COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO THE RECOGNITION AND ADEQUACY OF THE RESPONSES BY STATE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES TO EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA BY WORKERS AND VOLUNTEERS ARISING FROM DISASTERS

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
MONDAY, 18 JUNE 2012

SESSION THREE

Members

Mr A.P. O'Gorman (Chairman)
Mr A.P. Jacob (Deputy Chairman)
Ms M.M. Quirk
Mr I.M. Britza
Mr T.G. Stephens

Hearing commenced at 12.02 pm

AXWORTHY, MR DAVID GEORGE
Deputy Director General, Schools, Department of Education,
151 Royal Street,
East Perth 6004, examined:

O'CONNELL, MRS MAURA
School Psychologist, Department of Education,
examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Good morning. Thank you for appearing this morning. Before I start, can I just introduce members of the committee. Albert Jacob, who is the member for Ocean Reef, is the deputy chair of the committee. Margaret Quirk, who is the member for Girrawheen, is a committee member. Ian Britza, who is the member for Morley, is a committee member. I am Tony O'Gorman, the member for Joondalup. You know David Worth. He and Jovita Hogan are research officers for the committee.

I am going to read you an opening statement. There are a couple of questions. I ask that you answer them verbally, rather than with a nod or a shake of the head, so that we can record them in Hansard. The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed a "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions relating to your appearance before the committee this morning?

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Before we start, we have received your submission. Is there any additional information or anything you would like to add to your submission?

Mr Axworthy: No. We are very happy to provide any supplementary information and answer any questions that you may wish to put to us.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it possible for us to obtain a copy of your emergency critical incident management policy?

Mr Axworthy: Certainly. It is online, but we can certainly make that available to you.

chai: In your submission you mention the department's responses to last year's Margaret River bushfires. Can you give us an idea of what other critical incidents it has had to respond to over recent times?

Mr Axworthy: Certainly. I understand your committee is interested in natural disasters, but on a daily basis we respond to incidents in schools that we regard as being critical incidents, whether that be a suicide or a car accident that involves one of our students or one of our staff, or a sudden death or events as fell out in Esperance last year with the incident of someone coming onto the premises with a gun. These are critical incidents that we get involved in almost on a daily basis in one of our 800 schools. But in terms of the storms of last week, whilst not a natural disaster, they were certainly things that had the potential to be much worse than they were, so we were geared up and ready to respond. We were involved after the fires in Roleystone and Kelmscott last year. We are very much involved in the major flooding post any cyclones that occur. Basically, whenever there is anything, because our schools are spread across the state into very remote and isolated communities, with events that happen, usually we are on the ground and we are the first agency that people turn to. If there are any specific ones that you would like us to talk about, I am more than happy to. We have a large number of psychologists who are fully trained. We have over I think 269 full-time equivalent psychologists and many more individuals making up that number. All of those psychologists are trained in critical incident management, both as part of their pre-service training and then, once we take them in for an internship, we ensure that they are fully trained and on the ground, as it were, to be able to assist schools with any kind of emergency or critical incident management. That is from the prevention stage—the preparedness for an event—and then the response and recovery that may happen following an emergency. Because we have, I guess, the largest number of trained people in this area, it is our staff that get used by other agencies when there are emergencies. For example, when the emergency crisis centre was set up in Margaret River during the bushfires, our staff went and worked. In that sense, we worked to the Department for Child Protection, which had coverage of the emergency centre, but it was our staff that were engaged in that work. In fact, I think Maura was one of those people.

[12.10 pm]

Mrs O'Connell: No, I did not go to that one, but we were certainly in daily phone communication with the staff.

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned the training, with three-day training provided to all of your 340 school psychs. What does that cover?

Mr Axworthy: I will ask Maura.

