

EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO DIGITAL INNOVATION IN SECONDARY EDUCATION



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 19 AUGUST 2020**

SESSION TWO

Members

**Ms J.M. Freeman (Chair)
Mr Ian Blayney
Ms J. Farrer
Mr Z.R.F. Kirkup
Ms S.E. Winton**

Hearing commenced at 10.52 am**Ms VALERIE GOULD****Executive Director, Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia, examined:**

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Valerie, for attending today. I need to read a short opening statement, and then we get down to business.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for agreeing to appear today to provide input and comment on remote learning, with particular reference to lessons learned as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This follows last year's inquiry into digital innovation in secondary education.

I am Janine Freeman, and I am the Chair of the Education and Health Standing Committee. I would like to introduce the other members of the committee; on my left is Sabine Winton, and on her left is Ian Blayney. Mr Zak Kirkup, unfortunately, had to leave, and Josie Farrer sends her apologies.

It is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, this privilege does not apply to anything you might say outside of today's proceedings.

Before we begin, do you have any questions about your attendance here today? And do you want to make a brief opening statement or are you happy that we go into questions?

Ms GOULD: Can I assume that you have read the background?

The CHAIR: I did. Yes. If you wanted to give any particular highlights of that or add anything else to that, that is good. Otherwise, we have some questions we can just go into.

Ms GOULD: I think it is fairly explanatory. I saw my friends from Catholic Education just left. They are a system; we are a sector, so things are very different. As I said—145 independent schools, and we had 145 different responses.

The CHAIR: Yes, and in a way, that is an interesting thing, isn't it? Within that 145 different schools in your sector, are there different systems?

Ms GOULD: There are a few systems, yes. We have the Anglican Schools Commission.

The CHAIR: That is what I was going to ask: do you have the Anglican schools?

Ms GOULD: Yes, so they are a group. Then, we have the Swan Christian Education Association that is based mainly out in Midland, sort of Swan, and there is some up in Armadale. Then, we have the Adventists; they are a system, the Adventist schools. Then we have sort of other groups that work closely. There are three Aboriginal schools: Wongutha, Coolgardie and Kurrawang CAPS—Christian Aboriginal parent-directed schools. They have a single board. Wongutha is down outside Esperance. Coolgardie CAPS is obviously in Coolgardie, and Kurrawang is between Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie. They are a bit like a system because they operate a bit like a system, but they are not a pure system like the Anglican Schools Commission is a pure system.

The CHAIR: What about the schools like the Montessori schools and those sorts of schools? Are they associated with —

Ms GOULD: Yes, they are all members of AISWA—Montessori and Steiner. We are sort of the United Nations of the schools because we have the Jews, we have the Islamics, we have the Christians, we

have the completely secular schools, and then we have the strong educational philosophy schools. Because of the different sorts of schools, their response to COVID was actually quite different.

In fact, you mentioned Montessori; they were probably some of the best prepared because, of course, the approach of Montessori is very much on each individual student progressing at their own pace. They have become very independent learners, so when they had to be at home, they had to work independently, and it was just the same. Of course, particularly for the young ones—because they start at the age of three in Montessori sector schools—they just put together incredibly comprehensive work packs. In fact, a lot of those schools saw an increase in enrolments during this because of their response to COVID.

The CHAIR: And those work packs were mostly physical, weren't they?

Ms GOULD: Yes, they were physical.

The CHAIR: They did not rely on digital as much?

Ms GOULD: Not for the younger ones. As the students got older, they did, but not in the Steiner, of course, because Steiners do not introduce technology until quite late—sometimes not until year 7, which is a challenge for NAPLAN Online.

The CHAIR: Okay. My first question, just to get us started, is a lot of independent schools apparently spent considerable time and money preparing for remote learning, but there was a suggestion that school fees should be refunded or discounted if students were not learning face to face. I am not quite sure where that suggestion came from—probably in your thingy. Does that indicate a concern that online learning is an inferior method or that teachers are not doing anything if the students are not in the classroom? Was there that feeling?

Ms GOULD: I do not think it was the feeling about the academic learning. The academic learning online actually worked out quite well for many schools. In fact, we had reports of some students, particularly older ones, saying they preferred the online learning because they could cover in three hours what might take them five or six hours at school because of all the interruptions, the changes of classrooms, the silly questions by other students, all those sorts of things. So, some of them did prefer that.

