

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS TAKEN ON NOTICE
PAEC Inquiry into the 2023-24 Financial and Performance Outcomes
Department of Education
Wednesday 20 November 2024

1. And was Ms White's performance as VCAA as CEO formally reviewed before her resignation?

(Asked by Nick McGOWAN, pages 3-5 of the transcript)

Response:

Performance discussions were aligned to the Department of Education Performance and Development Plan cycle that runs from 1 July to 30 June.

Transcript extract:

Nick McGOWAN: Somewhat ironically, I suppose, John Bennett did a review some 12 months ago probably it is now, commissioned by the education minister, and you know where I am going with this. In the course of his review – because of course last year's exams had issues with biology and there were some issues with, I think from memory, Chinese studies and also maths, and you got a number of university mathematicians writing to you, although you may eclipse that number this year – one of the recommendations that was part of that review was that the VCAA needs to:

... develop procedures for managing issues that have been raised by the public or those that will take longer to resolve.

I suppose the obvious question is: what action is the VCAA taking on that recommendation by Dr Bennett?

Jenny ATTA: Thanks, Mr McGowan. I should note up-front that we do not have a representative from the VCAA with us today. As you will understand, the CEO has resigned. We have got a new CEO, who has only been in place for 48 hours. I am very happy to take what we can and take anything else on notice.

But I am happy to talk to the Bennett review, which was a very important review commissioned by the minister after the issues that were raised around errors. It was principally looking at the mathematics and chemistry exams, Mr McGowan, and some distribution issues with some Chinese language exams. The Bennett review produced six recommendations. It did confirm that overall there were good processes and systems in place for the VCAA, but it provided six recommendations. They did go very specifically and particularly to the preparation of mathematics and chemistry papers, the strengthening of the involvement of suitably qualified academics, the strengthening of the exam-setting process, the construction of the papers, the review and editing processes of the papers, training and guidance for the publishing and the in-house production of those papers, updated guidance for staff at exam centres, the recommendation to publish examination material in a timely manner and updating policies and processes relating to management of errors and alleged errors. The VCAA has led a program of work, a very substantial program of work, to progress all of those recommendations over the past year.

I want to acknowledge it up-front: we have seen another set of issues emerge. I acknowledge the concern and anxiety that that has caused for students, schools, family and community, and the VCAA

has apologised for that. I think there is an umbrella issue, if you like, that goes to embedded systems and processes we suspect are at play here. But it is important to note that, in terms of the work of the Bennett review, that work has been well received, including by the academics who were very vociferous in expressing their concerns last year. The authorities worked diligently on improving those maths and science exams. While there is always a wrap-up at the end of a VCE examination series, no issues of errors in those exams have emerged. I just do not want to conflate the two issues too much – a very specific set of reviews around a particular issue. But I think what the minister has pointed to in calling for a comprehensive root-and-branch review is that the issues around systems, processes, accuracy and quality assurance clearly go deeper, and we do need to unpack all of that with a comprehensive review of the structure, operations, capability and culture of the organisation so that we do have a fit-for-purpose, high-performing agency to fulfil this really critical role.

Nick McGOWAN: Is this the worst ever you have seen in your time?

Jenny ATTA: It is going to reflect that it has been a long time, Mr McGowan, and I have seen a little bit, but look it is clearly very concerning.

Nick McGOWAN: I could take that as a yes if it makes it easier for you.

Jenny ATTA: I would simply say that it is very concerning, and it is notwithstanding what I know to be very diligent work from a large team of people with significant expertise and skills in this area, but there are a lot of fundamentals that go to building a high-performing agency, and clearly we conclude at this stage that there has been a deterioration over time. And it really is not a specific review; it is the root-and-branch review, as the minister has said. On top of that, he has asked for an independent monitor to be established, because the life cycle of a VCE examination series is really a 12-month life cycle. So we want an additional layer of assurance over the planning, preparation, management, production and implementation of the 2025 exams that can start straightaway in the new year.

Nick McGOWAN: You will forgive me, I have got a few machinery-like questions, but you know why I am asking them. In respect to Ms White's appointment, was the role advertised externally?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, it was.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. And was a proper merit-based process followed to the extent of your knowledge?

Jenny ATTA: That is correct. Yes, it was.

Nick McGOWAN: And do you know how many candidates were considered for that role?

Jenny ATTA: I could not tell you offhand the pool of candidates, but there were multiple applications for the role.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. And I have been asked to ask whether you were aware of Ms White's longstanding Labor Party membership.

Jenny ATTA: I am not aware of that.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Did the Minister for Education actually sign off on Mrs White's appointment?

