with the Government's decision to open the Tasmanian border on 15 December 2021 is acknowledged. Early education care services operated during the Christmas and January 2022 period prior to return to school, particularly to support essential workers to attend employment and therefore had very limited time to prepare. The emergence of cases of

COVID-19 in the early education and care sector began as soon as the borders opened. The sector also faced challenges associated with inconsistent provision of rapid antigen tests.

The Committee recommends the Government ensure the early education and care sector is included in any future state pandemic preparedness planning.

The Committee acknowledges the extraordinary work undertaken by all Departmental staff to minimise disruption to student learning while keeping staff and students safe.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Forrest', with a stylized, cursive script.

Hon Ruth Forrest MLC
Chair

8 September 2023

Summary of Findings

The Committee found:

Area	Finding
Governance and stakeholder engagement to support return to school planning	<p>F1. The Department of Education and Department of Health collaborated and provided oversight, support, guidance and advice for teachers, parents and students in preparation, during and after the return to school in February 2022.</p> <p>F2. On 20 January 2022, the Tasmanian Return to School Plan and Operational Plan for managing COVID-19 in Early Childhood Education and Care were released by the Department of Education.</p>
Tasmania's Operational Plan for Managing COVID-19 in Schools	<p>F3. The Tasmanian Schools Operational Plan whilst broadly adopted across the education sector was not mandatory for non-government schools.</p> <p>F4. Some non-government schools implemented different vaccination requirements for staff.</p>
Public health measures to prepare for the return to school	<p>F5. A range of additional measures was introduced to assist in reducing the transmission of COVID-19.</p> <p>F6. Funding was provided to Government and non-government schools for air purifiers and additional COVID-19 related cleaning.</p> <p>F7. An assessment of all schools' rooms with access to open air was undertaken.</p> <p>F8. The Government claimed no infrastructure upgrades, outside the planned Government school window upgrade work, had been required to resolve ventilation issues.</p> <p>F9. Subsequent to the assessment, resources were made available to schools to assist in mitigating school ventilation issues.</p> <p>F10. An occupational physician and a certified occupational hygienist developed guidelines for school ventilation.</p> <p>F11. Tasmanian education stakeholders expressed concerns as to the different levels of expertise employed to assess ventilation between TasTAFE, Government schools and colleges.</p> <p>F12. Tasmanian education stakeholders expressed concern about the lack of timely and consistent State Government/Department of Education communications with respect to ongoing improvement in ventilation in state schools.</p> <p>F13. Tasmanian education stakeholders expressed concern about the lack of training for employees and labour required to implement and maintain the new ventilation requirements including air purifiers.</p> <p>F14. Employment of specific COVID-19 cleaners was reported to have been inconsistent across Government schools.</p> <p>F15. There was not a centralised approach to employing, training and coordinating for Education Facility Attendants, permanent or relief, to support the return to school plan.</p> <p>F16. School business managers arranged Education Facility Attendants relief staff during the pandemic but some schools found it difficult to fill shifts.</p>

Area	Finding
	<p>F17. Additional COVID-19 cleaning protocols required during the pandemic highlighted the lack of flexibility of Education Facility Attendant employment arrangements.</p> <p>F18. The job security arrangements that underpin employment of Education Facility Attendants in Government schools may need to be re-examined in light of the changed working conditions since last reviewed in 1997.</p> <p>F19. The then Department of Education Principal Matters communication to inform school staff of COVID-19 related changes and requirements related to all areas from student learning to school cleaning was not consistently communicated to all levels of staff, particularly Education Facility Attendants.</p> <p>F20. Schools were provided with surgical masks, not P2 or N95 masks, for staff and students to wear on return to school when the mask mandate was in place.</p>
Supporting Public Health Advice	<p>F21. In the absence of a national definition of COVID-19 outbreaks for schools, a Tasmanian approach to school case and outbreak management was developed by the then Department of Education and Department of Health in partnership.</p>
Financial, Social and Educational impacts	<p>F22. The Tasmanian results for the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) released in November 2022 suggest that COVID 19 impacted Grade 3 and Grade 5 student literacy and numeracy levels across a number of indicators.</p> <p>F23. Analysis is required to assess the lost learning experienced by Tasmanian students during the COVID-19 period.</p> <p>F24. The Department of Education Children and Young People employs a number of strategies, including the student well-being survey, to monitor and assess state school students' engagement and progress.</p> <p>F25. Wearing of face-masks by teachers and parents when engaging in teaching and learning, may have had a detrimental effect on young children with respect to their individual speech development.</p> <p>F26. The use of child-friendly government messaging is crucial during periods of heightened risks related to physical health, mental health and wellbeing of children.</p> <p>F27. During Term 1 2022, there was an increase in home education applications and registrations with the Office of the Education Registrar.</p> <p>F28. Government policy related to home education applications was altered to ensure the child remained enrolled in school until after assessment for home schooling was completed and approved.</p> <p>F29. During Term 1 2022, there were lower attendance rates in Government schools.</p>
Vaccination	<p>F30. On the return to school, there were inconsistent employment arrangements for staff in relation to vaccination status: some unvaccinated staff were stood down with full pay whilst others were stood down without pay.</p> <p>F31. Employment arrangements allowed unvaccinated educators, whilst stood down from the Department of Education on full-pay, to work in the non-government sector.</p>

Area	Finding
	F32. In July 2022, unvaccinated staff were permitted to return to work in Government schools.
Curriculum/Virtual Learning Centre	<p>F33. The Virtual Learning Centre initiative was successfully established in a short timeframe as an on-line platform designed to deliver teaching for students learning from home.</p> <p>F34. The Virtual Learning Centre enabled continuous engagement for students who remained at home during the pandemic.</p> <p>F35. Some existing Department of Education programs (e.g. Launching into Learning and Gifted Students programs) were interrupted for a period at the beginning of the 2022 school year.</p> <p>F36. The Virtual Learning Centre required parental support for some learning, and was not universally accessible, especially for some students with disability and/or limited internet access.</p>
Staffing Strategies	<p>F37. COVID-19 created staff shortages in Tasmanian schools.</p> <p>F38. The available pool of relief teachers was unable to meet demand.</p>
Supporting Safe Sites	<p>F39. It was recognised by Department of Health vaccination of children had a modest effect on reducing transmission of COVID-19 in schools.</p> <p>F40. After the public health mandate to wear masks had been lifted, subsequent messaging on wearing masks in schools resulted in some confusion.</p> <p>F41. A dedicated COVID-19 hotline for Department of Education staff was utilised at the beginning of the 2022 school year.</p> <p>F42. The roll-out of the COVID-19 care packages to Tasmanian school students was inconsistent.</p>
Support for Vulnerable Students	<p>F43. Parents and carers of students with disability strongly advocated for individual COVID-19 return to school plans before the end of the 2021 school year.</p> <p>F44. On 20 January 2022, the Government released the Return to School Plan, which provided four weeks to implement measures in the Plan prior to Term 1 commencing.</p> <p>F45. Despite best efforts by Department of Education staff to engage with all parents and carers of students with disability, time did not permit all to be contacted prior to the beginning of Term 1.</p> <p>F46. Not all students with disability began Term 1 with a Return to School Plan in place. As a result, some families chose not to send their child back to school.</p> <p>F47. COVID-19 presented particular challenges for the preparation and delivery of individual learning plans for students with disability.</p> <p>F48. COVID-19 had a substantial impact on the quality and accessibility of learning for many students with disability.</p>
Teaching and Support Staff	<p>F49. Department of Education school based staff accessed nearly 2,660 days of communicable diseases leave during Term 1, 2022. A total of 14,744 sick leave days had been used by both school based and non-schooled based staff over this period.</p> <p>F50. Both relief staff and non-school based staff were deployed to assist Tasmanian schools during Term 1, 2022.</p> <p>F51. Department of Education provided a series of well-being webinars to all staff and additional targeted support for school principals.</p>

Area	Finding
Early Childhood Education and Care	<p>F52. The opening of the Tasmanian border on 15 December 2021 put pressures on early education care services that operated during the Christmas and January 2022 period.</p> <p>F53. The emergence of cases of COVID-19 in the early education and care sector began as soon as the borders opened and many were under-prepared.</p> <p>F54. Inconsistent provision of rapid antigen tests exacerbated the challenges faced by early education and care centres.</p> <p>F55. Inconsistent rapid antigen tests supply meant that many early education and care centres had to purchase their own in a time of high demand and low supply.</p> <p>F56. Early Childhood Education and Care had unique challenges to face during COVID-19, including the importance of remaining open to enable essential workers, and others, to continue to work.</p> <p>F57. The COVID-19 safety plan templates did not adequately address unique early education and care settings, including the varying sizes of centres.</p> <p>F58. The Federal Government’s decision to waive the gap fee was a welcome initiative for parents, however this decision impacted the financial positions and profitability of Early Childhood Education and Care providers.</p>

Summary of Recommendations

The Committee made 17 recommendations:

Area	Recommendation
Tasmania's Operational Plan for Managing COVID-19 in Schools	R1. In the event of a future pandemic, a public health approach be consistently applied across the education sector.
Public health measures to prepare for the return to school	<p>R2. Recognising the fundamental importance of maintaining access to education, the Government ensure the education sector is included in any State pandemic preparedness planning.</p> <p>R3. The Government review and contemporise its communication strategy for use during emergency events to ensure all education stakeholders (i.e. all staff, parents, students etc.) are adequately informed in a timely and consistent manner.</p> <p>R4. In the event of another COVID-19 related response or similar, the Department of Education Children and Young People ensure all policy or protocol changes are communicated effectively to all staff.</p> <p>R5. The Department of Education Children and Young People establish a regular program of assessment for all schools' facilities in relation to air quality and ventilation, ensuring all air purifiers are maintained and serviced, as per product guidelines.</p> <p>R6. The Government review the employment arrangements for Education Facility Attendants to improve flexibility across schools.</p> <p>R7. The Government work with school principals and business managers, and unions to develop a system to facilitate the employment and deployment of additional staff during a pandemic</p> <p>R8. The Department of Education Children and Young People consider adopting a centralised approach for the employment and training of Education Facility Attendants.</p> <p>R9. The Department of Education Children and Young People review the job security agreement for EFAs to ensure it is consistent with contemporary requirements, particularly with regard to the cleaning formula and increased workloads of many Education Facility Attendants.</p> <p>R10. The Government/ Department of Education, Children and Young People make masks available that provide the greatest level of protection, relevant to the risk of transmission if a mask mandate is re imposed.</p>
Financial, Social and Educational impacts	<p>R11. The Department of Education Children and Young People fully assess the levels of lost learning that has occurred since the beginning of the 2020 school year and utilise evidence based programs and methods to assist children with learning gaps.</p> <p>R12. In the event of a future public health emergency, Government should use child friendly messaging for public communications.</p>
Vaccination	R13. In any future public health emergency, Government ensure consistent public health requirements are applied across the entire education and early education and care sectors.

Area	Recommendation
Curriculum/Virtual Learning Centre	R14. The Virtual Learning Centre be maintained, and continually improved as an option for continued and enhanced student engagement in learning.
Staffing Strategies	R15. The Department of Education Children and Young People maintain an accurate and current register of available relief teachers.
Support for Vulnerable Students	R16. The Government review the Return to School Plan process including timeframes and engagement with all relevant stakeholders.
Early Childhood Education and Care	R17. Acknowledging the early education and care sector operates during school term breaks, the Government ensure the sector is included in any State pandemic preparedness planning.

Conduct of Review

On 23 February 2022, the Committee resolved to conduct an inquiry into the COVID-19 related responses and measures taken by State Government.

On 24 February 2022, a media release and terms of reference were circulated and published on the Committee's website.³

The terms of reference included the Committee undertaking further inquiries into the Tasmanian Government's continuing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The areas to be covered in the inquiry included measures taken by the Government (including relevant Public Health advice) to prepare for the State border re-opening on 15 December 2021, the return to school, the vaccination rollout, business support and the COVID-19 Tasmanian Check-in app.

Particular emphasis for the Inquiry was detailed as follows:

Reopening of the Tasmanian Border

- the financial and public health measures taken by Government to prepare for the re-opening of the Tasmanian border to other mainland States on 15 December 2021;
- the Public Health advice that supported the re-opening plan; and
- the financial and social impacts associated with measures implemented to support the border re-opening including (but not limited to) impact on:
 - access to health services;
 - patient outcomes;
 - health professionals; and
 - the broader Tasmanian community and economy.

Return to School Plan

- the financial and public health measures taken by Government to prepare for return to school for students and staff for the 2022 educational year;
- the Public Health advice that supported the return to school plan;
- the financial, social and educational impacts associated with measures implemented to support the return to school plan including (but not limited to) impact on:
 - students and educational outcomes;
 - parents and carers;
 - staff; and
 - the broader Tasmanian community and economy.

COVID-19 Vaccination Uptake and Rollout

- the financial and public health measures taken by Government to support and encourage COVID-19 vaccination uptake;
- the Public Health advice that supported these measures including accessibility to vaccinations across all age cohorts;
- the financial implications of the vaccine rollout to the State; and

³ See [Media Advisory – 24 February 2022](#) on the Committee's website

- the impact on employment in sectors where vaccination was mandated to continue employment.

Targeted Financial Support Programs and Payments

- the financial and public health measures taken by Government to support businesses impacted by COVID-19 since August 2021;
- the financial impacts associated with these measures; and
- the uptake, timeliness and adequacy of the financial support measures.

COVID-19 Check-in App

- the Government's role related to the Tasmanian COVID-19 Check-in App with regard to the application's:
 - development;
 - effectiveness;
 - use; and
 - associated costs
- the Public Health advice that supported the use and development of the COVID-19 Check-in App;
- the advice around the effectiveness and privacy considerations of the COVID-19 manual check-in process; and
- the future planning around tracking and tracing.

This Report is one of three separate reports related to the above areas of inquiry and is focussed on the planning and preparedness for the return to school for the 2022 school year.

The Committee wrote to the then Premier Hon Peter Gutwein MP and the following Ministers to advise them of the Committee's intentions and invite them and their respective departments to make a submission to the inquiry:

- Hon Jeremy Rockliff MP (Minister for Health)
- Hon Roger Jaensch MP (Minister for Education, Children and Youth)
- Hon Jane Howlett MP (Minister for Small Business)

On the 21 March 2022, the then Premier Gutwein wrote to the Committee seeking an extension of the deadline for Tasmanian Government departments to respond to the enquiry from Friday, 25 March 2022 to Thursday, 14 April 2022. This extension was granted by the Chair and communicated accordingly. The response was received by the Committee on 21 April 2022.

Premier Gutwein announced his retirement from Parliament and as the Member for Bass on Friday, 4 April 2022. Parliament was subsequently prorogued from Wednesday, 6 April 2022 and did not resume until Tuesday, 3 May 2022. By convention, all Parliamentary Committee activity ceased until the relevant Chambers (Legislative Council and the House of Assembly) reappointed the Committee.

On 12 May 2022, the Committee was re-established and noted the new Premier Hon Jeremy Rockliff MP retained his Minister for Health portfolio and the new Minister for Small Business, Hon Madeleine Ogilvie MP, taking over the Hon Jane Howlett’s portfolio.

The Committee wrote to the relevant Ministers and invited them to attend the Committee’s public hearings. The ministerial public hearings were held at Committee Room 2, Parliament House as follows:

Friday, 17 June 2022	Friday, 24 June 2022
<p>Hon Roger Jaensch MP Minister for Education, Children and Youth</p> <p><u>Department of Education Representatives</u> Tim Bullard (Secretary) Jenny Burgess (Deputy Secretary Strategy and Performance) Kane Salter (Deputy Secretary Corporate and Business Services) James Burrows (Manager, Office of the Secretary)</p>	<p>Hon Jeremy Rockliff MP Premier Minister for Health</p> <p><u>Department of Health Representatives</u> Kathrine Morgan-Wicks (Secretary) Lisa Howes (Director, Office of the Secretary) Dale Webster (Deputy Secretary, Mental Health & Wellbeing) Dr Mark Veitch (Director of Public Health) Dr Tony Lawler (Chief Medical Officer & Deputy Secretary, Clinical Quality, Regulation and Accreditation) Craig Jeffrey (Chief Financial Officer)</p> <p><u>Department of Premier and Cabinet Representatives</u> Jenny Gale (Secretary) Craig Limkin (Deputy Secretary, Policy & Intergovernmental Relations)</p> <p>Hon Madeleine Ogilvie MP Minister for Small Business</p> <p><u>Department of State Growth Representatives</u> Kim Evans (Secretary) Mark Bowles (Deputy Secretary, Industry & Business Development)</p>

The Committee wrote to the relevant Ministers seeking their responses from the questions taken on notice during the public hearings. The responses were received as follows:

- 5 July 2022 (Hon Roger Jaensch MP, Minister for Education, Children and Youth), and
- 26 July 2022 (Hon Madeleine Ogilvie MP, Minister for Small Business).

On 24 June 2022, the Committee resolved to invite a range of Tasmanian education stakeholders to share their views with respect to their experience of the actions and decisions made by the State Government since the Committee’s first report tabled in August 2021.

The Parliament was prorogued again between 1 and 16 August 2022 following the resignation of Hon Jacqui Petrusma MP on 25 July 2022.

On 24 August 2022, the Committee resolved to receive the six public and one private submissions from Tasmanian education stakeholders. The Committee also resolved to publish the public submissions (see Committee website). In addition, the Committee resolved to invite representatives and nominated individuals to public hearings at a date to be determined.

Parliament was suspended from 13 to 27 September 2022 (following the passing of a condolence motion of both Houses in commemoration of the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II).

Further public hearings with Tasmanian education stakeholders on Friday, 21 October 2022 and Wednesday, 2 November 2022 and were held at Committee Room 2, Parliament House:

Friday, 21 October 2022	Wednesday, 2 November 2022
<p>United Workers Union (Tasmania) Amy Brumby (Leader/Organiser)</p> <p>Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Lobby Kristen Desmond (Founder)</p>	<p>Australian Education Union (Tasmanian Branch) David Genford (President) Steven Smith (Senior Industrial Advocate)</p> <p>Early Childhood Australia (Tasmania Branch) Lynne Moran (President)</p> <p>Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance Adjunct Associate Professor Lisa Denny Emeritus Professor Michael Rowan</p> <p>Commissioner for Children and Young People Tasmania Leanne McLean</p>

The Committee wrote to Hon Roger Jaensch MP (Minister for Education, Children and Youth) seeking his response to questions taken on notice during the 2 November 2022 public hearing. The response was received on 13 December 2022.

Background

The Committee tabled its first report on the Government’s social and economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic (No. 13 of 2021) in August 2021. That Report published 35 findings and 16 recommendations (see ‘Completed Inquiries 2021 – 2022’ on the Committee’s website for further details).⁴

As at 6 September 2023, the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Tasmania stood at 304,098 and 312 deaths.⁵ This is compared to the Australian 11.6 million confirmed cases with 22.78k deaths nationally. Globally for the same period, 770.4 million confirmed cases and 6.96 million deaths.⁶

This Report (one of three) specifically deals with the preparation for the return to school in February 2022.

⁴ See https://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/58356/covid-1920inquiry20final20report20full20signed.pdf

⁵ See Tasmanian Department of Health COVID-19 Weekly Statistics, total cases since 15 December 2021, <https://www.health.tas.gov.au/health-topics/coronavirus-covid-19/current-risk-level-and-statistics/weekly-statistics>

⁶ See COVID-19 Data Explorer, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-cases>

Evidence

Preparation for the Return to School in February 2022

The Committee was informed through the submission from the Tasmanian Government, that the Government had committed to returning to face-to-face learning and starting the school year as planned in early February as a priority. This commitment required extensive planning for the opening of schools in the months prior to Term 1 2022, informed by Public Health advice and ensuring that the wellbeing of the State's children and education staff were at the centre of this planning.⁷

The transition to Tasmania's State borders reopening on 15 December 2021 had seen school communities adjusting to significant change: from attending school with zero cases of COVID-19 in Term 4 2021, to returning to school in Term 1 2022 with community transmission occurring. This shift was also significant for libraries, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs) which were impacted immediately following the opening of borders.

To support this transition, the Department of Education (DoE) undertook significant planning from late 2021 to support the return to school in 2022, in close consultation with Public Health.

Measures Taken by Government

Engagement in National Work⁸

The Committee was informed that national work related to schools and the return to school was undertaken through forums such as National Cabinet and had informed Tasmania's approach. On 5 January 2022, acknowledging the importance of planning and certainty for the safe return to schools in 2022 whilst accounting for the broad easing of public health and social measures and other restrictions, the National Cabinet tasked the First Secretaries Group (FSG) to develop a national school reopening framework. This national framework was designed to enable students to return to school on day one of Term 1, and for schools to stay open with consistent requirements across all jurisdictions to be in place prior to the first day of the first term of school.

Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPAC) led the Tasmanian input to the national schools reopening framework as Tasmania's FSG representative, with DoE and DoH providing education and health advice into its development. Development of the national schools reopening framework was informed by the most recent Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) statement on COVID-19, schools and early education. AHPPC was also provided with the opportunity to provide input to FSG's drafting. DoH's input and advice to the national schools reopening framework was largely through its involvement in AHPPC. A key aspect of Tasmania's input to the development of the national schools

⁷ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry (https://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0027/59157/2022042120tasmanian20government20submission20to20covid-1920follow-up20inquiry.pdf), p.20

⁸ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.20-21

reopening framework was to ensure it allowed states to implement the approaches best suited to their local requirements. This input was reflected in the final published version.

On 13 January 2022, National Cabinet agreed and published the National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in schools and ECEC.⁹ The Framework provided an outline for a nationally consistent approach to the ongoing delivery of education through COVID-19 and outlined six national guiding principles for managing COVID-19 in schools and ECEC, which included:

1. ECEC services and schools were essential and should be the first to open and last to close wherever possible in outbreak situations, with face-to-face learning prioritised;
2. baseline public health measures continued to apply;
3. no vulnerable child or child of an essential worker was to be turned away;
4. responses to be proportionate and health risk-based;
5. equip ECEC services and schools to respond on the basis of public health advice and with support from public health authorities where required; and
6. well-being of children and education staff to be supported.