Where we saw some schools make—and I know Scotch was one of them, they did what we call “fee remissions”—that is because of all the other things they could not do. It was a reduction in sport, camps, all the choirs, all the other activities which could not happen because of COVID restrictions. They felt academically they were offering comprehensively, but there was a whole load of other stuff they could not actually offer.

Plus, of course, when online learning started for some schools, it was much more expensive than face to face. We had some small schools—Emmanuel Christian is one of them, up in Girrawheen, very low socioeconomic status—they had to purchase quite a few devices and dongles for their students because they just did not have that capacity at home. They have quite a large Burmese population at that school.

The CHAIR: Karen Burmese and Chin Burmese, mostly.

Ms GOULD: That is what they had to do just so the kids could do it. Some of the Montessoris had to purchase devices for the older students as well—not for the youngest, for the oldest. That was scattered among schools. It was a problem, and I am sure other sectors have explained this to you: some families would have one device and very low internet coverage, so they could not actually access online learning, which was why they had to supply dongles so they could have decent connectivity.

The CHAIR: Did you have different periods of time that schools went back or did most independent schools go back at the same time as the public schools?

Ms GOULD: It did vary a lot. We will not talk about the boarders just yet because that is another whole problem. A lot of schools did go back or offer return to school with the same timing as the department. Some schools felt they wanted to keep the students at home another extra couple of weeks, only because they put so much time and energy into developing online resources over the school holidays, they actually wanted to use that mode of delivery. One example was The King's College down in Bertram; they kept their online learning going for a couple of weeks longer than anyone else, but that is because they had a really comprehensive system and they were getting good feedback from the students and from the parents. But other schools—Court Grammar, I think the first day back they had 94 to 95 per cent return. Court Grammar is in Serpentine–Jarrahdale, and a very low socioeconomic school, with not great resources on the home front to support those students.

The CHAIR: From your perspective, you seem very informed about all the different schools and what they did. I am assuming you have done a bit of an audit of that, have you? Or is that just because anecdotally you have talked to all of the schools?

Ms GOULD: We have not done a formal audit, per se, but what we have had—and we have actually got one tomorrow as well—is a series of Teams catch-up with almost every school. We invite everyone, and we end up with 150 people online. We tend to get a lot of feedback that way.

We have also got some subcommittees at AISWA. We have an education committee; we met about a week and a half ago. In fact, COVID and their response to COVID was on the agenda.

We did not do an audit of all schools. I think schools might have just died under the weight of that. They are very busy places at the moment. They are quite stressed, and I did not want to add to that, but yes, certainly, we did get to talk to an awful lot of schools in online environments quite a few times over that period.

[11.00 am]

The CHAIR: In addition to your Teams meet-ups, did you offer any system support in terms of the types of packages that they want to deliver for remote learning or any support in terms of structure in terms of how they communicate with parents or any suggestions in terms of what platform they use, whether they use Microsoft or any of that sort of stuff; or because you are sector, not a system, did you just say, “Really, you have to deal with that as it comes.”

Ms GOULD: No—it was probably yes to all those questions to start off with. The schools pay subscriptions to me. If I just said, “You’re on your own”, they would not pay their subscriptions. We actually had a dedicated part on our website, which was all the support available through COVID so it was suggestions of platforms they could use, yes. We tried to source as much free software and free apps as we could. Ideally, not all the apps required the internet because, of course, that was the request they had, “Can you please source apps that don’t require the internet?” There is quite a lot of them so they can load them up on to their iPad and they can do the work that way. I do not think my IT staff had ever been as busy—but not just them. So, the early childhood team developed a lot of resources for online to support the teachers, constant contact with the early childhood teachers because it was the early childhood ones who said, “Well, what do I do with a four-year-old? They’re just learning how to read. They’re not going to be able to access online learning the way a 14-year-old can” though the truth is that four-year-olds get very, very good at navigating online resources. They may not be able to read, but they pretty soon work out whereabouts they have to click to make something else happen.

I think it was a really steep learning curve for everyone. We had a team at work, a COVID team, of which obviously I was part of. I do not think we ever worked so hard as we had for the first few months. It was every day COVID and night-time conversations with Lisa Rodgers from the department, with the Minister for Education, meetings with Health. It was full on. A lot of information was sent out to schools, updating them on procedures but also how they can actually get the best out of the online learning.

