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EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND SMALL BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Members present:

Ms LM Linard MP (Chair) (via teleconference)
Mr BM Saunders MP (via teleconference)
Mrs SM Wilson MP (via teleconference)
Mr N Dametto MP (via teleconference)
Ms J Pugh MP (via teleconference)
Mr JJ McDonald MP (via teleconference)

Staff present:

Ms E Jameson (Acting Committee Secretary)
Ms A Groth (Assistant Committee Secretary)

PRIVATE BRIEFING—DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RESPONSE TO COVID-19

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

(Private)

THURSDAY, 7 MAY 2020

Brisbane

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The committee met in private at 2.01 pm.

CHAIR: Good afternoon, everyone. I now declare open this private briefing of the Education, Employment and Small Business Committee on the department's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Leanne Linard, the member for Nudgee and chair of the committee. With me today via teleconference are Mr Jim McDonald, the member for Lockyer and deputy chair; Mrs Simone Wilson, the member for Pumicestone; Mr Bruce Saunders, the member for Maryborough; Mr Nick Dametto, the member for Hinchinbrook; and Ms Jessica Pugh, the member for Mount Ommaney, who is kindly substituting for Mr Michael Healy, the member for Cairns, who sends his apologies.

For the purposes of the departmental representatives today, the purpose of this private briefing is simply to hear from representatives of the Department of Education and get an update about the impact of COVID-19 and the department's response to the pandemic. The private briefing is being recorded by Hansard and a transcript of the briefing will be provided to you for review. For your information, the committee does not intend to publish these proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath, as per normal.

ALLEN, Mr Craig, Deputy Director-General, Office of Industrial Relations, Department of Education (via teleconference)

COOK, Mr Tony, Director-General, Department of Education (via teleconference)

HUNT, Mr Jeff, Deputy Director-General, Corporate Services, Department of Education (via teleconference)

KELLY, Mr Peter, Deputy Director-General, State Schools, Department of Education (via teleconference)

CHAIR: We thank you very much for your time. We know how busy you have been. I formally welcome Mr Tony Cook, the director-general of the department. Thank you so much for joining us today to give us an update on how things are progressing. Would you like to provide an opening statement? After that, committee members will ask some questions.

Mr Cook: Thank you very much, Chair, for the invitation. Before beginning, I respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today in our various locations across the state and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee about the department's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Today I am joined by Peter Kelly, the Deputy Director-General, State Schools; Mr Jeff Hunt, the Deputy Director-General, Corporate Services; and Mr Craig Allen, the Deputy Director-General, Office of Industrial Relations.

As we are all very well aware, the last few weeks have been quite unprecedented for all of us—for the world, for Australia and also for Queensland. Throughout our response to COVID-19, the department has had a very clear focus: the health, safety and wellbeing of children, students and staff while maintaining learning continuity. All decision-making has been informed by this key goal. Central to our response has been the parents and carers of the children and students in our kindergartens and our schools. Their understanding and support have enabled us to continue to deliver learning opportunities for every child and student. However, we could not have managed our response without our principals, teachers, teacher aides, specialist support staff, cleaners, and regional and central office staff all working together. It is the critical work of each member of the school and support team that has kept schools open and safe, and for each member of staff it has been a challenging time.

As director-general, my approach has been to communicate frequently and directly to all of our staff, particularly those in schools. I also acknowledge and thank the broad range of stakeholders across the early childhood and school sectors. Keeping stakeholders informed and consulting on key decisions has been an important aspect of our approach. Every day during our response I have met
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with stakeholders. To date this has meant 30 daily teleconferences to keep all stakeholders informed of developments and respond to questions or concerns. Connecting regularly has ensured a cohesive response across schooling and early childhood, tailored to the unique needs of each sector.

As the committee would be aware, the department has significant experience in responding to emergency or disaster situations such as floods, cyclones or fires. This experience has placed the department in a good position. However, this is a very different event to manage. The key difference for the department has been managing the duration of the event and the breadth of the response that has been needed. Internally, the governance of the response is overseen by the Executive Response Team, the ERT, chaired by the Deputy Director-General of Corporate Services. The ERT is made up of senior executives from across the department and all regional directors. The ERT meets regularly and at times daily when needed. All internal communication about required actions, emerging issues and key decisions are discussed in this committee. The ERT, therefore, provides me with assurance that appropriate levels of consultation, consideration and planning are informing decision-making. I, in turn, provide that assurance to the minister. The ERT uses advice from state and national disaster management groups such as the Queensland Disaster Management Committee, the State Disaster Coordination Centre, the State Health Emergency Coordination Centre, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee and the Queensland Chief Health Officer to inform our response action in relation to COVID-19. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr Jeannette Young, Queensland's Chief Health Officer, for her ongoing support and advice. Her advice and clear communication with the education sectors and the department has been invaluable when responding to this rapidly evolving situation.