On 20 January 2022, National Cabinet noted jurisdictions would release their operational plans for schools that would be developed in line with the National Framework and its key principles. The Tasmanian DoE Return to School Plan¹⁰ was released this same day, with confirmation schools would commence face-to-face teaching and learning as scheduled in February 2022. The Return to School Plan included a high-level overview as well as a detailed Schools Operational Plan. At the same time, a detailed Operational Plan was also released for managing COVID-19 in ECEC.

Governance and stakeholder engagement to support return to school planning¹¹

The Committee was informed that along with engagement at a national level, from Term 4 2021 preparation for the return to school included a focus on engaging with key stakeholders and establishing governance to support the return to school planning. Preparing families for returning to school with COVID-19 active in the Tasmanian community was also a priority during this time.

Establishing these governance arrangements and ongoing engagement with stakeholders provided a strong foundation to support planning for the return to school. A range of internal governance arrangements were established within DoE, including:

- regular briefings with Principals and CFLC leaders led by the Deputy Secretary, Learning;
- a COVID-19 Working Group organised around key portfolios of work including staffing, data, outbreak management, enquiries management, communication, disability, facilities, the Virtual Learning Centre (VLC) and curriculum, and stakeholder engagement; and
- COVID-19 Executive Committee to engage the Executive Group and senior leaders to make timely decisions.

⁹ See [Attachment A - National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care](#)

¹⁰ See [Attachment B - School Reopening 20 January 2022](#)

¹¹ See [Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.21-22](#)

DoE also engaged in governance arrangements with key government agencies, including regular:

- briefings with the COVID-19 Coordination Centre;
- liaison with DPAC; and
- briefings and meetings with Public Health.

Engaging regularly with key stakeholders was also central to development and implementation of the return to school plan, including:

- regular engagement with DoE statutory bodies;
- a working group and ongoing engagement with Independent Schools Tasmania and Catholic Education Tasmania;
- regular liaison with the Tasmanian Principals' Association;
- bi-weekly meetings with unions including the Australian Education Union (AEU), United Workers Union (UWU) and the Community and Public Sector Union;
- liaison with representatives from the disability sector; and
- ongoing engagement with the Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations.

Cooperation between DoH and DoE had been an important component of planning for, and responding, to COVID-19 in school settings throughout the pandemic. This collaboration had continued in the development of Tasmania's own plan for the return to school in 2022 and followed the commencement of Term 1 in February 2022. There had been strong engagement and collaboration across all levels of DoE and DoH, including between heads of agency, senior officers and at the operational level. The Education and Care and School Operational Plans¹² provides an overview of activity to support the return to school, including key elements of the Schools Operational Plan, supporting governance arrangements and stakeholder engagement.

Work between DoH and DoE was ongoing in relation to communications materials that were provided on both websites. This ensured there was consistent advice for teachers, parents and students whether they sought information via DoE or DoH.

Following the commencement of the school year in February 2022, DoH continued to provide support, guidance and advice to schools and DoE to help manage COVID-19 within these settings including:

- providing guidance and advice on case and outbreak management in schools (including infection prevention and control, testing, information collection, monitoring and communication);
- supporting schools and DoE to meet notification requirements;
- supporting supply and access to rapid antigen tests for schools; and
- maintaining broader community access to COVID-19 laboratory testing.

DoH was also maintaining outbreak response specialists for the education settings.

¹² See [Attachment C - Education and Care and School Operational Plans](#)

The Committee was informed that DoH would continue to work closely with DoE throughout the 2022 school year to support timely information sharing and provide ongoing advice and support.

Committee Findings

- F1. The Department of Education and Department of Health collaborated and provided oversight, support, guidance and advice for teachers, parents and students in preparation, during and after the return to school in February 2022.
- F2. On 20 January 2022, the Tasmanian Return to School Plan and Operational Plan for managing COVID-19 in Early Childhood Education and Care were released by the Department of Education.

Tasmania's Operational Plan for Managing COVID-19 in Schools¹³

The Committee was informed that the primary objective of the Schools Operational Plan for Weeks 1 to 5 of Term 1 2022 was to safely maintain face-to-face learning as a priority, while supporting learners who needed to learn at home due to COVID-19. The plan aligned with the six principles in the National Framework and had been regularly reviewed to ensure it remained contemporary, complies with Public Health advice, and continued to provide the best protection and outcomes for children. An updated Return to School Operational Plan had been published.¹⁴

The Schools Operational Plan was also consistent with DoE's Risk Management Plan, which was approved in December 2021 following consultation with all DoE staff. DoE's Risk Management Plan saw the establishment of a COVID-19 Vaccination Policy as the most effective control to protect employees against harm as a result of being exposed to COVID-19 at work. This included a requirement for all education workers to be fully vaccinated prior to school commencing.

The Schools Operational Plan broadly applied to both the government and non-government sector, however, while the non-government sector aligned their approaches with the Plan, it is important to note that some elements differ between Catholic, Independent and government schools (e.g. vaccination), although remained consistent with the six principles.

¹³ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.22-23

¹⁴ See [Attachment D - COVIDsafe Schools Plan \(Weeks 6 - 10\)](#)

Committee Findings

- F3. The Tasmanian Schools Operational Plan whilst broadly adopted across the education sector was not mandatory for non-government schools.
- F4. Some non-government schools implemented different vaccination requirements for staff.

Committee Recommendations

- R1. In the event of a future pandemic, a public health approach be consistently applied across the education sector.

Public health measures to prepare for the return to school¹⁵

The Committee was informed that in order to keep learners and staff as safe as possible, COVID-19 safe measures were put in place to support schools in line with public health advice. These measures built on what schools were already doing:

- vaccination – all DoE staff were required to be vaccinated, including volunteers and contractors. Vaccination was encouraged but not mandatory for students.
- Rapid Antigen Tests (RAT)s – all students and staff had ongoing access to RATs to use when they had symptoms or were directed to use them. Schools had stocks of RATs to ensure families and staff could replenish their stocks as their allocated tests were used.
- face masks – all schools were well stocked with face masks in both junior and adult sizes. All adults, secondary students and visitors over 12 years were required to wear face masks. Primary school students did not need to wear face masks but could if they choose.
- hygiene practices – COVID-19 safe behaviours continued to be actively promoted. Schools were adequately supplied with hand soap and sanitiser.
- cleaning – frequent cleaning was continued, particularly on high-touch surfaces.
- ventilation – natural air flow was maximised. Air purifiers had been provided to all schools for use in learning spaces with lower natural ventilation. Each site had been provided a CO2 monitor with supporting guidelines developed by an Occupational Physician. A window assessment and repair program commenced in 2021 with the majority of identified windows repaired prior to the commencement of Term 1 2022.
- outdoor learning – schools were encouraged to take advantage of outdoor learning opportunities.
- physical distancing – all adults were required to keep a physical distance of 1.5 metres from each other.
- safe site management – schools regularly reviewed their COVID-19 safety plans.
- groups – mixing of students and staff from different groups was being limited where possible.

¹⁵ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.23-24

- outbreak management – schools across the government and non-government sector were supported in the management of cases and outbreaks of COVID-19 to support them to continue to deliver face-to-face, high quality education to students in a safe environment with minimal disruption. Each government school was supported by a DoE COVID-19 Outbreak Support officer who assisted the school and DoH in the identification and management of group and school outbreaks.

The Tasmanian Government had committed to \$12 million of funding for Government Schools preparation costs and \$5 million for the non-government sector. A further \$3.45 million of DoE budget had been allocated to purchase additional air purifiers as the State proceeded towards winter. Additional cleaning costs of approximately \$4 million per year relating to COVID-19 were also being met under the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) by DoH.¹⁶

Additional cleaning costs of approximately \$4 million per year within Government schools relating to COVID-19 were also being met by the DoH, using the 50% funding through the NPA.

At the public hearings, the Committee heard from the Hon Roger Jaensch MP (Minister for Education, Children and Youth) and Ms Jenny Burgess (Deputy Secretary Strategy and Performance, DoE) around the DoE's assessment of schools' ventilation with respect to COVID-19 control and assessment of windows in schools:

Mr WILLIE - ... When were those window upgrades completed - a date? What was the total cost and what is the time line of the air purification devices being delivered? How many and how were they distributed? ...

It's my understanding now that schools can access specialist help for airflow if they're having particular problems. Could the Minister confirm that and when that came online and was available to schools?

Mr JAENSCH - ... First of all, there was not an audit but there was an assessment undertaken of all perimeter classrooms across the state ...

...

Mr JAENSCH - The word 'audit' has been used quite a bit but the approach taken was because the 'kryptonite' for COVID-19 is ventilation and air movement, opening doors and windows is the way to do that. Every classroom in every school is different. There was an assessment of all rooms with access to open-air and schools were then equipped to be able to manage those spaces and their ventilation to the best of their ability.

That segues through to a program of work to ensure that windows are then operable and the vast majority of those were completed before the return to school in term one and the program has been continuing since then. The other things that schools were provided

¹⁶ This did not include the costs of masks or RATs which were being met through a combination of DOH funding and the COVID-19 National Partnership on COVID-19 Response (NPA) between states, territories and the Commonwealth which provided for 50% funding of COVID-19 related costs.

with was things like air purifiers, particularly for those unable to be ventilated from the outside. I understand the total - about 9,000 air purifiers have been purchased and deployed and these are HEPA¹⁷ filter purifiers. ... 8,400 is the number deployed. Ms BURGESS - There are 600 waiting in reserve in case they are required.

Mr JAENSCH - ... And each school has a carbon dioxide monitor and instructions on how to use it. This is a way of measuring the mixing of air and the flow of air. Each school also has access to an occupational physician, someone who is able to assist them with the configuration of the room and the use of natural and artificial ventilation and air circulation to ensure that they're achieving - they're not creating pockets of air where a virus may accumulate and provide a greater risk of infection.

The schools have been given tools and equipment and expertise and guidance on how to ensure each space is safe, noting that each space is different and there is not a central program of doing the same thing in every school and every room because that wouldn't work.¹⁸

In replying to a question taken on notice around the cost and completion of the window upgrade work, Minister Jaensch provided the Committee with the following with respect to the DoE's assessment of schools' ventilation undertaken of Tasmanian schools in Term 1:¹⁹

Window repair costs as at 22 June 2022 are \$969,123.

Total number of perimeter windows to be repaired following inspection in Nov/Dec 2021	Number of windows repaired prior to start of the 2022 school year	As a % the total number of windows required prior to the start of the 2022 school year	Number of windows still to be repaired as at 17 June 2022	Total % of windows repairs that have been completed by 17 June 2022
8,768	6,914	78.9%	110	98.7%

Minister Jaensch also provided the Committee with the following with respect to the DoE's air purification device delivery and deployment:²⁰

- *A total of 9,000 air purifiers have been purchased across four orders:*
 - *first order 1,000 units;*
 - *second order 3,000 units;*
 - *third order 500 units; and*
 - *fourth order 4,500 units.*
- *Orders 1-3 were received and distributed prior to the commencement of the 2022 school year.*

¹⁷ high efficiency particulate air

¹⁸ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(17 June 2022\) - \(Minister Jaensch\)](#), p.11-12

¹⁹ Letter to Hon Ruth Forrest MLC Chair – COVID-19 Public Hearing - Responses to Questions taken on Notice, 17 June 2022

²⁰ Letter to Hon Ruth Forrest MLC Chair – COVID-19 Public Hearing - Responses to Questions taken on Notice, 17 June 2022

- *Of the 4,500 ordered across the first three orders, 4,319 were distributed to schools, colleges and CFLCs with 181 units stored as a contingency supply.*
- *The fourth order of 4,500 units was received and distributed from late March, and late May (2022) for mainland Tasmanian deliveries. Deliveries to King Island District High School and Cape Barren Island School were completed by mid-June.*
- *A total of 4,104 units were distributed with the balance of 396 units stored as a contingency supply.*
- *The total cost of air purifiers including distribution costs was \$6,173,065.*
- *The distribution of all air purifiers across all deliveries was conducted by Airmaster Australia. Airmaster Australia are one of the Department's contracted mechanical services contractors and are suitably qualified in the operation of air purification units.*

Minister Jaensch provided the Committee with the following with respect to the availability and usage of occupational physicians to schools and whether any further infrastructure upgrades had been required as a result:²¹

- *An Occupational Physician and a Certified Occupational Hygienist developed the Improving Ventilation in School Guidelines that is used by all schools and CFLCs.*
- *The Guidelines and Information Sessions attended by schools were informed by their visits to schools.*
- *Schools and CFLCs are provided with resources and equipment to enable them to make ventilation decisions specific to their site, based on the principles and advice contained in the Guidelines.*
- *Where a school is unable to adequately manage their ventilation levels they can seek specialist support from the Department's Facility Services team and an Occupational Physician if needed.*
- *This may result in advice on the use of, or provision of, equipment to support ventilation such as air conditions[sic], air purifiers or fans.*
- *Alternatively, it might relate to site specific issues and require a site visit.*
- *Where the internal Department resources and staff cannot resolve a school or CFLC ventilation issue, the Occupational Physician is available to attend a site and/or provide specialist advice and recommendations.*
- *However, to date, issues or queries raised by Schools have been addressed within the Department or in accordance with the Improving Ventilation in School Guidelines and therefore, attendance by an Occupational Physician has not yet been required.*
- *No infrastructure upgrades outside the planned window upgrade work has been required to resolve ventilation issues.*

At the public hearings, the Committee heard from Mr David Genford (President) and Mr Steven Smith (Senior Industrial Advocate) of the Australian Education Union (AEU - Tasmanian Branch) around their views of the Government's approach to ventilation within schools:

²¹ Letter to Hon Ruth Forrest MLC Chair – COVID-19 Public Hearing - Responses to Questions taken on Notice, 17 June 2022

Mr GENFORD - ... The lack of a ventilation audit is concerning. To start with they were just looking at outdoor windows and whether they could open. The identification of how many windows couldn't open was concerning for normal ventilation in schools. There was a reliance on principals to have knowledge as to whether or not a school was ventilated. If teachers or support staff had concerns they had to go their principal, who was then the person making the decision.

Other areas such as TasTAFE brought people into the buildings to make the assessments: experienced people who had the expertise. That wasn't done from a schools and colleges setting. I am concerned that it still hasn't been and it isn't a focus for the Government and that they think the summaries the principals have done was enough.²²

The Committee was informed that there was a perception that the State Government did not communicate as well as they could with respect to ventilation and air purifiers in State schools:

[The Government] right up and until school return, continued to come out and say that the appropriate assessments had taken place of all education facilities. However, [the Government] failed to release this information. [The Government subsequently] advised that all works that needed to be done to school buildings to ensure all external windows were in working order for proper ventilation were being done and [would] be completed in time for school return. However, when questioned by media and communities, [the Government] failed to provide any evidence to the fact. [The Government also advised] that the up to 4,500 air purifiers [would] be supplied to all classrooms. Once again when asked, [the Government] failed to provide any evidence.²³

At the public hearings, the Committee heard from Ms Amy Brumby (Leader/Organiser, United Workers Union (UWU - Tasmania Branch) as to their views of the Department's roll-out of air purifiers to schools:

CHAIR - ... Are you able to comment more about the issues you raised around air purification and the assessment of the schools undertaken in regard to that? ... This was a key factor around the reopening of the borders and the preparation for the children and staff to return to schools?

Ms BRUMBY - That was something that was centrally co-ordinated through Facility Services. However, communication didn't make it down to the school that 'next week you are receiving 60 air-purifiers that need to be put together, that need to be put in specific places in the classroom. Not too close to this, not too close to that, all the windows open,' all of that kind of stuff.

Whilst that was centrally coordinated, there were copious amounts of resources: purifiers, fans, sanitisers, and masks, turning up at schools. Schools didn't know that was coming. That then created a workload for EFAs in particular.

²² See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.1-2 (Australian Education Union)

²³ Extracted with permission from Confidential Submission

CHAIR - So, there was adequate supply of equipment but the gap was the manpower to implement it.

Ms BRUMBY - Yes.

CHAIR - How could that have been done better?

Ms BRUMBY - I think there should have been more communication with schools. Again, that work should have been done by someone who was employed under the COVID-19 banner.

CHAIR - The Education COVID-19 banner or?

Ms BRUMBY - So, someone put on, paid for out of the COVID-19 bucket of money, as we call it, and all of that work - cleaning, purifiers, fans, filters - all should have done by that COVID-19 cleaner. For the majority of the time, it was left to existing EFAs to do on top of their normal workload, because the majority of the schools simply just did not have COVID-19 cleaners.²⁴

The Committee also heard about the challenges faced in implementing the air purifiers at schools from the Ms Brumby:

Ms WEBB - From what you describe, and from what is in the submission, it sounds like things like pieces of equipment arrived at schools, people on the ground who would then be responsible for assembling them or placing them appropriately, maintaining them in an ongoing way, weren't aware that they were coming beforehand, and then had to absorb that into their existing role. Is that correct?

Ms BRUMBY - Yes.

Ms WEBB - How did that work in practice?

Ms BRUMBY - Other work. In a college where you have allocated three grounds maintenance people, they had to stop the grounds and maintenance side of their work to go and put all the fans and the air purifiers together and distribute them around the school. Essentially, they were not doing their grounds and maintenance work. They were doing this stuff instead. The only time they were notified - and this is because I was told and I let them know - is that at the start of term two or three I was advised that there were another 4,500 fans being distributed to schools at the start of term two or three.

Ms WEBB - I guess we'll never have an opportunity to quantify the displaced work that didn't occur during that time because of the COVID work that was put on to the existing workforce.

Ms BRUMBY - Yes, that's right.

²⁴ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(21 October 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.2-3

Ms WEBB - Your suggestion of a centralised approach was to ensure that there was an actual separate workforce that was available to come in and do that additional work so that the regular work could continue?

*Ms BRUMBY – Yes...*²⁵

At the public hearings, the Committee heard from Ms Brumby (Leader/Organiser, UWU) as to their views of the centralised employment structure for Education Facility Attendants (EFAs) that had occurred as part of the COVID-19 Return to School Plan:²⁶

Mr WILLIE - ... I am interested in the benefits of a centralised system you effectively operated through COVID-19 with the Department [of Education]. What sort of benefits did you see in that system?

Ms BRUMBY - I think it was the way that we did streamlined processes. It took away a lot of complexities around making sure that schools had the resources they needed. At the moment, things are done normally on an individual school basis, but having that stepped process outlined where we all followed the same process we got to the end point and made sure that schools had the resources they needed. It took away a lot of issues we ordinarily, under the current structures, would have faced.

Mr WILLIE - Did you have positive feedback from schools, in terms of not being able to find relief staff were available because of this new system?

Ms BRUMBY - No, to be honest, we did not receive any feedback from schools.

Mr WILLIE - Or the Department?

Ms BRUMBY - To be honest the Department was extremely grateful that I was willing to be the end point in that process, where if they had exhausted all other avenues they could come to me and I would ring people to find people to fill in the shifts at school, so they could open the next day. The Department has made a number of comments on a number of occasions thanking the Union for the role we played in that.

Mr WILLIE - Would a centralised system, as per your recommendations, require additional resourcing, or could it be done within the existing resource of the Department?

Ms BRUMBY- I think it could be done within the existing resources of the Department, absolutely. There are numerous HR,²⁷ regional HR people within learning services. What we are seeking as a result of this submission is that not only do we centrally coordinate relief, COVID-19 has shown us there are better ways of doing things within the Department. Adding a number of other things that can be centrally coordinated would be of great benefit.

²⁵ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(21 October 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.4

²⁶ See submission #7 [United Workers Union \(Tasmanian Branch\)](#)

²⁷ Human resource(s)

Mr WILLIE - Anecdotally I have heard of some schools not providing the additional resources for cleaning and things like that through this period, which is a bit concerning given the environment. Is there a reason for that?

Ms BRUMBY - I have been very clear with the Department of Education that the way the COVID-19 funds were rolled-out could have and should have been done better. They should have been a central recruitment of cleaners, central training around COVID-19 cleaning, what the expectations were, what was their job, and what was not their job. The way it was done resulted in a large number of schools not engaging COVID-19 cleaners.

Whilst the Government in everything they said clearly said there is additional cleaning, it simply was not the case. As we have pointed out in there, there was one primary school with five COVID-19 cleaners and the high school over the back never had a COVID-19 cleaner over the last three and a half years.

Mr WILLIE - You would have preferred to have seen this central system you are using develop a pool of resource to then be allocated to schools, rather than schools having to apply for it?

Ms BRUMBY - What actually happened was that it was done on an individual school basis. Each 195 different business managers were all scrambling to find their own relief and their own COVID-19 cleaners. What we say is it should have been a bulk recruitment of cleaners done centrally and then dispersed out to the schools and done that way.

CHAIR - Training done centrally too?

Ms BRUMBY - Training done centrally: this is how you COVID-19 clean; this is your job, this is not your job; these are the hours you will work. We had COVID-19 cleaners cleaning at 4 o'clock in the afternoon and all different times of the day. There was a lot of confusion over what does actually need to be cleaned, and what does not need to be cleaned; what is our job, and what is not our job? That sort of thing. I have always maintained it could have been done a lot better.²⁸

...

Mr WILLIE - ... Recruitment and retention, do you think these would be improved through your recommendations, a centralised system and a review of the allocation of resources?

Ms BRUMBY - Absolutely, I think central recruitment needs to happen. How it is done at the moment is on an individual school basis. If there is a vacancy at a school the SBM²⁹ has to put that position in to be advertised. They then form the committee of who is going to be on the interview panel, they do the interviewing, and they have to contact the successful or the unsuccessful applicant. That process is done a number of times a year on an individual school basis.

²⁸ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(21 October 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.1-2

²⁹ School Business Manager

What we say is that to streamline that process, recognising that the workload for business managers has increased as well over the years, that if they are centrally advertised for the positions, central interviews, central induction and then, there is your school that you will be working at but also a central pool of relief.