The CHAIR: So knowing what you know now, is there anything you would have done differently in those first few months?

Ms GOULD: Well, probably not things that I had control of. It would have been nice if it had happened more slowly. I got the call on the Monday, which was the Australia Day holiday—I do not think it was 26th but it was the Australia Day holiday on the Monday in January—to say, “Yes, we are putting together a team in the department”, and it just moved so, so quickly. I was having catch-ups with people over weekends, particularly boarding schools. They said, “We have to know what we’re doing. We have to know how we plan for this. Where’s the intelligence and when’s someone going to make a decision about boarders?” It would be great if it could be not as fast and I think if we do have another—hopefully, we do not—but if it does come back again to WA, people will be much more prepared. In fact, I was talking to a parent from Wesley College this morning and the students wanted to take Webex off their laptops because apparently it uses a lot of battery power, but the school said, “No, you’re keeping Webex on the laptops just in case we need to reactivate it.” What would we have done differently? It is so hard to say. We reacted really, really fast, and even in my own organisations we had a planned rollout of Teams. Well, our planned rollout of Teams went out the window and we all became experts in less than a week! We just had to learn how to communicate that way. It would have been nice to have time to train people. We did surveys of staff and we gave sample surveys to schools. They could survey their staff to see how their own health and wellbeing was going and how they were managing it.

Ms S.E. WINTON: You said you were meeting with the department et cetera, is that collaboration ongoing between your association and the Catholic and the department in terms of future planning for various scenarios?

Ms GOULD: Yes, absolutely.

Ms S.E. WINTON: So that is taking a fair bit of your time now in terms of for the future?

Ms GOULD: Look, it does, and I think it is very important. So Health has had a planning committee doing a number of different scenarios, which is planning for the future. I attended the scenario planning for the residential colleges and boarding. That was a couple of weeks ago. That was a matter of talking to all the boarding schools, getting all their risk emergency plans in place so we could talk about how we do it and then plan for different scenarios. We are lucky in WA that the three sectors have always collaborated quite closely. We always have. We have always got on very well. I get on very well with Deb Sayce and Lisa Rodgers. So that is always the same but we are still planning. I was at the department yesterday.

Ms S.E. WINTON: So that is ongoing.

Ms GOULD: It is absolutely ongoing. We have always met and we continue to meet quite a few times each term, just sometimes the three sectors, sometimes with the minister, just to ensure that cross-sectoral sharing because there is a lot we can learn from each other.

The CHAIR: In Victoria—we were talking about this in the previous hearing—when they closed a school, they would announce it; well, at one stage, I think, when they started closing schools they announced it on the Friday and it activated on the Monday so basically kids did not return to school

on the Monday and it was Friday lunchtime-ish. Is that part of the planning, that sort of quick turnaround able to communicate with parents, you know, the responses? Do each of the schools in your sector have a response plan now?

Ms GOULD: Absolutely. We sent pandemic plans out to all the schools. We made sure that all schools had a quick way of contacting all parents either through SMS, email, all sorts of—you know, using more than one way of communicating. Most schools had that in place anyway but it was not so much an audit, it was actually saying, “If you have not got this in place, get it in place”, and we gave them commercial options to purchase that, mainly the SMS to get all the mobile phone numbers so you can text all parents to say, “School’s closing as of two o’clock on Friday afternoon.” As I said, most schools had that in place anyway. All schools have to have an emergency lockdown procedure anyway as part of registration and so if you are going to do that—you know, something as simple as a water main bursts outside the school, you have to close the school and you have to be able to contact all parents anyway, you know, even pre-COVID. Very few schools did not have that. Probably the more challenging ones would have been those in remote areas. We have got 14 remote Aboriginal schools. That was much more challenging. Fortunately, most of those schools are in community so worst-case scenario you just go around and knock on all the doors and say, “Guess what. School’s not opening.”

The CHAIR: And in those communities, particularly in the Kimberley, a number of kids were boarders. Are you aware if the boarders have all returned or are they still back on country? Is there assistance for them to learn?

