

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Melbourne – Thursday 9 May 2024

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WITNESSES

Jenny Atta, Secretary,

Dr David Howes, Deputy Secretary, Schools and Regional Services,

Sharon Barry, Acting Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support,

Andrea Del Monaco, Deputy Secretary, Schools Workforce, and

Tony Bates, Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services, Department of Education.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into the State Education system in Victoria. I would like to welcome the Department of Education for joining us and our panel – Sharon, David, Jenny, Andrea and Tony. Welcome, and thank you very much for giving us your time to actually present some evidence and your submissions. Quickly, my name is Trung Luu – I am Chair – and my Deputy Chair is Mr Ryan Batchelor. Also we have Mr Joe McCracken and Ms Melina Bath to my right, Mr Aiv Puglielli, Ms Moira Deeming, Mr Richard Welch, and also we have got Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr Michael Galea and Dr Renee Heath joining us on Zoom.

I will just quickly go through the formalities. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. As you are fully aware, you are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and be posted on the committee's website.

Again, I say thank you for coming in. Could you please state your full name and then your title for the record. We invite you to make a quick, short opening statement, and then we will throw it open to the committee to ask you questions.

Jenny ATTA: Jenny Atta. I am the Secretary of the Department of Education.

David HOWES: David Howes, Deputy Secretary for Schools and Regional Services.

Sharon BARRY: Sharon Barry, Acting Deputy Secretary of School Education Programs and Support.

Andrea DEL MONACO: Andrea Del Monaco, Deputy Secretary of the Schools Workforce group.

Tony BATES: Tony Bates, Deputy Secretary for Financial Policy and Information Services.

The CHAIR: Thank you for coming in. Please start, Jenny.

Jenny ATTA: Chair, I think last year we provided a presentation to the committee just setting out broadly the details around the state education system. It is obviously a big, diverse school system, the second biggest in Australia – 1560-plus schools, more than 650,000 students, more than 50,000 principals and teaching staff and on top of that a whole range of education support staff working in our schools across secondary and primary schools and 83 specialist schools. So it is a big and diverse system. There are a range of things we would be happy to take the committee through today. It is a school system that we are proud of – many of the achievements. We are in the middle of rolling out significant reforms across schools in the wellbeing, disability inclusion and senior secondary reform spaces in particular. Taking those sorts of changes in a big contemporary school system to scale is a really significant challenge, but one where we are seeing very encouraging signs and a lot of encouraging improvement across the school system.

We have also been in a context and working through a period where we have had significant investment in school infrastructure across our system to add to the asset base particularly to meet growth as well as to modernise our school system, with school upgrades that are gradually moving through the whole asset base to

introduce more contemporary, modern learning environments best suited to optimal teaching and learning conditions. That infrastructure investment is also focused on delivering schools that are important community facilities as well, so wherever possible those schools are delivering competition-grade sporting grounds, for example, and where possible we are provisioning for kindergartens on school sites, an important part of getting rid of that double drop-off. Our schools are important parts of the communities that they are situated in.

In terms of the current context it is worth noting – and I am sure we may come to this – it is a challenging time for schools in terms of teacher supply. We are seeing that right across Australia and indeed internationally, and Victoria is no exception there. But a big focus for us at the moment is looking at the sorts of programs and supports to both attract more teachers to our schools and retain teachers in our schools, and both of those objectives are equally important. We would be happy to talk more about a really multifaceted strategy against both of those objectives and, again, some very encouraging recent trends there. Chair, I might leave it there in terms of a brief opening statement. Obviously we are really happy to assist the committee in any way we can.

The CHAIR: Okay. I will open up, and I will be pretty short so we can roll with all the questions, because I have got quite a few. There are three things I want to speak to you about in relation to teaching staff – I will go to this; it is probably the easiest one – and attracting and retaining teachers. I know salary is one issue and workload is another issue we have been hearing a lot from teachers. What is the department – just in a couple of main points – considering to address those two things: attract good-quality teachers and actually keep them ongoing and have a path for them to progress in their career?

Jenny ATTA: Certainly. It is so important. I might ask Andrea to give you that high-level snapshot of the five-pronged strategy, if you like, that goes to both of those objectives, and we can dig into any of those if you would like to.

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes. So that is my job – schools' workforce. Thank you. The government has got a comprehensive workforce strategy. It covers five pillars: attraction, recruitment, supporting early-career teachers – which you have heard something on – retention and career development. The reason it is multipronged is because one thing on its own is not enough, and each part contributes a small part to the increase in the supply and retention of our teachers.

On the attraction part, you have heard from a couple of the universities on the employment-based pathway programs. Victoria is probably leading the way on that. We have nine programs that are running where we do employment-based pathway programs, so people work while they study. For some that is an intensive work first and then study, or they work and study and work and study, and they are provided with supports of scholarships and the like. We are seeing great success from that – better retention rates, and schools saying that teachers are ready when they come out to teach. We are probably reaching a level of maturity with those. We got in the last two years 750 people in our schools doing those programs, and we have got capacity to do more. That was funded in the 2022–23 budget, so we have got funding for the cohorts in 2023, 2024 and 2025. You are starting to see the Commonwealth do some of this and some other states are picking up on this. It is really positive in terms of the diversity of practice. We find a lot more specialist maths and science coming through that frame and more diverse cohorts. The fact that we can support people with financial means while they study is really good.

You have probably heard the recent announcements on scholarships – funding for up to 4000 scholarships this year and next year, supporting people to study teaching, and then additional supplementation if they choose to come and work in a government school system. So it is actually available for everybody who undertakes a secondary teaching or a primary–secondary teaching degree. Then the other one is paid placements. You have heard recently about the Commonwealth's paid placements that are means-tested week placements. We have a program that was funded last year which provides a daily rate of \$140, \$280 or \$420 a day, but it is only for placements in rural, regional or specialist schools. It is quite deliberate in that it is trying to provide those schools with access to the new graduate supply for the future. That is the attraction piece.

In the recruitment piece, then, we have got teacher financial incentives. You would have seen some people paid funding to move to certain schools – I think Greater Shepparton talked on something about that – and we have got international teacher recruitment. The teacher financial incentives have done a number of waves of these. International teachers – there was additional funding provided on Tuesday for that. On their own they are not

enough, but they are a very important tool to redirect teachers to the areas where we need those hard-to-staff roles.

Supporting early-career teachers – we have got that career start program, which is providing support to graduates and mentors to give them relief in that early time. That has been a pilot program that is now rolling out to scale. We are really confident that that will help both on the retention piece and the quality piece.

Then in the retention space we have got the changes to maximum face-to-face teaching hours that have been rolled out, building from 2023 to 2024. That is an additional hour-and-a-half reduction in the maximum face-to-face teaching time.

In the career development space, it was before my time but the academy has trained 600 people with the academy's teaching excellence program to date. There are number of things that are happening there to support that.