We asked for this in the last wage or job security bargaining because, again, it is done at individual school level. If we had a permanent pool of relief cleaners in the regions that were centrally coordinated, we could ensure a relief and it would also take that workload off business managers for them to be able to concentrate on the other increased workload that they have as well.

Mr WILLIE - This new system that you were using through COVID-19, if it was expanded, would it allow for EFAs to transfer between schools like other staff if they wanted to?

Ms BRUMBY - That is what we would be asking for because at the moment if you were employed at Wynyard High School and there was a vacancy at Penguin you have to put in a job application for that job at Penguin. You have to be successful, you have to go through the interview process to be able to get a job. It is almost like they are employed by the school, not by the Department or not by the State Government. We would be seeking a transfer policy so that process did not have to take place...³⁰

An observation raised by Ms Brumby (Leader/Organiser, UWU) was that there was challenges in ensuring important communications were getting to the appropriate audiences:

CHAIR - What I'm hearing, ... is that part of the issue is communication, and the other is perhaps a lack of a fully end-to-end coordinated response. ...

Ms BRUMBY - Yes, the problem we had with communication was that everything would go out in a communication called Principal Matters, as in principals of the school. That is where everything to do with cleaning, student learning, teachers preparing to work from home, it was all buried in there. Nothing was going direct. We had to rely on that information filtering down to the cleaners. For the vast majority of the time, because the workload increased significantly for school business managers and principals, that information didn't flow down to the people who needed that component of the communication around everything to do with ...

CHAIR - I am trying to look at how the Government can do better, so you could argue that the Department put in place mechanisms through the Principal Matters communication platform. It was all there, but the difficulty was getting it down to the relevant levels of classroom teachers, cleaners and other ancillary staff. How do you fix that problem?

Ms BRUMBY - I had conversations with the Department of Education and said, 'You need to be sending anything relevant to the cleaning component to business managers and every single EFA across the state'.

³⁰ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(21 October 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.6-7

CHAIR - And they had that information available? They could have done that - put an email group together?

Ms BRUMBY - Yes, they could have done that.³¹

Ms Brumby (Leader/Organiser, UWU) also informed the Committee on the challenges faced with resourcing EFAs in the current environment:

Mr WILLIE - ... could you explain to the Committee how the allocation of resources works now? Put the COVID-19 resource aside, but how cleaners or EFAs, are allocated, the number of FTEs to schools and the formula for that? You make some recommendations about that potentially being reviewed. Could you explain that?

Ms BRUMBY - Under the job security agreement, there are three formulas. There is one for kitchen assistants, one for grounds, and one for cleaning. The cleaning formula is called the FECA, which is fully-enclosed covered areas. The architects get the plans of the school to the Department and then they work out the size of the floorspace of the entire school. You might have the school at 3,500 square metres. The allocation of labour is that a cleaner cleans 42.7 square metres per hour, but that is only based on the floorspace of the room. It doesn't consider what's in the room. It doesn't consider whether it's a kitchen or a library or a classroom or full of computers. It just is about the floorspace. Each school is allocated cleaners based on the total square meterage of the school. If it is 3,000, it's divided by 42.7 to - let's just say - 260 hours of cleaning, and that's what the school is allocated.

That formula - all three of those formulas - have never been reviewed since the start of the job security agreement in 1997, so EFAs today are still working under the same resource allocation that they were in 1997. However, the expectation of their role has dramatically increased. Schools are no longer your standard square besser brick. They are now full of glass, as you said, different floor surfaces, and so their workload has increased, not only just because they clean, but they also do myriad other things in the school. They are first aid, they're doing a whole range of other things rather than just going in and vacuuming and cleaning.

We did have a commitment from the Department when we negotiated the last job security agreement that the FECA needed to be reviewed, because their workload has increased but their resources have not. We got that commitment and then COVID-19 hit, so we've not been able to do anything about that, obviously, because there were other priorities over the last three years.

Mr TUCKER - ... You said that their workload has increased, such as first aid and there were other things. Can you expand a little bit more on that? What other things they are doing, and how much it is increasing their workload.

Ms BRUMBY - Particularly for grounds and maintenance, because that formula has not increased at all. Whereas in 1997 a groundsman would simply just mow the lawns and

³¹ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(21 October 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.3-4

pull some weeds out, now they're doing everything for athletics carnivals; they're setting up for fairs; they're cooking barbeques; they're painting the schools. Anything that doesn't fall literally within teaching or the budget of the school or the principal literally is passed to an EFA or a groundsman to do.

...

Ms BRUMBY - They are supposed to do a playground safety check every morning before the school opens. They do things like turf management, watering systems, outside the school, minor maintenance of the school, hanging doors, all of that kind of stuff.

Mr WILLIE - ... I know from my time, where they support students who might be having a tough time in playgrounds or whatever else. They're very good at doing those sorts of things.

Ms WEBB - They even supervise students at some times, don't they?

Ms BRUMBY - They are seen in schools by students as a safe person to go to talk to because they're not a person of authority in the school. More often than not the students will go and talk to the EFAs, the cleaners or the groundsman.³²

With respect to the quality of facemasks issued to State school staff and students, Mr Genford (President, AEU) apprised the Committee as follows:

Mr GENFORD - ... There is a lot of research showing how more effective P2 or N95 or KN95 masks are compared to surgical masks. We're still allowing cloth masks to be worn when the research with those different types of masks shows what needs to be done. If we are just talking about future planning, the level of masks would be a good thing to look at as to whether or not that was practical.

CHAIR - ... there is plenty of research around the effectiveness of N95 or P2 masks.... Did the union or others in the education system actually ask for those to be supplied?

Mr GENFORD - We were told 'no'. We were told one of the reasons was because of the practicality of wearing the mask. They felt that people were less likely to wear them for a full day. Our response was to give the teachers the option to have that. The fact they weren't being supplied was more the issue for me. We would have been content with a mixed approach of supplying both surgical masks and the P2 and N95 masks and allow for people to decide the safety level they were comfortable with, mixed with the comfort and the ability to wear it for the day.

I know from experience how difficult some masks are to wear, but we needed to give people the option of what safety measures they could put in place based on what they felt the comfort level. Multiple requests were denied.

CHAIR - Did you find across the system that teachers who were older and perhaps more vulnerable chose to buy their own P2 and N95 masks, or did they continue to wear what was available?

³² See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(21 October 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.5-6

Mr GENFORD - I could probably only give anecdotal evidence, but I would say that some members of all age groups that took mask wearing more seriously than others. That was based on education given to the community and what people felt they wanted to wear.

Originally for me cloth masks were the way to go because you could be a bit more fashionable and they are a bit easier to wear. You could get your local footy team put on them or whatever else, but as the research started to come out there was identification that cloths masks did not have the same impact. Some people did buy their own P2 and N95 masks because they wanted to provide that safety level for themselves.

The other issue was our workers working with students with a disability and younger students. I really would have liked to have seen better PPE provided because we know our students with disability and younger students inability to maintain social distance or the transmission of fluids is more likely. It would have been good to see more face shields, et cetera, for those people working with those students to provide an extra level of precaution for them in catching COVID-19.³³

Committee Findings

- F5. A range of additional measures was introduced to assist in reducing the transmission of COVID-19.
- F6. Funding was provided to Government and non-government schools for air purifiers and additional COVID-19 related cleaning.
- F7. An assessment of all schools' rooms with access to open air was undertaken.
- F8. The Government claimed no infrastructure upgrades, outside the planned Government school window upgrade work, had been required to resolve ventilation issues.
- F9. Subsequent to the assessment, resources were made available to schools to assist in mitigating school ventilation issues.
- F10. An occupational physician and a certified occupational hygienist developed guidelines for school ventilation.
- F11. Tasmanian education stakeholders expressed concerns as to the different levels of expertise employed to assess ventilation between TasTAFE, Government schools and colleges.

³³ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.1-2 (AEU)

Committee Findings

- F12. Tasmanian education stakeholders expressed concern about the lack of timely and consistent State Government/Department of Education communications with respect to ongoing improvement in ventilation in state schools.
- F13. Tasmanian education stakeholders expressed concern about the lack of training for employees and labour required to implement and maintain the new ventilation requirements including air purifiers.
- F14. Employment of specific COVID-19 cleaners was reported to have been inconsistent across Government schools.
- F15. There was not a centralised approach to employing, training and coordinating for Education Facility Attendants, permanent or relief, to support the return to school plan.
- F16. School business managers arranged Education Facility Attendants relief staff during the pandemic but some schools found it difficult to fill shifts.
- F17. Additional COVID-19 cleaning protocols required during the pandemic highlighted the lack of flexibility of Education Facility Attendant employment arrangements.
- F18. The job security arrangements that underpin employment of Education Facility Attendants in state schools may need to be re-examined in light of the changed working conditions since last reviewed in 1997.
- F19. The then Department of Education *Principal Matters* communication to inform school staff of COVID-19 related changes and requirements related to all areas from student learning to school cleaning was not consistently communicated to all levels of staff, particularly Education Facility Attendants.
- F20. Schools were provided with surgical masks, not P2 or N95 masks, for staff and students to wear on return to school when the mask mandate was in place.

Committee Recommendations

- R2. Recognising the fundamental importance of maintaining access to education, the Government ensure the education sector is included in any State pandemic preparedness planning.
- R3. The Government review and contemporise its communication strategy for use during emergency events to ensure all education stakeholders (i.e. all staff, parents, students etc.) are adequately informed in a timely and consistent manner.

Committee Recommendations

- R4. In the event of another COVID-19 related response or similar, the Department of Education Children and Young People ensure all policy or protocol changes are communicated effectively to all staff.
- R5. The Department of Education Children and Young People establish a regular program of assessment for all schools' facilities in relation to air quality and ventilation, ensuring all air purifiers are maintained and serviced, as per product guidelines.
- R6. The Government review the employment arrangements for Education Facility Attendants to improve flexibility across schools.
- R7. The Government work with school principals and business managers, and unions to develop a system to facilitate the employment and deployment of additional staff during a pandemic.
- R8. The Department of Education Children and Young People consider adopting a centralised approach for the employment and training of Education Facility Attendants.
- R9. The Department of Education Children and Young People review the job security agreement for EFAs to ensure it is consistent with contemporary requirements, particularly with regard to the cleaning formula and increased workloads of many Education Facility Attendants.
- R10. The Government/ Department of Education Children and Young People make masks available that provide the greatest level of protection, relevant to the risk of transmission if a mask mandate is re-imposed.

Supporting Public Health Advice³⁴

The Committee was informed that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the AHPPC had released a number of statements relating to schools, and early education and care, with the aim of supporting decision making to limit the transmission of infection in schools while balancing the risk of impacts to educational, social, health and wellbeing outcomes of school closures.

The Tasmanian Government had been involved in these national discussions and contributed to the preparation of statements and advice through its representation on AHPPC. This national work was key to informing DoH's advice on local measures in Tasmania related to schools and planning for the 2022 school year.

On 15 November 2021, AHPPC published an updated statement on schools and early education and care. This statement included AHPPC's overarching position that schools were

³⁴ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.24-25

an essential service and should remain open whenever possible. The statement outlined the broad goal of reducing transmission for the entire school community, to protect the unimmunised population of students at school, and maintain the ability of schools to remain open. It also specified three (3) principles to minimise disease in schools:

1. reducing opportunities for introduction of the virus to schools;
2. reducing transmission of the virus if it was introduced; and
3. early use of containment measures if spread occurred.

The statement outlined actions under each of the above principles that should be taken into account when planning reopening of schools noting that these would need to be tailored to individual schools. These principles guided work on local planning activities, with DoH providing extensive advice and working closely with DoE to support COVID-19 planning, preparedness and management activities within Government schools throughout the pandemic.

Between mid-December 2021 and early February 2022, ahead of the commencement of the school year in Tasmania, DoH and DoE met regularly regarding Tasmania's plan for the return to school. As the National Framework did not include a national definition of outbreaks for schools, a key purpose of these meetings was to develop and finalise school case and outbreak guidance and processes that best suited the Tasmanian context in line with the provisions of the National Plan. Along with agreeing roles and responsibilities, these meetings were also used to agree on reporting and data requirements.

A significant part of the planning work was the development of the process for the notification of cases. This was a new process for this specific context, and the process required considerable background work with IT infrastructure being coordinated across DoH and DoE. There was also considerable effort put towards agreement about how schools would be guided and supported through case notifications, outbreaks and site outbreaks.

In working with DoE to develop the Return to School Plan, Operational Plan and supporting documentation, DoH provided advice on issues such as definitions of cases, contacts and outbreaks, as well as guidance on factors such as testing, quarantine requirements and release from isolation. As part of the Schools Operational Plan, DoH also provided advice on general COVID-19 safe measures for all school environments, such as face mask requirements, physical distancing, recommended hygiene practices, and strongly encouraging vaccination for everyone aged five years and older.

Committee Findings

- F21. In the absence of a national definition of COVID-19 outbreaks for schools, a Tasmanian approach to school case and outbreak management was developed by the then Department of Education and Department of Health in partnership.

Financial, Social and Educational impacts³⁵

The Government's submission stated, in order to achieve the best possible education, health and wellbeing outcomes 'every day that students are at school learning with their teachers and friends counts'. The Government submission claimed the Government's principles-based approach Schools Operational Plan, provided measures that keep learners and staff as safe as possible whilst supporting learning. This plan for Weeks 1 to 5 of Term 1, had an objective of safely maintaining face-to-face learning as a priority, while supporting learners who needed to learn at home due to COVID-19.

The Government submission noted that there had been an increase in COVID-19 cases in schools because of the virus circulating in the community, however, this was anticipated and had been managed with support from DoH when needed.³⁶

The long-term financial, social and educational impacts of specific educational measures were still being assessed. The Government submission noted there are a number of touchpoints that will track how students have been impacted more generally by the pandemic including National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), Progressive Achievement Tests, Student Wellbeing and Engagement Survey, and the Kindergarten Development Check.

At the public hearings, the Committee heard from Adjunct Associate Professor Lisa Denny and Emeritus Professor Michael Rowan (Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance) about the NAPLAN results released in November 2022:

Prof DENNY - ... in August, when preliminary NAPLAN results are usually released, ACARA³⁷ issued a media statement advising there would be no NAPLAN 2022 preliminary results released in August as closer analysis is required due to 'lower than usual student participation rates as a result of the pandemic, flu and floods'. In the same media release ACARA stated that:

The lower than usual participation rate means that closer analysis of jurisdictional level results is required using student background information.

The data will then be released once the information is fully checked and cleared by state and territory education authorities.

NAPLAN is one of the only national measures available into the effects of the pandemic on schooling.

Given the spread of the Omicron variant throughout Australia before the start of the school year and throughout, particularly, the first two terms, the inability to be fully vaccinated prior to the start of the school year for those in primary school or vaccinated at all for those aged under six, the isolation requirements of positive COVID-19 cases

³⁵ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.25

³⁶ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.25

³⁷ Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority

and the close contacts, it's not surprising that many students and their teachers missed weeks of school during the first half of year and some continue to do so.

It is well known that there was high demand for relief teachers during the first half of the year and the compression of many classes in response to the high level of COVID-19 cases and close contacts impacting the education workforce. This lack of continuity in teaching and high level of absences and disengagement from school will have short- and long-term impacts on learning engagement and outcomes.

On Monday this week, NAPLAN results were released. While there hasn't been the time to undertake full detailed analysis as I would usually like to do, not only were participation rates down compared with previous years but so too were the results. ...

For Grade 3, all literacy indicators - reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation - as well as numeracy, were lower than in 2021. That shows there has been an impact by the pandemic and lost learning on outcomes for Grade 3 students in particular. If we don't get our foundational skills right this will have lifelong implications, not just for the individual but for the economy, society and fiscally. For Grade 5 students there was also a loss compared with previous years, apart from in spelling.³⁸

The Committee heard from the Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance that the DoE had not identified in its 2021/22 Annual Report any commentary around what the Government might be doing with remediating the lost learning during the COVID-19 period:

Prof ROWAN ... The second issue we want to highlight in the lack of preparedness for COVID-19 in schools is the release of the annual report for the Department of Education, Children and Young People last week, which was tabled in Parliament. While the report had a section on the department's response to COVID-19, that focused on the health responses and ventilations and such things in the classrooms rather than anything in relation to plans for the impact of any loss of learning, apart from stating that, 'Schools have adapted to operating with COVID-19 active in our community and continue to demonstrate innovation and local solutions to learning'.

There is no evidence in the annual report of what the Department is going to put in place in order to identify that lost learning, measure it at the individual student level, and identify the gap. Because this pandemic didn't occur at one particular time, it occurred over a lengthy period of time, with students away at different times of the year for different periods of time, as were their teachers, the disruption is not the same for every student. We need to look at this from an individual student level.

While they did outline there was a virtual learning centre which provided access to online learning modules and teacher support for the over 13,000 students who had to isolate and learn from home due to COVID-19, it was an opt-in solution. There was no evidence in the annual report or otherwise of what measures have been put in place to identify

³⁸ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.2-3 (Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance)

*what students had missed individually and what measures have been put in place to close that gap.*³⁹

The Committee sought advice from the Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance around the DoE actions taken to address lost learning:

CHAIR - What are the crucial interventions you think are needed to address this very real challenge? Who should be doing the work and monitoring this? Whose responsibility is it in monitoring the impacts on children over this period, in the time ahead and for how long?

Prof DENNY - Firstly, the responsibility for education of Tasmanian children rests with the Department of Education. And so, the responsibility is really there in order to be able to identify the gaps that lost learning for the individual student level and correct for that.

At a government level, we already know the Government has announced literacy targets and established a Literacy Advisory Panel. What we said in our submission to this inquiry was that at the time when we released our 'A Road Map to a Literate Tasmania', we said the issue was urgent. We now say it is critical.

The Literacy Advisory Panel was supposed to release its draft community framework for a literate Tasmania in October. It is now November. We argue that it needs to be fast-tracked and provided the critical urgency to broaden its scope to make sure that instead of just achieving the literacy targets that were set, but actually undertaking that identification of the lost learning and making a strategy and action plan, in particular, for how it is going to intervene to make sure those students can catch up.

The Committee asked what interventions DoE should examine with respect to assessment of literacy programs and the Department's engagement (if any) with Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) to ensure that any literacy interventions are evidence based:

CHAIR - Do you have a suggestion as to what sort of interventions would be needed in that area to address the lost learning components?

Prof DENNY - What we outlined in 'A Road Map to Literate Tasmania' in 2021 actually put in place a strategy that was designed for all students, but also those ones that were not meeting the expected level for their age and grade. The same road map can be applied to this situation also. The interventions are not going to be any different. They might just need a different level of scale. I will iterate that, whatever interventions we put into place, we need to make sure they are evidence based and not use the interventions we know that are not as effective as others.

CHAIR - How do we assess the effectiveness of the interventions? Is it the Education Department or is its external bodies that should be monitoring that?

³⁹ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.3 (Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance)

Prof DENNY - The Australian Government established the Australian Education Research Organisation which is now into its second year. Its primary purpose is to identify the evidence and, as all jurisdictions are essentially owners of this organisation, the Education Department should not have to do its own research. It should actually look to the Australian Education Research Organisation to provide them that information about how best to provide, not just intervention services, but teaching instruction to start with.

CHAIR - Do you know whether they have actually reached out to them or not?

Prof DENNY - I know that effort has been made by AERO to meet with the minister's office and there have been high-level discussions between the agencies. In terms of actually engaging with them to do that, I am not sure.

One of the recommendations we made in the Alliance, with the road map, was for an evaluation of the literacy practices actually undertaken in Tasmania at the moment. Their policies, practices, the initiatives the Government funds or are run independently. That was actually included in the terms of reference for the Literacy Advisory Panel. I am unsure whether that work has been done by the Literacy Advisory Panel.⁴⁰

Professors Denny and Rowan reiterated the importance of monitoring a child's progress and early intervention when indicated:

Prof ROWAN - I guess the wrap-up message from that is that we need to be more ambitious for our children. We need to be more closely monitoring how they are performing and when the performance isn't up to what we need, we need to act to change the way we do things.

...

Prof DENNY - One statistic I will give you that I didn't get to say is that it costs four times as much to fix a literacy problem in Grade 4 than it does in Grade 1.⁴¹

In response to a Committee request for further information around whether the Reading Recovery program was still being used in Tasmanian State Schools, the Hon Roger Jaensch MP (Minister for Education, Children and Youth) provided the following:⁴²

Reading Recovery is not used in Tasmanian Government Schools.

Similarly, the Committee requested further information as to whether DoE had policies in place that required use of evidence-based programs to assist students at risk of, or having fallen behind in expected learning outcomes:⁴³

Our teachers use a range of strategies to monitor and assess learner growth and achievement, including observations, everyday learning opportunities and assessment tasks as well as screening tools.

⁴⁰ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.4-5 (Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance)

⁴¹ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.18-19 (Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance)

⁴² Letter to Hon Ruth Forrest MLC Chair – COVID-19 Public Hearing - Responses to Request for Further Information, 13 December 2022

⁴³ Letter to Hon Ruth Forrest MLC Chair – COVID-19 Public Hearing - Responses to Request for Further Information, 13 December 2022

From 2022:

- *Kindergarten students are assessed twice annually by teachers against the Kindergarten Development Check (KDC), involving 21 developmental markers. Teachers are provided with information and resources to support students at risk;*
- *all Tasmanian Government School students in Year 1 are screened using the Year 1 Phonics Check or another approved assessment/screen at the end of Term 3 each year;*
- *Prep students are assessed twice-yearly using Progressive Achievement Testing (PAT) Early Years Reading and Mathematics; and*
- *PAT Reading and PAT Mathematics are also required for all year levels from Year 1 to 10 unless approval has been granted to use an alternate assessment*

Where students are not progressing as expected teachers have access to targeted professional learning and resources and collaborate with Professional Support Staff (e.g. Speech and Language Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, Psychologists etc.).

Professional Support Staff may provide and/or recommend appropriate evidence-based supports if students are referred to them for diagnostic assessment.

Senior speech and language pathologists continue to work with the Teaching and Learning Team to enhance service delivery for at risk children: this includes strategies to promote early identification and management of communication and literacy difficulties.

