

**Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee  
Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria**

**Submission from the**



**Australian Principals Federation  
(Victorian Branch)**

**December 2023**

# Australian Principals Federation (APF)

## Submission to: Parliamentary Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The APF Victoria Branch, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Legislative Council's Legal & Social Issues Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria at this crucial time.

The Victorian education system, like any educational framework, is a complex entity that undergoes continuous evolution to meet the evolving needs of society. While there are several commendable aspects of the Victorian education system, there are also areas that require attention and improvement. This submission is based on feedback from our membership based and focusses on key areas that need attention to enhance the overall quality and effectiveness of education in Victoria.

Members of the APF Victorian Executive and State Councillors have contributed to this submission with feedback canvassed across the state and across settings – primary school, secondary school and specialist schools.

The most recent release of the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) provides ample evidence of the critical need to address declining national standards in key areas of mathematics, science and reading, with nearly half of 15-year-olds failing to meet benchmarks. With the Inquiry's focus on improving student learning outcomes, mental health and wellbeing, teacher recruitment, training and retention as well as the impact of leadership on school culture, this data provides a compelling argument for reform.

The findings revealed a school leadership cohort in Victorian government schools that is deeply troubled on many fronts. Perceptions of respondents are consistent with those contained within the [VAGO Principal Health and Wellbeing Report 2023](#).

Importantly, also, they speak to the consequences of the chronic underfunding of government schools, as per the Student Resource Standards (SRS), illustrated powerfully in the review of the [National School Reform Agreement Study Report 2022](#) released by the Australian government Productivity Commission.

In summary, members identified the importance of raising the level of funding of government schools in Victoria to 100 per cent of the Student Resource Standard (SRS) as a matter of immediate importance. The SRS has been identified as the minimum level of funding required by schools to effectively provide students with the educational resources, per se, to optimise their learning and wellbeing development. For every day that our government schools remain underfunded, the ripple effect of this underfunding will continue to impact negatively on student learning outcomes in many ways – ranging from staff shortages, lack of resources, adequate support and workload pressures, all of which then contribute to the diminishment of community confidence in public education.

## **THE AUSTRALIAN PRINCIPALS FEDERATION (APF)**

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The Australian Principals Federation (APF) is a prominent industrial organisation with branches in Victoria and Western Australia. Our organisation is dedicated to supporting and advocating for school leaders across Australia. Established to represent the interests of school principals and assistant principals, the APF plays a crucial role in shaping education policies, fostering professional development, and providing a collective voice for its members.

One of the primary objectives of the APF is to advocate for the industrial rights and concerns of school leaders at both state and federal levels. The organisation works tirelessly to ensure that the unique challenges faced by school leaders are acknowledged and addressed by policymakers and respective state governments. This advocacy extends to issues such as funding, curriculum development, workforce support, and overall school management.

The APF is an independent, self-funded not for profit organisation. As an apolitical body, we operate with autonomy, allowing us to advocate for the interests of school leaders without being compromised or having direct affiliation with government bodies or educational institutes. We solely sustain ourselves through membership fees, ensuring financial independence and the capacity to prioritise the needs of our members. This self-funded model empowers the APF to maintain objectivity when serving as a strong voice for educational leaders. As such, we advocate for the interest of school leaders across the entire government sector educational landscape.

Our Victorian Executive team and State Council comprises of currently serving employees of the Department of Education, with all being practicing principals and assistant principals with representation for all sectors (primary, secondary and special school) and across the metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

As a unified voice for school leaders, the APF is instrumental in promoting the importance of effective school leadership in achieving positive educational outcomes. By championing the interests of our members and promoting excellence in educational leadership, the Australian Principals Federation plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of education in Australia.



***Australian Principals Federation***

## **SIGNIFICANT ISSUES IN THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT EDUCATION SYSTEM**

### **1. SCHOOL FUNDING:**

The adequacy of school funding in the Victorian education system is a topic of ongoing debate and scrutiny. It is simply unjust that government schools in Victoria continue to be funded at less than 100 per cent of the Student Resource Standard (SRS). That simultaneously, non-government schools receive 100 per cent and in some cases above that level, is beyond belief. This underfunding is a major contributor to a substantial number of the concerns that currently hinder our schools in their quest to provide a fair and equitable education for all students.

Adequate funding is essential for reducing educational inequalities, improving teacher-student ratios, and enhancing the overall learning environment. Continued efforts to assess and adjust funding allocations based on the specific needs of schools are crucial for building a more equitable and effective education system in Victoria.