Mrs O'Connell: I actually present that. We use the basic words that David has just mentioned there: prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, so that everything that could come under that is dealt with in the first two days. We talk to our school psychologists about what prevention means; what could prevention look like on the ground in a school; what should a school do in order to make sure—the idea of prevention is that you prevent what you can, but there are some things that you cannot, so therefore you move into the preparedness phase. Therefore, with preparedness, it is about looking at the policy and seeing what is required and it is also looking at what good practice would say would provide the best chance of recovery. It may be that schools never have to activate a plan, because here and there are some schools that do not have critical incidents and there are some schools which might have a number within a short number of years. But we say that in the event of an event happening that the preparedness remains and people can swing into response. So then our school psychologists are taught about what is their role, primarily, when they go in when there has been an event. We teach them about analysis. That is one of the things that our psychologists bring, which is quite surprising to some people to hear that counselling is not the primary function of school psychologists; it is analysis, looking at what are the school's needs, what are the gaps, if any, in the services that are available on the ground at the time; who are the major at-risk groups; what communications need to be written and need to be done verbally; and what other support needs to be brought on board. It is an hour-by-hour analysis. That is the overarching thing. With some of them that does not develop in their first two years of working as a school

psychologist; they know this stuff, but the breadth of it develops as they work with others. It is then looking at what you see in front of you when you see somebody behaving in a particular way. You are looking at behaviour—behaviour of students, staff and community members, meaning perhaps parents of the students. What does what you see mean? Does this mean that somebody who is crying is having a much stronger reaction than somebody who is sitting quietly, and does it mean that the person who is not reacting at all is in fact more at risk or less at risk? So they are walked through a lot of stuff like that. However, all of this builds on the basic training they would have done in their university years anyway, so it is supplementary.

Did you want to know about the third day? Those two days are done during their first years; their intern years. Our school psychologists have two years when they are provisionally registered, and we have quite an intensive set of training across many subjects in that time. When they have achieved their registration, we put them through a day when they have to demonstrate their competence. They are given hypotheticals and they are made accountable for the answer to a specific question at any particular moment. It is done as a group exercise, but in fact it is very much that each person has to be accountable. If they meet those requirements, we then have three different parts to their credentialing and accreditation. The first one, which I do for all of them, if it is a thing that I have noticed, and yes they have displayed confidence and competence, I will sign off on it. Their lead school psychologist or senior school psychologist, their professional line manager, will also endorse that they believe they have this capacity and they will also give a written submission as well. So they are the three days.

The CHAIRMAN: You are talking specifically about your psychs there. What about other staff? Is training provided to the rest of the staff in dealing with traumas?

Mr Axworthy: Yes. We have, I suppose, layers of staff, but because the psychologists are the most numerous of our support staff and they are our direct employees that is why we have focus on those. We also have in our schools a large number of chaplains, both faith-based chaplains and secular chaplains or care workers who are there, and we have through Youthcare, which is the organisation that employs the chaplains, engaged in a training program for the chaplains in dealing with post-critical support.

It is not at the level of a full psychological intervention because these people do not necessarily have a full qualification in mental health, but there is a post–critical incident counselling program. Eighty-five of the chaplains have been exposed to that and there is a further training session this year for another 25. These are people who can then be called on to come in to support any kind of critical incident.

In addition to that, because we have a policy that says the principal of every school must have a management plan, must have a critical incident management plan, and we require our school principals to develop that, renew it, revise it every year—and as part of that it is talking again about the same areas of being prepared, preventing things, being prepared for things and then looking at recovery in the longer term. So, we ask that principals work with their staff in the development of that plan so that everyone is aware and they work through that. In many cases principals will say, "I think there are enough guidelines here. You have given me examples. I have got case studies. I have been around a while. I think I can manage this on my own." In other cases, they would call on the expertise of usually a member of the school support services—it could be the school psychologist—to help me run through something in my school that helps to develop the plan so we are all on the same page and we talk about what would happen if there were a disaster here and how would we recover from that and what would be available to us in the event of something like that.

Mr A.P. JACOB: What is the department doing on tracking incidents? I am certainly not focusing on the disaster side exclusively, but critical incident in particular. I can think of one that happened recently in my electorate that you are probably both well aware of. What is the department doing

when these things throw up curve balls? How well are we responding to them in adapting a critical incident management plan after that?