Ms GOULD: The huge majority are back. We have got about 220 Aboriginal boarders in the high-fee boarding schools—you know, Wesley, Christchurch and MLC. Almost all of those boarding students are back. It did take a while. There were some problems that some of the communities did not want them to leave the community and then there were problems getting flights because there were very few flights, mainly from Broome back to Perth; and then, of course, for a while they had to get the good-to-go, the G2G passes to travel. That took a while to organise. We had one school that took—I think it was a Northern Territory boarder down at Bunbury Cathedral, he got out probably three weeks ago. The school that has not got them all back yet is Wongutha CAPS. That is 100 per cent Aboriginal boarders, again, mainly from the Kimberley, some from the Pilbara, and often that is community not feeling comfortable about their young people returning to what might be a potentially infectious place. Not that Wongutha is going to be infectious because it does not have any infections. I was talking to the principal at Wongutha a couple of weeks ago and he said that they are having more trouble getting the kids back.

The CHAIR: Are they doing anything in terms of remote learning for those kids?

Ms GOULD: They are as much as they can. Again, for some of those, the communities do not have good internet access. Unfortunately, some of the students did not want to take their laptops back because they would get stolen so there were those sort of issues. It was mainly the connectivity and the safety. The other issue that we did have, when I spoke with Yiyili community, which is in the Kimberley in the Fitzroy Valley, they suddenly had 16 older boarders return to community. That school has only got 45 or 50 students, K–9, and they actually do not have the capacity to cater for an extra 16 students. They had nowhere to put them and no-one to supervise them, and when they finally worked it out, it was a challenge on community to suddenly have this big influx of young people expecting some sort of supervision around their education.

The other issue in the community, of course, is that a lot of community members who had not been in community for quite a few years returned to communities from the towns. That was quite

disruptive and did result in a certain amount of domestic violence and other things, which, of course, made it a less safe place for young people.

[11.10 am]

Ms S.E. WINTON: Just on that, have you found any staffing difficulties or issues around this in terms of getting teachers to stay up? Has COVID created some or exemplified existing issues?

Ms GOULD: It became quite tricky. At the end of term 1, some of the community leaders told teachers they were not safe in community so those teachers left. I will not name the communities, but there were a few communities that became quite dangerous with the people who came back in. They were dry communities, but they were not dry anymore. They were bringing in alcohol and they were bringing in drugs and there were some fairly not nice people coming in. So they recommended that the teachers leave. Some of those teachers decided to fly back east. We recommended they did not do it. In fact, we said, “If you can manage to not do it, please don’t do it” but some did because that is where their families came from. Some of them took six to eight weeks to get back in because, of course, teachers and principals do not have exemption to cross borders so you had the biosecurity arrangements but then you also had the WA border closure. So that meant getting back was quite difficult. We are now getting questions, “Okay, we’ll probably stay in community in the next holidays—the September–October holidays—but will we be able to go home in December?” We cannot answer the question; I do not think anyone can.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: At the end of term 1, they had to choose, did they not, that they either left or stayed?

Ms GOULD: We did a survey of all the schools for them to say who is staying and who is not. We had great big spreadsheets, which we provided to the Department of Education.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: That might have been the government schools.

Ms GOULD: I think the government schools could tell—we could not tell. We can highly recommend, and I highly recommended that they did not leave! But at the end of the day, if they felt unsafe in community, I do not blame them for leaving. Ideally, they just would have stayed in Broome or if they were in the Pilbara, they would have stayed in, say, Newman, but two weeks in Newman is not a great way to spend your holidays!

The CHAIR: You will get us in trouble for saying something like that. Someone will come and suddenly tell us how lovely Newman is during the holidays.

Ms GOULD: I am sure they will. I do not mean that—when I used to work for the government, I used to go to Newman quite a bit.

Ms S.E. WINTON: Fitzroy Crossing is very lovely during the holidays.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: My wife taught at Newman for two years so I will ask her what it was like.

Ms GOULD: Sorry about that. I used to be a school moderator and I used to go up to Newman quite a bit. Look, it is fine, but I would not choose to spend two weeks’ holiday in Newman.

The CHAIR: Your correspondence and also something you said just recently, some schools purchased devices and dongles to send home to students so they could continue to work. Did Telstra and NBN help out with that, do you know? Was there any assistance with that?

Ms GOULD: There was some assistance from NBN. I mean, we kept getting sort of updates from NBN about how certain plans are going to be larger and all sorts of things. It seemed to work but a lot of the problems that schools had was not with the NBN but with the providers actually delivering what the NBN said they could deliver. It became quite tricky.