A range of educational supports and services are also provided for students with dyslexia and other specific learning disabilities in Tasmanian Government Schools including assessments, literacy intervention programs, assistive technology supports and a range of professional learning programs to build the capacity of staff in supporting the learning of students with dyslexia.

Minister Jaensch provided the following response to the Committee with respect to the current status of the Literacy Advisory Panel Draft Strategy (Community Wide Framework) and reasons why the draft strategy release date had been postponed:⁴⁴

In accordance with the Literacy Advisory Panel's Terms of Reference, I am advised that the Panel will present the framework and a final report to the Premier next year.

I am advised that the Panel has met 14 times since September 2021 and is hearing from a range of people with extensive experience in literacy approaches. In addition, it embarked on the first round of community consultation to address item (i) of the terms of reference (a review of the current literacy policies, approaches and supports in place in Tasmania).

I am advised that this consultation ran from 4 February to 25 March 2022 and received 352 responses. There were 72 responses from organisations, 160 online responses to a survey, 98 responses through Facebook and 22 responses of lived experience through

⁴⁴ Letter to Hon Ruth Forrest MLC Chair – COVID-19 Public Hearing - Responses to Request for Further Information, 13 December 2022

assisted submissions. A full consultation report with an analysis of responses was released on the website on 30 August 2022.

I am advised that in analysing this work, the panel identified there was a lack of responses from particular groups in the community. Further targeted consultation is being undertaken to address those gaps and to hear from Tasmanians with lived experience of literacy challenges, disability, incarcerated Tasmanians, regional Tasmania, and youth. This targeted consultation round will be completed at the end of November [2022].

It is important that the feedback from this targeted consultation is received before the next round of general consultation, which is expected to be the last before the Panel delivers the Framework to the Premier.

Committee Findings

- F22. The Tasmanian results for the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) released in November 2022 suggest that COVID-19 impacted Grade 3 and Grade 5 student literacy and numeracy levels across a number of indicators.
- F23. Analysis is required to assess the lost learning experienced by Tasmanian students during the COVID-19 period.
- F24. The Department of Education Children and Young People employs a number of strategies, including the student well-being survey, to monitor and assess state school students' engagement and progress.

Committee Recommendations

- R11. The Department of Education Children and Young People fully assess the levels of lost learning that has occurred since the beginning of the 2020 school year and utilise evidence based programs and methods to assist children with learning gaps.

According to the Government submission, two data trends had emerged in the first five weeks of Term 1:

- an increase in home education applications and registrations with the Office of the Education Registrar; and
- an impact on attendance rates in Government schools.⁴⁵

The submission further noted that through placing the learner at the centre, the main goal of the Schools Operational Plan was to protect children from both direct and indirect impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic:

⁴⁵ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.25

- direct impacts referred to COVID-19 illness amongst children and their families – these impacts were mitigated by supporting COVID-19 safe sites and vaccination of staff; and
- indirect impacts included educational impacts and wellbeing. The key mitigation strategies had been to prioritise wellbeing, and maintaining face-to-face learning as a priority, while supporting learners who need to learn at home due to COVID-19.⁴⁶

The Committee heard from Commissioner Leanne McLean (Commissioner for Children and Young People) as to her views of the unintended consequences of the COVID-19 decisions made by Government with respect to children’s well-being:

Ms McLEAN - We also had range of consultation mechanisms with children in care. ... one of the things that I do is monitor the out-of-home care system in Tasmania. How children in care were experiencing COVID-19 was also very important to me. There were a great range of issues.

It shows that so often we overlook or misunderstand the depth of impact that these things can have for children. Your family visits are interrupted. Just because you're a child living in care it doesn't necessarily mean that your family are still not some of the most important people in your life. Digital technology became very important, so if your household didn't have access to digital technology or if your carers didn't know how to help you operate digital technology, it was really hard for you to stay connected to the people in your life. They're the types of things we heard.

Overall, from the breadth of children across the socioeconomic spectrum, we heard from children that their world shrunk. That is the best way I can think of to describe it. If your world is shrinking and the shrinkage includes a loss of access to services and supports which may have included those that were available to you in your school, that can be very concerning.

Mrs ALEXANDER - Overall though, the decisions made were purely from a health perspective. The unintended consequences were quite significant and quite high.

Ms McLEAN - Yes, I would say profound for children into the future. Health is one very important part in the wellbeing of a child. I don't want to disregard the views of those who think that health is the number one priority when it comes to managing the pandemic. It is extremely important but if we think about this through the lens of the socio-emotional development of a child, who may have been a very young child through COVID-19, it is a really useful way to help understand what those impacts might be. Children develop in a socio-emotional way largely through human interaction. When that is cut down, that has an impact. That certainly occurred for many children during the pandemic.

To add to that, when we did return to the school environment, which I supported because of the overall impact for children's wellbeing, we returned to an environment where teachers and all the adults around them were wearing masks. I understand the important health benefit of that, but socio-emotional development and early literacy development,

⁴⁶ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.26

which your two previous witnesses spoke very well about, is really influenced by a child's ability to see faces. It is so important.

Think about the first book you read to a child. It was probably filled with faces. That is how children grow and develop. If we get that right in the first 1,000 days of their lives, then we set them up for a really great life and an ability to adopt literacy in a really easy and useful way.

We interrupted that. We also interrupted service delivery for kids. I can't tell you how important child health and parenting nurses are. They are so important. I am telling you that as Commissioner, but I am also telling you that as a mum who has had two children in Tasmania. They are so important.

Their work was reprioritised to an extent to the broader pandemic need, which meant that for children who were over six months of age, their child health appointments may have largely been cancelled. I am still hearing from mums who are having trouble getting access to child health and parenting nurses in Tasmania. There is evidence that really strongly suggests that sustained home visits from people such as child health nurses set up the wellbeing for children for a long time into their future. We have interrupted that. We need to acknowledge that while we did it in the best interests of the health of the community, there will be a lasting impact on the overall wellbeing of this generation of children.⁴⁷

The Commissioner also expressed her views with respect to future Government policy and decision-making with respect to children:

Ms McLEAN - ... There are mechanisms that we could use help guide policy and decision making on an issue like this into the future. For example, some jurisdictions, New Zealand is one and Queensland is another, require what is called a child impact assessment to be undertaken as new policies or legislation are developed that might bear an impact on children. If that were the case here when we made decisions around, for example, the reallocation of the CHaPS⁴⁸ workforce, we would have needed to go through a process to at least demonstrate what the impact on children would have been and be prepared as to how we managed that into the future.

...

I'm a huge fan of child impact statements generally. They could help us in a range of ways, but this is a really good example of how they could have helped us understand the impacts of COVID-19 for children.⁴⁹

The Committee sought the Commissioner's views with respect to the challenges of communicating to Tasmanian students and children around the COVID-19 period:

Ms WEBB - What are your reflections on the provision of information to children across that time, given there might have been a lack of consistency in practice, but also maybe

⁴⁷ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.3-4 (Ms McLean)

⁴⁸ Child Health and Parenting Service

⁴⁹ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.4 (Ms McLean)

challenges in communicating consistently across the state to students and children of different ages?

Ms McLEAN - When we communicate as leaders and decision-makers to the broad community, we are largely communicating to adults. We want the message to be consistent. Wherever possible, it was pointing people to the centralised Government COVID-19 web page but I would not have described that as a child-friendly web page. And often how we communicate is a very good way to engage children. I know there were particular efforts made with the Youth Network of Tasmania and Public Health to come up with some messaging to help young people - that 18- to 25-year-old cohort - manage COVID-19 in the community. I'm not sure about the effectiveness of that, but I know there were some particular efforts made.⁵⁰

The Commissioner expressed her views as to how the Government could focus its efforts post-COVID-19 to improve its service delivery to children:

Ms McLEAN - ... We will need a suite of work to understand - in terms of catch-up - what is required for the children whose access to services like child health and education has been disrupted. We will need to understand exactly what that looks like, and where it is that we need to catch up. For example, child health and parenting is an area that we'll have to have a particular focus on. Have children received all the checks that they need to make sure they're healthy and well - eye checks, ear checks, developmental checks.

Secondly, there are new programs being developed for the first 1,000 days of children's lives in Tasmania, and we've seen the Government commit to more services, including enhancing the CHaPS parenting service. But, we tend to target them to vulnerable areas in the community. All of the research suggests that if we want to make a real difference to the wellbeing of children, we will have a universal approach to those services. For example, home visits from trained child health and parenting nurses would be available to every child in every family, until that child turns two to make sure that we're keeping a track on their development and referring that family and child into any services they need.⁵¹

⁵⁰ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.7 (Ms McLean)

⁵¹ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.9 (Ms McLean)

Committee Findings

- F25. Wearing of face-masks by teachers and parents when engaging in teaching and learning, may have had a detrimental effect on young children with respect to their individual speech development.
- F26. The use of child-friendly government messaging is crucial during periods of heightened risks related to physical health, mental health and wellbeing of children.
- F27. During Term 1 2022, there was an increase in home education applications and registrations with the Office of the Education Registrar.
- F28. Government policy related to home education applications was altered to ensure the child remained enrolled in school until after assessment for home schooling was completed and approved.
- F29. During Term 1 2022, there were lower attendance rates in Government schools.

Committee Recommendations

- R12. In the event of a future public health emergency, Government should use child-friendly messaging for public communications.

Vaccination⁵²

The Committee was informed that vaccination had been a key measure to keep learners and staff as safe as possible whilst supporting learning. Following a period of staff consultation, DoE's Risk Management Plan was approved and communicated. This saw the establishment of a COVID-19 Vaccination Policy as the most effective control to protect employees against harm as a result of being exposed to COVID-19 at work.

All DoE workers were required to be fully vaccinated by:

- 20 November 2021 for all Teacher Assistants and Education Support Specialists;
- 21 January 2022 for workers in non-school business units; and
- 8 February 2022 for school-based workers.

As at 29 March 2022, the vast majority of permanent and fixed term staff at DoE (98.5 percent) had been fully vaccinated (or had a booster scheduled), or approved for exemption under medical or exceptional circumstances. 87.3 percent of casual and relief staff so far have also been vaccinated or exempted.

DoH and DoE had also been working together to provide children's vaccination clinics across a range of community locations including in schools. The COVID-19 Schools Vaccination

⁵² See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.26

Program commenced in August 2021 for Years 11 and 12 students (16 years and over) in senior secondary locations across the state. This was part of the Tasmanian Government's 'Super Six' week vaccination effort to vaccinate students with the aim of minimising disruption to the study and examination schedules.

In November and December 2021, many schools across the state were used for vaccination sites for students aged 12 and above. Over the summer holiday period this then continued at further school sites around the state for children aged 5 to 11 years of age. DoE and DoH had continued to follow expert medical advice that young people were not immune from COVID-19 and its impacts, and the best way to protect them was to get them vaccinated.

At a public hearing the Committee heard from Ms Cassy O'Connor (Leader of the Tasmanian Greens) regarding the decision to return to school at the commencement of the 2022 school year:

Then a decision was made - despite the fact no child under 12 was vaccinated - to open schools. Unmasked, unvaccinated under 12s were sent into schools. Not long after, masks were removed completely from schools and that was while community transmission was still high.

The latest data tells us the total number of five- to 19-year olds who have been infected - these are recorded infections, because not all of them have been recorded - is close to 54,000. That represents over half of the population of five- to 19-year olds. Many were either unvaccinated or under vaccinated and most, as far as we know, have not been boosted.⁵³

At the public hearings, the Committee heard from Ms Brumby (Leader/Organiser, UWU) in relation to unvaccinated workers returning to school:

Ms WEBB - ... UWU expects the Government to consult UWU members about the impact of the withdrawal of vaccine mandates, replacement measures, including any by employment direction and steps to manage health and safety risks; and that ongoing data should be provided about the impact of COVID-19 in workplaces.

I am wondering, given that some time has passed since you put that submission together, has any of that eventuated? Has there been any sort of consultation or some sort of gauging of impact there? Has any of that data been provided?

Ms BRUMBY - The data has not been provided. We have had consultation with the Department of Education regarding unvaccinated workers returning to school. We put a recommendation to them that it needs to be mandatory across the board. You cannot have it mandatory for some school staff and in a policy for others.

We ended up in a situation where there were about seven or eight EFAs across the state who were off for Term 1 and 2 on full pay. When the health direction was lifted, the response when we said, 'How are you going to deal with this because there is going to be a lot of angst on the ground, that they have been off on pay, they are now allowed to

⁵³ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(21 October 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.27 (Tasmanian Greens)

come back into school unvaccinated?', the response we received was: 'Yes, it is ... but there is nothing we can do about it', because it was a policy and the health direction was lifted. We think that that could have been handled better as well.⁵⁴

The Committee heard from Mr Genford (AEU) with respect to the different treatment of unvaccinated teachers compared to school support staff over the COVID-19 period:

Mrs ALEXANDER - ... I'm very interested to hear if there's been any statistics or your numbers at the moment of how many teachers moved out of the teaching profession because they were not vaccinated. Do we have final numbers for those?

Mr GENFORD - It is my understanding, from a teacher's perspective, that all those people who were stood down with full pay for three terms returned to the workforce. I was never given any data explaining whether or not any of those people chose not to come back.

From a teacher perspective, they were stood down with full pay for three terms. There were definitely concerns raised by some members, especially when we were hearing stories of them actually working in the independent system and Catholic system, where they were allowed to relief teach. It meant they were basically getting a double salary while being unvaccinated.

There was also a high level of concern that our support staff who chose to be unvaccinated were treated differently and were stood down without pay. Initially we were told they were - what's the polite word for sacked? - terminated; they were terminated. But later on, it was revealed that they were actually stood down without pay and treated differently compared to a teacher.

Mrs ALEXANDER - ... Basically, what you're saying is a different way in which people were treated between the support staff and the teachers at that point in time, that was a big disparity in that process?

Mr GENFORD - That is correct. The reason we were given was because the support staff were working closely with students with disability who were vulnerable, and it was following the Public Health order. This was concerning for our teacher assistants because a lot of the time those students with disability work just as closely with teachers.

For example, a teacher in a support school works extremely closely with students with disability but were not considered different from a teacher assistant in the same situation. There was definitely a concern with treating people differently for the same reason, based on Public Health advice, that suggested teachers don't work closely with students with disability.

Mrs ALEXANDER - In terms of the shortage of teachers we have at the moment, that is not caused in essence by any non-returning teachers to the profession following being stood down?

⁵⁴ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(21 October 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.7-8

Mr GENFORD - That is correct. All unvaccinated teachers are allowed to be teaching at the moment, so they are definitely not contributing to the teacher shortage. If I could just clarify: we were looking at total of about - I want to get my numbers right - it was about 50 staff and about 30 of them were teachers. When we are looking at the shortage in the first two terms. I would not have said it was a major impact.⁵⁵

Committee Findings

- F30. On the return to school, there were inconsistent employment arrangements for staff in relation to vaccination status: some unvaccinated staff were stood down with full pay whilst others were stood down without pay.
- F31. Employment arrangements allowed unvaccinated educators, whilst stood down from the Department of Education on full-pay, to work in the non-government sector.
- F32. In July 2022, unvaccinated staff were permitted to return to work in Government schools.

Committee Recommendations

- R13. In any future public health emergency, Government ensure consistent public health requirements are applied across the entire education and early education and care sectors.

Supporting Learning⁵⁶

Curriculum/Virtual Learning Centre

The Committee was informed that where possible schools supported learners to access their learning program on site under the supervision of their classroom teacher. When this was not possible, consistent with the Schools Operational Plan, students had access to learning from home, including through the DoE Virtual Learning Centre (VLC).

The VLC provided students in Kindergarten to Year 12, who were learning from home for short periods, with access to quality learning modules and online support from a registered teacher. The VLC was not compulsory, schools may choose to support learning from home in other ways, however it supported teachers not having to manage both classroom and learning from home concurrently.

The VLC was not intended to replace normal, planned classroom learning. However, schools could use it to augment face-to-face learning as part of their COVID-19 Site Plan where there was limited staff capacity.

⁵⁵ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.10 (AEU)

⁵⁶ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.26

Resources were developed to support learning from home, including a central pool of computers and internet dongles prepared for deployment to students who required access when learning from home, and printable resources for students who did not have access to the internet (e.g. blackspot).

Curriculum planning resources (Term Overviews across the focus areas) were developed to support continuity of learning. The overviews and year level plans provided detail of the learning in the VLC for those students learning at home. They were a reference point for schools outlining what students would be learning through the VLC. These resources had been well received by schools and were also provided to the non-government sector at the start of Term 1 to support their planning.

VLC content was differentiated to support students with diverse learning needs. Additional lessons are written specifically for the VLC Literacy and Numeracy Canvas Course to ensure equitable access with age-appropriate content.

For Years 11 and 12, access to VLC was expanded to include short-term enrolments in up to 100 per cent of their study load at Virtual Learning Tasmania (VLT) for Term 1. This included live tutorials in the areas of English, Maths and English as an additional language or dialect (EALD) as well as stand-alone online Vocational Education and Training (VET) units of competency.

Since 9 March 2022, schools were provided with VLC Student Activity snapshots to alert schools if follow up with student/family was needed to support learning in the VLC. School Support and Wellbeing Teams monitored student attendance (and participation in VLC), with a particular focus on vulnerable students. Vulnerable students were centrally monitored and contact made as required.

The Interagency Student Support Team worked closely with Child Safety Services, Tasmania Police and the Advice and Referral Line to monitor the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people, delivering support where needed. This had included more regular interagency case management meetings, using the vulnerable student list to identify level of need.

Another related change was made to the home education process in Term 1. Schools were advised not to 'un-enrol' students until confirmation of full registration of home education had been received from the Office of the Education Registrar. This was a change in process for Term 1, where students were previously un-enrolled based on provisional home education registration. This enabled students to remain the responsibility of the school, which included keeping VLC as option to support learning for the short-term, if appropriate.

The VLC had been instrumental in reducing the impacts on students who had not been able to physically attend school due to COVID-19.

At the public hearings, the Committee heard from Minister Jaensch (Minister for Education, Children and Youth), Ms Burgess (Deputy Secretary, Strategy and Performance, DoE) and Mr Tim Bullard (Secretary, DoE) about the impact that COVID-19 had on the teaching and support staff in Tasmanian schools and the numbers of students engages with the VLCs:

CHAIR - ... the numbers of students who may have engaged with the virtual learning centre, what length of time? Or, because of a particular vulnerability are there some who are engaged with it on a full-time basis? Who otherwise might be home schooled or what's being done at home? I assume there will be a number too who were engaged with the virtual learning centre whilst they've had COVID-19 or had been excluded from school through being close contact.

Mr JAENSCH - ... My understanding though is that the virtual learning centre has been very successful in ensuring continuity of learning. I think at the peak periods where we had the most students absent from school due to COVID-19 positive or close contact rules at the time, we had the majority of those children, more than two-thirds of them at the peaks, who were able to continue learning from home.

I understand that the virtual learning centre approach was very much to support that short-term absence due to illness, family vulnerability or close contact as well. There have been - for other students who have had longer periods away or reasons for longer absence from school, other things have kicked in. Virtual learning is not meant to replace face-to-face learning for extended periods of time. Schools have been engaging with those families regarding their learners' needs, if there are reasons why they can't return to the school environment after a short absence due to COVID-19 cases...

...

Ms BURGESS - I want to give it a bit more detail and context because it's important to understand that the virtual learning centre was just one of the measures that we put in place. The virtual learning centre was established for short-term bursts of learning opportunities where students were isolated either because they were a close contact or they had COVID-19 and were still able to learn or they were living in a family where there was a vulnerable context. It was designed specifically for short-term bursts of learning, rather than longer term, as the Minister indicated.

In addition to that, families that had children in the 0-4 age groups were also supported through Launching into Learning (LiL) programs twice a week, online. And the virtual learning centre was really for prep to year 10 and we supported students in years 11 and 12 through Virtual Learning Tasmania. I think it's important that you understand that there was a broad spectrum of measures.

The data that we have for those students with regard to longevity of participation, the average through the Term 1 process was about 80 per cent of the students were there for about four days. Also, remembering too, that schools had in place additional mechanisms for students. Some schools didn't encourage their students to use virtual learning, but had their own supports for students. In addition, we also had written materials and packs for those students who were unable to access virtual learning. We also had stationery packs and supplies for students as well, so those who weren't able to have those resources at home, could have them.

The participation data shows that approximately 500 students per day were learning from home, and that's from about the second week. That has fluctuated throughout the term but over the course of term 1, our data shows that we had about 12,700 students accessing VLC courses. The breakdown of that shows that 40 per cent of those were close contacts,

33 per cent were COVID-19 positive, 22 per cent had other and about 6 per cent were medically vulnerable. That data is only as solid as the information that we received from the families, carers and parents but that's the data that we have to date.

CHAIR - What is the future of the virtual learning centre?

Ms BURGESS - With regard to the virtual learning centre we have learnt that it does provide additional resources both to schools and to families. One of the benefits for us is that we've been able to make sure that our curriculum documentation is up to speed so the teachers know exactly what the students have been learning while they've been in the virtual learning environment. We would anticipate that we will maintain that site so that if schools have students who for whatever reason are not able to return to a learning normal environment and they're not moving into the Tasmanian eSchool, would actually be able to use and have that as a support for their ongoing learning.

Mr JAENSCH - Chair, the other thing is that we can't assume that we won't need to bring on a number of the mechanisms for dealing with future waves of COVID-19 or other types of events in the future and where we've developed solutions and new muscles and synapses to deal with these sorts of events, we need to hold on to them so that they can be deployed rapidly when we need them again. This is similar to the additional investment that we've made in the pool of devices, laptops and tablets and dongles that are available so that we can ensure everyone who needs one can access learning wherever they are if they can't be at school.

Mr WILLIE - Just on the virtual learning centre still. Minister, you said two-thirds of students at the peak, what did you mean by that? Two-thirds of students were accessing the virtual learning centre or two-thirds of students were close contacts and had COVID-19?

Mr JAENSCH - No, two-thirds of students who were absent from school due to COVID-19, either direct cases or close contacts, were participating in learning from home.