Jenny ATTA: Just to supplement very briefly, part of the strategy is designed on the understanding that it is lumpy, the situation across our schools, in terms of supply challenges. Parts of the system are very well resourced and have choice for teachers. They may have smaller pools when they advertise, but they are going very well and feeling very comfortable. In other parts – parts of regional Victoria, parts of our growth corridors – it is a much more significant challenge.

The CHAIR: There are a couple more topics I want to ask about, but I will stay on the teacher part: with all the new strategies put into attraction and retention, do you forecast in a few years time you will have the numbers, actually? Because I know we are short of staff, short of teachers; with all the attraction strategies you are putting through and the program for retention, what is the forecast in relation to actually meeting the number of teachers for all the schools?

Andrea DEL MONACO: I have got a teacher demand and supply report, which I think you heard about yesterday. It forecasts what our teacher supply and demand needs are, out to 2028. At the moment that is forecasting a shortfall, particularly in the secondary space, so there is more of a balanced equation in the primary and early childhood space. But that was before – I talked about those significant interventions, the scholarships, paid placements and those innovative, employment-based pathways.

The CHAIR: Sorry, my question is basically for the department: in how many more years do you reckon you will have enough teachers to meet the shortfall?

Jenny ATTA: Well, I think it is really telling us that at least for the next four to five years we need to continue with the sort of strategies we got in place to both attract more people into that pipeline through initial teacher education – and for the first time in a long time, this year we have seen an uptick there in the numbers of young people moving in to study teaching, which is very encouraging – as well as bringing teachers laterally through employment-based pathways or from other professions into teaching. So that multifaceted approach, we are very confident we are going to need to have that in place for at least the next four to five years. Really, through the national work being done to look at teaching supply, that is pretty much the picture across the country.

The CHAIR: To finish off, is the department getting enough funding in the budget to deal with all the programs that you need to do?

Jenny ATTA: We have had very significant investment over three budgets now that has us at the point of feeling that we have got a comprehensive, multipronged strategy. At the moment we are very pleased to have that investment, and as I have said, the early signs are very positive. We have got a few years ahead of us; I am sure will stay in conversation with the minister and with government around that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, I will come back another time. Deputy Chair.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, everyone, for coming in. I was going to say earlier in the week, but I think it was only yesterday, we heard evidence from the Parliamentary Budget Office about relative sources of funds under and next to the national school reform agreement, and the thing that particularly caught my eye was the big fat zero sitting in the column of 'Commonwealth contribution to capital of Victorian

government schools in 2021.' I just wanted to check that, from your perspective, that is an accurate figure. I also asked the PBO to provide on notice that figure going back for the duration of the agreement back to when it was signed in 2013, but are there any reflections you have on how much contribution there has been from the Commonwealth to the significant capital program in government schools in Victoria in the last nine years?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, thanks, Mr Batchelor. Mr Bates – where is he, there he is – might have some figures. Look, there is minimal spending from the Commonwealth into our capital investment program. This year and perhaps the last there have been a couple of small grants programs, I think about \$48 million at the moment, that our schools can apply to. But overwhelmingly, the investment is at the state level. Tony, anything you would add?

Tony BATES: No, thanks, Secretary. I think that is pretty much right. I might just check in my folder and maybe come back a bit later. But I think you are right for 2021; it was zero. As the Secretary said, there have been some rounds over the last couple of years in the tens of millions of dollars.

Ryan BATCHELOR: It has been more ad hoc and in the tens of millions, rather than systemic in the multiple?

Tony BATES: Yes. So we are spending probably \$1.5 billion per year at the moment on school-building or purchasing land or upgrades, and the amount we have been getting from the Commonwealth in the last couple of years is in the tens, to maybe \$30–\$40 million.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, it is almost \$17 billion over 10 years at the state level.

Ryan BATCHELOR: This is, sorry, the state's contribution to school capital, \$17 billion over 10 years?

Jenny ATTA: \$16.9 billion.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Okay, and not much from the Commonwealth. Okay. That is interesting – relative priorities. I am sure we could have done more if we had received more. The other thing which has come up as a theme in the evidence we have received has been about what Victoria's approach is to instructional methods, with respect to particularly literacy. It might be worth asking you to provide us with the department's perspective on what the department's approach is to instructional methods with respect to literacy.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, sure, and we would be happy to do that, and it is such an important part of what schools are about, so it is not surprising that there is a lot of interest and focus on it as really there should be, but I will ask Dr Howes to take you through that.

David HOWES: Thanks, Secretary. And thanks to the committee. Our approach to both – and this is a matter that is close to my heart as a former teacher, and I still feel that instinct at the core, so I have got a great interest in this, and it is at the heart of our schools' performance. In relation, there are two questions that I think are at the core of the issue you have raised: one is our broad approach to instruction and the instructional model, and the second is specifically in relation to teaching of reading. So on the teaching of reading, we are implementing the revisions that were made to the Australian curriculum that have strengthened the emphasis that is given to phonics. We have had an emphasis on phonics in the past, but following those revisions to the Australian Curriculum that we have implemented we are strengthening that and making it clearer. So schools are required, and I will just quote from the curriculum, to:

... use knowledge of letters and sounds to read and spell consonant-vowel-consonant ... words ...

There are a series of things. So that is clear. The challenge for us is we have got many, many schools who are achieving the nation's leading results, especially in the early years, and the thing that I do want to put on the record is that Victoria did have Australia's best reading results for the last few years in year 3. Our schools are doing lots and lots very well, and they are delivering strong foundations that set children up for success. One of the key aims of the early years is to teach children to read so that then they are able to use reading to learn further. But it is also true that that very good practice is not yet universal. That is our challenge. As the Secretary indicated, we have got 1560-plus schools – that is a challenge that we recognise head-on. Our challenge is not to say to Victorian schools, 'You've been doing it all wrong,' because clearly they have not, but it is our challenge to focus on those schools who are not receiving the same strong outcomes as the others. One of the strategies that we have got well underway now – it has been in preparation over the last six months –

is to develop what we are calling Victorian lesson plans, and this has been funded by the government to enable us to develop exemplar teaching and learning programs in English, mathematics, science and technology, so those subjects that are at the core of both the essential foundations of learning and those subjects like science and technology that are so important for equipping students for the –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Sorry, just to clarify: those are lesson plans that a teacher could then pick up, adapt and use?

David HOWES: That is exactly right. They will reflect the best programs that are happening in our schools that we are working with –

Ryan BATCHELOR: I assume they are evidence-based.

David HOWES: They are absolutely evidence-based, using expertise, for example, at the University of Melbourne, drawing on the most robust evidence of both what works and what teachers can find easiest to use, and explicit teaching will be at the heart of those.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Great, thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Aiv, do you want to start?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thanks for coming in. We have heard a lot through this process about teachers being under a lot of pressure, being forced to put in effectively unpaid overtime because of the pressure that they are under and working with really large class sizes. Obviously a solution that is often put to that that we have also heard in this committee process is upping the recruitment of new teachers to take on that demand. In your view – and I am open to whoever wants to answer this – when do you think we will have enough teachers in the system working to take that pressure off the current teaching workforce?