The CHAIR: Did you have to negotiate with some of those providers or they had to negotiate directly?

Ms GOULD: No, that is a school issue because there would have been a contract between the school and the provider.

The CHAIR: As a sector, you are not in any position to do a sector-wide negotiation or some sort of contractual sector discussion around that?

Ms GOULD: No. We used to have an arrangement with Telstra. We had what was called AISWANet. After a while, we found the schools were pulling out of AISWANet because they could get better deals elsewhere. We established that probably eight years ago when things were very, very expensive and it was a good deal, but over the time there were many more players and it was cheaper for them to go off to Vocus or Optus or somewhere else. In hindsight, perhaps we should have kept AISWANet going, but we did not know about COVID when we decided to end AISWANet. The other schools were pretty much up to their own devices.

The CHAIR: And on the basis of being up to their own devices, what we have heard a lot in the previous report, and as a consequence of COVID is that it has highlighted the digital divide, the effects of the digital divide. Do you want to talk about your experience with that digital divide amongst independent schools and some of the dealings with that but also how that has impacted in terms of students into the future?

Ms GOULD: I think it has actually really shown how inequitable access to digital technology is. I mean, we always knew that but it has really, really flagged it. Scotch College already had an online learning system. Kids could go home, flick it like this and it was almost seamless; Wesley exactly the same. I am not quite sure exactly what software—Webex, actually. Teachers all had to come to school. Wesley boys had to get into school uniform but they were accessing it as though they were in the classroom.

The CHAIR: True? They had to get into school uniform?

Ms GOULD: Yes. It was the only school I heard of that required that, but they could just wear their sports uniform. They did not have to wear their tie. I think it was more so the students felt that they were at school still, so they were not sitting there in their pyjamas. That is what Wesley—I presume because the teachers could see it, they could make sure the kids —

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: Some people who had to go from office to working at home did exactly the same thing, followed the same routine and dressed the same so that mentally they were in the same space.

Ms GOULD: I think that was really the theory behind it. Certainly, when I was having main meetings, at least on top I would have decent clothes because I felt that it looked unprofessional to be sitting there with a t-shirt or a sweatshirt on whereas really you are actually in business and you are working. That was Wesley's argument. That was fine for those schools that had everything there, and they worked very hard because they have all got Aboriginal kids that have gone back to community. They worked very hard to support their remote communities as well. Just one point I want to make about sending devices, so some schools sent devices home. That became a bit of an insurance issue for a while because often the insurance was for the devices to be used in the boarding house and at school and suddenly they were going to go to a remote community a couple of thousands kilometres away. I know that some schools had to work quite closely with their insurers on that. But where we saw the, I guess, the inequity, it was like the Emmanuel Christians, the Court Grammars, a lot of the lower SES schools. Even John Wollaston, which is one of the Anglican Schools Commission's schools, but they are in Gosnells—it is not called Gosnells anymore —

The CHAIR: Thornlie?

Ms GOULD: It is Champion Lakes or something. They rezoned it at some stage. That is a much lower SES area than, say, St Marks, which is up in Hillarys. It was not so much the case for John Wollaston at school because they had access at school, it was more what they access at home in terms of connectivity and the number of devices. A family of four may only have one computer at home, and you cannot really do good online learning on a phone. You can do bits, but it is not like having a computer with a proper screen and a camera and all those sorts of things. It was difficult.

The CHAIR: In terms of those, one of the things that came to light for me during that period of time was when we were accessing a service that could give laptops for students who did not have laptops so they could have connectivity at home was that if the laptops were older than about four or five years, then they were not compatible with the —

Ms GOULD: They did not run the software.

The CHAIR: Yes. They were not compatible with the systems. Is that something you came across as well?

Ms GOULD: Yes. Schools did. They went around and found their old laptops and then realised they could not load the apps on to them that they wanted to put on to them for the students to work. It is a problem.

The CHAIR: So this idea that we can all just go out and find them old laptops and somehow the divide will be fixed is not actually the case. To be able to actually address that divide, what needs to be done is some sort of provision—or if the laptops can be repurposed, they have to be relatively new.

Ms GOULD: Yes, because even the older ones often do not have the sufficient storage or speed to run the software. You can probably blame Apple—oh no, I cannot say that. Apple upgrades their operating system all the time, as does Microsoft. After a while, your old iPad will not work because if you upgrade the Apple software, either your iPad gets overloaded or it cannot take the new software, which means that all the new applications do not work. That was also a problem.