Mr WILLIE - ... I am interested in whether the Department or yourself thinks that there will be an impact to student outcomes through this period? The virtual learning centre is great, I've logged on with my son who's in prep but there was a level of instruction. It's not just this virtual learning world where the kids just go off on a journey themselves. It's obviously not a level playing field in every home. Do you think that this period of time will impact student learning because of the disruption?

Mr JAENSCH - ... Regarding what we might expect to see as legacies of this, in their progress and attainment, I'd ask the Department if they wish to comment on that.

Mr BULLARD - I think the short answer is, it's too early to tell because we've got to go through an assessment cycle to see what the impact is. The important thing for us will be to be able to look for any patterns or trends in the data that we're getting back. We discussed at some length in Estimates, for example, the kindergarten development check and the responsive stance that we'd taken once we'd been through that check in 2020 to

see that gross motor skills were an area that had been in decline during the COVID-19 period. We'd be doing exactly the same thing.

It will then be a matter for us to provide some really targeted support if we think there are common areas across the learner population that we need to make an effort to ensure that any learning loss is remediated.

Ms BURGESS - There are probably three elements we are thinking about. First is the attendance, which the Minister mentioned. We have to get kids back to school so that they can learn. Then, there is the element around their wellbeing. We are really tuned and focused in on knowing and understanding how those young people are. As you would be aware, we have the wellbeing survey for young people from grades 4-10. That will happen in August, so we will get a sense in August of what measures have changed because we will now have four years of data on that. We will work with schools individually on what their data is telling them.

From a learning perspective, we absolutely understand that there may be impacts. We are really heightened and attuned to the fact that the teachers are focused on making sure that their assessments are appropriate for where the students are in their learning, and making sure that they are not getting any signals that the learning has been impacted across the years of schooling. What that might look like in kindergarten, as you would know, will be different from what it might look like in year 6 or 7. As you would also be aware, we have PAT⁵⁷ now, too. That is a really valuable and useful tool for us on those key areas of maths and reading. We get a sense and understanding through that data of whether we are getting different trends at both an individual school and system level with regards to that. We can respond either at a school level, network level or system level if we need to adjust our strategies going forward. We are looking at the data with that learning loss potential in mind.⁵⁸

The Committee was informed that whilst the deployment of the VLC platform was quick, the supporting guidelines might not have taken the needs of some vulnerable students:

We would like to congratulate the Government on their swift action to ensure that each student was able to have access to educational material at all points during their educational year. However, the guidelines which were set out regarding who was classified as being vulnerable and unable to partake in a normal learning environment, was set and regulated by those who worked for the Government. ... without consultation of those who mattered most, the families, the carers, the communities.

These guidelines saw all the pressure being unfairly placed on each principal as the formal decision maker to decide each child's medical stance. It was up to them to make the decision. If at any point any of the families were seen to go against this decision, the child was marked with an unexplained absence.

⁵⁷ progressive achievement testing

⁵⁸ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(17 June 2022\) - \(Minister Jaensch\)](#), p.6-9

Each child who gained access to the VLC platform to do online learning, only had access for a small portion of the day. It was not as promoted to be, online learning at home. The work that was issued was well received by some, but it didn't suit those who had additional needs that were seen in their classrooms and supported by their classroom teacher.⁵⁹

With respect to other DoE initiatives that may have been impacted during the period, the Minister for Education, Children and Youth, and Ms Burgess provided the following information:

Mr WILLIE - ... I am aware that the gifted program across schools has been impacted to develop the Virtual Learning Centre. Has that been reinstated now or will it be reinstated?

Mr JAENSCH - My advice had been that that was turned back on at the beginning of Term 2 [2022].

...

Mr WILLIE - The other program impacted through this time was Launching into Learning. My understanding is that there was a staffing issue because the Department was worried about staffing the school and LiL teachers would potentially have to be redeployed. There were also issues with people coming onto school sites, which might have been able to be overcome by going to libraries or other community spaces...

Mr JAENSCH - My understanding, again coming in fairly late to it all, was that with the Launching into Learning, a very important program, it was the face-to-face indoor elements of that that were wound back, largely to do with COVID-19 restrictions and risks. But there was a ramping-up of the online content so that there could be continuity of delivery of that and there could be access to it. There were people who were drafted to assist with doing that, including the Secretary and myself recording sessions and content for Launching into Learning. What you have seen is the return to face-to-face and indoor Launching into Learning as restrictions have lifted and we have been able to. My understanding is those were the key drivers of the changes to format of delivery of LiL. The Department may care to make additional comment.

Mr WILLIE - It was suspended for Term 1 [2022] completely.

Ms BURGESS - That is correct. I think it was a combination, as the Minister has indicated, but also schools telling us that they felt that from a wellbeing and safety point of view, they, too, needed some space not to run those additional programs.

It is important also to mention on the gifted approach, while we did divert the resource to support, more broadly, the virtual learning, we also were able to provide access for schools and students falling into the gifted category to be able to access content, information and courses above their year level. There was an opportunity there for those students to be extended through that Virtual Learning Centre as well.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Extracted with permission from Confidential Submission

⁶⁰ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(17 June 2022\) - \(Minister Jaensch\)](#), p.9

Attendance⁶¹

The Committee was informed that student attendance and engagement was a priority for DoE and there was significant work occurring to support and engage all learners to succeed. The Department noted consistent attendance at school is critical to achieving positive educational outcomes and keeping students engaged in their learning.

The Department noted the vast majority of students continued to attend school as normal, however attendance rates in Government schools during the first five weeks of Term 1 had been impacted by COVID-19. The Department also noted safety measures, together with the provision of learning at home for impacted students, had helped to mitigate potentially larger impacts.

The Department noted schools were being supported to monitor attendance rates daily and were supported to engage with learners and families.

Online Launching into Learning (LiL)

Twice weekly LiL sessions had been provided to families with a focus on fun with an opportunity to sing songs, listen to stories and explore activities to do at home. Sessions were filmed at schools and CFLCs across the state and broadcast on DoE's Great Start website.

Committee Findings

- F33. The Virtual Learning Centre initiative was successfully established in a short timeframe as an on-line platform designed to deliver teaching for students learning from home.
- F34. The Virtual Learning Centre enabled continuous engagement for students who remained at home during the pandemic.
- F35. Some existing Department of Education programs (e.g. Launching into Learning and Gifted Students programs) were interrupted for a period at the beginning of the 2022 school year.
- F36. The Virtual Learning Centre required parental support for some learning, and was not universally accessible, especially for some students with disability and/or limited internet access.

Committee Recommendations

- R14. The Virtual Learning Centre be maintained, and continually improved as an option for continued and enhanced student engagement in learning.

⁶¹ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.28

Staffing Strategies⁶²

The Committee was informed that DoE had proactively reviewed its workforce to identify pressure points and put in place strategies to cover expected absences due to COVID-19. DoE had developed staffing strategies to ensure staff are supported and that face-to-face learning was able to continue. Staffing strategies included:

- contacting recently retired school staff and asking them to indicate if they would be willing to return to a school if called upon;
- deploying staff from non-school areas, including both registered teachers and general staff;
- using relief staff, including identifying available people from relief registers, promoting the registers, and actively contacting people on the relief register; and
- revisiting long leave requests.

An escalation matrix supported school staffing levels by providing triggers for staffing and options for management of schools at a local level to a system level approach. This approach enabled all schools to remain open even in the face of community and school outbreaks.

Where solutions cannot be managed at a school level, the issue is escalated through to Learning Services and supported at a regional level, accessing broader staffing options. When a regional approach still did not identify staffing options, the issue was raised with the Director Operations who worked with other Department leads to identify staffing strategies and implement solutions.

The number of school staff furloughed due to being COVID-19 positive or a close contact was generally around 2 per cent to 3 per cent of the workforce at any one time.

At the public hearings, the Committee heard from Mr Genford (AEU) with respect to their views on the Government's assertions related to the provision of relief teachers over the period:

Mr WILLIE - There are obviously health concerns here, but one of my biggest concerns through all of this is the impact of student learning. The Government made a lot about the 1700-relief teaching figure, in your submission you say that is dishonest. Could you elaborate on that? What was the true figure and what impact was staffing having on schools at that time?

Mr GENFORD - I have never seen the actual list, but I was definitely concerned with the number such as 1,700. We know how difficult it is for schools to get relief teachers: whether or not they were still currently available, how many days were they available, and what areas were they prepared to work in. The best way I can sum it up is what we have been seeing happening on the West Coast for years and years was happening in Hobart and Launceston where schools could not get relief teachers. I do not know where the 1,700 went because they were not in schools covering the staff required.

⁶² See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.28

We saw such a high staff absent rate, especially in Term 1 [2022], once the borders had opened continuing into Term 2 [2022] where we were asking for data and not getting it. Either the Government was not aware or was not willing to provide us the data of how many staff were issued. We had to basically survey principals ourselves and ask them how many staff were missing. As our submission says, we saw cases of up to 100 staff in a week missing from some of our biggest schools, which is really difficult to cover.

CHAIR - What would their staffing numbers be? One hundred a week: how many are we talking about?

Mr GENFORD - The schools I am thinking of have 100 teaching staff and over the week that would average on about 20 staff absent a day. You are looking at about 20 per cent of their workforce. The reason why that is a major concern - and I think you are alluding to it, Josh, in your concerns - is the impact that has on student learning when classes get collapsed because you cannot find the relief teachers. For people to be aware of what that means, a collapsed class means we cannot find a relief teacher so you have 30 students, what you do with them, you put five students in six different classes and often that is in a different age group.

For example, my daughter is in Grade 6, she got put into a classroom with a Grade 3 teacher who then tries their best to not only maintain their current workload of teaching the Grade 3s, but also making sure the five Grade 6 students are also on task. As I say, this is a practice that has happened in our remote schools for a long time, which we would like to see solutions for, but it was also happening in our metro schools.⁶³

In response to a request for further information around the breakdown of relief teachers identified for the restarting of school in 2022, the Hon Roger Jaensch MP (Minister for Education, Children and Youth) provided the following:⁶⁴

Numbers from the employment register of February 2022 were 1,700 applications. The breakdown by region was:

- *353 indicated willing to work in municipalities in the North-West region*
- *466 indicated willing to work in municipalities in the Northern region*
- *952 indicated willing to work in municipalities in the Southern region.*

The total by region is higher than the individual total as some individuals expressed availability in multiple regions.

⁶³ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.2-3 (AEU)

⁶⁴ Letter to Hon Ruth Forrest MLC Chair – COVID-19 Public Hearing - Responses to Request for Further Information, 13 December 2022

Committee Findings

F37. COVID-19 created staff shortages in Tasmanian schools.

F38. The available pool of relief teachers was unable to meet demand.

Committee Recommendations

R15. The Department of Education Children and Young People maintain an accurate and current register of available relief teachers.

Supporting Safe Sites⁶⁵

The Committee was informed a range of Public Health measures had been implemented across all DoE school sites to ensure the safety of students and staff in maintaining face-to-face learning. COVID-19 safe plans existed on each site and were regularly updated. Case numbers noted in the Government submission suggested that these measures assisted in keeping the number of COVID-19 cases less than projected.⁶⁶

Supporting staff, parents/carers and students

DoE noted in the Government submission, considerable efforts and resources to contact stakeholders and support clear and consistent engagement with learners, staff and school communities.

Key measures included:

- the COVID-19 hotline was created and staffed for the beginning of Term 1, 2022 to ensure consistent and fit for purpose advice was provided to schools and school communities;
- back to school COVID-19 care packages provided information to support parents and included two RATs to use if their child/student developed symptoms, as well as face masks;
- additional support for administration staff in government schools who were undertaking extra hours to support COVID-19 response activities were paid for centrally. This included extra hours and overtime claims for existing staff assisting or payments for relief for additional assistance with administration duties;
- regular and ongoing engagement with Tasmanian Government bodies and agencies, non-government schools, and unions;
- the COVID-19 Outbreak Support Team was established for the beginning of Term 1 2022. The purpose was to support school leaders managing COVID-19 outbreaks and reduce administration requirements placed on schools;
- development of internet and intranet pages with key information and searchable frequently asked questions;

⁶⁵ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.29

⁶⁶ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.29

- movement of non-essential reporting, testing or programs to later in the term or year. The purpose of this was to assist DoE schools to maintain a singular focus on keeping learners and staff as safe as possible whilst supporting learning;
- one of the key COVID-19 safety measures for schools was to take advantage of outdoor learning opportunities where appropriate. Resources and best practice approaches were shared with schools to celebrate outdoor learning opportunities at schools;
- School Support and Wellbeing Teams monitored the wellbeing of all students, with a particular focus on those students with diverse and complex needs requiring coordinated support; and
- a range of staff wellbeing webinars were available to all DoE staff.⁶⁷

The Committee was informed that the Government messaging behind mask wearing by students was confusing to some:

Mask wearing by students came with a lot of confusion. [The Government] had stated that it was not a requirement for primary school students, but must be worn by those in secondary school and above. On the other hand, [the Government had stated] that [was] age 12 years and above. The questions would then be raised, what about the 12-year-old in primary school? Or the under 12 year old in secondary school.

Questions were also asked around district schools. The lack of clarity continued throughout the beginning of 2022. Questions were then raised about the students who did wear masks throughout the day and the proper handling of those masks. Most students removed their masks at recess and lunch times and place it in their pockets. They would then pull it out of their pocket and place it back on before entering the school building. Contamination of these masks happened almost immediately, but students were not encouraged or required to replace them.⁶⁸

In addition, the Committee was informed that the mask wearing by teachers in state schools was problematic:

Mask wearing by staff, although generally accepted, became increasingly evident it was not an effective tool in the school environment as there was no clear-cut way of ensuring proper protocol was followed. It also inhibited learning of students as they were not able to focus on their teacher or staff member's face, especially of those with additional learning needs and disabilities.⁶⁹

With regard to the back-to-school COVID-19 care packages, the Committee was informed the delivery and distribution of the packages was inconsistent across state schools:

Why did it take the Government so long, when they knew when school was to commence well in advance?

⁶⁷ An example as the Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) Early Years, which has been moved from early in Term 1 to Weeks 8, 9 and 10 in Term 1.

⁶⁸ Extracted with permission from Confidential Submission

⁶⁹ Extracted with permission from Confidential Submission

Furthermore, [through the Premier, the Government] stated that each student will receive a total of two tests per week. These tests were being sent to the school. Staff were then required in most cases to separate them, and some were then placed in bags with masks and documentation regarding the use of the tests and masks.

This was most certainly not the case. Tests were not being handed out to every student each week, nor was there any real clear-cut protocol on how to properly handle these tests by general staff at the schools.⁷⁰

With respect to the end of mandatory masking in Tasmanian schools, the Committee heard from Dr Veitch (Director of Public Health) and Mr Rockliff (Premier and Minister for Health):

Mr WILLIE - It's good to hear that serious illness is very low, but it has been incredibly disruptive to education and the system. You're about to remove masks in schools. Is there an expectation that cases will increase in schools from that measure being removed?

...

Dr VEITCH - The vaccination will have a modest effect on attenuating spread in schools. Very limited, as I have just said. Children mix in a whole range of circumstances inside and outside of schools. I'm sure that when masks come off there will be transmission within schools. When masks were on there was transmission within schools. In the course of the first and second term, about 45 percent of school-age children were notified with COVID-19. Even with masks in place, you are still seeing cases among school children. Whether they caught it in school, outside school, or in the home we do not know. There will be instances of transmission when masks come off in schools.

Mr WILLIE - The question, Premier, is whether we are going to see an increase in transmission? Is the Government expecting that?

CHAIR - If I can elaborate on that question. Has there been modelling done to specifically look at the impact of masks in these sorts of settings?

Mr ROCKLIFF - Lifting the mask mandate is not an order to not wear masks. People are encouraged to wear masks in certain settings, and for very good reasons. We will be encouraging people to continue to wear masks where appropriate. In lifting the mask mandates, I will still encourage people to wear masks in certain settings. It is not an order to not wear masks...

Dr VEITCH - The first thing I would say is the most useful information we will get will probably not be from modelling but it will be from monitoring the incidence of reported cases in school-age children.

Since the peak of transmission among that age group, which was during first term, when the more senior students were wearing masks, the rates dropped right down to about a quarter of what it was during the start of Term 1, and through towards the end of that term. We will continue to monitor the trends in the incidence of COVID-19 in school

⁷⁰ Extracted with permission from Confidential Submission

children. We will continue to provide support to schools that identify a problem in their schoolroom with a greater than expected number of cases.

In the discussions with schools, we have talked about the prospect that there may be particular circumstances and particular times, they might be doing a particular activity that brings a large number of students together, maybe occurring at a time when there is more COVID-19 in Tasmania in general, or in their particular community and in those circumstances they may make requirements or a strong recommendation that their students wear masks.

It is almost impossible to stamp out the mask-off meme that comes through the community. It is not masks-off. It is no longer a public health mandate to wear masks, but the ongoing recommendation is to wear masks if people want to, or if there are circumstances they cannot socially distance, or the risk appears to be greater, or the setting in which they are, requires them or recommends them to do so.⁷¹

At the public hearings, Ms Burgess (Deputy Secretary Strategy and Performance, DoE) spoke to the utilisation of the dedicated COVID-19 hotline:

CHAIR - ... there is a series of those measures like the COVID-19 hotline, which it seems was a dedicated hotline for education staff, the back-to-school COVID-19 care packages, additional support for administration staff, et cetera. We could talk about staff wellbeing, which you talked about, but are you able to provide some information to the Committee about the uptake of all those measures, like how many calls to the hotline?

...

Ms BURGESS - Certainly with regards to the first five weeks of term, we had 1,000 contacts through either our email or our phone system, with regards to questions. We do not have a breakdown of whether that is schools or families, or who they were, but certainly 1,000 in that first five weeks. I don't know whether you are aware or have the detail, but we stood up a team of 28 staff as COVID-19 support officers. Some of those were internal staff and some we received more broadly across government. This meant that every school had a key person they could contact. That person then triaged the work and liaised directly with Public Health so that we didn't have to put additional burden on schools. Anecdotally, the reports are that that was very successfully put in place and achieved what it set out to achieve, which was to allow schools to have a key go-to person when they were managing the risks in their schools. In addition to that, we developed an internally facing data dashboard and that data dashboard gave us real-time data on student absences, student illness and staff absences and illnesses. We could then manage what that looked like from a data perspective and whether we were about to trigger either a class outbreak or a site outbreak. That was very well utilised as well.⁷²

⁷¹ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(24 June 2022\) - \(Premier Rockliff\)](#), p.13-14

⁷² See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(17 June 2022\) - \(Minister Jaensch\)](#), p.10-11

Committee Findings

- F39. It was recognised by Department of Health vaccination of children had a modest effect on reducing transmission of COVID-19 in schools.
- F40. After the public health mandate to wear masks had been lifted, subsequent messaging on wearing masks in schools resulted in some confusion.
- F41. A dedicated COVID-19 hotline for Department of Education staff was utilised at the beginning of the 2022 school year.
- F42. The roll-out of the COVID-19 care packages to Tasmanian school students was inconsistent.

Support for Vulnerable Students⁷³

DoE also undertook a range of measures to support vulnerable students. An example of this was the return to school for students with medical vulnerability and/or disability:

Families of students with medical vulnerability or disability were contacted by phone call or letter to discuss their needs or concerns prior to the return to school. Support teachers used the information gained from parent feedback to update Learning Plans with specific adjustments to support a safe return to school for students with medical vulnerability/disability as needed:

- *from a list of 2,248 families identified on DoE systems -*
 - *there were 1,651 successful contacts made, where families shared information with the School Health Nurse;*
 - *there were 462 families where calls were attempted on three separate occasions and no response was received*
 - *there were 16 schools which asked to undertake the process themselves – this related to 83 students; and*
 - *in addition to this process a letter was sent to all students included in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (students with disability), with 7,119 letters distributed via email, hard copy postage and for 38 students through Child Safety Service’s case managers.*

Further support provided to vulnerable students:

- *vaccination clinics commenced operation in the third week of school for enrolled students aged 5-11;*
- *students with individualised learning plans continued to be supported. Parents and carers were encouraged to contact schools to discuss their child’s individual learning plan and medical action plan. The priority was for schools to support learners to come to school and learn under the supervision of their classroom teacher;*

⁷³ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.29

- when students with disability needed to learn from home, they were be provided with a Learning Pack to complement online learning options;
- School Support and Wellbeing teams support the wellbeing of all students, with a particular focus on those students with diverse and complex needs requiring coordinated support; and
- advice from Public Health was sought and provided to all schools regarding management of students with medical issues or disability including consistent COVID-19 symptomology, allowing these students to participate safely on school sites.⁷⁴

The Committee was informed by the Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Lobby (TDERL) that there was a lack of preparation of return to school plans for students with disability across all school systems:

When the Tasmanian Government announced that the Tasmanian border was to be opened in December 2021, TDERL was calling on the Government to ensure that it had return to school plans in place for students with disability before the 2021 school year was completed.

In October 2021, TDERL called on the Government to issue a ministerial direction to push schools to create individual COVID-safe plans for families of students with a disability before school resumed in 2022. This call was ignored. It is well recognised that COVID-19 has significant impacts on medically complex and vulnerable students with disability and TDERL was very concerned that there were no plans in place at the end of the 2021 school year to give parents and carers certainty about how their children would be kept safe when school commenced in 2022.

On the 14th of January no plans in relation to return to school had been announced by the Tasmanian Government and in fact the Government’s public messaging was not even acknowledging the significant danger that COVID-19 causes to vulnerable students with disability in Tasmanian schools. TDERL at that time felt compelled to call on the Government to make its plans clear, given we were less than a month from returning to school.

Ultimately, the Government announced its PAC/COVID-19 return to school plan that included all students with disability and their families being contacted to determine what mitigation requirements were required to keep them safe at school. The Government advised parents of students with disability that their child’s school would phone them to discuss their child’s needs. The reality was the Government had left the Education Department with less than four weeks to contact more than 4,000 families and this was never achievable.

...

Some families received excellent support [and] some families did not receive any communication. This made it incredibly hard for parents to make informed decisions in relation to whether their child should return to school at the beginning of Term One.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.30

⁷⁵ See [Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Submission](#), p.1-2.