Just to take us back in terms of the history of COVID-19, the first case of COVID-19 in Queensland was on 28 January 2020, with my first message to all staff and principals issued the next day about the health directions. The ERT stood up on 2 February 2020 to align with SDCC status. The response by the department in early February was focused on contacting students and staff returning from overseas to ensure self-isolation prior to any return to school; raising awareness about the need for increased hygiene and cleaning protocols; and ensuring parents and carers, staff and students had access to accurate health information. The department's response rapidly progressed during February and early March, with a continued focus on hygiene, cleaning and isolation of those who had travelled overseas.

From mid-March, key decisions undertaken by the department included: banning all student, school and departmental related international travel; ceasing all school excursions, school camps, interschool sports and social gatherings; closing state-run school boarding facilities; allocating additional cleaning resources to schools; ceasing non-essential regulatory visits in early childhood services; and moving to remote safety compliance monitoring of workplaces. Each of these decisions has had a flow-on effect and requires significant planning to implement.

During March, work commenced on preparing online curriculum in preparation for potential learning at home options. The early decision to develop online learning resources has been the key to maintaining continuity of learning. Queensland was well positioned, as the department had invested in Curriculum into the Classroom online resources to support the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. This investment proved to be a critical platform from which to launch the learning@home resources. During March other jurisdictions in the non-state schooling sector requested access to these Queensland materials to support their response. Therefore, every state and territory education system is utilising the Queensland materials in some form.

In developing the resources to support learning from home, the department undertook the following actions: we redeployed internal staff to assist with lesson development, scripting and developing parent and carer learning guides and supporting resources; we negotiated with commercial television to develop curriculum content for broadcasts of television programs on three commercial channels, including reading and coding programs, and all three of those programs are operating this week; we opened access to the Learning Place resources to non-state schools; and we developed the learning@home site for loading of curriculum materials and making those materials available to the broader community. This has been a significant piece of work and has required a real shift in our approach to teaching and learning and how we best support schools.

During March the impacts on the early childhood sector became very apparent. Our approach was to keep in constant contact with stakeholders in the sector through regular briefings and meetings. This provided information and data for national decisions about the viability issues for providers across the sector, from long day care through to outside school hours care. On 2 April the Australian government announced a relief package for early childhood that complemented the already announced JobKeeper arrangements. This was welcomed across the sector and community.

However, a key issue for Queensland was the exclusion of community kindergartens from the arrangement. On 17 April, the Queensland government announced a \$17 million package aimed at keeping community kindergartens, an important player in the early childhood space, operating alongside schools.

In late March and early April a number of key decisions about school operations were made. These decisions were informed by health advice at both the national and the state level, internal data sources such as school attendance rates, parent and carer feedback, and advice from stakeholders and schooling sectors. These decisions included: moving to pupil-free days from the last week of term 1; learning from home arrangements for the first five weeks of term 2; arrangements for staff movements in and out of discrete Indigenous communities; arrangements for children of essential workers and vulnerable children; and the set-up of additional regional arrangements to monitor student protection and students at risk. When decisions were announced, schools commenced using the term 2 operating guidelines to develop local arrangements to support learning at home. These included teachers developing and uploading learning materials to the Learning Place platform, trialling the use of technology products like Skype and Teams to be ready to engage with students, and preparing paper based learning materials. There are many good news stories about how schools have engaged with their school communities to support students and parents during this challenging time.

On the first day of term 2, the department's website, as the committee would be aware, received 1.8 million requests in the first half hour of the school day. That was the number of hits made on our website. The significant web traffic caused the department's website to time out for some users, delaying some access. While approximately 11,000 students were still able to continue using the Learning Place for online learning during this time, for approximately three hours there were some limitations for additional users in accessing the website. The department had expanded its platform during the Easter break in preparation for anticipated demand. However, given the unprecedented level of demand, urgent action was taken overnight on 20 April to further bolster capacity, which addressed these limitations, and no further issues have occurred. The department continues to monitor and work with our partners CITEC, Microsoft and others to ensure continuity of service to meet online learning demand.