Mr Axworthy: We have a system of notification of any critical incident and we ask that we be notified; that notification goes both to the regional office and into the central office. Critical incidents may take different forms and go in different directions, but bear with me a little bit. One of the things we check when a critical incident comes in is that the immediate response is being provided to the school. That is the first thing. Is there still something there that is critical that could be causing danger? We act to remove that or support that straightaway. That may be ensuring that State Emergency Services have been called or doctors have been called or the fire brigade has been called or the police have been called, depending on the nature of the incident and who are dealing with that side of things. We then follow up and we make sure that there has been the appropriate longer term, if you like, recovery things put in place.

Now, again, if the incident is one of damage caused by a natural disaster kind of thing, then clearly there is a range of things; we make sure that no child goes back into the school until there has been a proper inspection of the premises. It is not just the principal of the school or a teacher who says, "Yeah, it looks okay to me now. I think we can go back inside," if there has been storm damage and water has come into the roof and there may be electrical wires or something like that. We make sure everything is checked before people go back into the building.

In the event of the sort of emotional traumas that have been caused by people witnessing events, the first step is for us to make sure that the school feels confident that its staff and its students have had the opportunity to be debriefed, to be able to talk about the incident and to be referred on where necessary. There are a couple of stages to this. The first is what we refer to as psychological first aid, if you will, of seeing people who may be obviously upset and we want to comfort them, support them and give them a place where they can settle down and feel comforted. Moving beyond that, there are those staff—this is where the work that Maura was talking about is so important, of people being able to assess. It looks okay but is everyone all right? Are there people here who we know are vulnerable because they have a history of vulnerability? That is the analysis that Maura was talking about. A school psychologist would work with the school principals and deputies and say, "What do we know about our staff and our children here? Are there children here who may be more vulnerable than other people? Have we done a check? Let's talk to the form teacher. Let's talk to the other teacher. Do they seem to be okay? Are there any signs that are going on? "That may take a day or two. It may take a week or two. It may even be a month later when things may come up. We make sure in following up, that the psychologists have gone back into the school and have checked and rechecked with the school principal. In circumstances, for example, the Esperance circumstance, where the school to all outside appearances got back on its feet straightaway on the Monday following an event later in the week, we made sure that there were professionals on hand in case staff members started to feel more nervous than normal about that.

We have an arrangement with an external provider, with PRIMEXL as an outside agency that provides confidential counselling to staff. That is an important aspect because many times a staff member may want some help, but they do not want to acknowledge to their peers or to their employer that they are seeking some counselling. So, we make available information through PRIMEXL. There are pamphlets that are always distributed. They are always the first thing. When you go into schools, you can see the pamphlets. They are always the first thing that get distributed to staff members. Then people are encouraged to follow up.

When we know from a critical incident being lodged in central office, for example, that something has happened that looks like it may have traumatic follow-on effects, we then get on the phone to PRIMEXL and make sure they have counsellors and they have cleared their books to make time available for an event that may occur. So, in Margaret River, for example, one of the first things we did was to contact PRIMEXL and say, "Look, these fires are big, there will be teachers down here

undoubtedly whose houses are going to be impacted or if not their houses, then they are going to have friends, relatives, family around. Please can you make sure—the last thing we want to do is tell someone to call your number and it goes through to a switchboard and no-one answers then they get fobbed off." We have a very good working relationship with PRIMEXL.

The CHAIRMAN: Are they reporting back to you?

Mr Axworthy: Yes, but, having said that, they report back to us but not about individual cases. We are very clear about that. There is a line there. This is confidential, but we are regularly in touch with PRIMEXL about issues that need to be—if there are generic issues that need to be picked up or after something like that.