The TDERL submission provided comments from parents/carers of students with disability on the impacts of COVID-19 and the Government's lack of preparedness on their child's learning:

- *'Reduced attendance at school'*
- *'Reduced opportunity for socialisation'*
- *'My child is not engaging with school as the school are not catering for leaning at home – they deem school to be safe place to be'*
- *'The added stress and frequent disruptions because of sickness (including lots of substitute teachers and unfamiliar TAs [Teacher Assistant]) has been very disruptive for their engagement and progress'*
- *'They have become very disengaged'*⁷⁶

The TDERL raised concerns that as Tasmania went into the 'living with COVID' phase, the Tasmanian Government was not properly engaging with parents and carers of students with disability and that there was no overarching strategy to ensure students with disability were able to remain safe in their local school:

*The Tasmanian Government needs to be able to articulate its strategy for keep (sic) students with disability in our schools safe, simply saying there are individual learning plans in place is not enough. Is the Education Department ensuring that these plans are appropriate and up to date? Are they consulting with people with disability in schools as they withdraw more and more mitigation measures from our schools?*⁷⁷

At the public hearings, Ms Kristen Desmond (Founder, TDERL) informed the Committee of some of the challenges faced by students and their parents around the return to school during the COVID-19 period:

Ms DESMOND - ... I have a short statement and want to give you a bit of an insight into one parent's journey. There is no confidential information in that, and does not name the student, the parent, or the school, but it is important in the context of the types of discussion we are having that we get a real life feel of what it was like for parents coming into a school year with the borders opening.

Again, thank you for taking the time to hear the evidence in relation to the COVID-19 preparedness - or lack thereof - in our schools this year.

I would like to give you an example of what some parents have gone through. This is an example from an independent school. I have chosen an independent school because a lot of our time the Government has focused on Government schools. The Government has a responsibility for all schools and all students across the state. The Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Lobby has lobbied hard late last year and early this year to try to get the Minister to put in a ministerial instruction, which would have maintained a minimum base of what was required across all schools. He could have done that through the

⁷⁶ See [Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Submission](#), p.2.

⁷⁷ See [Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Submission](#), p.3

Education Act. I say he; it could have been he or she at the time, because it varied at the period of time coming in. But, for whatever reason, the Government chose not to do that.

What that meant is for students with disability in independent and Catholic schools, the guarantees the Government had given about what was going to occur in Government schools did not necessarily apply to them. For this parent, who worked in aged care prior to the borders opening noted they had to undergo COVID-19 PPE training, policy meetings, hand hygiene competency tests, all a part of COVID-19 planning in that sector. They were also required to review 12 manuals from the Tasmanian Health Department and be vaccinated to maintain their employment. Before the borders opened, they said:

I began questioning the COVID-19 prevention plan for vulnerable people in the community. I called Carers Tasmania and Carers Gateway and Advocacy Tasmania, who had no idea. I called the local newspaper, but no one returned my calls. I called Jeremy Rockliff, Jacqui Lambie and Cassy O'Connor's offices. Cassy O'Connor sent an email to the Premier who asked a Health Department employee to call me. No one else even returned my call.

My son is medically vulnerable and has a hearing impairment. I'd spoken to my son's GP, paediatrician, and neurologist about whether it was appropriate for him to be vaccinated or not. I had also spoken to the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne to ask about individual COVID-19 plans and how to create one for my son and they were very helpful.

Carers Tasmania supplied me with an NDIS document that had general information. It appeared to me that Tasmania did not have a plan for prevention of COVID-19 for people with disability.

I was reassured leading up to the 2022 school year that when I contacted the Education Department that schools would be providing a plan for vulnerable children. My son was attending an independent school, so the Education Department planning did not apply to my son's school. I also contacted Hearing Services prior to school returning asking if the Government had made any accommodations for hearing impaired students; their reply was no. I was encouraged to talk to the school principal to request hearing services for my son due to the mask wearing protocols. Hearing services support is at the discretion of the school and was denied, as the school claimed they had no budget for further supports.

In the first week of school, I provided the school with an Australian Government form called Return to School for Students with Disability. It was risk assessment for vulnerable students and I signed my part. This was meant to be reviewed and signed off by staff. I was not offered a meeting to discuss my son's needs with the school, and my son's learning plan was not altered. The school's policy said that a meeting would occur with parents of vulnerable students to discuss a plan. It didn't happen.

The school's operational plan said that students with disability with complex needs will continue to be supported on an individual basis, working closely with parents

and carers as necessary. This could include additional medical advice with student's medical plan; didn't happen.

It was frustrating when taking my son to school and collecting him seeing staff were wearing handmade masks and had their noses exposed. There was no 1.5 metre social distancing in classrooms, and the masks provided had no grading, so I couldn't determine what protection my son had. I then purchased N95 masks for my son.

The other issue for this family is that their son has a swallowing disorder, and wearing a mask made it difficult for staff to be able to supervise during break time to ensure that there wasn't an issue around a choking event occurring:

More disturbingly at this time, staff did not supervise my son while he was eating as required. My son was the only one wearing a mask.

The school conducted assemblies via Zoom but did not properly understand how to connect his hearing technology to the TV or computer, even though they'd been given the information, meaning my son was not able to hear any discussion during assemblies, so he was completely excluded. Teachers' aides were being rotated between classes, which meant there was not minimal mixing of classroom staff as per the school's protocols. School camp also occurred in Term 1. I attempted to contact Independent Schools Tasmania but they didn't return my call, so I was referred to the Health Department.

They went back to the Health Department person that they had spoken to previously, and they referred them on to the Disability Emergency Response Team, who advised the school's plan was sufficient. By the second day of camp, a number of students had tested positive to COVID. The school rang his parent asked them what they wanted to do. The parent went to collect them from camp because they didn't want them in the minibus coming back with other students. When they got to camp, no one was wearing masks.

They rang again the Disability Emergency Response Team to work through how they could better protect their child, and when they talked about how hard the system was to navigate, the response from the person on the other side was, 'By now you should have realised there's no use in complaining'. And they used the quote, 'Don't complain about thorns you're walking on, get a pair of sandals'.

...

CHAIR - Who was this?

Ms DESMOND - That person was within the Disability Emergency Response Team.

CHAIR - As part of the State Government's COVID response?

Ms DESMOND - Yes. When the COVID response was set up, you could call the COVID hotline, and then if you had a disability there was an emergency team that you could get to which was diverted off. The end of this in terms of how did COVID and all of this impact this family, that child no longer attends mainstream schools; that child is now being home-schooled.

That story is not untypical of many stories I have heard. The kicker for me at the moment is that there are students being referred to the registrar for non-attendance at schools. For independent and Catholic schools, they really don't have a choice because they're not in power to be able to provide any kind of electronic schooling under the Act, and because there's no ministerial instruction, they're saying that people who are at risk of COVID and not attending school can access that kind of online learning in a Catholic or independent school, then realistically, the legislation says the Catholic or independent school is putting their school registration at risk by providing online learning to some of these students.

Again, it's completely under-reported. The lack of consultation was clear, even based on the Government's own last submission to this Committee. I note in there they talked about the engagement, and they talked about they regularly engaged with key stakeholders, regular engagement with DoE, statutory bodies, a working group, and ongoing engagement with Independent Schools Tasmania and Catholic Education Tasmania, regular liaison with Tasmanian Principles Association, biweekly meetings with the unions, liaison with representatives from the disability sector - that's the line. I would have thought if we were going to properly prepare for our most vulnerable students, liaison would have been a lot less than what I would have expected.⁷⁸

Ms Desmond also informed the Committee of the difficulties still faced by parents of children with disabilities in the State school system:

CHAIR - ... Are you aware of situations similar to that in public schools, where there should have been more organised support and processes in place to assist a student like that? Every student is an individual; they all have individual needs. We know there are many students with disability accessing our public schools.

Ms DESMOND - Yes, and, the difficulty in public schools is there is meant to be a learning plan in place that supports it. What we are hearing is that that is not the case in every case and that those learning plans, while there was a fairly good reachout at the beginning of the school year to try to get that sorted, that has dropped off now.

Parents are concerned, especially with the new changes, without mandatory isolation, how are they meant to make a decision around what the risk is for their child going to school? It may be that that child is at risk or it may be that there is a sibling at risk, or may be that there is a parent at risk who may be undergoing treatment for cancer, for example, or may be immuno-compromised.

The difficulty at the moment is that there isn't any real communication, I would say, for people to be able to make that choice. In fact, in public schools, what I have been hearing from parents is where they did make a choice not to send their child to school in the early days, where there may be one case in the classroom or two in the classroom, and it wasn't considered to be an outbreak, when they kept their children home, they were told they were unauthorised absences. What that means is you can have 10 unauthorised

⁷⁸ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(21 October 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.12-15

absences a year before you end up referred to the Education Registrar. So, there are children out there who have had more than those, who may well be put through that process, when it's simply their parents trying to keep them safe.⁷⁹

Committee Findings

- F43. Parents and carers of students with disability strongly advocated for individual COVID-19 return to school plans before the end of the 2021 school year.
- F44. On 20 January 2022, the Government released the Return to School Plan, which provided four weeks to implement measures in the Plan prior to Term 1 commencing.
- F45. Despite best efforts by Department of Education staff to engage with all parents and carers of students with disability, time did not permit all to be contacted prior to the beginning of Term 1.
- F46. Not all students with disability began Term 1 with a Return to School Plan in place. As a result, some families chose not to send their child back to school.
- F47. COVID-19 presented particular challenges for the preparation and delivery of individual learning plans for students with disability.
- F48. COVID-19 had a substantial impact on the quality and accessibility of learning for many students with disability.

Committee Recommendations

- R16. The Government review the Return to School Plan process including timeframes and engagement with all relevant stakeholders.

Teaching and Support Staff

The Committee was informed through the Government submission that while there had been unavoidable impacts on Tasmanian schools as a result of COVID-19, the successful implementation of the Return to School Operational Plan had ensured that the Tasmanian Government was well prepared and able to respond swiftly and appropriately to manage these impacts.⁸⁰

Minister Jaensch (Minister for Education, Children and Youth) provided evidence regarding the impact COVID-19 had on the teaching and support staff in Tasmanian schools:

⁷⁹ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(21 October 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.15

⁸⁰ See Tasmanian Government – Follow-up Inquiry, p.30

CHAIR - Minister, in terms of the feedback from staff, particularly, we know the whole COVID-19 period, ... has been a really stressful time for staff. Can you provide any information about your interaction with the teaching and support staff for schools, in terms of how they are feeling and how they are doing, stress leave, other or personal leave related to the psychological stress ...?

Mr JAENSCH - Since I became Minister, I have visited a number of schools and spoken to principals and teaching staff there. I have offered them my thanks, in particular, and congratulations for the way they have managed through these very difficult, changing times, for the innovation they have been able to bring to the response as well, at that individual class and school level. Particularly with things like creating new ways to deliver learning outdoors and in different formats, and finding alternatives to some of the teaching and learning opportunities they would have had previously. I was particularly struck by a primary school visit where the pump track had been turned into a maths class - not just time-out, not just burning energy but they built into it opportunities for learning as well. I hope that some of those innovations will stick with us.

I have also had frequent contact with the Australian Education Union and David Genford, and discussions with him. Also, representatives of the Tasmanian school associations and the Tasmanian Principals Association. I have had direct contact with some of the support school principals as well and generally tried to get myself up to speed as quickly as possible with how our workforce and our leadership on the ground in these organisations have been responding.

I have found that, yes, they have all been expressing that there is additional work and there have been uncertainty and pressures on people, particularly with regard to dealing with staff absences in the period where close contact rules were moving a lot of staff out of the school environment, and the need to be able to secure relief or backfill.

I know that the Department's efforts to establish a register of available relief teachers was a mighty effort and there were around 1,700 on that list in Term 1. I understand that in the order of 1,000 or so of those were deployed, taken up by schools. Every school had a different approach to doing that as well. Talking with principals, some were very keen to reach out for the supports available to bring additional teaching staff on site. Some went to great lengths to ensure that they did not bring new staff on site but, instead, were innovative in the way that they divided the workload across existing staff and increased the hours maybe of some of the people they already had familiar to them.

This is still changing. The environment will change again before the end of this term in response to public health advice and what is happening in our broader community with regard to COVID-19. We are incredibly proud of the people we have at all levels and the work they have undertaken to deal with this practically. I am so glad that we have been able to keep our schools open for face-to-face learning. The vast majority of young people have been able to continue in a modified way to learn at school. Those who have not been able to have been supported to learn at home.

What we now need to do, as we move to the next stages of COVID-19 recovery and exit, is we are encouraging all students and all families to re-engage with face-to-face

*learning if they haven't been. That is where our kids need to be to get the best experience of these years. Every day of learning really counts for their future success and their ability to reach their potential...*⁸¹

The Committee sought data related to any trends with respect to teaching staff being on sick leave during the period with a particular focus on COVID-19 related sick leave. In replying to a question taken on notice, Minister Jaensch provided a break-down of DoE staff sick leave numbers including COVID-19 absences related for Term 1, 2022:⁸²

Leave Type (In Days)	Southern Region	Northern Region	Total Leave Days
Schools			
Personal Leave	4,157.33	3,988.14	8,145.47
Carer's Leave	869.85	940.32	1,810.17
Communicable Diseases Leave	1,228.20	1,430.00	2,658.20
Special Leave	47.00	45.00	92.00
Sub-Total	6,302.38	6,403.46	12,705.84
Non-Schools			
Personal Leave	1,092.48	451.87	1,544.35
Carer's Leave	237.34	129.38	366.72
Communicable Diseases Leave	75.38	54.71	130.09
Special Leave	18.00	9.00	27.00
Sub-Total	1,423.20	644.96	2,068.16
TOTAL	7,725.58	7,048.42	14,744.00

Note: Direct COVID-19 leave could go either to personal, special or communicable diseases leave. School Based staff were able to apply for communicable disease leave for COVID-19, however close contacts could only apply for personal leave.

The number that had been recorded for communicable diseases leave in the non-schools is for those staff that work or support schools, but their business unit is not an actual school, for example school-based Information Technology staff.

In terms of unique head-count, the number of employees who accessed relevant leave over the period were as follows:

Schools/Non-School	Southern Region	Northern Region	Total Leave Days
School	751	764	1,515
Non-School	151	86	237
TOTAL	902	850	1,752

At the public hearings, Minister Jaensch and Mr Kane Salter (Deputy Secretary, Corporate and Business Services, DoE) spoke to the question around the utilisation of relief teachers during Term 1 2022:

Ms WEBB - I'm interested to know about the level at which relief teachers were utilised across first term...

⁸¹ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(17 June 2022\) - \(Minister Jaensch\)](#), p.1-2

⁸² Letter to Hon Ruth Forrest MLC Chair – COVID-19 Public Hearing - Responses to Questions taken on Notice, 17 June 2022

Mr WILLIE - I think it's ready to hand here, but I could add to it from Estimates. The Secretary was able to provide the current relief teaching pool, the number of part-time staff that could relief teach on the days that they weren't teaching, and also the people deployed. I am also interested in the departmental staff that work within the Department - not in schools - how many of them were redeployed into schools too, as part of that relief teaching effort.

...

Mr SALTER - For Term 1: genuine relief - that is, additional people who have already been doing part-time work - that number was 781. Part-time staff paid relief were 911 people, who undertook relief outside their normal part-time hours ...⁸³

In replying to a question taken on notice, Minister Jaensch provided the Committee with the following with respect to the deployment of non-teaching staff to Tasmanian schools in Term 1, 2022:⁸⁴

16 non-school based staff agreed to provide assistance in schools as one of the range of workforce strategies used during the term.

At the public hearings, Mr Bullard (Secretary, DoE) spoke to the staff well-being seminars made available to DoE staff over the period:

Ms WEBB - Do you have records of what usage has been made of those webinars and what topics are covered with those webinars?

Mr BULLARD - Responding to the additional impacts on staff wellbeing - which is a priority of the agency - we ran a number of webinars across the period of Term 1 [2022] for all staff. They were voluntary. There were 1,500 attendees to those different webinars. They covered: recharging the batteries; managing energy and motivation; living with uncertainty and making space for growth; understanding and harnessing your strengths; thriving into the new normal; and understanding your wellbeing and supporting others.

In addition to that general support for staff, we had a particular focus - and continue to - on principals, knowing that they are the leaders at the frontline who are at risk of being most impacted. A principal wellbeing team provided targeted support for 42 principals in the north and 19 in the south, as well as providing general support through an ongoing contract that we have with occupational psychologists where principals can choose to engage with that company when, and if, they need help.

Ms WEBB - From that answer, it sounds like there was a lot more take-up of that support for principals in the north than in the south. Those numbers are quite substantially weighted to the north. Was a reason identified for that?

⁸³ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(17 June 2022\) - \(Minister Jaensch\)](#), p.4

⁸⁴ Letter to Hon Ruth Forrest MLC Chair – COVID-19 Public Hearing - Responses to Questions taken on Notice, 17 June 2022

Mr BULLARD - I would need to seek that information. We'd need to understand what was going on in terms of the north and south. I don't have that to hand.

Ms WEBB - Was that reliant on the principals putting themselves forward to seek support, or how was it offered?

Mr BULLARD - The way in which we run principal support is universal to targeted. There's a universal level for principal wellbeing where they can engage in wellbeing check-ins. Then there are ongoing resources at a universal level: 'I'm tracking okay but I want to take care of my wellbeing'; and that can escalate up to 'I need some particular support for the issues that I'm managing'. The targeted support there would have been where there had been, either the principal wellbeing team had identified that a principal needed additional support in terms of the discussions that they were having or information we're receiving from the school, or principals always know that they have the ability to be proactive and ask for more.

Ms WEBB - ... A final one on the staff and principal wellbeing measures that were put in place. It looks like quite a concerted effort. How has that been assessed for impact and outcomes and quality? Are we going to assess by interacting with the staff and the principals about how well it was done, and how well the outcomes that were sought were achieved?

Mr BULLARD - In terms of gaining feedback about the principals, FBG Group provides that support on our behalf or in collaboration with us, and they provide feedback. I think it's annually. They do a check-in about 'how useful have you found it', et cetera. I'd need to check in on how we were assessing the staff wellbeing webinars; FBG provided those as well so we'd need to see what metrics they had attached.

Ms WEBB - Apart from those specific measures, is there a way that the Department is going to go out to all teaching staff and principals to say, how well did we do in supporting you across this period of time, and in some way evaluate that?

Mr BULLARD - One of the pieces of work that is underway now is evaluating staff wellbeing and having an evaluation tool through our staff wellbeing team that will provide that level of data. I wouldn't want the Committee to think that we'd stopped there. There are additional rounds of webinars which we're going to run throughout the course of this year and the principal support is ongoing.⁸⁵

...

Mr BULLARD - If I could just use the mention of outbreaks to bring us back to the difference in principal wellbeing check-in, it was outbreak related. So, there were more in the north and north-west to start off with. As part of the process, once a school hit what we'd call the 'red zone' on our escalation matrix, there'd be a call made automatically to the principal to see what support they needed.

CHAIR - It's proactive as well as reactive, if you like?

⁸⁵ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(17 June 2022\) - \(Minister Jaensch\)](#), p.5-6

Mr BULLARD - Yes, that's right. Targeted.⁸⁶

Committee Findings

- F49. Department of Education school based staff accessed nearly 2,660 days of communicable diseases leave during Term 1, 2022. A total of 14,744 sick leave days had been used by both school based and non-schooled based staff over this period.
- F50. Both relief staff and non-school based staff were deployed to assist Tasmanian schools during Term 1, 2022.
- F51. Department of Education provided a series of well-being webinars to all staff and additional targeted support for school principals.

Early Childhood Education and Care

The Committee also heard from Ms Lynne Moran (President, Early Childhood Australia – Tasmania Branch (ECA)) who spoke about the challenges of early education and care centres being open throughout the border re-opening period including the provision of RATs to these centres:

CHAIR - ... I had a number of reports from my area that RATs were not being received in a timely manner to early education and care. Follow up suggests they were being provided by the Education Department but it seemed there was a gap between delivery to the schools and the delivery to education and care. Do you understand what went on there and how that was addressed?

Ms MORAN - I suppose the difficulty in the timing was that Tasmanian borders opened on 15 December last year. That coincided with the finish of school term for last year. Throughout the Christmas and January period, early childhood education care services were open, operating, and getting inundated with COVID-19 cases. Some services back in December ordered their own rapid antigen tests.

CHAIR - Were they supposed to be provided by the Education Department that early, acknowledging that school wasn't due to start for six weeks.

Ms MORAN - We weren't given any information about when they'd be provided. Some services ordered their own at significant cost. However, my understanding is that the supplies were directed to health care first and that the rapid antigen tests arrived for those people who had ordered privately after the ones that arrived from the Education Department. That was eight weeks after they were ordered.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(17 June 2022\) - \(Minister Jaensch\)](#), p.11

⁸⁷ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.1-2 (ECA)

Ms Moran also spoke about other issues faced by early childhood providers:

Ms MORAN - I suppose the major focus of the feedback that we've had from members is that during COVID-19 the early childhood sector seemed to be the forgotten part of Tasmania.

We felt that educators were working hard, day-in day-out, to keep services open and available for children. There seemed to be very little assistance, very little guidance for services, and a lot of confusion in relation to information coming from Public Health: one scenario being given one answer and a different scenario being given a different answer.

I think that has changed a little in the past six to 12 months. I think the Government recognises the importance of early childhood education and care services for two aspects. One, for the developmental outcomes for children. Two, to keep the economy going. Without early childhood services, parents can't go to work. While some parents can work from home with their children there, a lot of people can't. These two aspects are really important and are starting to be recognised a lot better.⁸⁸

The Committee also heard with respect to the responsibilities of the Federal and State government including the impact of the Federal Government's decision to waive the gap fee:

CHAIR - Some might suggest that it's the Federal Government's responsibility to look after the early education and care sector. Was there communication with the Federal Government about access to RATs and other PPE?