Jenny ATTA: No. The Secretary is the employer of the CEO.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. And was Mrs White's performance as VCAA CEO formally reviewed before her resignation?

Jenny ATTA: Ms White had acted in the role, I think from memory, from around November last year and has substantively been appointed in the role for four or five months now. I can check that detail for you. So we had a performance conversation at the midyear point, when I usually have those

conversations with executives, but it is only more recently that she has had a substantive contract that would be reviewed in that sense.

Nick McGOWAN: Did Ms White's resignation follow any internal recommendations or findings?

Jenny ATTA: There had been no time –

Nick McGOWAN: That were conveyed to her, let me put it that way.

Jenny ATTA: No, Mr McGowan. These events of course unfolded very quickly over the last week or so, and Ms White tendered her resignation. I do want to note that Ms White had worked diligently, taking on that role to turn around performance issues with the agency. I do not want to draw conclusions – and it is too early to, and the minister has announced a review – around exactly what are likely to be a range of factors that have contributed here.

Nick McGOWAN: Is it not preferable sometimes to wait for a review in order to determine whether that member of staff should actually receive certain benefits or payouts, to determine what their actions were and their culpability?

Jenny ATTA: Mr McGowan, Ms White has resigned, and that just triggers the usual contractual arrangements around the payout of accrued entitlements that are triggered on a resignation. There is nothing in that space, I think, that needs to wait.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Without identifying anyone else, were there any other staff members disciplined or dismissed over the incident aside from Ms White?

Jenny ATTA: No, Mr McGowan. All of our focus and all of the VCAA's focus under Dr Devlin, the interim CEO, is on exams being completed this week and then working through the very important process around ensuring fair assessment of all exams next week. The minister has called for the review. I am in the midst of putting together advice for him about the scope and terms of reference for that review, and we will move to that just as soon as we can take our eyes off this immediate period.

2.

- a) **On what date were the sample cover sheets uploaded to the VCAA website?**
- b) **On what date was it discovered that the sample cover sheets included hidden text including hidden questions?**
- c) **On what date were these sample cover sheets taken down from the VCAA website?**

(Asked by Nick McGOWAN, page 5 of the transcript)

Response:

- | |
|---|
| <p>2. a) The sample cover sheets were uploaded to the VCAA website on 4 October.</p> <p>2. b) The VCAA became aware of the examination material being online on 12 October.</p> <p>2. c) The VCAA immediately took the material down on the 12 October.</p> |
|---|

Transcript extract:

Nick McGOWAN: These questions are intended for Dr Devlin, but I am happy for you to either answer them as you can or come back to us if you wish. The question I have here is: on what date were the sample cover sheets uploaded to the VCAA website?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, I would have to come back to you to be sure I can give you an accurate date there.

Nick McGOWAN: And the other question I have is: on what date was it discovered that the sample cover sheets included hidden text, including hidden questions?

Jenny ATTA: My understanding is that was 12 October.

Nick McGOWAN: If that is not correct, you will let us know, obviously.

Jenny ATTA: That is right; I will.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay, thank you. And on what date were these sample cover sheets taken down from the VCAA website?

Jenny ATTA: I understand it was on the same day, and I will come back with confirmation of that.

3.

- a) **On what date was the minister advised that the sample cover sheets had been uploaded with hidden text?**
- b) **What assurances was the Minister given about the course of action for when and rewriting the exams?**
- c) **Do you know why the VCAA initially assured the Minister that the exams had been rewritten, if that is in fact what they did?**

(Asked by Nick McGOWAN, pages 5-6 of the transcript)

Response:

3 a) The VCAA CEO briefed Minister Carroll's office on Monday 14 October and Tuesday 15 October.

3 b) The Minister was advised that changes would be made to questions or prompts or other aspects of the examination item to ensure no advantage could be gained by early access to the original question. A full set of quality assured exams would be distributed to exam centres in line with usual practice.

3 c) VCAA Management advise that the then-CEO of the VCAA provided that advice in good faith with the understanding that it was accurate advice.

Transcript extract:

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. On what date was the minister advised that the sample cover sheets had been uploaded with hidden text?

Jenny ATTA: I understand that was early in the following week – I think around the 14th – along with, by that time, the work that had been done on the proposed remedy to ensure that there was a full set of quality-assured exams with no relationship to those sample questions, if you like.

Nick McGOWAN: That flows on to my next question. What assurances was the minister given about the course of action and rewriting the exams?