Decisions about continuity of learning could only be implemented with clear guidance and support arrangements for schools. To ensure equity, schools moved to loan devices to those students who do not have access to technology in their homes. Supplementing this, the department sourced supplies of 5,000 SIM cards and devices, with appropriate security for distribution to schools. Early action was also taken to secure the supply of critical products, including hand sanitiser, soap, cleaning products, paper towels, toilet paper and other standard office supplies, given increased demand for hard copy learning packs. The department's existing relationship with suppliers and cooperation across government meant that we were able to support schools and ensure adequate levels of supply during term 1 and into term 2. The monitoring of supply chains is also ongoing.

Throughout our response, the health, safety and wellbeing of staff has been the foundation piece of our response. Without our teams of dedicated school, regional and corporate staff, the delivery of learning from home would not have been possible. Our approach to supporting our staff has had communication at its centre, with regular updates from me throughout the event. Over 40 special director-general messages on COVID-19 have been sent to principals and school, corporate and regional staff since 29 January this year.

Actions taken to manage our workforce and continue to deliver services for Queenslanders include implementing the staff wellbeing COVID-19 strategy; deploying staff to critical business functions, both internally and externally; activating critical business continuity plans such as payroll and TRACER; maintaining employment of casuals in schools and casual payments; supporting vulnerable workers to work from home to continue their contribution to the response; and implementing working from home arrangements for non-essential staff in regional and corporate offices. Chair, I am almost finished; I am aware of the time.

As the committee would be aware, the Premier announced on Monday a staged return to schooling in light of Queensland's low transmission rates. With advice from Dr Young and consistent with the AHPPC advice to schools, kindy, prep, year 1, year 11 and year 12 students can return to school from Monday, 11 May—next Monday. This decision considered the educational evidence that supports the importance of face-to-face teaching in the early years and the critical importance of senior schooling, particularly with the transition to ATAR this year. The return-to-school approach includes measures such as physical distancing of adults, hygiene and cleaning protocols, restricting

non-essential adults to the school site, amended timetables and drop-off and pick-up arrangements. A full return is scheduled for 25 May 2020, depending on the continued rate of low transmission in Queensland.

In addition to our work in early childhood and school education, the department has also played a key role through the Office of Industrial Relations. This has included supporting employees with information about their responsibilities and providing practical advice about maintaining clean and hygienic workplaces. The office has also stood up a dedicated hotline for private sector industrial relations referrals. The Office of Industrial Relations has also worked with the Public Service Commission to ensure appropriate industrial arrangements for the Public Service to support the COVID-19 response.

In an event such as this, while the response is critical, it is important to dedicate resources to planning the longer term recovery strategies. The department has implemented an education and early childhood recovery group as part of the state's recovery governance arrangements. This group brings together stakeholders in early childhood, schooling and universities to identify the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on education in Queensland. This will include service viability, workforce implications and monitoring parental choice in driving changes to the sectors. Already this group has identified that some aspects of the COVID-19 event will not be apparent until enrolment trends for 2021 are analysed. A key aspect of this is the international student market. This is an important economic driver for Queensland and has been significantly affected in the short and medium term.

A very important part of the department's role has been an economic one. The large Capital Works Program underway provides essential employment across the state, particularly in regional areas. In 2021 we will open five new schools, have refurbished major high schools and continue to roll out a significant maintenance program. Keeping this going during this time has been a priority for the department to support Queensland's economy.

While we would all wish that the past 3½ months did not happen, there have been some really important gains made by the department in this time. The strength of our relationships with stakeholders, the capability and dedication of our staff, and our sound governance arrangements have meant we could shift our thinking and service delivery to respond to this extraordinary situation. Many of our innovations will carry forward to the new normal, and how we work to deliver high-quality learning for Queensland children and students will remain changed forever. I welcome any questions the committee may have for me or any members of my executive team.

CHAIR: I appreciate that, with such a large area of responsibility, that would have been a lot to fit into the restricted time we gave you. Thank you so much for the fulsome briefing you have given the committee. We will move now to questions. I am sure the secretariat has advised you that, following on from this briefing, we are having a briefing from the other portfolio areas. We will keep strictly to time and I will move between the different members. Director-General, I have one question for you. I will not ask more than that to make sure other members can ask a question. Before I do that, I put on record my significant thanks as a member but also as a mother for the actions of the department and all who are employed across the education sector. I can only imagine how hard you have all been working. It was interesting to hear just how many briefings you have been having. One of the pieces of feedback I was going to give was that being connected, both as a member and a mother, into the Catholic and state school sector in my electorate—I do not have any independent schools—the consistency of information between those parties clearly indicated that they were receiving a lot of information but very consistent information. Principals certainly commented to me that they felt informed. Thank you very much for your efforts in that regard.