Ms MORAN - Because it was a health issue we kept getting directed to the Tasmanian Department of Health. That's the reason why there was not any Commonwealth involvement at that time.

Mr WILLIE - They waived the gap fee for a period.

Ms MORAN - For a period of time, that's correct. That was a period I try to erase from my memory. It was a very difficult period of time for early childhood education and care. While it provided the ability for services to continue to operate for - I think it was an eight-week period; it may have been a bit longer - the model where there was free childcare for a while was particularly difficult for education and care services because it didn't provide surety of what was going to happen on JobKeeper and all those sorts of things. For the permanent staff JobKeeper was great. It was more problematic for part-time and casual staff. For the family day care sector with independent contractors it was difficult as well. All that information kept going to the Commonwealth and we were writing submissions saying it was a problematic area.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.1 (ECA)

⁸⁹ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.2 (ECA)

Ms Moran, on behalf of the ECA, also commented on absentee rates at early childhood centres and the impact of JobKeeper:

Mr WILLIE - Does the ECA have an understanding of the absentee rates in early childhood education and care from when the borders opened and what impact that has on children? In the school system there were close to 30,000 absentees in the first term for students.

Ms MORAN - We have not directly asked for those figures but anecdotal evidence was that some services were impacted with 30 per cent to 50 per cent of a usual occupation. While that may seem a lot, in a way it was a relief because we were having staff impacted at the same time. We were worrying about how we were going to staff these services because staff were being impacted by COVID-19. At the same time, it was a blessing in disguise that the children weren't there.

The financial consequence of that is that even though staff aren't at the services, they are still being paid sick leave and all those things they are entitled to and rightly should have. The waiving of the gap fee is problematic. The Commonwealth allowed services to waive the gap fee for families. But the problem with that is that for that space for that child, you may only get 20 per cent of your normal fee instead of 100 per cent of the normal fee. How much money you got for that child not being there depends on the level of a family's childcare subsidy while you are still paying a full wage to a staff member who may not be there as well. Some of the impacts, I think, are still being felt by services because they have missed out on that income.⁹⁰

...

Mrs ALEXANDER - ...You have mentioned that there is still a significant financial impact that a lot of the centres are suffering, especially through the fact that the fee-waiving was actually not compensated. Is that correct?

Ms MORAN - Yes. When the Commonwealth Government waives the gap fee, under ordinary circumstances the parent sends a child along, maybe 80 per cent of their fees paid by childcare subsidy, and 20 per cent is paid by the parent. Under ordinary circumstances, the Commonwealth requirements are that you must make every reasonable effort, including sending people in to collectors, to collect the gap fee. That is under ordinary operating circumstances.

During the pandemic, the Government allowed us to waive the gap fee, bearing in mind that the gap fee may be 100 per cent for some families if they do not get any childcare subsidy. Which is okay, but it means that you are not collecting that fee and so it is having an impact on your finances.

CHAIR - The Government didn't meet that cost?

Ms MORAN - No.

Mrs ALEXANDER - ...What was the duration over which you did not collect the gap fee?

⁹⁰ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.2 (ECA)

Ms MORAN - It was permitted from, and this is from memory, about March 2020, so after the free childcare occurred, right through to, I am not across the detail, but I am pretty sure it was the end of June this year [2022].

Mr WILLIE - It stopped and then I think there was a change for parents and children who were isolating. There was an arrangement in place.

Ms MORAN - Yes. I suppose the other thing that has occurred is it sets up an expectation from parents that they won't be charged when their child is not there as well. It is making sure that messaging is really firm around: 'This is an isolated exception. You do need to still pay when your child does not attend if they have a cold or whatever.' Part of the unintended consequences was that expectation from parents that they do not pay when their child doesn't come.⁹¹

The Committee also heard from Ms Moran that it would have assisted the early childhood and care sector if better COVID-19 safety plan templates had been developed:

Ms MORAN - It would have been helpful if there had been templates developed so if you are a 20-place service and your configuration looked like this, then these are the risks and this is what you should look at. But, if you are a 150-place service and your configuration looks like this, it may be something entirely different in those risk minimisation plans and COVID- 19 plans, rather than services having to start from scratch.

Mr TUCKER - I understand what you're saying. Instead of having the same template for both, what you are saying is to have a broader template to start with.

Ms MORAN - Yes, and you can drill down. Services are used to doing that in their usual risk minimisation plans. It was because it was something that hadn't been experienced before and needed that extra level of vigilance.⁹²

⁹¹ See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.7-8 (ECA)

⁹² See Transcript of Evidence [Public Hearings \(2 November 2022\) - \(Various\)](#), p.6 (ECA)

Committee Findings

- F52. The opening of the Tasmanian border on 15 December 2021 put pressures on early education care services that operated during the Christmas and January 2022 period.
- F53. The emergence of cases of COVID-19 in the early education and care sector began as soon as the borders opened and many were under-prepared.
- F54. Inconsistent provision of rapid antigen tests exacerbated the challenges faced by early education and care centres.
- F55. Inconsistent rapid antigen tests supply meant that many early education and care centres had to purchase their own in a time of high demand and low supply.
- F56. Early Childhood Education and Care had unique challenges to face during COVID-19, including the importance of remaining open to enable essential workers, and others, to continue to work.
- F57. The COVID-19 safety plan templates did not adequately address unique early education and care settings, including the varying sizes of centres.
- F58. The Federal Government's decision to waive the gap fee was a welcome initiative for parents, however this decision impacted the financial positions and profitability of Early Childhood Education and Care providers.

Committee Recommendations

- R17. Acknowledging the early education and care sector operates during school term breaks, the Government ensure the sector is included in any State pandemic preparedness planning.

Summary of Attachments

Attachment A	National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care
Attachment B	School Reopening 20 January 2022
Attachment C	Education and Care and School Operational Plans
Attachment D	COVIDsafe Schools Plan (Weeks 6 - 10)

Attachment A - National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care

National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care

January 2022

In 2019, Australian Governments set out our shared vision for Australia's education system in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. Our vision is for a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face. Since Term 1 2020, our children have experienced unprecedented challenges, as they live and learn in a world with COVID-19.

Evidence throughout the COVID-19 pandemic continues to demonstrate the vast majority of children who develop COVID-19 experience mild disease of short duration. This National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) aims to ensure children can return in Term 1 2022 and continue to attend ECEC, primary and secondary school, and outside of school hours care in the context of COVID-19. The Framework also complements ongoing workforce participation at a time of workforce pressure in many sectors.

Framework Objectives



Keeping ECEC and schools open is important to children's learning, social and emotional development, wellbeing, physical and mental health. Children benefit most from face-to-face learning and further interruptions should be avoided, where possible. ECEC and school closures also often come with significant societal and economic costs, including hidden impacts on the mental health of families, the safety of children and the ability of families to participate in the workforce. Australian businesses and industry are affected in instances where families are unable to attend work due to ECEC and school closures, which can create ongoing disruptions to Australia's ability to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

With high levels of community transmission, COVID-19 transmission will occur in education settings and contribute to overall levels of community transmission. While this will present challenges for both staff and students, the National Cabinet agreed ECEC and schools are essential services and their ability to operate and remain open should be prioritised above other community settings where disease transmission occurs.

The objectives of this Framework are to:

- Protect vulnerable children and staff at higher risk of severe disease within ECEC and schools, including those with disability or severe chronic health conditions.
- Minimise disruption to face-to-face learning from COVID-19 transmission in ECEC and schools, because of the mental and physical health, and social development advantages from ECEC and school participation.
- Minimise broader community transmission and keep it within the capacity of the health system.
- Minimise the broader workforce disruptions for parents and carers.

Framework Approach



While the Framework's objectives and guiding principles are predominantly aimed at ensuring national consistency, specific measures will be implemented through individual State and Territory operational plans and through localised arrangements within ECEC services and schools. These measures will be updated on an ongoing basis as local and international evidence and operational research on Omicron and other variants of concern increases.

Australia's Omicron epidemic is expected to peak in individual jurisdictions at different times in the first weeks and months of 2022. State and Territory operational plans will consider local outbreak trajectories and local health system capacity. While the timing and specific implementation arrangements of jurisdictions may differ, the principles agreed to in this Framework form a consistent basis for State and Territory operational planning and support continuity of education in Term 1 2022 and beyond.

Early childhood learners have experienced similar disruption to school-aged students, noting some childcare and preschool services are co-located with schools. Ongoing access to quality early childhood education and outside of school hours care is necessary for the best start to learning and for many families to participate in the workforce. It is expected the application of these principles will need to be tailored for this sector. The Commonwealth will undertake further work with States and Territories to address the unique circumstances of the ECEC sector, for example guidance on workforce and regulatory requirements that maintain the primacy of child safety.

The principles in this Framework recognise different education settings are impacted differently by COVID-19:

- Children aged 0 to 4 years are not currently eligible for COVID-19 vaccination, reinforcing the need to prioritise prevention strategies in ECEC settings. It is acknowledged that depending on both eligibility for vaccination and vaccination rates, there may be a mix of vaccinated and unvaccinated children in any given education setting.
- For most of Term 1 2022, the difference between primary and secondary school settings will be more marked as it will take time to build strong vaccination coverage of children aged 5 to 11 years.
- In secondary schools, the majority of the student and teacher population is already double vaccinated. This means secondary school environments are currently more comparable to other community settings and workplaces, noting that boosters are progressively becoming available for ages 18 and over but are not yet approved for any groups under 18.
- In every education setting, there will be some subsets of the population, like in the broader community, who are at higher risk of severe disease. A proportionate response in individual State and Territory operational plans and

through localised arrangements within ECEC services and schools will see additional supports provided in these settings and population groups.

National Guiding Principles for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care

 <p>Principle 1 ECEC services and schools are essential and should be the first to open and last to close wherever possible in outbreak situations, with face-to-face learning prioritised*</p>	 <p>Principle 2 Baseline public health measures continue to apply</p>	 <p>Principle 3 No vulnerable child or child of an essential worker is turned away</p>	 <p>Principle 4 Responses to be proportionate and health risk-based</p>	 <p>Principle 5 Equip ECEC services and schools to respond on the basis of public health advice and with support from public health authorities where required</p>	 <p>Principle 6 Wellbeing of children and education staff to be supported</p>
<p>Children are entitled to an education. ECEC and schools are essential and should remain open wherever possible to maximise their wide-ranging benefits for children, the community and the economy.</p> <p>By the start of Term 1 2022, school and ECEC workers will be designated as essential workers in jurisdictions.</p> <p>Education systems should support schools to ensure individual student learning can continue through periods of isolation-related absenteeism</p> <p>Arrangements should seek to maintain a reasonable workload for teachers and educators, particularly when balancing face-to-face and remote learning environments.</p> <p>Remote learning should be considered as a time-limited last resort within schools experiencing widespread COVID-19 infections or staff absenteeism that impacts the school's operations.</p>	<p>ECEC services and schools should practice and promote evidence-based COVID-Safe behaviours at all times, irrespective of the level of COVID-19 community transmission.</p> <p>While recognising the exact combination and nature of COVID-Safe behaviours – such as hand washing, face masks, physical distancing and ventilation – in ECEC may look different to school settings, it is important for all education settings to adopt a multi-layered prevention strategy and, in all cases, persons must stay at home if experiencing COVID-19 symptoms or if required to isolate in line with the jurisdiction's health advice.</p> <p>Vaccination of all eligible persons is strongly encouraged.</p>	<p>Localised school planning must ensure a minimum offering of on-campus supervised learning is available at all times in the school term to the children of parents and carers who need to work and cannot support remote learning at the same time (e.g. frontline and essential workers), and for vulnerable children and young people.</p> <p>While ECEC services may sometimes close, during times of reduced service levels ECEC services should similarly prioritise children using these criteria.</p> <p>Provision for this has been standard practice throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>	<p>All responses to COVID-19 outbreaks in ECEC and schools should be proportionate and informed by the latest health advice, practical implementation requirements and the individual risk profile of different education settings.</p> <p>Responses will need to evolve to adapt to the changing nature of the pandemic. Response settings may need to be more stringent in those ECEC services and schools where there are more children at high risk of severe disease, including children with disability or severe chronic health conditions, or unvaccinated, and public health authorities will prioritise these settings in line with a proportionate and health risk-based approach.</p> <p>Clear and timely communication to members of the ECEC service or school community should explain these considerations when responses are implemented, for example, school or class-based notifications to families.</p>	<p>Education systems will continue to support ECEC services and schools as appropriate to implement State and Territory operational plans, which will be informed by public health authorities and updated to reflect the changing nature of COVID-19 as required.</p> <p>Plans will consider any additional training or capacity building needed.</p> <p>Public health authorities may intervene where an outbreak is beyond an ECEC service or schools' capacity to respond. Data collection and sharing will be critical.</p> <p>Communication between ECEC services or schools and public health authorities, and data collection and sharing at the local level, will enable States and Territories to ensure local consistency, and determine the relationship between transmission of COVID-19 in ECEC services or schools and broader community transmission, and adjust jurisdictional plans accordingly.</p>	<p>The health, safety and wellbeing of children, teachers and their families is critical to the successful operation of ECEC and school systems and the delivery of quality education.</p> <p>ECEC and schools should continue to meet regulatory requirements, including through addressing workforce shortages, wherever possible, and noting the Commonwealth will undertake further work with States and Territories on ECEC workforce requirements.</p> <p>Staff and student wellbeing will continue to require close attention and support.</p> <p>Clear, consistent and timely communication should continue to be a priority, particularly about the step-change that likely transmission of Omicron in ECEC services and schools requires, giving certainty and confidence to children, students, staff and their families about the COVID-19 response measures outlined in State and Territory operational plans.</p>

* The Queensland and South Australian Governments have delayed the start of their school years by two weeks due to the forecast peaks of the virus in the states. These schools will still be open for the children of essential workers.

Attachment B - School Reopening 20 January 2022

Tasmania's Operational Plan for Managing COVID-19 in Early Childhood Education and Care

To be in place for the first 5 weeks of Term 1*

* Plan to be regularly reviewed to ensure it remains contemporary, complies with Public Health advice and continues to provide the best protection for children.

Principle I - ECEC Services and schools are essential and should be the first to open and last to close wherever possible in outbreak situations, with face-to-face learning prioritised

Services remain open unless it is unsafe to do so or they are directed by Public Health or other regulatory body to close.

Where possible, partial closure for ECEC is preferred over full closure.

Where the service, or a part of the service, has closed, it is because educator to child ratios cannot be safely met. Services are encouraged to explore all options to remain open.

Educators are essential workers and can continue to work unless they are symptomatic, a positive case or a close contact.

To support this, services will have their [COVID-19-Safety Plans](#) and case and outbreak management plans in place.

COVID safe behaviours are clearly communicated and encouraged for all staff and families.

Services will conduct COVID safe risk assessments before undertaking excursions.

Mandated vaccination for all staff will continue, and boosters are encouraged.

The Australian Government has allowed ECEC services to [waive gap fees](#) for families who access the [Child Care Subsidy](#) (CCS) in the event that the area they are in is declared a COVID-19 hotspot by the Commonwealth for more than seven days.

ECEC services have business continuity plans in place.

Long Day Care may provide remote learning for 4-5 year-olds depending on the services' individual capacity.

Outside School Hours services that are co-located in schools are to be aware of the school's COVID Safety plan and outbreak management plan.

An Outside School Hours Care service that operates on a school campus will be required to close if the school is directed to close.

Family Day Care (FDC) services and educators have risk assessments in place and COVID Safe Plans. FDC educators minimise contact with family members/visitors during operational hours. An FDC educator cannot provide their usual service if they, or a member of their immediate household, is quarantining or isolating.

In Home Care (IHC) educators cannot provide their usual service if they, or a member of their immediate household, is quarantining or isolating.

Principle 2 – Baseline public health measures continue to apply

[COVID Safe](#) measures will be in place across all services, in line with public health advice.

All services have a range of complementary health measures in place and actively encourage COVID Safe behaviour.

Stay Home if Unwell

Children, staff and families must stay home if unwell or if they have symptoms of COVID-19.

Children, staff and families must stay home if isolating if they have COVID symptoms or quarantining as a household or household-like close contact.

If a child becomes symptomatic while in education and care, isolate the child and contact families to collect them as soon as possible.

If a staff member is symptomatic, they must leave the service immediately, get tested and follow Public Health advice.

Handwashing and Hygiene

Increased hygiene and handwashing:

- Regular handwashing is promoted, and handwashing and sanitising products are available in all services.

Cleaning

Increased COVID-19 safe cleaning is in place at all services; including

- Additional disinfecting of high touch point surfaces.

Physical Distancing

Physical distancing and density requirements help to reduce the spread of Covid-19.

- All staff and families entering the service must stay 1.5 metres apart and abide by density requirements, such as maximum room capacity advice.
- Minimise cross contact where possible:
 - Keep children within their cohorts
 - Keep educators with the same cohorts of children

Facemasks

[Facemasks](#) are required to be worn indoors by all staff and families entering the service.

Each service has a supply of surgical masks on reserve.

Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs)

ACOVID Care Package for ECEC services will include an initial supply of RATs for use by ECEC staff if they are symptomatic.





Ventilation

Opening windows and doors to increase natural airflow. Education and care will happen outdoors where possible.

Vaccination

[Vaccination](#) is the best way to reduce the severity of COVID-19 symptoms and the likelihood of contracting the virus.

- Vaccination is mandatory for all workers in the ECEC sector.
- Children under 5 years old are not vaccinated. Evidence says that their symptoms are milder and they are less likely to develop severe illness.
- Children over 5 years old are strongly encouraged to be vaccinated.

Parent, Carer and Visitor Access

Minimising the number of people who come inside buildings helps to minimise transmission.

- Use the [Check-in TAS](#) app.
- Parents and carers may enter buildings where necessary, but must wear a mask
- Drop-off and pick up times are based on risk assessment and taking into consideration individual context/s.

Excursions

Services will conduct COVID-19 safe risk assessments before undertaking excursions.

Communications

Communication strategies are in place for contacting close contacts.



Principle 3 - No vulnerable child or child of an essential worker is turned away

Children who are vulnerable, or children of essential workers, have priority for education and care.

Medical management plans and risk minimisation plans are in place for children with specific health care needs.

Risk minimisation plans are in place for educators with medical exemptions and other health conditions.



Principle 4 - Responses to be proportionate and health-risk based

All responses to COVID-19 outbreaks will be guided by the latest advice from Public Health.

ECEC services are continuing to communicate regularly with families.

Stay Home if Unwell

Children, staff and families must stay home if they have symptoms of COVID-19 and follow Public Health advice.

ECEC services will be provided with two Rapid Antigen Tests per educator to support testing of symptomatic educators during Feb/March.

Positive cases can return to their ECEC setting after 7 days if they have no symptoms, or 10 days if they still have symptoms. They must be symptom free prior to returning.

ECEC services must inform all parents, carers and staff where a positive case has attended and direct them to monitor for symptoms and follow Public Health advice.



Principle 5 - Schools and early childhood services will be equipped with public health advice

Equip ECEC services and schools to respond on the basis of public health advice and with support from public health authorities where required.

The Regulatory Authority (RA) will continue to work with Public Health to support ECEC services.

The RA will inform Public Health of daily notifications of positive cases. Public Health will support services if an outbreak happens.

ECEC services will consider any additional training and capacity building that is needed to support staff.



Principle 6 - Wellbeing of children and education staff to be supported

Services continue to prioritise staff and children's wellbeing.

Requirements under the *Education and Care Services National Law Act and Regulations* ensure that children's health, safety and well-being are met.

Work Health and Safety regulations relating to a safe workplace continue to be met as a high priority.

Staff and families are provided with relevant and current information around COVID Safe requirements.

Workforce planning is ongoing, including communication between the State and Commonwealth on workforce initiatives and funding opportunities.

COVID Safety in Schools Plan

To be in place for the first 5 weeks of Term 1*



Educators, School-based Staff and Early Childhood Education & Care Staff

- Leverage wider pool of educators (trained departmental and retired staff) to assist with teaching continuity, in the first instance and if required.
- Exemption from close contact quarantine protocols to attend work, unless symptomatic or a diagnosed case.
- Undertake Rapid Antigen Tests when symptomatic.
- Access to a supply of masks, which must be worn when teaching indoors, except if clear enunciation is required.

Schools and Early Childhood Education & Care

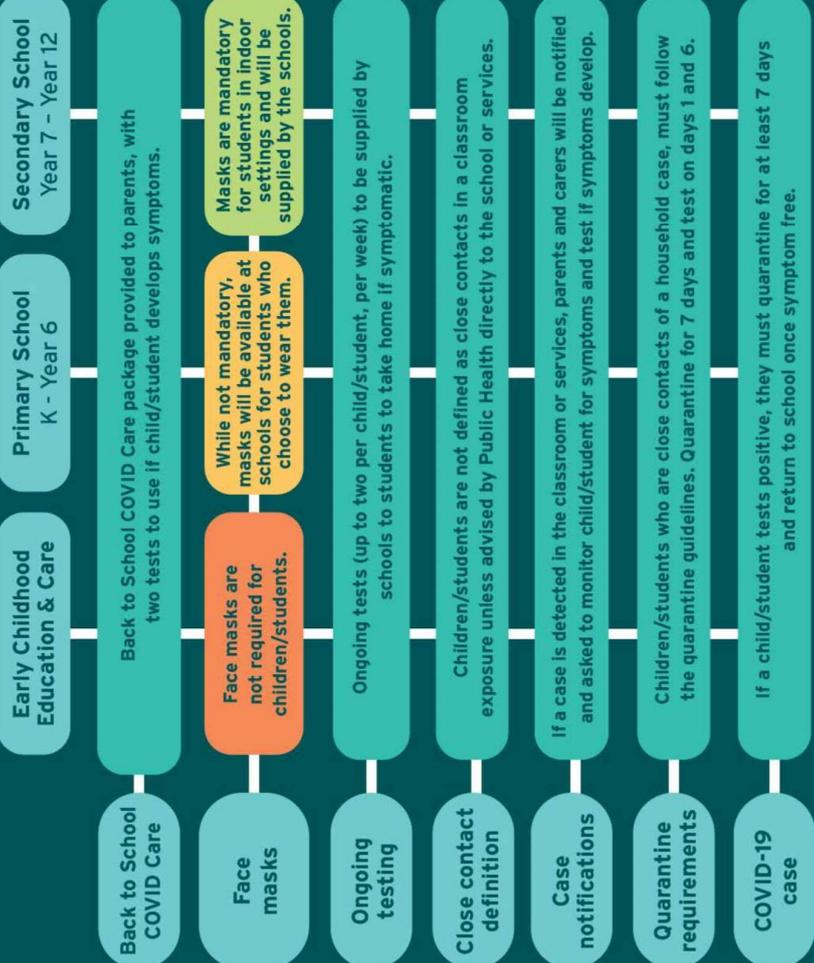
- Provided a supply of masks for educators and children/students.
- Supplied with Rapid Antigen Tests (enough for two per student, per week, should they be required).
- Virtual Learning approaches in place to support students required to isolate.
- Outbreak Management Plans in place. A class outbreak is determined when five or more cases occur in students and staff from a class within 7 days of each other, with Public Health to support if and when required. In most circumstances when this occurs, staff and students from that classroom would be tested immediately and then every 2 - 3 days, quarantining only if symptomatic or positive.
- Increased ventilation.
- Outdoor learning to be optimised.
- Breaks to be staggered where required.
- Increased COVID-19 safe cleaning is in place at all schools.
- Dedicated education COVID liaison for schools, early childhood education & care to contact:
P: 1800 816 057 E: COVID19support@education.tas.gov.au
W: www.education.tas.gov.au

School Sport, Activities and Excursions

- To progress as normal, with COVID safe practices in place.
- Masks are not worn when outdoors.
- Masks are not worn when undertaking vigorous physical activity indoors.