Jenny ATTA: It is a really good question, and it is not simply about how many teachers but also about teaching roles and how they are designed – how broad is the work teachers are taking on? You are absolutely right, and when we talk to teachers, they are talking about the load that they are carrying at the moment. I do not think it is related to large class sizes, and we can see that from the student–teacher ratios, which are not excessive, but there are genuine issues around workload that we are looking at in a couple of different ways. David might say something about the experience of teachers, and Andrea might talk about the work, but the workload issue is part of retaining people. We need better conditions for teachers to be working in.

David HOWES: Thanks, Secretary. It is a key issue. I would emphasise what the Secretary said earlier: that it is not even across the board. There are certainly areas in which we are experiencing those pressures. There are two initiatives that are key to addressing exactly this head-on. One is the one that Deputy Secretary Del Monaco referred to earlier, which was the reduction in face-to-face teaching, because that is 90 minutes less face-to-face teaching, but when you multiply that by all those students where work has to be marked, lessons prepared and so on that is a significant initiative to reduce the load that is on teachers. The second is the development of the lesson plans.

We have moved to a situation now I think where our teachers, who in the past may well have been saying, ‘We would like to be left alone to develop what we want to teach,’ have much more now of an orientation to say, ‘We would prefer to work collaboratively,’ (1) because you get better outcomes out of that, as we see in many, many of our schools, but (2) it is going to save us preparation. If we can use something that has been prepared on the basis of the best evidence, on the basis of what our best schools are using, then teachers’ time is able to be spent on where their professionalism is best invested, which is supporting those students who are struggling as well as supporting those students who we want to excel, at the top end. So both of those initiatives – the reduction in face-to-face teaching and the support of teaching and learning resources that can be immediately used and reduce the workload – we think are going to make a significant difference.

Jenny ATTA: Andrea might want to supplement that.

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes. I think it is worth touching base on some of the work we are doing. There is a national teacher workforce action plan, which all the states and the education ministers have agreed to, and

that has got 27 action items covering all priorities, including retention. We are leading on a number of those, so

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sorry to interrupt. In clarification on when this issue, we anticipate, will be resolved, these reports of overwork, unpaid overtime due to that lack of – well, there are a range of issues you have identified, but partly lack of teachers in the workforce but also the load that they are working with. Do you have a projection from those plans as to when that will be addressed?

Jenny ATTA: I do not know that we have put a particular date on it. Certainly we are recruiting more teachers than elsewhere in the country at the moment, so we are working hard to have more teachers to share the load in those schools that are feeling it the most, so those teachers will feel it the most. And then, including with school principals, teachers in our system, key stakeholders, we are working through these issues around what else we can be looking at to have a more consistent approach to what is reasonable in a teacher's workload and how we can use other resources within the school – education support staff, other administrative staff – to make sure that that core work of teaching and learning is what our teachers are focused on and that they are not taking that home on the weekend et cetera, as you said.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That is my time.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for being here. I am sure you have read all the testimonies from witnesses that we have had so far in Gippsland, in Bairnsdale, in the Latrobe Valley, in Shepparton and in Bendigo.

I want to take you to child safe standards. We have heard testimony from parents who are concerned that, I think it is, 4.1 is not being adhered to – and that is about communications with the parents. We heard a case study where a Latrobe Valley parent's son had a school excursion. There was a laceration on that school excursion. When the child returned back to school and the parent picked him up, the parent asked for an incident report, and the education department ended up saying, 'File for an FOI'. This is a parent of a disabled child who asked, 'What happened to my child on the excursion?' – 'File for an FOI'. The FOI came back to the parent. It was almost completely redacted. The parent took that to the FOI commissioner. The FOI commissioner called on the education department to resubmit with its considerable redactions redacted. I feel that many – not all – parents have lost trust or faith in the education department. What are you doing to ensure that these sorts of issues are in the minority and not getting worse?

Jenny ATTA: Thanks for the question. Look, I am not familiar with that instance. It sounds really unsatisfactory. Again, there might be some complexity to that individual case. I do not understand how it could get to that point.

Melina BATH: Neither could –

Jenny ATTA: I can certainly I think give you the assurance that a parent request for information about an injury a child would experience at a school – I do not understand how that gets into an FOI process. I am happy to follow up if I can. I would feel pretty confident that it is a minority of cases where parents are experiencing communication difficulties with a school. Dr Howes might be able to talk more about that from his operational experience with schools. But with every school leader that I talk to, the whole orientation of the school – certainly of the department – is that where schools can be working with students, parents and family together, that is how you get the best results. Every school leader I have met is setting up to do that.

Melina BATH: I agree – could not agree more. But these are not the experiences, genuinely. I have only got a few moments – genuinely, these are not the experiences. If you go back to read that testimony, there is another case example of where the education department said to a different parent, 'File for an FOI.' I want to understand – take it on notice if you please: how many FOIs has the education department told parents to go and access rather than providing information? And how many staff does the department have covering off on FOIs between either parents and teachers or the like? That is a question I have.

Jenny ATTA: Very happy to follow that up for you.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much; I appreciate that. Also, the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students – we know that part of the terms of reference is about regional disadvantage and socio-economic disadvantage. Again, on notice, there were some very good recommendations that came out of that, but it would be great to get an update on each of those recommendations and the sub-recommendations in there.

Jenny ATTA: We can do that.

Melina BATH: That would be excellent. Also, we have heard from many people that there is a teacher crisis – that some of the teachers are getting impacted in the classroom, but that they are not filling out forms, because they are an onerous duty and the burden on them to complete all of that administrative work just takes away from their teaching time. We heard that – I think it was in Shepparton. Also, eduPay is broken. As a request from one of these teachers, could you please review eduPay? I mean, that is a simple, logistical kind of mechanical thing, rather than day-to-day teaching.

Jenny ATTA: I have to say: I would call eduPay many things but ‘simple’ is perhaps not one of them.

Melina BATH: I call it broken, based on this lady’s conversation.

Jenny ATTA: I understand what you are saying, and I am happy to follow up those issues.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Again, we saw a number of people – a number of submissions – talking about how the curriculum is overcrowded. You might also like to take that on notice or make some comments. And on the importance of, we have heard it multiple times and read it in our submissions, language literacy, making students able to think critically – what is the education department doing to really shake up the education curriculum? Yes, they are Australian standards, but if we shake it out so that each and every minute that that teacher can get in and teach in a classroom is to experience good teaching with our students – how are you decluttering a very crowded curriculum?

Jenny ATTA: I might ask Dr Howes if he can make some comments there.