Jenny ATTA: I would have to come back to you on the details of the VCAA briefing. But certainly the department was provided with a briefing as well, and the VCAA of course took that information and proposal to their board as well with a fully set out, detailed plan to ensure that that effective remedy could be delivered and delivered on time.

Nick McGOWAN: Do you have a clear picture yet as to why the VCAA failed to detect and address the issue of the hidden text in the sample cover sheets before they were uploaded?

Jenny ATTA: No, I do not have a complete understanding. That initial issue does appear to be a somewhat obscure desktop publishing error, malfunction or issue. But I think it is important that we let the review proceed and not speculate too much on that. The minister is determined, as am I, that we have complete clarity about what happened, how and why.

Nick McGOWAN: On that, do you know why the VCAA initially assured the minister that the exams had been rewritten, if that is in fact what they did?

Jenny ATTA: To your particular question about why they provided that assurance, we will come back to you, but it was a central part of the detailed remedy. But I can come back to you with any further detail from the VCAA on that.

4. Do you know how the decision was made to rewrite only some of the affected exams while leaving others unchanged?

(Asked by Nick McGOWAN, page 6 of the transcript)

Response:

The VCAA considered it had identified all published examination material and, where necessary, made appropriate changes. In one case, the examination material that was published early was not identified and the examination was not changed.

Transcript extract:

Nick McGOWAN: Do you know how the decision was made to rewrite only some of the affected exams while leaving others unchanged?

Jenny ATTA: It was my understanding, Mr McGowan, that all impacted exams – all impacted items for the impacted exams – were adjusted. The question is clearly that some of them were not adjusted sufficiently. But again, I can come back to you to confirm the details on that.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. I appreciate that. From your oversight, there were multiple VCAA exams which some have described, in the way they were written and phrased – and this is teachers and students commenting – as clumsy. Would that be your observation?

The CHAIR: Mr Hilakari, is there a point of order?

Mathew HILAKARI: There is. I appreciate Mr McGowan is a forward-looking individual, but we are actually looking back at the previous year's financial performance. So I am hoping we can move to that now that we are two-thirds of the way through your questions.

Danny O'BRIEN: On the point of order, Chair.

The CHAIR: On the point of order, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: The questioning started specifically on the review undertaken last year on the exam debacle. This is the outcomes hearing, so we are seeking the outcomes of the Bennett review, which clearly have not been terribly well implemented. This is entirely within the scope, I would argue.

Mathew HILAKARI: Happy to hear if there are questions about the Bennett review, of course.

The CHAIR: I beg your pardon?

Mathew HILAKARI: Happy to hear if there are further questions on the Bennett review, of course.

Nick McGOWAN: I can move on to something else, at any case, if it assists.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Secretary, for your answer. Do you intend on disbanding the VCAA? What is the intention there going forward?

Jenny ATTA: My intention is to give the minister every support to establish the review that he has called for, the comprehensive review, which will provide recommendations to the minister on any future steps and actions going forward.

5. Can you tell us how many days compromised papers were up online before anything was done about it?

Nick McGowan - Notice it seems to be the 5th October is it? Do you have any evidence of... If you take those details on notice.

(Asked by Bev McARTHUR, pages 13-14 of the transcript)

Response:

The sample cover sheets were uploaded to the VCAA website on 04 October.
The VCAA became aware of the examination material being online on 12 October and removed them on the same day.
This accounts for 8 days that the papers were up online.

Transcript extract:

Bev McARTHUR: On 5 October the chemistry exam front cover was downloaded for people. You did not discover this till 12 October, you have said.

Jenny ATTA: No, I did not discover anything, Ms McArthur. We were talking earlier in response to Mr McGowan's question about my understanding of when the VCAA discovered –

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. Secretary, can you tell us how many days compromised papers were up online before anything was done about it?

Jenny ATTA: No. I do not have that information with me, but I can follow that up for you.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you. I will ask you to take that on notice.

Nick McGOWAN: It seems to me we had 5 October. Do you have any evidence of –

Jenny ATTA: I just do not have that knowledge, Mr McGowan. I am not aware of that date.

Bev McARTHUR: All right. Thank you very much, Secretary. If you could take those details on notice.

6. How many [of the exams] would you say were substantially compromised [of the 56]?

(Asked by Bev McARTHUR, page 14 of the transcript)

Response:

As at time of response to questions on notice, the VCAA are continuing to assess the impact on each of the 56 examinations.

Transcript extract:

Bev McARTHUR: ...On 14 November Ms White said:

The VCE examinations haven't been compromised and all students can be very confident about completing their exams.