The CHAIR: Yes. In terms of you as a sector, is there a sector-wide discussion going on about that or is there any sector sharing going on about that in the independent schools? I know that you are talking between sectors—the Catholic sector and yourselves and the public schools—but are there sector-wide discussions to assist those schools that do not have the same capacity and learnings?

Ms GOULD: Certainly, there is a lot of the networking. This afternoon, I have got a small schools business managers meeting. I think we have got 30 people online and 13 face to face, so they are the business managers of small schools. We host those sorts of network meetings with similar schools—this would be the Montessoris, the community schools, the Steiner schools, any school with less than 250 students—and that is where a lot of that sharing happens. We facilitate some of that discussion but, generally, we have a bit of an open forum for discussion. They send in questions. The sort of questions they have been sending is, “What sort of cleaning regime are you still maintaining?” and “How are you supporting your students at home if they do not have devices?” and so it is a facilitated discussion. We have had some of the larger schools offer slightly older devices to schools they know are suffering. There is a little bit of sharing but, again, they often encounter that problem that the devices are not as useful as they appear in the first instance because of the age. One group I did want to mention was the curriculum and re-engagement schools. They are the schools that target secondary students at educational risk. Some of those schools really did not close at all.

The reason they did not close was partly because the students did not have access to anything online at home because often they were couch surfing and did not have fixed abodes or, if they had homes, they had very few devices at home, but also the schools themselves were probably a safer place for those students than a lot of the homes where they lived or other places where they lived. A lot of those students were semi-homeless. When I spoke to that network of schools, they said, really, they were encouraging as many students to come as possible. They had sanitiser everywhere and they were trying to keep everyone socially distanced, but it was about where is the safest place for these students?

[11.20 am]

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: How many of those schools are in the state?

Ms GOULD: Alta-1 is the largest of those, and they have about 16 or 17 campuses. They have two campuses in Albany, one up in Kununurra and the rest are Perth based, and then there are seven others.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: The Edmund Rice ones?

Ms GOULD: They are Catholic.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: So they are not in that?

Ms GOULD: No, they are not independent; they are with the Catholic sector. Ours is the Port community down in Hamilton Hill, Sowilo out in Gosnells, Comet up in—well, they have got three campuses in Caversham, Midland and Clarkson. You have got SMYL, which is down in the Rockingham area. They have got about three campuses, so they are sort of spread. Fairbridge has got two campuses now and there is one in Bunbury. They are spread out around the state, mainly in the metro centre. We have probably got, I would say, 3 000 or 4 000 students in those now. They are purposely smaller; they will never grow. Alta has so many campuses because they do not want more than 60 students on one site. Port has a bus they put the kids in, which has got laptops. Often those students suffer from so much anxiety that they cannot be in a classroom, so they drive the bus to park at a beach and the kids can take the laptops and sit on a park bench and do work. It is just about catering for these really needy kids.

Ms S.E. WINTON: Just more broadly in terms of the enrolments, CEWA touched on that a little bit, have you had any feedback in terms of the enrolment impact on some of the schools in your sector?

Ms GOULD: Most schools have seen an increase.

Ms S.E. WINTON: Yes, not attendance, but in terms of the impact for the sector in terms of their overall enrolments?

Ms GOULD: So, most schools have seen—not the large, high-fee schools which are a bit separate, but the smaller ones and the lower fee schools—a lot of those have seen an increase in enrolments. I was at a Montessori school on Monday evening and principal there, as I was walking out, said that by the beginning of next year, they will have a 20 per cent increase in enrolments since last February.

Ms S.E. WINTON: And you would say that is directly —

Ms GOULD: Part of it is to do with COVID. I think people have found that the smaller schools—it is very individualised learning. They are more capable of really looking after every individual child rather than a school of 900. Now, we have got primary schools of 900 and secondary schools of nearly 2 000, but it is the smaller ones they feel they get looked after more carefully. When I asked my panel of education, they also said they felt the schools have very strong values and mission statements about caring for students and looking after the whole school community and they feel that has worked in their favour. It will be interesting to see—we do not have the August census data

yet. I will be doing comparisons from last August to this August and just tracking to see where that increase is, but the huge majority I have spoken to recently—I have been visiting schools for a particular purpose called capital grants, commonwealth grants, and they only go to low SES schools, so they are the only ones that I have been talking to in the last couple of weeks. I do know, though, from some anecdotal information from the larger high fees know they are struggling a bit; people are saying we can no longer pay \$20 000 or \$25 000 a year, but we can find very similar values and pastoral care activities in a school where you can pay \$5 000 or \$6 000, so it is a bit of a shift. We will see.