David HOWES: It is a very good question. That ambition of making things as clear as possible is one that we share 100 per cent. That is part of the objective of the lesson plan project that I spoke about. The other part, though, is that the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority have invested some time in trying to make the curriculum clear to address any duplication, to achieve exactly the aims that you set out.

Melina BATH: And indeed making life easier for teachers is not rote lesson plans. We have heard about the resources – people are working at night to teach the subject, which they may be teaching out of area. How can the education department really provide those useful resources? Some exist, but how can you further develop those?

David HOWES: The Victorian lesson plans are not intended to be rote, drill and skill. They will draw on the very best evidence of how you are able to explicitly teach and engage students who are achieving at a wide range of levels. I completely agree with you, having been there and done that and spent many a night preparing these kinds of lessons. The feedback that we have got from teachers is that is what they would welcome – to stop that so that they can invest their time exactly as you said, every minute, not having done unnecessary duplicative preparation but being able to work with the 24 or 25 children or young people that they have got before them.

Melina BATH: I think my time is up.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bath. Michael, do you have some questions?

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, officials, for joining us today. I would like to start by asking about something that has come up quite a bit in our hearings, which is the administrative workload that is put on teachers. I am curious to hear the department’s view on this and in particular any views on strategies or ways in which you would like to reduce that burden.

Jenny ATTA: Thanks very much for the question, and I might say a couple of things. Andrea might want to jump in.

We are looking at a range of responses to reduce the admin burden. There is a different approach for both teachers and principals, and it is a relevant issue for both groups of staff. Part of that is working on an updated organisational design guide focused on effective workforce planning. This is something that we have worked on with principal representatives and school leadership teams across our system to look at those schools, often with very experienced principals, who are organising their schools, their leadership teams, their resources in particular ways with a view to managing it and spreading that workload. It is really drawing on that experience. We are also looking at a school administration support hub and principal advisory service. Did you want to say more about that, Mr Bates?

Tony BATES: I can talk about the SASH, as we call it, Secretary. That is an arrangement we have put in place over the last couple of years. It is designed to support small schools, typically with 200 students or less. Basically, a lot of those schools are not big enough to have a full-time business manager, so there are a whole lot of things they need to do – payroll processing, using eduPay, and a range of things like that. We have got a process in place where we have got 12 experienced business managers from schools. Most of them are based up in Ballarat, but I think we are putting some in the Latrobe Valley and other places as well. It is really a process where principals and leadership in those small schools do not need to do a lot of that admin stuff; they can just go to this service who are specialist in doing those things, freeing up the principals to focus on educational leadership and basically running their schools. That is probably a quick summary of the school admin support hub.

Jenny ATTA: Again, it is really tailored to those smaller schools, often regionally based, where all of the same sorts of things need to happen in the school but there are fewer people to do it. These things build on some work we have been doing in recent years to look at what we can centralise or take from schools to either the regional office or the central office – a much improved central repository of all school policies that principals and teachers can access and navigate very simply – for instance, additional support to manage occupational health and safety administration that otherwise teachers or principals would be working on. There is a whole tranche of things in that space as well, but I have to say, the work around workload is not done yet. There is more that we have to do. I think it is one of the pressing challenges that we have got in front of us.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Yes, good to see some initiatives already well underway as well. In your opening remarks you also referred to the co-location of kinders. I know with Mr Batchelor you also spoke about capital works and quite an extraordinary amount. Just quickly, am I right that Victoria has actually accounted for almost half of all new government school builds in the nation in the last few years?

Jenny ATTA: That is correct. In fact I think one of the national reports recently set that out – or it might have been the ABS statistics – but Victoria's net increase of 32 new schools between 2018 and 2023 is the highest in the country. It accounts for almost 50 per cent of all new schools opening nationally. As I said earlier, it goes to part of that really significant investment in order to meet growth. Much of that is around our median growth, through our growth corridors et cetera, but also building new and replacement schools both regionally and in metropolitan areas.

Michael GALEA: If I may just very quickly, Chair, I just wanted to ask about those co-located kinders as well. In fact Mr Tarlami is on screen as well, and we have in our region one of them opening up next year at Topirum in Clyde North, which we are very excited about. You talked about the benefit of avoiding the double drop-off, which is very self-evident, but it was quite interesting to see the build of this kinder is actually going to really have a wonderful shared fence with the school, where the younger kids can see the older kids and potentially their older siblings play, which will hopefully be one of the things that will ease their transition into primary school. I am just curious if you could speak to any sort of evidence base that you are using in terms of making that transition easier. Or is this something you hope to see as part of the rollout once it has been a bit more established?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, we are certainly very focused on how we really capitalise on that co-located infrastructure, and it has got the benefit not only for parents in terms of that double drop-off – I can remember the double drop-off, and it would have been great to have them next door to each other – but also for that transition. The majority of those students at the kindergarten are likely to transition to their prep year at that school, and the work that the teachers and educators can do together to facilitate a strong and effective transition into the prep year is really significant when you have just got that physical proximity. We have got some great models where our schools and kinders are working really well together on that.

The other thing I would say is that having the co-location really strengthens the school's role, if you like, as a hub within the local community. It really helps to set up a culture where parents are part of the school. That happens much more naturally in a sense at the kindergarten level, when children are so small, and it really helps to just ensure that carries through as they move through primary school. There are lots of benefits. Others would be closer to the evidence in the literature than I am, but we can see the experience on the ground in those schools and kinders where we have been able to make that happen.

Michael GALEA: Okay, thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you so much for coming and appearing before the committee. The first question I have got is: can you confirm that 18 per cent of government school students qualify for a needs-based concession card?

Jenny ATTA: I am just looking to Mr Bates. He may need to just check that. It might take a couple of minutes. We will come back to you on it.

Renee HEATH: No worries. The other question I have is – I think Dr Howes said it before; he was talking about how really Victoria is leading the way in doing well in terms of the standards. However, I have read, and it is sort of widely reported – I will cite this one from the *Age* last year – that 28.9 per cent of Victorian schoolchildren are struggling to meet literacy and numeracy proficiencies. I would call that a disaster or a crisis – would you?

David HOWES: Any single child who leaves school without literacy and numeracy that they need to be functional is one too many. While there are excellent results being achieved in Victorian schools and acknowledging the workload but also acknowledging that that is clearly the result of, overall, I think outstanding work from Victorian principals and teachers, I hope I was clear in saying that there is more work that we need to do. That is particularly in the case of lifting those students who do need additional support, but there are fewer of those in Victoria than in other jurisdictions. We have got more work to do in achieving the same level of attainment in numeracy that we have with literacy, and we have got more work to do in addressing those students who do need additional support because of their circumstances, where we have not been able to achieve the same level of attainment as students who do not face those challenges.

I do not want to suggest in any way that we are complacent or resting on the success that has been achieved. I do want to acknowledge the success that has been achieved, because again it is the result of very hard work over a number of years now where we have achieved those strong results. But in saying that, we are not at all disguising or we are not – we are very clear-eyed about the challenges that remain and that is exactly why we are putting in place some of these programs that I outlined a bit earlier.