Mrs O'Connell: Even though we do notify the EAP, PRIMEXL, fairly quickly about this, it may be 12 months later when somebody says, "I think I have got time now in my life to actually address some of the things I have been putting aside now. I have been coping, like adults do and teachers do particularly." And they say, "Right, it is coming up to the long school holidays I am going to go see PRIMEXL." But they would not do that with any great confidence if they did not believe that confidentiality was going to be observed at all times. We do not get feedback as to individuals who have accessed the service. We do not ever get anybody telling us, "That was very interesting; it took a year for that person to come and access that." We do not know if they have gone or why they have gone if they have gone.

The CHAIRMAN: Can I ask if that extends to family members?

Mr Axworthy: Yes, it does.

The CHAIRMAN: How do they know?

Mr Axworthy: Again, there are brochures in every school. One of the things that we say when we are getting the school principal to develop the plan at the beginning of the year is to notify people about what services are available should they need to use them. One of the things that we know about traumatic events is that in the midst of that, people do not necessarily think in the most clear-cut or logical way. We find it is important that out of the traumatic event time, we sit down and we talk about things. For example, right now we are running workshops around the state in bushfire-prone areas in the middle of the rain to prepare for the bushfires. Because now it is not an immediate threat, people are more open to thinking about it with a logical mind. If you have been to schools, you would have seen the sort of brochure. The little flier that is there that is readily available.

Mrs O'Connell: There is also on notice boards—in fact, it is one of the prominent items. Probably alongside "Join the union" is a notice about how you get your support in the time that you need it.

The CHAIRMAN: You said the principals have to develop a critical incident management plan.

Mr Axworthy: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: What is the worst-case scenario they prepare for?

Mr Axworthy: In our planning, we give them some template scenarios for everything from terrorist bomb threats to fires, floods, cyclones, a death of a staff member. We have worst-case settings. But in pretty much all cases, what principals can see is that at a scaled-down level, this is really good and handy to have. One of the things that we insist that schools have is a good communication mechanism. That may be a telephone tree. It may be an SMS system. It may be an email out system that they can call on and use quickly. And then we test that out in terms of so what would happen if the telephone towers have gone down and you cannot actually use the SMS messaging, which is some of the things that happen in an emergency. That is all very well, but you have planned for this to happen on a Wednesday. What if it happens on a Sunday at 10 o'clock at night? How do you get your messages out to people then? It is that kind of scenario planning that we work with.

Mrs O'Connell: There is also the networking with the other agencies and there is a point at which it is no longer a critical incident that belongs to the school. If it is a bit bigger, it may be a locality. A bushfire does not belong to the school. It may be all around the school, but in fact it belongs to the community and the local government. It is a case of working in a complementary fashion then and knowing who the head management agency is and where the authority lies. It really goes from the most minor—minor in terms of disruption to the school—classroom-related out to something that relates to the whole school to something that goes to the community to something that might be statewide or national. Every one of those points are planned for and we—"we" being the education department—and individuals in the education department sit on some of the committees. We encourage principals to always know their LEMAC—local emergency management advisory committee—and not to wait until there is a problem. Get to know them beforehand and make that part of your prevention and preparedness.

Mr A.P. JACOB: There are two sort of different parts to responding to a critical incident or a disaster in terms of, I guess, how the school's leadership would respond. If you have a disaster—I had one with one of my high schools wiped out by a hailstorm a few years back and the school is wiped out, the incident has happened and then you are just responding afterwards and you are in clean-up mode. I would imagine the worst for a principal or for a school leader is when an incident has happened and then there is a very high likelihood of a repeated incident and they are having to swing into it and on the one hand, deal with the response and on the other hand, focusing on a preventative role as well.

[12.30 pm]

Mr Axworthy: Absolutely—the contagion that you get from this, and particularly from suicides.

Mr A.P. JACOB: So what sort of support—I think the principal would carry that first and foremost and also right down to the teacher level; that would be the hardest element of it. And feeling that pressure of trying to make sure that something is not going to repeat itself, what sort of support systems are in place?