The CHAIR: One of the things that has come out at the hearings that we have had is that so much of remote learning and where you send your kids and if you send your kids back early has a lot to do with parental preference. Have you had much to do with the parent bodies of any of the kids in the sector and knowing what their needs are in terms of—you have just said you anecdotally believe it is because they think they can get the same ethos and pastoral care that they need in these other schools, but is there anything other than your anecdotal views on that? Have you, as an organisation, had anything to do with the parent bodies?

Ms GOULD: There is no parent body for the independent sector. There is no body. There is a Catholic parent body and there is a government parent body, but there is not for independent schools.

The CHAIR: So there is no peak parent body in the independent sector? Each have P and Fs.

Ms GOULD: They all have their own P and Fs and so forth, so it is either talking to parents, as I sometimes do, but it is anecdotal or getting feedback from principals. But that is from the principals that said they thought it was their values and ethos and the fact that they have got really, really strong—and that is not to say that the Catholic sector and the government schools do not have strong pastoral care, but that is what they think they are seeing.

The CHAIR: But do you think that is where those students are coming from?

Ms GOULD: No. They may be shifting from one independent school to another, though some are coming from government schools.

Ms S.E. WINTON: Do you think it is just values based or is it also perhaps a perception that those schools are resourced better in terms of technology?

Ms GOULD: A lot of them are not resourced better.

Ms S.E. WINTON: No, but just the perception that people have towards independent schools.

Ms GOULD: I think it may be the perception that they are doing a better job and that they were better prepared but, again, that varied so much from school to school.

The CHAIR: It could also just be because they are local. The thing about COVID is that everyone started shopping local.

Ms GOULD: They did. Absolutely.

The CHAIR: They are doing all those things locally and it could just be that they were not going to get into the car and drive.

Ms GOULD: I know that Blue Gum Montessori, which is in Bibra Lake, developed their practical kits for the parents to pick up. Within two days of parents picking them up, they got three more enrolments and when she asked, they said, “We’ve seen your kits. We think they’re wonderful. We want our child to be able to access them.” But, again, that is kind of a small example.

The CHAIR: In terms of teachers responding to online learning and the tools and how they felt in terms of being equipped, I am sure that it was across a broad range of areas, but did the Association

of Independent Schools offer professional development and support to teachers, or was that left to the schools and do you know what was out there, or was it just a mosaic like you currently have in your sector?

Ms GOULD: Probably a mosaic. We did offer some training but, of course, schools use different platforms. We were not going to give training in Teams, because Teams is pretty easy to use, and that was a school issue if they were using Teams or Zoom or whatever they were using, but it was more some samples of lessons and what they might look like in an online version. There is no question that teachers would much rather do face to face but, again, some teachers were not comfortable returning to face to face, so when it is an opportunity for parents to send students back or not, there was quite a lot of discussion then about face to face, particularly for those more vulnerable teachers who said they did not feel comfortable. We had some principals that they had to decide whether it was better to have a highly experienced physics teacher who is 68 and not comfortable being in front of the class doing online learning for the class or to have a relief teacher in their low 20s who has not got anything like the experience when we are trying to prepare these students for year 12? She said she would rather have the experienced physics teacher who knows the class doing that work because the students would probably get a better education experience, despite how hard the younger, less experienced teacher will be trying. It is very hard to go in as a relief teacher for a few weeks in a completely unknown class.

The CHAIR: Other than that particular reason why some schools continued to teach online, are there other reasons why some schools that you are aware of continued to teach online?