Renee HEATH: Yes, and I am happy to hear that, because the vast majority of schoolchildren cannot read proficiently, and that is what the data is showing. I think that is really alarming. Another question that I just want to raise, keeping in mind that we have now really toured the state asking different people what their views are – one thing that keeps coming up is classroom discipline. There was one teacher, when we were up in either Shepparton or Bendigo, who said, 'It's a good day at work if you don't get assaulted.' The data shows that Australian classrooms are amongst the least-disciplined in the world, and our witnesses have really backed that up. I think that that is something – I would love to hear what your plan is to tackle that.

David HOWES: Again, it is important to keep two things in mind here, in my view. One is that today the vast majority of students in Victorian schools will have had a good day in a calm and orderly environment. There are instances, though –

Renee HEATH: Could you provide us with that evidence, if that is okay? I would like to see that evidence. You can take that on notice, obviously.

David HOWES: Thanks. It is the case, though, that we know there are challenging behaviours that schools are grappling with. This is again acknowledging the very hard work that schools are doing, and it is often in conjunction with parents and carers to deal with some of those very, very challenging behaviours. It is our determination that we will do everything we can and exhaust every possibility to support students whose

behaviour is challenging, often because there are causes behind that. We recognise the importance of the opportunity that those children have in our schools to have some of those issues addressed, so that one of the outcomes of that is that their behaviour is modified. But we do recognise there are some of those incidents that occur that are very difficult for schools and for teachers to manage in that moment, and it is something that we are absolutely committed to addressing. One of the key strategies for that is the program called positive schoolwide behaviours. That is why we are able to expand that program, because it is working. That provides schools with both the structure and resources to address exactly the issues that you have outlined of some of those challenging behaviours. We have been able to expand it because we know from the lived experience of people who are implementing it that it is working.

Renee HEATH: Okay. Interesting. How did you go with that question you were looking at?

Tony BATES: Dr Heath, my numbers are that 23.7 per cent of government school students are either a concession card holder, or we also include students who are in foster care, so out-of-home foster care, and/or are refugees, but the foster care/refugee percentage is pretty small. I have got 155,391 students eligible for the camps, sports and excursions program, where the prime eligibility is that the family has a concession card.

Renee HEATH: Okay. Thank you. That data was from the 2024–25 department performance statement – where I got the 18 per cent. But obviously to take on notice: could you provide a breakdown of the students per government school?

Tony BATES: Yes, we can do that.

Renee HEATH: Thank you.

Tony BATES: My data was from 2022–23, so that might be why the numbers are different.

Renee HEATH: Right. Okay. Thank you so much. All right, plenty more questions, but I better hand over.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Heath. Lee, are you still on? Yes. Go, Lee.

Lee TARLAMIS: Thank you for coming along today to present. You have spoken already about some of the areas where Victoria is leading the nation, both in terms of outcomes and investments. I was wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more on some of the other areas where Victoria is leading.

Jenny ATTA: Thanks for the question, and I am happy to do that. David has already taken us through some of the outcomes as measured by NAPLAN. NAPLAN is not everything, but it does give us some important outcomes data, particularly around literacy and numeracy. When we look at national comparisons, Victoria is more than pulling its weight there, but I want to perhaps highlight a couple of other things. A really critical underpinning of any outcomes we get at school is students attending school. Our principals and teachers across our school system are working incredibly hard on this, particularly in the post-COVID period, where we did see initially that those attendance rates had fallen away. But attendance at Victorian government schools in 2023 was the highest in the country, an attendance rate across years 1 to 10 of 88.6 per cent. So we are continuing that as a really important priority, and our schools are getting very encouraging outcomes and, as I said, the best in the country.

The other point where we are, I think, just second to South Australia is the rate of students attaining a senior secondary certificate – 82.6 per cent in 2022 so, again, doing better than particularly some of the other big states. When we look at what is happening with our 15 to 19-year-olds in Victoria, the engagement in work or further study, Victoria continues to have the highest proportion of young people engaged in education, training or work – the highest for any of the states and territories. We have talked about capital investment and the development of our school infrastructure. We are the leading jurisdiction in the country for the investment in and quality of that program.

But if I could just quickly mention perhaps three reform areas where we are really looking at, in a coherent way, bringing big reforms to scale across our system and pushing ahead of work in other states and territories. There are the senior secondary reforms, where there was a further \$108 million in this budget, building on \$639 million since 2018, a really transformational reform at the senior secondary level to improve the quality of perceptions of access to vocational and applied learning for secondary school students and really building high-

quality pathways – the academic pathway is very important, but ensuring that there are other high-quality pathways our students can aspire to and plan for, and we have got some great, encouraging data coming out of those reforms. Last year was the first full year for the new vocational major as part of the VCE.

We have had \$1.6 billion invested in the disability inclusion reforms across Victoria's schools, still rolling out to all areas, being progressively introduced between 2021 and 2025. But again, in terms of the whole system reform, looking at disability inclusion being an important part of what all schools do and are supported to do has been a really significant initiative. And then there are our student mental health reforms, part of a broader set of student wellbeing reforms, particularly the impetus since the royal commission in Victoria looking at mental health and again since the COVID experience. I think you have heard from health and mental health experts about the issues for young people in our community at the moment, and of course we see that play out in schools. But we have now a coherent set of comprehensive programs tailored to both primary and secondary schools, specifically looking at assisting with students' mental health. Those three big programs really signify the approach to building that contemporary, high-quality government school system in Victoria. It does take time to really embed those programs and see the better practice really spread across our system, but we are very encouraged by what we are seeing and we are getting a lot of interest from other parts of the country.

Lee TARLAMIS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Lee. Joe.

Joe McCRACKEN: Thank you so much. Firstly, I will start off: I have got a few documents that I would like to request from you. The first one is the La Trobe University study of structured literacy in six primary schools. Would you guys be able to provide the committee with that?

Jenny ATTA: Look, I am not particularly close to it, but –

Joe McCRACKEN: You could take it on notice.

Jenny ATTA: I can certainly take that on notice.

Joe McCRACKEN: Yes, sure. The next one – and I think it might have been mentioned before – is the Deloitte evaluation of the tutor learning program. Are you able to provide that one too?

Jenny ATTA: We can certainly look at what we can provide there.

Joe McCRACKEN: And any documentation relating to the impact or the evaluation of, I think it is called, the school-wide positive behaviour initiative, which I think Dr Heath might have mentioned before.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, we were just talking about that. I am happy to look at what we can provide there too.

Joe McCRACKEN: Yes. Any copies of any evaluations or impact statements or anything like that would be greatly appreciated. And the last one is statewide time line data over the Attitudes to School survey data: I think that was first done in 2017. Are you able to provide them to the committee as well?