Statistics provided by the Victorian Department of Education indicate that there are well over 650,000 students in the system meaning that the government school sector educates well over 60 percent of all students. Consistent research has demonstrated that teachers are the primary factor influencing student achievement. It stands to reason therefore that teacher capacity to provide individualised and tailored instruction for each student, is instrumental in lifting outcomes. The shortfall in SRS funding restricts opportunities for continued development of teacher skill sets and expertise, ultimately impacting on student growth and achievement.

Funding allocations to Victorian Government schools are dispersed through the Student Resource Package (SRP). This funding package is designed to provide a per-student funding allocation to schools which takes into account various factors such as student demographics, location and specific educational needs.

The Victorian Auditor's General Report (VAGO) released in 2020 into the [Management of the Student Resource Package](#) stated in part that the Department's funding method was dependent upon outdated information about schools and their students. Seven recommendations were identified (all of which were accepted by the Department) with one being improved transparency of the SRP for schools and the community.

Many APF members continually report frustration with the lack of transparency relating to the SRP and the fact that money in does not equate directly with money out, meaning money dispersed to schools via the SRP is based on averages, with money being paid out on actuals). The Department has undertaken work relating to a review of the SRP, however to date, we are yet to see or be informed of the results of this work.

In July of this year and extending through to June 2024, the VAGO is conducting a follow up assessment of the Department's progress in implementing the seven recommendations resulting from their 2020 report. [VAGO Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package](#) We are also eagerly awaiting findings from this review.

## 2. WORKLOAD:

Excessive workload has been identified as major concern by members and is consistent with findings reported in the [VAGO Report into Principal Health and Wellbeing 2023](#) and [The Australian Principal Occupation, Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey Data 2022](#) as one of a number of factors contributing negatively to the wellbeing of principals.

Additional research such as the work undertaken by Monash University [Teachers Perceptions of Their Work 2022](#)<sup>1</sup> indicates that teachers do not find their workloads manageable or sustainable.

The continuing influx of departmental initiatives that schools are expected to implement exacerbates the already burdensome workload for school leaders and staff. With staff shortages prevailing systemically, many schools simply cannot cope adequately with this pressure.

Our members identify excessive workload as a significant problem for teachers and principals for several reasons:

- i. **Administrative Burden:** Principals, in particular, often face a heavy administrative burden, including managing budgets, handling disciplinary issues, and coordinating various aspects of school operations. Excessive administrative tasks diverts their attention from instructional leadership, which should be at the centre and core of their role as educational leaders.
- ii. **Burnout:** Teachers and principals often work long hours, including evenings and weekends, to meet the demands of lesson planning, grading, administrative tasks, and other responsibilities. The constant pressure and lack of time for personal and family life leads to burnout, affecting both physical and mental well-being.
- iii. **Quality of Teaching:** Educators are overloaded with tasks, and they do not have enough time to adequately prepare for lessons, provide timely and constructive feedback to students, or engage in professional development. This impacts the quality of teaching and the overall learning experience for students.
- iv. **Student Outcomes:** Overworked education staff are challenged in addressing the individual needs of students, leading to potential gaps in learning. Students may not receive the attention and support they require, affecting their academic performance and overall educational outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> Longmuir, F., Gallo Cordoba, B., Phillips, M., Allen, K.A. & Moharami, M. (2022). Australian Teachers' Perceptions of their Work in 2022. Monash University. <https://doi.org/10.26180/21212891>

- v. **Retention Issues:** Excessive workload has contributed to high turnover rates in the education sector. Teachers and principals leave their positions due to burnout, stress, or frustration with the inability to maintain a healthy work-life balance. This turnover disrupts continuity in education and results in a loss of experienced and skilled educators.
- vi. **Lack of Innovation:** With educators overwhelmed by day-to-day tasks, they have limited time and energy to explore and implement innovative teaching methods, technologies, or curriculum enhancements. This hinders the evolution of educational practices and the adaptation to new and effective approaches.
- vii. **Teacher Morale:** High workload and limited resources have led to a sense of frustration and disillusionment among educators. Low morale can affect the overall culture of a school, influencing collaboration, teamwork, and the overall effectiveness of the school and the system.

The current levels of excessive workload are creating costs and risks across three domains:

- **People:** Detrimental effect on health, personal relationships, and family life.
- **Productivity:** Leaders and teachers are less able to prioritise critical elements of work that promote the growth of teaching, learning and practice.
- **Sustainability:** teachers are making alternative career choices away from leadership roles because of the excessive work demands.