Ms GOULD: Look, they only continued for a couple of weeks. The pressure to get them back was massive, from both the federal minister and the state minister, so the majority opened up for options for students to come back if they wanted and then within a few weeks it was almost mandated that they go back. But it was still not school as we knew it because they could not have assemblies, they could not have camps and for a while they could not use their play equipment. Of course, there was a massive expense for cleaning, so the government was able to provide financial assistance and finally the federal government \$10 million across independent Catholic schools across Australia, which for some schools came down a couple of thousand dollars which paid for the cleaning for a week. I did have a couple of phone calls from Dan Tehan saying, "What can I do to help independent schools get their students back?" I said money for cleaning. So we got a little bit of money for cleaning. In the end, though, I think the parents wanted to send their kids back. The schools have to be very careful about what the parents say because if they think they can go down the road to the local government school where the classes are face to face but if I stay here the school is teaching online but they are not happy with the online teaching, they would lose the enrolment. That is the reality of the market.

[11.30 pm]

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We are going to wrap up but I am just wondering if you could think of—never waste a good crisis!—a good consequence of what has happened within Western Australia around COVID in this particular period of time, and a bad consequence? Could you think of one that you have not mentioned? Or you can re-mention something that you have already mentioned; that is fine.

Ms GOULD: I think one of the good consequences is schools have seen how online learning works. We have a few smaller schools that offer senior subjects and they are actually now talking about, "Well, perhaps we won't run a maths specialist class for three in this school and a maths specialist for three in this school. One might be", I will make up a place, "in Carnarvon and one might be in Perth, but perhaps we'll combine them and we'll have the really good maths specialist teacher in

Perth teach specialist maths across two or three schools.” Then for physics, they may be based in Carnarvon. Schools are looking at different ways of doing things, and I think they probably never would have got to that point.

We are also seeing schools look at a blended learning model—again, mainly for their older students—where perhaps they do not come to school five days a week; they perhaps come to school four days a week and then have one day at home. It is enabling people to reflect on, “We have always done it this way, but is there a better way of doing it?” I think that has probably been quite a good thing. I actually think some of the health outcomes, like the fact we are all being much healthier and there is much less flu—but that is not an education thing, that is a society thing.

I think one of the really worst things that has happened, though, is the mental health and wellbeing of both students and staff. Colin Pettit—I do not know if he has been speaking of this—from the Commissioner for Children and Young People has done some work with young people and their voices. Many young people are very, very worried. They are worried their parents will lose their jobs, they are worried that their home life will be different and they are worried they will not be able to afford to eat. I think the mental anguish that people are under—and not just young people, all people—has been pretty awful, and I think we will see the consequences of that for a long time. It will play out in ongoing mental health issues for young people and I think that is really sad. We have got a team of eight¹ school psychologists; they have never been busier. They are absolutely run off their feet trying to support schools because people are saying, “We used to have a really nice class and now there are behavioural difficulties, the kids aren’t paying attention and you can tell they’re really stressed. What do we do to manage this?” I think that is sad because we do not know how long that will last.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Sorry, a final final question.

Ms GOULD: That is okay.

The CHAIR: Can you give us any feedback on how the different independent schools have been dealing with children with disabilities, in terms of remote learning and teaching?

Ms GOULD: They have certainly tried to continue to support—I think there has been a lot written also about how hard it has been to support students with disabilities during COVID. It depends on what the disability is, of course. For a wheelchair-bound kid who is perfectly functional, that is fine—no problem; they can sit at a computer and they can still do it. But for those that have quite significant learning difficulties, COVID has proved really, really challenging. I know that in some schools the teachers have actually been going out to the home to try and work with the parents to try and support how they can support that child. Yes, I think they have tried very, very hard but it is difficult. If you have got a large number of students with disability in your school, it is very hard to have a lot of one-on-one attention when you probably only have a couple of people that work in that space. The funding for students with disability in the independent sector is much, much less than in the government sector; most of it comes out of other school resources to support them. They get loadings from NCCD from the commonwealth and there is some state funding, but nothing comes close to covering the actual cost of having a one-on-one education assistant with that person. So, it has been a challenge. They have done their best. Some students with disability have survived. Visually challenged students have always had computers with large type—that was easy; you just move it home. It really varies by the type of disability, but it is those with severe learning difficulties and severe behavioural difficulties that have found it really hard because they do not have that one-on-one attention.

¹ The witness has indicated that the figure is 11.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I have really appreciated hearing from you today. It has been really great to hear about the sector. Your work across all of the sector is great and clearly challenging but also really worthwhile, and we thank you for that.

Ms GOULD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much for your time.

Hearing concluded at 11.35 am