Only days later another VCAA spokesman admitted:

It is clear some students have been let down as a result of these errors and that is completely unacceptable ... The VCAA are working to address the issues caused by the early publication of some examination questions.

while the minister confessed that a 'handful' of exams have been substantially compromised. How many exams are there in the VCE?

Jenny ATTA: My understanding is there are 117 written exams – 116, sorry.

Bev McARTHUR: 116, thank you very much. So how many were compromised?

Jenny ATTA: My advice is that there was some impact for 56 of those exams.

Bev McARTHUR: Fifty-six. How many would you say were substantially compromised?

Jenny ATTA: I am not able to give you that assessment, Ms McArthur, and again I am conscious as well that the minister has asked obviously for this to be reviewed. I can look at what information the VCAA can come back to you on to give a proper assessment. I am just not in a position to give you that assessment.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay.

7.

- a. Do you have any concerns about this year's exam in Chinese as a second language?
- b. Are you aware of a social media post from a social media platform Reddit that a tutoring company who had assisted the Department of Education sent out prompts identical to the leaked VCE Chinese paper?

(Asked by Bev McARTHUR, page 15 of the transcript)

Response:

7 a) The VCAA advise that there are no concerns about this year's exam in Chinese as a second language and the Department is not aware of any valid concerns being raised.

7 b) Claims on a social media post that the exam paper for Chinese Second Language was leaked by a tuition company have been identified as false.

Transcript extract:

Bev McARTHUR: Do you have any concerns about this year's exam in Chinese as a second language?

Jenny ATTA: There have been no concerns raised with me, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Are you aware of a social media post from the social media platform Reddit that a tutoring company who had assisted the Department of Education sent out prompts identical to the leaked VCE Chinese paper?

Jenny ATTA: I am not personally aware of that post.

Bev McARTHUR: Would you be able to find out?

Jenny ATTA: I can ask a question about that and follow it up for you.

8.

a. The 2024/25 Capital Works Bundle West 2 combines four school construction projects: Cobden Technical School, Fitzroy Primary School, Swan Hill North Primary School and Whittlesea Secondary College. Why?

b. We are now asking about the tendering process. Do you have any knowledge of this? ...This bundling process...makes it impossible for smaller businesses to pursue contracts in their own community... in my electorate, for example, BDH Constructions...cannot bid. Why take away this company's bread and butter?

(Asked by Bev McARTHUR, pages 15-16 of the transcript)

Response:

8 a) The bundling of works is in response to market conditions and can support cost-effectiveness through design and construction efficiencies.

8 b) There are significant opportunities across Victoria for small and medium organisations to work with the Victorian School Building Authority on upgrade and modernisation projects, capital works fund works, kindergarten, early learning centre, maintenance, renewal and school-led projects.

Transcript extract:

Bev McArthur: The 2024/25 Capital Works Bundle West 2 combines four school construction projects: Cobden Technical School, Fitzroy Primary School, Swan Hill North Primary School and Whittlesea Secondary College. Why?

Jacinta Blanch: Thank you for your question. Can I just confirm that was in the reporting period that we are talking about?

Bev McArthur: Sorry? Yes, the 2024–25 capital works bundle.

Danny O'Brien: That would be over the prior year. I do not think we would have funded them in this year's budget and then gone to tender within a couple of months. That is not how it works. So they were previously funded; we are now asking about the tendering process.

Mathew Hilakari: And I am sure we can find a reference within the budgets – the previous budget papers or the department's reports.

Bev McArthur: Do you have any knowledge of this?

Jenny Atta: So perhaps, Mrs McArthur, we can check that and come back to you during the session.

Bev McArthur: We are now asking about the tendering process. Do you have any knowledge of this? It goes to another point. This bundling process, and I am not sure whether it is new or you have done it before – I think you have probably done it before – makes it impossible for smaller businesses to pursue contracts in their own community, and that is about using local employees and local product et cetera. Fitzroy is a long way from Cobden, so that seems illogical. As you know, businesses wishing to tender must be pre-qualified on the DTF's constructions supplier register. When you bundle contracts like this, you automatically exclude smaller companies. So in my electorate, for example, BDH Constructions has operated for more than 30 years and recently successfully delivered the Colac Specialist School which I think was referred to in your report. Their CSR limit is \$15 million, enough for almost any standalone project, but bundled like this they cannot bid. Why take away this company's bread and butter?