Mrs O'Connell: We have had a number of situations where the worst case scenario has occurred. I know of one high school where one month after a staff member committed suicide, another staff member committed suicide, and with the second death, that person had been very condemning of the first person and said, "How can someone do this to us?" There was every sort of support that you could give that was given to those staff in a month there. So the impact is obviously huge when the second event occurs. So all we do is exactly the same as we have always done. We make sure that staff are told not only about the EAP, but the fact that sometimes there is something to be said for going to your GP and getting referred to counselling outside of that or that this too will pass so that it can be that what you are experiencing is a normal reaction to a very abnormal situation. From the suicide point of view that we are talking about, that was staff, but if we are talking about students, the other training that our school psychologists get, and which individual schools elect to also have for their staff members, is suicide prevention training. We have a two-day program—we call it the gatekeeper program—and that is also compulsory for all school psychologists in their intern two years or at some point before they are very experienced. We also have employed a consultant who, if the local expertise needs a third opinion, because the school psychologist would be consulted, they would go to their professional line manager and if they wanted another opinion and they said, "This is the way we are going to proceed, but do you think we should do it differently?" we have this other consultant as well. Not only is that in that arrangement there, but because these are not just occasional occurrences, there is a lot of contact between these people all the time for all sorts of reasons, so people know each other as well. So there is no reticence about having these conversations. I am not sure, does that answer your question?

Mr Axworthy: If I could just add to that, the world has changed quite a bit in the last 10 years, not in terms of youth suicide unfortunately. I, in a previous life, was chair to youth suicide prevention in

this state for many years, and our concern always was the fear of contagion—the desire to get information to people, but without, in a sense, validating suicide as a valid option for children. When I say the world has changed dramatically, the thing that has changed dramatically is communication and the capacity to control communication. One of the scariest things about suicide now is that within seconds there is Facebook, YouTube and social media, and it is not restricted to factual reporting of what may or may not have happened, so the story goes around very, very quickly and it is very hard for anyone—for a school principal as you said—to know that I may be doing all these things in school today. I may be calling an assembly and providing accurate information about that, but the children in front of me have been on their gizmos all night and have already developed this, and you get almost a mass hysteria and outpouring that is very hard for anyone to try to combat.

Earlier this year, we had that terrible situation of a girl going missing one night. She was a girl from a school in the south of the metropolitan area and she had checked out from the shopping centre that night and had not got home, and there were reports around that she was missing and the police were looking for her, and that was in the media. I had a report the next morning, at seven o'clock, that the police had found her body and that she was a student from one of our schools. We sent counsellors to the school to be there, to be available, not just to that school but to other schools in the neighbourhood where we knew that there were peers or sibs—the primary school that she had come from, because there was a young brother—to flood the area. The police had not released the name of the student, but already the social network was alive with it, so our carefully manufactured arrangements at the school so that we could bring the children in, calm them down and have them in small groups to be able talk about this, have an assembly, provide the facts and keep it all nice and calm —

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Gone.

Mr Axworthy: Gone. Most of the children who were greatly affected did not come to school to get it because they had already gone off —

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Can I just go back to the employee assistance program? In most agencies it is limited to, I think, six contacts, is that the case with the education department?

Mr Axworthy: The contract says six free sessions, Margaret, but in actual fact we have not had to invoke that. The point is that this is a counselling service for immediate work, not for long-term practice. So if a person needed long term help, the EAP, PRIMEXL, would be advising them to go either through their GP or to report to the department, because we have our own occupational health and safety doctor who could then place them into long-term counselling if that was what was required. What we are very anxious about is that we do not have someone fall between the camps. We have an arrangement with PRIMEXL that if a person is asking for more—they have already had their six, but they need more—they can come back, and we have actually not had to invoke that, but we would if we had to. Because six is an arbitrary number; it is not a bottomless pit of course, but we say six and typically six sessions is enough usually for a counsellor to be able to determine with someone, "You have a long-term problem here" or, "I think we're getting rid of this."

The CHAIRMAN: Does that not then involve identifying a person at that point to go past the six?

Mr Axworthy: If we were asked permission, we would not necessarily need to know the name of the person, but we would know that there was a case and we were extending; that is all. But as I said, it has not come up.

The CHAIRMAN: If they were referred back to the department?