Jenny ATTA: I am happy to look at the specifics of the request. When you say 'them' –

Joe McCRACKEN: The surveys from 2017 till now.

Jenny ATTA: I am happy to follow that up and see what we can provide.

Joe McCRACKEN: Okay, perfect. The first question I have got relates to education more broadly. I know phonics was mentioned before. Have you made the department's position clear to the government – what your position on phonics is?

Jenny ATTA: I might let Dr Howes talk to that, but we have a Minister for Education who is entirely engaged and supportive of work around phonics and explicit teaching in our system.

David HOWES: That is the case; he is. Definitely it has been one of the things that he has been asking us about, so we have been discussing with him what our position is now and how we will strengthen even further, lifting literacy results.

Joe McCracken: Was that advice provided as a once off? How was it delivered?

Jenny ATTA: Well, I think through ongoing discussions with the minister and advice around not only the teaching and learning strategy but the phonics check that now exists across year 1 right across our system; in all sorts of ways we are engaging with the minister on these issues.

David HOWES: It is a regular point of discussion.

Joe McCracken: If you have got any briefings or advice that you can provide us with, that would be greatly appreciated as well.

I know last year the Treasurer announced that there were going to be 4000 cuts to public servants. Were any of those in the education department?

Jenny ATTA: There were staff reductions coming out of the whole-of-government efficiency process in the education department, and Dr Bates might have it at front of mind or look at up for me, but I think it was around 238 –

Tony BATES: Around 230, yes – and I never finished my doctorate, so thank you, Secretary.

Joe McCracken: Thanks. Are you able to provide the details of those cuts, please?

Tony BATES: I can just look them up in a few minutes and come back with that, Chair.

Joe McCracken: Yes, I would be interested in the numbers, and also what positions as well if you can do that, thanks. I guess we continue to hear in the public, and I know it was spoken about before, about the challenges many teachers face in classrooms regarding abuse and those sorts of things with behaviour management. I know there are strategies in place, but it seems like those strategies are not really having an impact, because we keep hearing about increased instances of teachers being virtually traumatised about going to work. What is going on and how are you going to fix it?

Jenny ATTA: Yes. Again, David might want to supplement, but we are hearing it too. I think David has been making the point that it is not a consistent experience across the system, but we know there are really challenging, really challenging –

Joe McCracken: It is patchy; it is in pockets.

Jenny ATTA: Sure. For some of our schools in some parts of the state, there are some very challenging experiences that teachers are going through. I also know from talking with colleagues right across the country that this tick up, if you like, in really challenging behaviour, is something that is being experienced right across states and territories. We think that it is important to look at those schoolwide programs that David has talked about, the schoolwide positive behaviours, in terms of a whole-of-school climate; that is clearly important. But for those schools that are having particular challenges, it is not as simple as that. It is also around additional support that we can provide from regional staff supporting schools where there are particular challenges – David, you might want to talk a little bit.

David HOWES: It is a really important issue, and that is why the Career Start initiative is so important, because it is often, self-evidently, with teaching, like any other career, that the first couple of years are the hardest, and that is why we have now got this investment to support teachers. One of the critical things in this is preventing those situations that lead to those kinds of circumstances that you have described that can happen. The more support that we can provide to teachers, especially as they come into the profession, the better things are going to be.

Joe McCracken: I guess the point I would make, though, is that it is not a new problem. It has been getting worse in the last, say, 12 months, but probably more than that. Whatever is going on that the department is currently doing is not working. Is that being acknowledged?

Jenny ATTA: Again, as we have discussed, it is not a universal experience across the system, but we clearly need to do more. One of the things that we are looking at at the moment, and it builds on the Australian Education Research Organisation's guidance and resources for managing challenging behaviours, is really

drawing on that to look at a tailored resource for our system that provides the latest evidence-based strategies that we can have, again with our regional staff and others working closely with schools. It would be available across the system, but working closely with those schools experiencing the biggest challenges. But again it is a multifaceted issue that we have got to look at. Where schools are having the best results, they are working at a whole-of-school-community level, they are looking at the latest evidence-based strategies, they are looking at a whole-school climate. But where we see real spikes and challenges, the department is trying to get in there with those schools to look at how we can better support them.

Joe McCracken: Okay. My time has run out.

Tony Bates: Chair, I might just – so the number of staff who took packages from that savings round was 233.25 full-time equivalent.

Joe McCracken: Sorry, how many?

Tony Bates: 233.25 full-time equivalent, and they were mainly in central office. We reduced our corporate comms teams, we reduced some of our strategic policy teams, some of our project management areas. We had two big IT teams – we run IT for all the school system, we do not use a shared service provider – so we merged a couple of groups in there. So it was that central policy, central communications, project management, IT and some –

Joe McCracken: I have not got enough time to write all that down. Are you able to just send it through? Is that all right?

Tony Bates: Yes.

Joe McCracken: Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you. Moira, please.

Moira Deeming: Thank you. I would like to address a few issues around student wellbeing. I am coming from the perspective of parents being the children's best protectors and first educators, which I have heard a lot of people affirm. I have concerns around due process and justice, transparency and accountability and safeguarding issues. I am just going to go through a few examples, and then you can take things on notice or answer as you like.

The first area is around age and appropriate sexuality education. We have got these resources that lots of parents and teachers think are age inappropriate, and they are claiming that there is an evidence base and that we need to have sexuality education from kinder and five years old. I have just got some quotes from people who are involved and referenced in these curriculums, including Alfred Kinsey. But the first one I would like to read out is from Gary Dowsett from La Trobe University, the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society. He has written a few articles in the past, and these are some quotes:

... I also have a friend, a paedophile, who is working very hard on making sense out of his relations with boys. These relations consist of, among other things, a large amount of nurture and support for these boys, a real caring for their welfare and growth.

...

So what is the problem?

...

... we have ... legal/social questions to win: ... the legal right of paedophiles and their young lovers; and finally the sexual rights of children as a whole.

...

The current paedophilia debate then *is* crucial ... paedophiles need our support, and we need to construct the child/adult sex issue on our terms.

Another researcher that is referenced in our curriculums is Dr Steven Angelides, La Trobe University again. He wrote in a journal in 2004:

There is research to show that, as well as feeling a sense of power and control in sexual encounters with adults, children can frequently experience sexual pleasure ...

...

It is imperative that children's sexual desires and sense of power and pleasure not only be recognised but also normalised. I would put it to you that that is completely out of step with parental expectations, and I do not even know how that has been included anywhere near our curriculums. So that is one thing.

Jenny ATTA: Ms Deeming, if you are reading those quotes out because you think they have something to do with our school system, I am –

Moira DEEMING: The people who said them are researchers who helped construct our sexuality education curriculums.

Jenny ATTA: The department has nothing to do with those sorts of attitudes and beliefs, Ms Deeming, so I do want to put that on the record.