Jenny Atta: I think without having the specifics of that bundling approach in front of me, the thing I would say is that there have been different approaches to the procurement for the school capital program trying to balance a whole range of considerations, and it is important, and we have had approaches that have considered where we can ensure access for local companies for local projects, but we also have competing demands around how do we get price, how do we get things delivered on time, how can we bring like projects together where companies might have particular expertise. So I will just check if there is anything we can say about that bundle right now or otherwise I will follow it up for you.

Jacinta Blanch: Thank you, Secretary. In terms of that specific bundle, no, but generally all of our procurement follows the government's social procurement requirements, and there are procurement thresholds that do require an element of local input, and those larger capital programs would meet those thresholds requirements to do that and follow up with specific advice around that.

9.

- a. I understand after last year's exam conflagration that the then VCAA CEO asked Minister Carroll for approval to employ external experts in the exam unit. Is that correct, do you know?
- b. Could you perhaps investigate, because I understand Minister Carroll rejected the proposal for external experts in favour of using the GSC, which I think is an internal redeployment scheme of some sort?

(Asked by Danny O’BRIEN, page 21 of the transcript)

Response:

9 a) As part of the Bennett Review, external experts were employed and funded by the Department of Education. This employment was achieved through external recruitment processes and procuring services to support examination development

9 b) The Minister did not reject a proposal to use external experts. Additional staffing were also employed and funded by the Department of Education. This employment was achieved through advertising on the Department’s Job Skills Exchange and external recruitment processes.

Transcript extract:

Danny O’BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Secretary, I understand after last year’s exam conflagration that the then VCAA CEO asked Minister Carroll for approval to employ external experts in the exam unit. Is that correct, do you know?

Jenny ATTA: I am not aware of that as I sit here. I am just trying to think, Mr O’Brien. I am happy to follow it up for you. The VCAA will often work with different academics, different experts in the field who will assist or be contracted to do a particular task, but I am not aware of the specifics that you are going to there.

Danny O’BRIEN: Could you perhaps investigate, because I understand Minister Carroll rejected the proposal for external experts in favour of using the GSC, which I think is an internal redeployment scheme of some sort?

Jenny ATTA: I am not aware of that at all, but I am happy to follow up your question.

Danny O’BRIEN: If you would not mind, that would be great.

10. How much [are the costs for the about 11 projects across eight organisations]?*

**please note in the transcript and verification section below we have requested 8 organisations to be changed to 4*

(Asked by Danny O’BRIEN, pages 22-23 of the transcript)

Response:

There were 4 contractors working across 11 upgrade and modernisation projects that were impacted by insolvencies.

The table below provides a summary of the 8 projects that required additional investment as per Budget Paper 4.

The remaining 3 projects have not yet reached completion.

No.	School	Additional investment (\$m)*
1	Bell Primary School 2020–21 (Preston)	0.673
2	Heatherwood School 2020–21 (Donvale)	1.479

3	Hoppers Crossing Secondary College 2020–21 (Hoppers Crossing)	0.143
4	Kangaroo Ground Primary School 2021–22 (Kangaroo Ground)	0.414
5	Nepean Special School 2020–21 (Seaford)	1.238
6	Taylors Lakes Primary School 2020–21 (Taylors Lakes)	0.252
7	Vermont Secondary College 2020–21 (Vermont)	2.619
8	Yarra Ranges Special Developmental School 2020–21 (Mount Evelyn)	2.885
*as per State Capital Program - Budget Paper 4		

Transcript extract:

Danny O’Brien: Can I ask, has the department incurred additional costs because of any insolvencies of builders that were undertaking school builds?

Jacinta Blanch: Yes, there were a small number of additional costs for those projects. The department itself did not incur additional costs, but those building projects did incur additional costs.

Danny O’Brien: How many were there?

Jacinta Blanch: In this reporting period there was only one school project that was subject to an organisation that went insolvent, but there are projects completed in this reporting period that were subject to insolvencies in the previous calendar year. I think there was – I am happy to correct these numbers, but they were quite low – about 11 projects across eight organisations.

Danny O’Brien: What was the one in this reporting period?

Jacinta Blanch: Allmore Constructions was the name of the organisation, and it was Wallan Primary School.

Danny O’Brien: Sorry, I do not really quite understand when you say the department did not incur any costs but there were costs to the project.

Jacinta Blanch: Apologies. I was trying to make it clear that it was just for the building works that additional costs were incurred – for re-tendering. So yes, to the department.

Danny O’Brien: Have you been able to quantify that for those 11?

Jacinta Blanch: We have quantified that.

Danny O’Brien: How much is it?

Jacinta Blanch: I do not have that with me, but I am happy to provide that.