Mr Axworthy: If they were referred back to the department, as an employer, we would know that person, so it would take, if you like, some sessions to get the person to the point of being able to go to either their GP or to the department's occupational doctor to report in.

The CHAIRMAN: Is the system that you have in place one devised by the department or is it a national standard; does it come from another jurisdiction?

Mr Axworthy: We contract on a regular basis or put out tenders on a regular basis. The person that has the tender, now PRIMEXL. is one of the largest suppliers of this and has been providing this service to a number of players, but our tender contract is something that the department determines, but it meets —

The CHAIRMAN: Is the way you set up the whole critical incident policy completely drawn up by the education department; is it worked on from other jurisdictions; or is it a national standard that you are working to?

Mr Axworthy: I was going to say that it is a bit of all of those things. It was certainly something that the department developed for itself in conjunction with other agencies in discussing things, and is compliant, if you like, with national standards, as national standards have developed, and it is only relatively recently that we have started seeing standards being put into place in this area. But we have been involved in this work for a long time.

Mrs O'Connell: In fact, we have been seen as exemplary, actually, in some ways, because my manager and I are invited every couple of years to the Australian Emergency Management Institute, the AEMI, in Mt Macedon, and to national conferences and national planning groups.

Mr Axworthy: So when setting up a national strategy for dealing with something like bird flu or a massive epidemic, Maura and Chris from our agency have been called in for their advice on how to work. Because of the work that has been recognised, we were one of the first places to have such an intensive youth suicide program and the gatekeeper training was something that was developed here.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Obviously for a close-knit community like a school where there is an individual suicide, it clearly has ramifications for the broader school community, but in terms of preparedness for, say, something like, heaven forbid, Columbine or something, what sort of additional measures do you consider need to be put in place in terms of planning for something like that?

Mr Axworthy: A large amount is prevention and the preparedness. If you read the books that have been written about Columbine post the event, there were signals but they were not picked up at the time, and that is one of the things that we really stress, "Be aware of signals and things." You cannot know what you do not know, I understand that, but if there are things —

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I am more concerned about if something like that were to happen, you would obviously need to mobilise greater resources. Would it be planned to just rely on school psychologists or what other measures would be put in place?

Mrs O'Connell: We would certainly link. You see, one of the things about something like Columbine is that it becomes a crime scene, so it is no longer under our jurisdiction. The police become the hazard management agency, and take over.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: They do in the short term, but I mean post-traumatic stress is obviously over a longer period. So what I am trying to work out is what the protocols would be or what you would think would be the template for something like that.

Mrs O'Connell: It would be exactly the same as what we do with the smallest incident in that we would just magnify that. We would make sure that we monitored staff and students for as long as they needed monitoring. One of the things we are also really careful about is caring for the carers, whether that is the principal or those in leadership positions or our own psychologists, to make sure that those do not get overwhelmed as well, which can happen. It works. I am sorry, I do not know that I am giving you a clear answer here, but it just gets bigger.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I really wanted to know from your professional expertise. You said it is just the same, just bigger; there are no other special requirements other than, as you say, the crime scene.

Mrs O'Connell: We have our security branch too and the head of security is a very active member of all the planning groups here as well, and he would have his links. The interagency meetings and interagency committees are so strong that if my manager or David or any of us had to link with somebody, we would know who to link with and we know where to get the information.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: One of the things that has arisen with other agencies is that there is not good tracking of individual personnel who might have been exposed cumulatively to more than one incident and I just wondered how that is handled within the department.

Mr Axworthy: Again, as far as staff are concerned we do track staff members' files very much. We are aware of the staff that were in Churchlands Senior High School, for example, when Vicky Groves was stabbed, and we have tracked those staff members.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So, if, for example, one of those staff members was maybe moved to another school —

Mr Axworthy: And then had another incident —

Ms M.M. QUIRK: — and had another incident, what would you then do?

Mr Axworthy: This would be the classic situation of where we would know that there were vulnerable people in that school and we would ask the principal to pay particular attention.