Moira DEEMING: I am glad to hear it. I am just wondering how they are involved in writing our curriculum and involved in research that our curriculum is based on. That is what I am concerned about.

Next are parental rights. Lots and lots of parents have come before this committee and made submissions talking about how they feel cut out and they feel usurped and they feel that they are treated as the source of the problems in their children's lives and they are declared guilty when nothing has been proven, and one of the things that they reference in terms of policies is the 'mature minor' status that is now being implemented in schools on a much wider scale than, I would say, has ever been done before, having been a teacher myself. I have got it from the Minister for Education that there are no records kept whatsoever about who is declaring them mature minors, so I have a real concern about the legal transference of the idea of power of attorney from parents to children as mature minors and then about who is accountable if anything goes wrong. It says in a few of your documents that when there is a risk of imminent harm, then they are going to notify an adult. I do not know if it is a parent or someone else, but I think there is a very murky situation there where children are at risk systemically, because it does not seem that anyone is accountable or responsible and you cannot trace the transfer of parental authority to the kids and to someone else if something goes wrong, so I would like to understand that situation better.

Also, in terms of due process and fairness, girls in schools, particularly Muslim girls and LGB children, have made complaints about feeling that their rights are being eroded by these gender identity policies, so I asked questions about this, and I was told that in the policy that we have, the needs of individual transgender students are the ones that are prioritised – so not girls and not Muslim girls. It does not seem like anyone else. I could be wrong, but I have looked around for policies where there is some kind of risk assessment or some kind of balancing attempt, and I could not find one. But if you have one, I would love to see it.

Then there is just my final question, on the evidence base for methodology. I have brought up before on this panel the traumatic role-plays about sexual abuse that our children are being asked to do. Also, on third-party providers for schools for curriculum delivery, I have asked about standards. What are the standards for those organisations? I would be interested in information on those topics. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I am happy if you take it on notice and get back to us. Or if you are happy to answer now, you can, if you like.

Jenny ATTA: Well, I am happy to see what information we can provide. Perhaps if I just make the point that our community is complex and our schools are operating in complex environments, the policy and guidance that we have in place for schools to help navigate a whole range of those issues do of course have to have regard to the legislative and regulatory environment that schools have to operate within. So with mature minors, for instance, I just want to be clear: it is not a Department of Education concept. It is not something that we are creating, but we are trying to support schools to operate within the legislative framework that they are obliged to do.

The other very important context for schools is their regulatory obligations, their minimum standard obligations. The child safe standards go to that, and they are very detailed in terms of protecting and keeping children safe from harm et cetera. It is a complex world. I think overwhelmingly our schools do an extraordinary job to navigate all of that to support students and to work very closely with parents. Now, I understand that there will be complaints where the experience is that that is not done as well as it might be. We

are always happy to follow up and have a look at that. But I do want to, I guess, give a shout-out to our school leaders, who I think overwhelmingly do a pretty amazing job in navigating all this.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Richard?

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. You are the Department of Education, so that is a very wide remit. But will I just, for the time, focus on the one that is perhaps the biggest pain point and probably has the biggest impact on current educational attainment, which is the shortage of teachers. Could I just drill down on that figure of 5036 from the teacher supply and demand report? Is it that in 2028, if nothing else happens, there will be a shortage of 5036 teachers? Is that what that figure means?

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes. That is a 2022 report, so that was before the significant interventions in the 2023 year. The most significant of those things are the scholarships – we are already seeing an uptick in enrolments as a result of those; paid placements, which we think will really significantly improve completion rates; and career start, which we think will really help with retention. That is at the moment, with the current settings. We know that with the Victorian Institute of Teaching register we have got nearly 150,000 teachers on that register. Now, within our schools we are not utilising that full amount. So the other part of this is: how do we ensure that we access more of those people that are on the register?

Richard WELCH: From that time, now with your new interventions, will there be a shortfall in 2028? Do your plans now address the shortfall?

Jenny ATTA: That is absolutely the objective. That is what we are trying to do, and that is why we have the comprehensive, multipronged approach, and the data that we will be able to monitor over the years in terms of how we are tracking –

Richard WELCH: So the deliverables from that plan already paint out that you will be there or better by 2028?

Jenny ATTA: That is the objective. The other thing is what else might change between now and 2028. Part of the context for the constrained supply is economic and employment conditions and competition from other professions. The pause in immigration for a time really challenged the system.

Richard WELCH: So those contingencies are built into your –

Jenny ATTA: On a steady state, looking at what it might look like out to 2028. But I am just saying of course subsequent reports will update if any of those conditions change, and that might change the end point.

Richard WELCH: And so your forecasts have sort of incorporated those contingencies that they –

Jenny ATTA: The forecasts at the moment are incorporating all those known factors.

Richard WELCH: The known knows.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, the known knows.

Richard WELCH: That, I am presuming, is a net figure. Within that 5036, what is the attrition rate? So what is the actual acquisition rate, if you like, if we are going to use that term, for it?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, I am not sure if we have got that. We might be able to follow it up.

Andrea DEL MONACO: The demand and supply report, the supply line that you are building is bringing in a number of people completing university, so that is the big one that we think will move from those initiatives that we talked about. It is a net supply line, so you have also got your attrition rates.

Richard WELCH: Do you know what you have assumed in that attrition rate? Is it a percentage, and how does that differ to previous ones?

Andrea DEL MONACO: I would have to take that on notice. Attrition fell for a couple of years through COVID as people chose not to move. We have seen an uptick after that period. It is starting to level off in a number of cohorts across our teaching workforce. Rural and regional have started to settle back down. Our

principal class has started to settle down. Our older workforce has started to settle back down. We are still watching the younger cohort, but we are continuing to track and monitor that.

Richard WELCH: So given those couple of variables – you have got variables in attrition rates, you have got variables in demand –

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes, we have got our demand and our supply curve.

Richard WELCH: you have got variables in Tasmania saying, ‘We want your teachers now,’ as well. Are you actively monitoring that and adjusting your plans? Or is it like set and forget? How actively are you managing that?

Andrea DEL MONACO: You will see that a lot of the interventions that you saw introduced in 2023 were very much targeting secondary schools, and that is because the evidence was telling us the challenges we were going to have in secondary school were greater than we were going to have in other areas. That is not to say we have not done – we need to increase the net supply of all teachers, but the challenge in secondary is more acute. That is why those interventions are designed in that way.

The other thing I would probably say is, as the Secretary spoke to, we have got intervention 23, 24 and 25. Given the ongoing monitoring of this, it is likely that there will need to be continuing interventions in that space, and probably those employment-based degrees are going to be a big part of that.

Richard WELCH: Can I quickly sneak in then – there is a very solid business principle that the cost of acquisition is much higher than the cost of retention. So in your budgeting forward to get to this target, have you done the modelling within your budgets of what cost of acquisition is versus cost of retention, and will you have the funding to actually maintain those settings so that you do get there?