11. The questionnaire refers to the department currently undertaking a comprehensive, four-year strategic evaluation of Victorian school workforce attraction and retention initiatives... Who got it, and what is the value of the tender?

(Asked by Danny O’Brien, pages 25-26 of the transcript)

Response:

The department is undertaking a comprehensive and ongoing approach to evaluating investment in school workforce initiatives.

There are 2 key components:

- Strategic Evaluation – funding for Performance and Evaluation Division with elements externally procured. (2024-28) - \$2,000,000.
- Clustered topic-specific evaluations:
 - Attraction – Deloitte Access Economics (2024-26) - \$969,451.14
 - Recruitment and retention – Urbis Ltd (2024-25) - \$1,031,101.78
 - Career Start program – Urbis Ltd (2024-25) - \$520,058.64.

The strategic evaluation is over four years, commencing in 2024. The focus of this strategic evaluation examining the contribution of the Department's workforce initiatives to the objectives of workforce attraction and retention, rather than an in-depth assessment of the outcomes of each initiative. Such an assessment is being delivered through the clustered external procurement approach.

Transcript extract:

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Moving on, page 155 of the questionnaire refers to the department currently undertaking a comprehensive, four-year strategic evaluation of Victorian school workforce attraction and retention initiatives. When do you expect this comprehensive four-year strategic evaluation to be complete?

Jenny ATTA: Mr O'Brien, I will just ask Ms Del Monaco to talk to that, who will more likely have that timing than I will.

Andrea DEL MONACO: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. We are clustering that evaluation into a number of parts, so we talked –

Danny O'BRIEN: Here is that clustering again, Mrs McArthur.

Andrea DEL MONACO: Clustering, yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Clustering.

Andrea DEL MONACO: All the initial teacher education initiatives that we talked about earlier are being clustered in one, Career Start in another, and then the other workforce initiatives in the other. There are interdependencies between those. We are starting to get early signs of what those evaluations are showing us, and we are refining the programs as we go, based on those. I think, with the Secretary –

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I clarify, going back to the question: it is not a four-year review, is it? It is not going to take four years?

Andrea DEL MONACO: No. Each of them has got different parts to it. A number of the initiatives have a two-year life span, so they are funded in 2024 and 2025, so we need to wait until the end of the 2025 cycle for that initiative. Flexible work is a two-year initiative. This is just a phased approach to evaluation.

Danny O'BRIEN: So we are not going to see anything until the end of next year?

Andrea DEL MONACO: I mean, this is one where we are continuing to try new initiatives, and we are being quite open in the approach where we are refining certain things. For example, for the teacher financial incentives we refined the key selection criteria or how people are eligible, based on the feedback we have heard from you and others about eligibility. So that is an example where we are

using that information now and not waiting for the final piece. There are opportunities for learning. And there are things like scholarships and paid placements, where that information is available.

Danny O'BRIEN: Getting to the question: in terms of timing, it will not be released until the end of next year at the earliest?

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes. Most of the initiatives are funded to the end of 2025, which means the evaluation will be completed after that.

Danny O'BRIEN: In 2026. Is it internal or is it then being done by a contractor?

Andrea DEL MONACO: It is being done by a contractor, with significant input from us, because –

Danny O'BRIEN: Did that go to tender?

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Who got it, and what is the value of the tender?

Andrea DEL MONACO: They are all clustered with different – I will have to take that on notice, but that work is being undertaken.

Danny O'BRIEN: That is fine on notice. And will that final review be released publicly?

Jenny ATTA: We will make that part of the considerations that are put in train now around our evaluation reports.

12.

- a. In terms of the Victorian percentage of high school students who identify as LGBTQIA+, my office has heard from stakeholders that the department has a figure for the 14- to 16-year-old age bracket of 31%. Could I ask where that figure has come from?
- b. Where this sort of data would be sourced from typically by the department?

(Asked by Aiv PUGLIELLI, pages 31-32 of the transcript)

Response:

12 a) The department does not collect data on the percentage of high school students who identify as LGBTQIA+.

12 b) The department does not collect or source data on the percentage of high school students who identify as LGBTQIA+.

Transcript extract:

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. We know that if we are going to target support where it is needed, we need really good data. So in terms of the Victorian percentage of high school students who identify as LGBTQIA+, my office has heard from stakeholders that the department has a figure for the 14- to 16-year-old age bracket of 31 per cent. Could I ask where that figure has come from?

Jenny ATTA: I am not aware of that figure, but I am happy to follow it up. I do not think I have ever heard of that figure.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That would be really much appreciated. It is a very specific figure I have raised, so that is understandable. Could I ask maybe a bit further where this sort of data would be sourced from typically by the department.