Vulnerable students

- Schools will prepare a personalised approach to support students with disability, complex health needs or who are medically vulnerable, prior to the student commencing school. In consultation with parents/carers.



Keep practising these COVID safe behaviours

- wear masks where required
- symptoms? get tested
- stay home if sick
- stay up to date

* Plan to be regularly reviewed to ensure it remains contemporary, complies with Public Health advice and continues to provide the best protection for children.

Tasmania's Operational Plan for Managing COVID-19 in Schools

To be in place for the first 5 weeks of Term 1*

* Plan to be regularly reviewed to ensure it remains contemporary, complies with Public Health advice and continues to provide the best protection for children.

Principle I - ECEC services and schools are essential and should be the first to open and last to close wherever possible in outbreak situations, with face-to-face learning prioritised.

Learners

To keep our learners and staff as safe as possible, COVID Safe measures will be in place in our schools in line with public health advice. These measures build on what schools are already doing.

COVID Safe measures include:

- Hygiene and physical distancing;
- Vaccination;
- Ventilation and use of outdoor learning environments;
- Safe site management;
- Face masks; and
- Outbreak management plans.

All students should be at school unless they:

- are unwell or have symptoms of COVID-19;
- have medical advice which states they are unable to return to school due to an ongoing medical condition; or
- have been directed to stay home by Public Health.

Schools will continue to support students and young people with disability and those who are medically vulnerable on an individual basis, working closely with parents and carers. Schools will contact families of students with disability who have complex health needs within the first teaching week to discuss updating their individualised learning plan as a priority.

Parents can contact schools to discuss their child's individual learning plan.

Launching into Learning (LiL)

LiL will not occur for the first five weeks of Term 1 to enable LiL teachers to support teaching and learning across the school.

Staff

The Department of Education is proactively reviewing its workforce to identify pressure points and put in place strategies to cover expected absences. This includes:

- contacting recently retired school staff
- revisiting long leave requests
- deploying staff from non-school areas, including both registered teachers and general staff; and
- using relief staff.





The Department of Education, the Tasmanian Catholic Education Office and Independent Schools Tasmania will advise schools on strategies to manage workforce absences to ensure face-to-face learning continues.

Virtual Learning

- The DoE Virtual Learning Centre (VLC) is an online learning service accessible by families, principals, teachers and learners.
- Where possible, schools will support learners to come to school and learn under the supervision of their classroom teacher. When this is not possible, schools will communicate to parents about the resources to support learners and this may include the VLC.
- During Term 1, all learners needing access to VLC will be supported to access high quality online programs focussing on core areas of reading, writing, numbers, physical activity and wellbeing.
- All learners in Years 11 and 12 will have access to a wide range of courses through Virtual Learning Tasmania (VLT) and online tutorials in English and Maths.
- Essential communication will be provided to all staff regarding access to virtual learning resources prior to students returning.

The Department of Education is working with the Catholic and Independent school sectors to align the approach to virtual learning. A separate approach will be in place for Support Schools.

Principle 2 - Baseline public health measures continue to apply.

[COVID Safe](#) measures will be in place across all schools in line with public health advice, with all schools actively encouraging COVID Safe behaviour.

Attendance and Cleaning

Students, staff and visitors must stay home if unwell or if they have symptoms of COVID-19.

Students, staff and visitors must stay home if isolating if they have COVID or quarantining as a household or household-like close contact.

All schools will continue increased hygiene and handwashing. Hand washing and sanitising product are available in all schools.

All schools will continue increased COVID-19 safe cleaning including additional disinfecting of high touch point surfaces, increasing ventilation following a positive case.

Physical Distancing

Physical distancing and density requirements help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

- All staff and visitors must stay 1.5 metres apart and comply with density requirements such as maximum room capacity advice. Staff will limit unnecessary mixing.
- COVID-safe measures will be applied in staff rooms and offices, and students will be supported to physically distance *where possible*.
- Schools will limit unnecessary mixing between class groups where this is not required for learning.

Facemasks

[Facemasks](#) are required indoors by all staff, parents, visitors and students in secondary schools.

- Primary school students are not required to wear masks but they will be available at the school should they choose to wear them.
- Staff, parents and visitors to school sites are **required** to wear a mask indoors.
- Each school has a supply of surgical masks for staff and students.

Ventilation

Natural airflow will be increased by opening windows and doors and learning outdoors where possible.

- Windows in Government schools have been assessed and repaired where needed to ensure they can be opened.
- All Government schools have been provided with air purifiers to assist with increased ventilation where required.
- Periodic maintenance of air conditioners and air purifiers is ongoing, including the replacement of air filters.
- Work is occurring in Government schools to identify further opportunities for outdoor learning and to enhance existing outdoor learning areas.

Vaccination

Vaccination is the best way to reduce the severity of COVID-19 symptoms and the likelihood of contracting the virus.

- All DoE staff must be vaccinated and are supported to be vaccinated.
- A primary course involves two doses for most staff.
- All staff will be supported to receive booster doses.
- Students are strongly encouraged to be vaccinated.
- Contactors and volunteers must be vaccinated to work on Government school sites.
- Schools will not treat students differently based on their vaccination status.
- Non-government school sectors are responsible for setting their own vaccination requirements as informed by Public Health advice.

Outbreak Management

COVID safety plans are being updated. Specific outbreak management plans for the first 5 weeks of schools are being updated in accordance with Public Health advice and communicated to schools. A class outbreak is determined when five or more cases occur in students and staff from a class within 7 days of each other with Public Health to support if and when required. In most circumstances when this occurs, staff and students from that classroom would be tested immediately and then every 2 - 3 days, quarantining only is symptomatic or positive.

Parent, Carer and Visitor Access

Minimising the number of people who come inside school buildings helps minimise transmission.

Parents and carers must be vaccinated to attend government school sites and must wear a mask indoors and should only enter school buildings where necessary. All adults must continue to use the [Check-in TAS](#) app.

Drop off and / pick up for students will be streamlined - stop, drop and go - and schools will advise on meetings with teachers.

Assemblies and Performances

Restrictions may apply due to Public Health requirements such as density limits. This will include limiting assemblies in Government schools in the first five weeks of Term 1. Outside learning is encouraged where possible.

Mixing of Learner Groups

All schools are encouraged to limit mixing between different student groups where this is not required for learning purposes. Schools are encouraged to limit unnecessary mixing between staff where this is not required for learning.



Principle 3

No vulnerable child or child of an essential worker is turned away

Term 1 is commencing on time with all schools open for face-to-face learning.

The Government is coordinating efforts across agencies to ensure that all Tasmania's children and young people are safe, well and actively engaged in learning.

The Department of Education works closely with other agencies to support vulnerable students to access, participate and engage in their learning.

School Support and Wellbeing Teams will continue to support the wellbeing of all students, with a particular focus on those students with diverse and complex needs requiring coordinated support.

It is a priority that school sites across all sectors remain open for vulnerable children and children of essential workers to attend. However, they should not attend if they are feeling unwell, have medical advice which states they are unable to return to school due to an ongoing medical condition, or they have been directed to stay home by Public Health.

Ongoing guidance and advice will be provided to schools based on Public Health advice.

Principle 4 - Responses to be proportionate and health-risk based.

This plan applies for the first five weeks of Term 1. This will allow proportionate adjustments to be made in the second five weeks of Term 1 based on the extent of community transmission and increased vaccination rates of students.

The plan for weeks 1 to 5 of Term 1 will be communicated to learners, parents, families and staff in advance. It will include advice on when their school or learning may look different.

Communication with students and families will come from their school. For Government schools, this will be supported by DoE advice and messages.

Back to School COVID Care Package

All learners will receive a COVID-19 Care Package to support their return to school. This will include:

- an initial two Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) per student, to be used if symptomatic
- masks; and
- important practical information for learners and parents/carers.

These will be provided to families through their child's school before school returns.

Schools will also be supplied with Rapid Antigen Tests for use by staff if they are symptomatic.

Schools will also be provided with additional supplies of RATs for use by students and staff if they are symptomatic.

Stay Home if Unwell

Students, staff and visitors must stay home if unwell or if they have symptoms of COVID-19.

Confirmed Cases and Outbreak Management

Parents/carers and staff will be informed if there is a case in a class and will be asked to monitor their child for symptoms, test if needed and stay home if unwell. Unless otherwise advised, the class will remain open for learning and students who are well should continue to attend.

Specific outbreak management plans for the first 5 weeks of schools are being updated in accordance with Public Health advice and communicated to schools. A class outbreak is determined when five or more cases occur in students and staff from a class within 7 days of each other with Public Health to support if and when required. In most circumstances when this occurs, staff and students from that classroom would be tested immediately and then every 2 - 3 days, quarantining only is symptomatic or positive. Notifications to families regarding cases and outbreaks will utilise existing communication channels used by schools.

The Department has continued to support a number of students and young people with disability to continue to learn throughout the COVID pandemic, including making adjustments to learning and implementing Medical Action Plans where appropriate.

Students with disability with complex health needs will continue to be supported on an individual basis, working closely with parents and carers as necessary. This could include additional medical advice within the student's medical action plan.





Principle 5 - Equip ECEC services and schools to respond on the basis of public health advice and with support from public health authorities where required

The Department of Education will support schools to revise their COVID plans, according to Public Health advice.

Staff, learners and their families will be provided with clear advice on what to do if they are considered a close contact in line with Public Health advice.

DoE will assist schools to distribute RATs for students for the first week of Term 1, and with further supplies for use when confirmed cases occur in a school.

A dedicated support team has been established in the Department of Health. Staff will assist DoE, CET and IST and schools to manage the distribution of RATs, testing and implementation of Outbreak Management Plans.

Confirmed cases in schools will be managed in accordance with Public Health advice.

Government schools will communicate with Early Childhood Education and Care providers who operate on school sites to ensure a co-ordinated approach to managing confirmed cases, in accordance with Public Health advice.

Principle 6 - Wellbeing of children and education staff to be supported

The wellbeing of learners in government schools will be supported by:

- each school's Support and Wellbeing Team monitoring students' wellbeing and determining the required supports to meet each student's individual needs.
- the online *Wellbeing Check-in*.
- the Department's Professional Support Staff teams, including school psychologists, social workers, speech and language pathologists and school nurses who will continue to provide both face-to-face and online support, for students learning on site and from home as required, and
- the Virtual Learning Centre where students and families will be able to access Wellbeing resources.

Catholic and independent school sectors also have in place approaches to support the wellbeing of their students and staff.

Staff Wellbeing/Workload

- DoE will provide clear guidance and supports for teaching and learning in different scenarios, with workload principles factored in (*Principle 1*).
- System level workforce planning will occur to support school planning to ensure we can continue to keep learners safe and learning throughout COVID-related staff shortages.
- DoE will communicate clearly with staff on expectations, processes, planning and resources related to COVID, including the resources available to support student learning and wellbeing.
- DoE will communicate leave available to support all staff through COVID-related absences.
- DoE will consistently promote staff mental health and wellbeing, with supports available. This includes guidance and strategies to support principals and line managers in schools to hold staff wellbeing check-ins/conversations and make referrals to supports as needed.



COVID Safety in Schools Plan

To be in place for the first 5 weeks of Term 1*



Educators, School-based Staff and Early Childhood Education & Care Staff

- Leverage wider pool of educators (trained departmental and retired staff) to assist with teaching continuity, in the first instance and if required.
- Exemption from close contact quarantine protocols to attend work, unless symptomatic or a diagnosed case.
- Undertake Rapid Antigen Tests when symptomatic.
- Access to a supply of masks, which must be worn when teaching indoors, except if clear enunciation is required.

Schools and Early Childhood Education & Care

- Provided a supply of masks for educators and children/students.
- Supplied with Rapid Antigen Tests (enough for two per student, per week, should they be required).
- Virtual Learning approaches in place to support students required to isolate.
- Outbreak Management Plans in place. A class outbreak is determined when five or more cases occur in students and staff from a class within 7 days of each other, with Public Health to support if and when required. In most circumstances when this occurs, staff and students from that classroom would be tested immediately and then every 2 - 3 days, quarantining only if symptomatic or positive.
- Increased ventilation.
- Outdoor learning to be optimised.
- Breaks to be staggered where required.
- Increased COVID-19 safe cleaning is in place at all schools.
- **Dedicated education COVID liaison for schools, early childhood education & care to contact:**
P: 1800 816 057 E: COVID19support@education.tas.gov.au
W: www.education.tas.gov.au

School Sport, Activities and Excursions

- To progress as normal, with COVID safe practices in place.
- Masks are not worn when outdoors.
- Masks are not worn when undertaking vigorous physical activity indoors.

Vulnerable students

- Schools will prepare a personalised approach to support students with disability, complex health needs or who are medically vulnerable, prior to the student commencing school, in consultation with parents/carers.

Early Childhood Education & Care

Primary School K - Year 6

Secondary School Year 7 - Year 12

Back to School COVID Care

Back to School COVID Care package provided to parents, with two tests to use if child/student develops symptoms.

Face masks

Face masks are not required for children/students.

While not mandatory, masks will be available at schools for students who choose to wear them.

Masks are mandatory for students in indoor settings and will be supplied by the schools.

Ongoing testing

Ongoing tests (up to two per child/student, per week) to be supplied by schools to students to take home if symptomatic.

Close contact definition

Children/students are not defined as close contacts in a classroom exposure unless advised by Public Health directly to the school or services.

Case notifications

If a case is detected in the classroom or services, parents and carers will be notified and asked to monitor child/student for symptoms and test if symptoms develop.

Quarantine requirements

Children/students who are close contacts of a household case, must follow the quarantine guidelines. Quarantine for 7 days and test on days 1 and 6.

COVID-19 case

If a child/student tests positive, they must quarantine for at least 7 days and return to school once symptom free.

Keep practising these COVID safe behaviours



wear masks where required



symptoms? get tested



stay home if sick

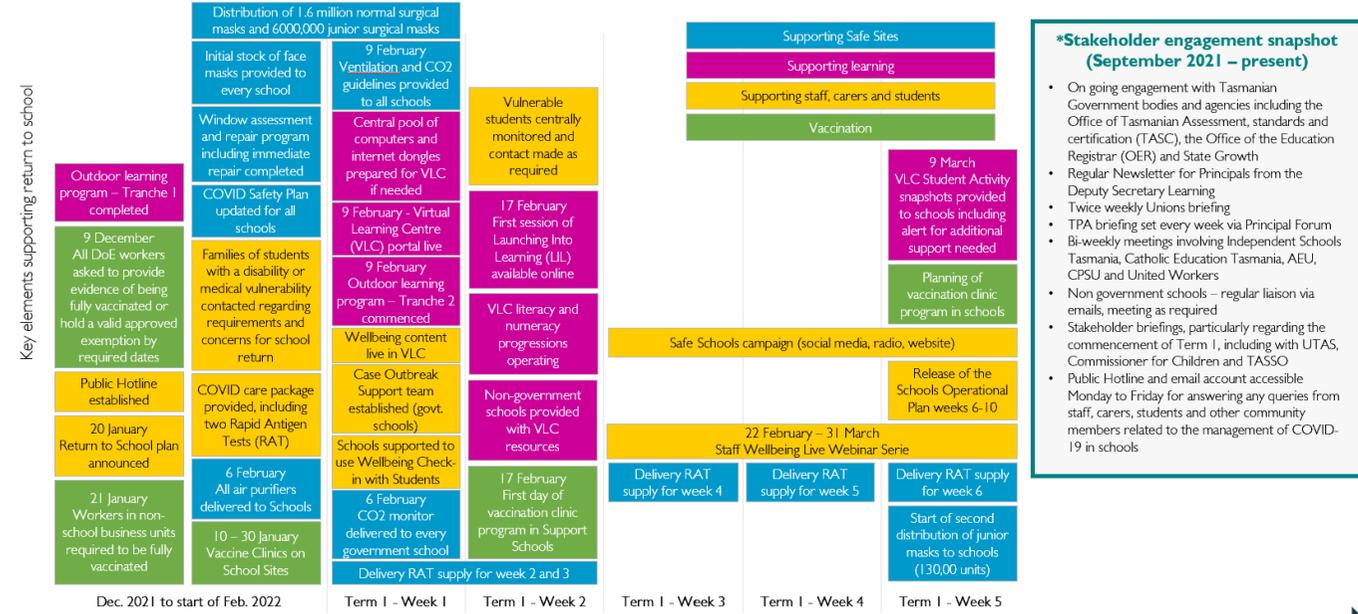


stay up to date

Attachment C – Education and Care and School Operational Plans

Department of Education Tasmania

Summary of activity to support the return to school



- *Stakeholder engagement snapshot (September 2021 – present)**
- On going engagement with Tasmanian Government bodies and agencies including the Office of Tasmanian Assessment, standards and certification (TASC), the Office of the Education Registrar (OER) and State Growth
 - Regular Newsletter for Principals from the Deputy Secretary Learning
 - Twice weekly Unions briefing
 - TPA briefing set every week via Principal Forum
 - Bi-weekly meetings involving Independent Schools Tasmania, Catholic Education Tasmania, AEU, CPSU and United Workers
 - Non government schools – regular liaison via emails, meeting as required
 - Stakeholder briefings, particularly regarding the commencement of Term 1, including with UTAS, Commissioner for Children and TASSO
 - Public Hotline and email account accessible Monday to Friday for answering any queries from staff, carers, students and other community members related to the management of COVID-19 in schools

CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT with key STAKEHOLDERS*



Attachment D - COVIDsafe Schools Plan (Wks 6 - 10)

COVID-safe schools plan

Weeks 6-10, Term 1, 2022

KEEP IT

COVID
safe

Being at school is the best place for our students. The first five weeks of school has shown us that when we work together and have COVID-safe measures in place, our schools can safely stay open and student learning thrives. This is our plan for Tasmanian Government schools for the rest of Term 1, 2022 - to keep our schools safe and make every day of learning count.

Commencing 15 March ▶ Week 6 ▶ Week 7 ▶ Week 8 ▶ Week 9 ▶ Week 10 ▶ **Review and continue future planning**

Early childhood services
(including childcare programs and
Out of School Hours Care)

Primary schools
(including childcare programs and
Out of School Hours Care)

Secondary schools
(including vocational placements and
school-based apprenticeships)

Face-to-face learning will continue with COVID-safe measures in place.

Students with disability that have complex health needs will continue to be supported by their school with individual learning plans.

Regular school and learning activities will continue in a COVID-safe manner.

Testing for COVID-19 when you have symptoms will continue. Students and staff will have access to rapid antigen tests at their school, to use if they have symptoms. If there is a COVID-19 case in your child's classroom, your school will let you know and ask you to monitor for symptoms - you do not need to isolate and can continue going to school. If your child is unwell, please keep them home and get tested.

COVID-19 cases will be safely managed by Public Health. Every school has a dedicated COVID-19 support person, who works closely with Public Health if there are COVID-19 cases. Families will be contacted directly about any COVID-19 impacts at their school.

Learning at home via the Virtual Learning Centre with the support of an online teacher will continue if students need to isolate due to COVID-19. If your child is a household close contact, they can do online learning while isolating at home for seven days. If your child is a COVID-19 case, they can do online learning if they feel well, and return to school if they have no symptoms after seven days.

Workforce planning strategies are in place to ensure there are enough staff in schools.

Keeping up our COVID-safe measures (they're important)



Vaccination:

Children aged 5+ years will continue to be encouraged to be vaccinated - vaccination is not mandatory for a child to attend school. All Department of Education staff, including volunteers and contractors, are vaccinated.



Face masks:

All adults will continue to wear face masks, however, teachers may remove their masks if required to assist clear communication when teaching (for example, to meet the needs of a student with disability). Primary school students still do not need to wear face masks, but can if they choose. Secondary school students must continue to wear face masks. Medical exemptions apply. Face masks are available at school, if needed.



Ventilation:

Open windows and air purifiers will continue to be used in classrooms.



Outdoor learning:

Schools will continue to take advantage of outdoor learning opportunities.



Physical distancing:

All adults will continue to keep a physical distance of 1.5 metres from each other.



Hygiene practices:

Regular handwashing and sanitising will continue.



Cleaning:

Frequent cleaning will continue, particularly on high-touch surfaces.



Safe site management:

Non-essential visitors will continue to be limited, and schools will regularly review their COVID-19 safety plans.



Groups:

Mixing of students and staff will continue to be limited where possible.

► Access the detailed operational plan at education.tas.gov.au/COVID-19