You mentioned the recovery group's work. I am very interested—I appreciate in these early times you cannot really say a lot perhaps—in the impact of COVID-19 in respect of learning continuity in regard to the early years, who were really just learning to do their reading and writing when all of this happened, and also the grade 12s moving to ATAR. Do you have any early indications or views about what that impact may be or concerns about children catching up?

Mr Cook: Obviously a decision made by government in relation to the early years and also the seniors was based on the educational research which would say that brain development is happening the fastest and the quickest in the early years of life and then those important later years in terms of actually making decisions about pathways beyond schooling in years 11 and 12. I will contextualise it in the sense that, in reality, it has been two to three weeks when the learning has been disrupted. We are only in week 3 of term 2. We do know—and I will say this particularly as an early childhood teacher—that particularly young children are very quick to recover in relation to their learning. They are learning at home. Remember that. There are programs that teachers are actually overseeing in Brisbane

relation to what is happening. The teachers have provided learning packs—hard copy, online, virtual—and those materials are being used by parents or other people at home. We will know more about that when the children return to school next week.

My view as an educator is that, while this has been challenging and difficult, the ability for children to quickly catch up in relation to their learning will result in a slight disruption. However, I do not see it, personally myself as an educator, as being a major disrupter to their learning development. There is also research that would support this. Research has been done by John Hattie, who looked at, for example, what happened at Christchurch where they had 10 weeks of learning in which they were disrupted. The research would indicate that that disruption did not significantly impact on the outcomes of those students at the time.

We will obviously know more when the students are back at school. I am confident our teachers and our staff will be doing a lot of work. They will be assessing children when they are back in terms of where they up to with their learning and then they will continue that learning going forward.

CHAIR: We really appreciate the information. I will move now to the deputy chair.

Mr McDONALD: I would like to also place on the record my thanks to you for accepting this briefing. Thank you for being here. It is a shame we are not there in person, but I appreciate the work and the complex environment in which you have been working. In the interests of brevity, I wonder if it would be appropriate, rather than just answering this question verbally, for you to actually table the health advice that the department received in regard to the opening of schools, including the health advice provided in relation to the announcement on Monday this week.

Mr Cook: There are a few things in relation to that. The health advice is part of the national health advice. That health advice is public, so that health advice has already been made available. Other advice would have been advice that went to government. I am happy to take that on notice and have that discussion with the minister.

Mr SAUNDERS: I would like to put on the record to the director-general and staff what a wonderful job the teachers have been doing. I do not have a question. I would like to say thank you for the job they have been doing through these tough times.

Mrs WILSON: Thank you all for coming in today. What guarantees can you give that the 2020 cohort will not be placed under more pressure to achieve the desired metrics they are required to achieve?

Mr Cook: We have already provided advice to our schools in relation to assessment and reporting as a result of the changed nature of education over the last several weeks. Every school will be looking at their learning program. They will be looking at their expectations in relation to student development and they will be making amendments and changes to that based on the advice we have provided to our schools already in relation to that issue.

Mrs WILSON: Will you be able to table that information for us?

Mr Cook: No problem at all. I am happy to do that.

Mrs WILSON: Due to COVID we have seen technology issues raised during the COVID-19 classes that we are seeing in the schools. I have heard from schools that they have had some issues with technology. Are we able to say that schools across Queensland have effective technology being used by students to provide them with the compelling educational experience that they require?

Mr Cook: There are a few responses to that question. In some cases schools have made decisions to provide physical hard copy packs to their students, and that has been very welcomed by families, with some level of contact through email and using technology in that way. In other cases many schools have used a whole range of virtual technology to support their students, particularly in the senior years. Overwhelmingly, that has worked very well. I mentioned in my statement about the issue we had for a few hours with the department's website.

The other issue I would raise is that a number of schools use external software, which is not department software. They make the decision to use that software themselves. Therefore, they work with the provider of that software in relation to any limitations or concerns they may have in relation to that software. We do know—and this was a Pacific issue, I think—that Microsoft was having challenges—and I think our minister indicated that in one of her statements a few weeks ago—in relation to some of the resources used by some of our schools but also other schools across Australia and in other countries. For example, in Japan I understand the Microsoft suite of software was really struggling in terms of the number of people who are working from home more generally. We had to make contact with Microsoft and we worked with them in relation to that.