Jenny ATTA: I am not sure if it is Mr Howes or Mr Fraser in terms of the student information that we collect.

Stephen FRASER: I am happy to jump in and take anything further on notice. There are a range of ways that we collect the gender identity of students – the enrolment form, but obviously that is often at those entry points into the school system, at prep and year 7, and we are going to get quite different figures at each age range. The other key mechanism is we survey all students from years 3 to 12 every year through the attitudes to school survey, and there are questions about gender identity in that survey, which are completely voluntary for students to complete. That is another source – it is not a definitive source – but it is a way that we can analyse that data by the experiences of different cohorts.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I suppose the elements of the question that you do not immediately have to hand, if those could be on notice, that would be fantastic. Thank you.

13.

- a. **Will this [Merri-bek North] education plan provide a fairer and better education opportunity to all students in the area? And if you like as well on notice, potentially a breakdown of the consultations that took place with the community would be really handy.**
- b. **Does the department acknowledge that without new funding associated with the [Merri-bek North] education plan, it kind of just looks like a string of press releases?**

(Asked by Aiv PUGLIELLI, page 32 of the transcript)

Response:

13 a) Community consultation on the Merri-bek North Education Plan (MNEP) was undertaken between February and May 2023. This included:

- an online Engage Victoria survey
- workshops with 120 students
- workshops with 150 school staff members
- a parent workshop
- engagement with Merri-bek Community Connectors – a group of local people representing the culturally diverse community
- meetings with stakeholders including tertiary partners, Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network, Merri Community Health, community advocacy groups and the Australian Education Union.

13 b) The Victorian Government has recently funded new buildings at MNEP schools:

- Through the 2023–24 State Budget, John Fawcner Secondary College received \$14.5 million for a new science and visual arts building and a new food technology building.
- In addition, Coburg High School received \$17.8 million for a two-storey technology building and to create space for 250 additional local students.
- In the 2021–22 State Budget, Pascoe Vale Girls Secondary College received \$11.944 million to build a new arts and technology centre.
- In the 2019–20 State Budget, Glenroy Secondary College received \$9.215 million for a new senior and junior school, learning resource centre, administration centre and staff hub.

With the launch of the MNEP the Victorian Government provided an additional \$50,000 to Glenroy Secondary College to update its masterplan and to plan for future buildings at the school that will meet the needs of the school community.

Transcript extract:

AIV PUGLIELLI: I will just move on to the education plan for Merri-bek North. The community said that they felt like they were a bit placated back in the election year of 2022. They did not hear much more, did not see much action, and then the plan was unveiled again via a media release in late October of this year. There is no formal copy of the plan on the government's website. I suppose my query is: what does the plan tangibly do? I mean, it uses phrases like 'leverage their shared vision', which kind of sounds like spin. Will this education plan provide a fairer and better education opportunity to all students in the area? And if you like as well on notice, potentially a breakdown of the consultations that took place with the community would be really handy.

DAVID HOWES: I am happy to take that. I know the schools have worked very closely together, and I think there has been consultation with the community about community expectations about the types of programs that will be available. I think there are some specific initiatives around links with external providers to broaden the offerings, to broaden the range of opportunities that are available. I can take on notice about the publication of that plan.

AIV PUGLIELLI: Thank you. A closer look of what at least is in the press release for this plan, looking through the past budgets, shows that the funding is seemingly all previously allocated before the plan's supposed rollout. So does the department acknowledge that without new funding associated with the plan it kind of just looks like a string of press releases?

DAVID HOWES: Again, happy to take that on notice, but I think there is some additional resourcing that has gone in to support that. The implementation of that plan and some additional resourcing into some of the schools that are part of that plan, but I can take that on notice.

14. The instances that I have raised [related to the Middle East Conflict] – do those align with the department's interpretation of sensitivity?

(Asked by Aiv PUGLIELLI, page 32-33 of the transcript)

Response:

The department recognises the ongoing distress caused by the Middle East conflict, particularly for those with connections to the region, and has reminded schools to maintain sensitivity and respect for all students and staff.

Teachers should not use their professional position to make political statements but instead support students to consider and think critically about a range of perspectives on complex issues.

The Victorian Public Sector Code of Conduct requires all employees to seek to build and maintain public trust, to demonstrate integrity and impartiality.