[12.45 pm]

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Right; thank you.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you ever involve parents or other volunteers in the training for, in particular, incident management?

Mrs O'Connell: That is not what we do, because my brief is really just the training of the school psychologists. In the past I have done training with principals and with staff, but it is just bigger than we have the capacity to do at this moment.

Mr Axworthy: I suppose I am saying yes we do and no we do not. We do not train volunteers to be critical respondents to a critical incident, but what we are aware of is that in school at any one time there are volunteers and parents who are there. So, when the principal is developing the plan, the plan has to include what awareness the people have, whether you are asking a parent to come up and read to children or they are involved in some other program that is going on in the school. If a critical incident happens at that time, would those people know what to do? So, include them. When we have a plan, it is important that the parents know what the plan is, the community knows what the plan is, and any volunteers or relief teachers who are coming into the school are aware of what the plan is if something were to happen. That is a bit different from training volunteers to be counsellors or support agents in an emergency, but it is recognising that there does need to be a degree of awareness-raising among those people.

Mrs O'Connell: In fact, we even say, including the crosswalk attendants, that if there has been a critical incident that everybody who is likely to be affected or in contact with students should really be brought in for briefing meetings.

Mr Axworthy: Absolutely.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you do an incident debrief after every incident or do you use a psychological first-aid approach?

Mrs O'Connell: The psychological first aid is really just the comforting; it is really making sure that people feel okay so that they can then move from that to processing what has actually occurred. That occurs at a different speed for different people; some people can process stuff really quickly, for others it takes quite some time. Many years ago there was something called critical incident stress debriefing, which was very popular. I think that involved seven different steps—I cannot remember the details of them now—but it has been out of vogue for quite a long time. I am saying

"out of vogue"; it was proven that the administration of this, during which people were asked, "Where were you? What did you see? What did you feel?" and so on in groups, tended to re-traumatise or over-traumatise people. The effect was that, Albert, you might not have been there, but you hear what Margaret has just described, so suddenly you have that added information you did not have before. It is no longer being used. What we are inclined to do is to just do the psychological first aid. The psychological first aid, actually, is administered much more by familiars to the students and the staff than the psychologists, unless the psychologist is known. So, it is other teachers, it is perhaps parents who might come in and be there, or volunteers, but always familiars. Yes, we do an operational debriefing.

Mr Axworthy: I was just going to say that we do require an operational debriefing, and that is where we draw the line. It is an operational debriefing rather than a psychological debriefing. That is to work out what worked and what did not work, where the snags were, what we could improve and what we would need to change. We do that at a number of levels. We encourage the school to engage in an operational debriefing at the school level, and if it is something that has involved the psych team, they will do an operational debriefing about things. For things that have got larger, like the bushfires and things like that, I certainly call an operational debriefing of the central office and all the key players who were involved in that. I was involved in the state emergency debriefing that occurred after the bushfires in both cases, where we talked interagency about what we learned and what we could do better.

Mrs O'Connell: But we also do a defusing, which is really an open invitation to anybody to just talk it through on the phone or let us meet up, or whatever it involves. They will just go over the ground until people are comfortable that they can move on from there or until they have had an opportunity to air the sort of things that might have troubled them at the time, whether that is self-doubt or whether it is something that they took a risk on in doing that maybe they were not 100 per cent sure it was a good way of going but in fact it was fine. That is there all the time. It is there at a school level, between the principal and staff; it is there between the school psychologist and staff; and between the leadership in the school psychology service and wherever. The links are, as I have said a number of times, very strong and they are fairly clear on where to go to get help.

The CHAIRMAN: When we were overseas we heard a lot about retired people, particularly fireys and police officers, assisting with peer support and things like that. Is there any system within the education department for that?

Mrs O'Connell: Peer support is something that the Tunnecliffes used to do quite a lot of training in; I have not heard much about it recently. Certainly Michael Tunnecliffe and his group used to do staff training on that, but I have not heard anything recently. But because principals have a lot of autonomy in these areas, there could be things happening locally that we would not hear about. Often when you do not hear about them, it means things are going fairly well.