The thing we can learn from this is how well some of that online learning is actually operated. One of the things we will be taking from COVID-19, even though it had many challenges, was the opportunity for us to better use technology for supporting student learning. I have to absolutely commend our staff. Basically, they had a week to actually put together a whole program based on home learning, because at the time we did not know where we would end up in relation to COVID-19. I have to shout out very much for the incredible work that our teachers—and our parents—our support staff and our principals undertook to turn what they were doing in their classrooms into some level of home based learning, whether that be physical or through remote technology. They have done an amazing job. They have really learned quickly on the job. I cannot commend them highly enough for that work.

There is a lot of learning for us to do around that. Generally my statement would be notwithstanding some cases where schools had challenges—and we actually sent people into those schools where we could to assist them, with appropriate social distance, with some of the technology issues they had.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you for coming along today to give us a briefing on what hopefully is a situation we will never see again in our lifetime. I would also like to put on record my thanks to the department. It has been a very trying time. We have had a few things come backwards and forwards through our office where some parents have been frustrated. However, I do understand that you have done a really good job at trying to reinvent the wheel in a short time. I have had very good feedback and correspondence from my regional director. I wanted to add my support to what you are doing. I have no questions.

Ms PUGH: I note that the Minister for Education has pointed out that we are heading back to school and we are in the lucky position that we are able to do so. As a part-time homeschooler, I am super excited about that. I am a mum of a grade 5 child and a grade 2 child, so I still have a few weeks to go. We had a situation in Middle Park a few years ago where the flu went through the school and about 30 per cent of the school population was infected in a week. If you need a clean-down protocol, I can recommend you get in touch with the Middle Park school principal, because they did an amazing job cleaning that place out over the weekend and getting the kids back to school—the ones who were well enough to go. That was quite an extraordinary event a few years ago. It was in the news. It was very exciting in Middle Park for a while there.

My question is around the kids who are coming back who may not have had access to technology. They might have had those print packs or they might have parents who have been at home with them who have not been able to keep up with the workload sent home by teachers. I am assuming there are going to be some parents who, for whatever reason, just have not been in a position to assist with their children's education. I know there will be some level of assessment when the kids come back. Can you explain what will happen? Obviously, there will be some parents who have helped their kids do everything perfectly. What about those ones who have not?

Mr Cook: Thank you for the comment about the cleaning. We actually have a protocol in place in relation to cleaning. If there is a case of COVID-19 in a school when we return next week—or at any time, including today—we have protocols in place. We have strict cleaning requirements that go into place. We actually have a hygienist who signs off on the cleaning as part of that process. It would be similar to what happened a couple of years ago as well.

What a teacher would do is what they would normally do with a class of 25 students when they come back from school holidays or anything similar that might happen. Teachers will be doing assessment of students individually as well as at a class level. Then if they have identified that students need additional support in relation to learning particular concepts they will often do that through group work with groups of students. They will have teacher aides to support them and other additional support staff that would help them with that particular situation.

That is advice that we constantly provide to our schools and to our teachers, and there are materials the department offers to teachers to assist them with that as part of that process. We will be very attuned to that. We are in a very unusual situation, so teachers are very attuned to that. One of the first things they will do when the class is back in front of them is undertake that process over the first several weeks.

CHAIR: Director-General, you must have been a teacher in a previous life, because you have literally finished right on 2.30. Thank you. On behalf of the committee, I say thank you to you and all of your officers for being willing to give us an update as a portfolio committee on what is happening. We really do appreciate it. I also appreciate that there is so much information that has been made public anyway. You have been pushing that information out to keep people in the know. It has been

really lovely having access to you and your team to ask questions that we might have on our mind. I think it is fair to say on behalf of the committee: please take our thanks for the hard work back to the department. I am sure teachers will look forward to having students back. Certainly as a parent I do, and I have seen the videos. Some of them are having a lot of fun in those videos. They are certainly making learning from home a really positive experience for kids. Thanks again on behalf of the committee.

You have taken one matter on notice in respect of health advice, to have a discussion with the minister. I also note that an email came out from schools today to parents attaching the health advice from the Chief Health Officer that was depended on to open schools. It may well already have been out there, but I appreciate the deputy chair may not have received that directly himself yet. I appreciate there is a lot of that out there, but if you could confirm that, that would be lovely. If you could respond to our secretariat by 5 pm this Thursday, that would be great.

Mr Cook: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

CHAIR: That concludes this private briefing.

The committee adjourned at 2.31 pm.