Transcript extract:

AIV PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That is much appreciated. I might move on with some questions regarding instructions and directions of school staff that have taken place in schools. I have heard some instances raised with my office of teachers at multiple public schools being directed to removal

keffiyeh by principals, principals directing union representatives to not allow discussion of Palestine in union meetings, students and staff directed to remove symbols because of a perceived threat to the wellbeing of other students, principals investigating teachers for potential misconduct because of references to Palestine and principals directing staff members not to communicate about Palestine with each other in staffrooms. Can I ask: what is the department doing to protect staff and students against vexatious and political complaints that seek to characterise any representation of Palestinian existence as antisemitic?

DAVID HOWES: Thank you for the question. The events in the Middle East are obviously causing extreme distress for many in the community, especially those who have got connections to the countries there and the areas there. We have given advice a number of times to schools – public advice – about the importance of maintaining sensitivity to everyone who is impacted by that, and that applies both to staff and to students. We have also indicated, and this would particularly apply in secondary schools, that it is important for students to have the opportunity to discuss those issues. We have asked staff to be very sensitive both to each other and to students around the impact that any kind of behaviour might have at a time of such distress for many members of the community from many different groups. I do think, in the middle of very challenging circumstances, our schools have overwhelmingly behaved in a professional, sensitive way, where they have done as much as they can to support the members of their community, and that is staff and students and obviously families as well, to maintain a cohesive and collaborative environment for both study and work.

AIV PUGLIELLI: Thank you. The instances that I have raised – do those align with the department’s interpretation of sensitivity?

DAVID HOWES: I do not have the details of the examples you have raised, so I would need to look at some specific examples. But the things that have come to my attention I think have been instances where people are trying very hard to acknowledge the sensitivities that are being experienced by, as I said, many staff and students and trying to respect those.

AIV PUGLIELLI: Are you able to look into these matters on notice and perhaps come back to the committee in relation to these issues?

DAVID HOWES: I might need some more specific details to look at.

AIV PUGLIELLI: I am happy to see what I can pass on as well if that is useful. Thank you.

15.

- a. **I understand there are outstanding defects that need to be addressed at [Docklands Primary School] temporary campus. For example, the school tells us that the security system does not work as intended... Is the department aware of this issue and will it be fixed?**
- b. **VSBA never had blinds placed on the windows as part of the funded scope for the new campus. They frosted the windows, but there are still reports of significant glare coming in and teachers have had to put black paper on the windows to deal with it. Will the department fix this?**

(Asked by Aiv PUGLIELLI, page 34 of the transcript)

Response:

15. a) The Department of Education is aware of concerns raised by Docklands Primary School in regard to its security fob system at the temporary campus.

The security contractor that installed the system has informed the department that it has tested the access control system and it is in good working order. The contractor has also provided the school with a quote for additional security supports. The school has not made any further contact to carry out the works.

In addition, the VSBA attended Docklands Primary School on 21 October 2024. During this walkthrough, it was agreed the VSBA would review a list of defects as provided by the school.

Since this time, the VSBA has addressed a number of these defects.

The VSBA is continuing to work closely with the school.

15. b) The Victorian School Building Authority's *Building Quality Standards Handbook (BQSH)* outlines the minimum quality criteria for all building projects, including new construction, refurbishment, and maintenance works.

The new campus at Docklands Primary School was designed in accordance with the handbook. While the handbook recommends shading for windows, it does not mandate the installation of blinds. Blinds were not included in the project scope; however, frosted windows were installed to minimise sunlight impact.

In addition, the VSBA attended Docklands Primary School on 21 October 2024. During this walkthrough, it was agreed the VSBA would review the installation of blinds.

The VSBA have sought quotations and are working with the school on the installation of blinds, as well as providing support on the remediation of minor defects.

The VSBA is continuing to work closely with the school.

Transcript extract:

Aiv Puglielli: On another matter, just maybe going to a specific school, Docklands Primary School temporary campus, I understand there are outstanding defects that need to be addressed at that temporary campus. For example, the school tells us that the security system does not work as intended. We have also been told, though, in a letter that the VSBA thinks there is no problem but the school tells us it is still an issue. Is the department aware of this issue and will it be fixed?

Jacinta Blanch: Thank you for the question about the Docklands campus. We have been working with that school to have that campus in place. I am not aware of any unresolved defects but obviously the school and the VSBA can continue to work through that if there are. I am happy to take that back, but I am not aware of any at the moment.

Aiv Puglielli: I also understand that the VSBA never had blinds placed on the windows as part of the funded scope for the new campus. They frosted the windows, but there are still reports of significant glare coming in and teachers have had to put black paper on the windows to deal with it. Will the department fix this?

Jacinta Blanch: I am not aware of that issue, but again happy to follow that one up.