Andrea DEL MONACO: I mean, it is a decision for government, what they invest in in terms of their suite of –

Richard WELCH: But under your own modelling, do you have the funds to do it?

Jenny ATTA: Well, as I said earlier, we have got really significant investments for the strategies that we have got in place. Where we are getting good results from those, we are getting support from government. So we will keep monitoring what we are doing to try and drive those numbers up.

Richard WELCH: But the cost of those, are they in your budgets, or will you require funding for that?

Jenny ATTA: We have funding for the initiatives that we are rolling out at the moment. They are on different sort of multiyear time lines, if you like. But to your point, it is not a matter of set and forget. Part of the reason for a comprehensive strategy is to try and find what is working best, what is getting us the best results. We have seen, for the first time in a long time – the first time that I can remember – an increase in the number of students moving in to study initial teacher education in Victoria. We think a big part of that is the scholarships the government has invested in. If we can demonstrate success with these programs, we can continue having that conversation around where we will get the best value for further investment.

Richard WELCH: I think it would be helpful to know what your modelling assumptions are in attrition rates, success rates and funding, to see if there are any magic boxes in these plans that mean we are going to magically get there. To understand how you have modelled that, I think, would be really useful.

Jenny ATTA: Certainly the attrition and other modelling you can see in our supply and demand reports.

Andrea DEL MONACO: The other key point is that clearly you have got an enterprise agreement that is coming up for renegotiation in 2026, so that nominally expires at the end of 2025. When you talk about demand and supply, you are also talking about pay and conditions. The part we talked about on conditions earlier, that significant investment, which is about \$260 million per year ongoing, is that reduction in maximum face-to-face teaching time. When you look around other states that is a significant investment, which we are just seeing the effects of now. That was a 1-hour reduction in 2023 and a half-hour reduction in 2024, so we are watching that roll through the system as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Richard.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Apart from being Chair, I get the last questions; that is the point of being Chair. I have got 10 minutes. This is certainly an inquiry where we have addressed various issues of teaching – teaching staff, the curriculum, wellbeing and various organisations – and we try to cater for and assist all of those falling through the gaps. I think the government is doing that, and that is what this inquiry is all about. Term of reference 5 refers to:

... examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes ...

With our population in Victoria almost matching that of New South Wales – I dare say we will exceed that in coming years – our cohort of students is just about the same as New South Wales, so there can be a pretty good comparison between New South Wales and Victoria. At the moment we are looking at addressing all those who are falling through the gaps, those that are missing out, and we are trying to be inclusive, which is fantastic and something we need to do. But as an education system and an education department, we cater for all Victorians. This question is basically on behalf of all this data at the top end of the scale, in the top half, which has not been looked at at all during these inquiries. What we are looking for is how we can improve these students and provide education for this other half – probably more than half. As has been said, hopefully only a small number are falling through the gap, not a large proportion of our society. At the moment we have got four selective schools in the state, compared to New South Wales, where there are 48. Does the department have any consideration or any investment moving forward to cater for or invest in this group of probably our future leaders of the state or of the country, this particular cohort. Do you have any plans? Do you have a concept of actually investing more in selective schools? There is a demand. At the moment we have got four, so all those people are turning to private schools if they can afford them. Are we catering for them at all?

Jenny ATTA: It is a really interesting question, and I think government has a very small number of selective entry schools. Government has added a couple. The question of excellence and how we focus on excellence and make sure that we do in our system I know is one close to David's heart; he might speak to that. There are no current plans around additional selective entry schools; that would be a matter of government policy. But as I said, I think two were established in recent times. David?

The CHAIR: I have spoken to Suzanne Cory out west. They have got area to expand and they have got the capacity to expand. This is not building a new school; this is to cater for the demand to go to the school, to cater for the students who are seeking to excel and have not got the finances to go to a private school. I was wondering: is the department considering this at all?

David HOWES: Thanks, Chair. You are quite right about us having to walk and chew gum at the same time and be able to support those students who are struggling but equally give those students who are capable the possibility to excel. The primary focus is that we have got the four selective entry schools, and we have got the John Monash Science School. It is also important to note that we do want to genuinely define and celebrate excellence as broadly as we can.

The Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School provides access for those students who are talented in a wide range of arts, and I completely encourage you, if you to get the chance, to see the celebration of excellence that happens each year when we look at the very best performance. It certainly lifts the spirit. We have got the John Monash Science School and we have got Maribyrnong Sports Academy, so there are across the government systems a number of opportunities outside those select-entry schools. But the primary commitment is that we want every student who is at a government school to be able to excel with the right support, and that is why the government has maintained the program that supports gifted and talented high-ability students, so that has given access to students who schools deem would benefit from that. So there are programs that are in place that students can access.

We have also opened the Centre for Higher Education Studies, which is designed to give more students at the senior secondary end exposure to those high-end studies. Again, it has been one of the themes of today I think that there is not a single strategy that is appropriate or that will be effective to put in place, but we are doing a number of things because that commitment to enabling those students to achieve their full potential is critically important.

The CHAIR: Surely looking at and comparing to the number and growth and forecasting the population growth and demand compared to New South Wales – it is 48 there. We have got four plus one or two other art and sports facilities. We are not catering – the facilities are not catering – for the population growth or demand. I know this is a very popular program through schools who support excellence, but in relation to our Department of Education, catering for the demand of those who seek to excel, we are not actually addressing that, we are just hopping along.

Jenny ATTA: You are right to point on different approaches across the state, and I cannot pre-empt any government policy on further select entry schools. The data between New South Wales and Victoria, I do not have it in front of me, but it is interesting in terms of numbers of students in the top two bands. I think we are doing better on those domains than New South Wales.

David HOWES: I think it –

The CHAIR: If we are sure, just acknowledge it, so if it needs to be invested in, yes, we are happy to look into it, but I am just flagging that we are seeing the education department –

Jenny ATTA: It is a very reasonable question to put.

David HOWES: Just to make the point, every school does have a high-ability practice leader in place to address exactly this need. There may be a student who, no matter how many select-entry schools you have, does not get a place for whatever reason. Our fundamental aim is that every school is able to cater for those students' needs just as much as we are supporting those students who are struggling.

The CHAIR: I understand. For example, one of my kids is at a school that is doing that program, but for that program, compared to actually a selective school, there is a big difference between the two – between service delivery and excellence. So I am just saying: are we as a state catering for all the demand. I am just throwing it out there to the education department. We need to look forward and focus meeting the demands of our populations. Take it on notice or come back or whatever. If you need more funding or need more advocacy related to what the government need to do, please let us know and we will make a recommendation in that area.

Unless the committee have any other questions in the last 2 minutes, we will put that as a question on notice. We will put questions on notice to you via staff, by our panel. Again, thank you so much for coming in.

Jenny ATTA: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: It is a pleasure to actually be able to speak to you and actually move forward. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.