The CHAIRMAN: Members, any other questions?

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Before I became a member there was a high school student who died, and it appeared that whatever was done by the book then went pretty well. They have set up memorials and that is how they have dealt with it, and of course two years went past and that class was out of school, so there was a whole new lot then and there was only the perpetual memorial. But last year and this year there were two deaths; there was a teacher who died and a student whose mother was a single parent. The only reason I bring it up is most probably to encourage you that the system must have been working. I was only notified about the child with the single parent because obviously they needed some assistance. I reckon I got called according to the book—it is this number here; we need to go to a local politician to get some help. It was terrific. I just wanted to say that they went through it. I think when the teacher died there were certainly some issues they had to deal with. With the student who died, before my time, though, I think they took care of the children magnificently, but I think a couple of teachers slipped through the cracks, and I think they have

gone on. But from what I gather here today, things have been really tightened up very well and I am encouraged by that. But I wanted to give a good report.

Mr Axworthy: Thank you.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Of course sometimes we do not get in the picture at all, and when we do our motivation is always questioned. So, for me to be asked to assist in the area they asked me to, I thought it was terrific. When I explained further, they said, "No, we did everything, and when we came up to the sixth point we could not deal with that and we had to go to you." If was terrific, to be honest.

Mr Axworthy: Thank you for that.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Thank you for raising the social media one; it was great hear that that is on your radar. It is one of those things that is changing so quickly.

Mr Axworthy: It is.

Mr A.P. JACOB: My question is—you were going down this path a bit—how do you adapt to it? I do not have a clue what the answer is, and you may not yet, but how are you trying to find that answer?

Mr Axworthy: It is certainly not to try to ban it, because you cannot. Look, I do not have an answer to it; I do not know whether Maura does.

Mrs O'Connell: As recently as the end of April, early May, Chris Gostelow and I were at Mt Macedon and we met up with people from the Australian National University, and lots of people who were actually researchers and writers in this area. We raised the topic there; it is new to everybody. There has been some stuff written in the United States. The trend, as David said, seems to be to go with it as much as possible, and—even if you cannot control how it is being used what sites have been set up—to contribute, and perhaps to contribute formally. We have not done this yet, but probably our next plan will include the sort of statements you could put on Facebook. The sort of things we would be saying would be clarifying that a death has occurred and we are all terribly sad about it, but help is available. It would be saying where help is available and how to get it, not just locally but connecting with all the other agencies such as headspace. There are so many other organisations and agencies that can provide help as well. One of the advantages is the links these days—hyperlinks and other sorts of links like that—so that someone can just click go and straight into it. So when they are motivated to do that, they can perhaps go further than they might if we were just monitoring them.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there a relationship or is there a process for dealing with the union within critical incident management?

Mr Axworthy: Yes, we have worked very strongly with the teachers' union, and with United Voice, which looks after the ancillary staff, on all our projects like this. The particular area we have had a lot of focus with the union—we work with the teachers' union—is in the development of a thing called keeping our workplace safe—KOWS. It is about dealing with violent behaviour. We make joint presentations with the police, the teachers' union and ourselves when we go out to schools. Again, that runs around the same sort of thing; be prepared for things, how do you respond at that time, and then how do you recover from events. That is particularly to do with violent incidents. Again, although any one of a number of critical nasty things can happen, we have a similar sort of template and then it spins off into the specifics of that context. I think most principals may never be in a situation like that, but they have been in a situation like this and they can see, "Well, if I did that sort of thing, I would be well placed." That is what we are trying to do.

The CHAIRMAN: Any other questions? No.

David and Maura, I thank you both for coming in this morning and giving us the benefit of your experience. I will read you a closing statement that will tell you what happens from here on. A

transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for the correction of minor errors. Will you please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 working days of the date of the covering letter. If the transcript is not returned within this period we will deem it to be correct. New material cannot be introduced via these corrections and the sense of you evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Again, thanks for your attendance this morning.

Hearing concluded at 12.57 pm