Reducing workload and addressing burnout among school leaders and teachers in the Victorian education system requires comprehensive and collaborative approaches. The current teacher and principal shortages are the result of complex problems that have accumulated over an extended period of time. Actions need to be solution focussed and must address ongoing matters relating to excessive workloads, increasing complexities of the role (both teaching and leading), growing demands and expectations imposed by the department and indeed society, and administrative overload. Furthermore, the lack of respect for the profession continues to prevail and this is particularly prevalent for teachers and principals working within the government sector.

The perceived lack of respect for the teaching profession manifests in a number of ways which have a deleterious impact on the profession – for example, in terms of attracting people to the profession. While the strategies implemented to promote the profession are to be applauded, more importantly, respect for the profession is impacted far more substantially by measures other than promos.

As one APF member has recently stated,

*“The remuneration of teachers in their first 5 years of teaching does not adequately reflect the volume and complexity of work required. It is no surprise they leave for either reduced workload or increased remuneration in alternative occupations.”*

### 3. TEACHER TRAINING:

The federal government has identified this as a priority area for action and this is most welcome. The connection between the universities and schools insofar as the provision of teaching practice rounds has been cited as inadequate to almost non-existent. This together with the need for a greater focus on the practical challenges, such as classroom management and engaging with parents, that graduates face on entering the profession, are significant challenges to be addressed. Meeting these existing deficiencies further increases the workload and stress on existing staff in schools.

The Australian Government's [Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review](#) identified the key issues in relation to teacher training across Australian universities. The review outlined that graduate teachers are simply underprepared in several areas of readiness and teacher practice.

Investment in improving teacher supply is a high value area with strategies required to be well supported. There is a critical need to attract the right people for the job. As demonstrated in the [2021 Education and Training National Census](#), as a study area, teacher education has a high attraction rate however, retention and completion rates are not commensurate with entry levels. Whilst bursaries provide monetary award, the consideration for teacher training to be counted as service (by way of studentship) offers greater incentive and award.

As graduates transition into the professional extensive support and mentoring is required and the expansion of the Department's [Career Start Program](#) aims to provide the targeted support needed to develop and retain beginning teachers. However, it is widely felt amongst our members that this indeed should be the work of ITE service providers. Despite best efforts thus far to improve teacher preparation, disparity and gaps continue to exist between the theoretical knowledge again in teacher preparation programs and the practical demands of the classroom.

The statement below from an APF member, encapsulates the expressed concern in relation to teacher training and preparation:

*"It feels like we are "re-training" graduate teachers once they arrive in our schools in the fundamentals of classroom and behaviour management. This lack of preparation on arrival to their first teaching position is clearly a leading reason for new teachers not staying in education."*

Remuneration isn't everything, but it is a lot more than nothing in terms of importance. With NSW school leaders and staff recently securing a substantial pay rise, Victorian colleagues feel their work to be devalued by comparison. This is having a direct impact on schools close to the NSW border, who are losing staff to NSW, and is disheartening to all other public-school principals and teachers.

Couple this with the severe shortage of teachers nationwide, and the rampant competition for staff both across public schools and with private schools, competition which spills over into pecuniary inducements beyond the scope of the EBA. Little wonder that principals are finding themselves in an intolerable situation in seeking to maintain a stable level of staffing and maintain budget liquidity.

Linked to this is the issue of a failure to attract teachers suitably qualified to teach specific subjects and also to attract principals and teachers to some metropolitan and regional areas. More certainly needs to be done in this space.

#### **4. DEMANDS UPON SCHOOLS AND EXPECTATIONS**

The expectations placed upon schools by their respective community are both numerous and multifaceted, creating a complex landscape that often strains not only schools but also the system. These expectations range from academic performance to social development and community engagement, placing a significant burden on schools to meet diverse needs.

One primary area where schools face heightened expectations is academic achievement. Communities often measure a school's success by standardized test scores and graduation rates. Parents and community members expect schools to provide a high-quality education that prepares students for the challenges of the future. However, meeting these academic expectations is challenging due to various factors such as limited resources, diverse student needs, and evolving educational standards.

Beyond academics, there is an ever-increasing demand for schools to address students' social and emotional well-being. The department and communities expect schools to foster a positive and inclusive environment, ensuring that students develop not only intellectually but also emotionally. This places additional responsibilities on schools to implement programs that address issues like bullying, mental health, and social skills development. Striking a balance between academic and socio-emotional development adds complexity to the educational mission.

Community expectations also extend to the realm of extracurricular activities and community engagement. Schools are often expected to offer a broad range of extracurricular options, from sports to arts, to cater to diverse student interests. Additionally, communities expect schools to actively engage with parents and local organisations, fostering a sense of collaboration. Balancing these expectations requires schools to allocate resources and time effectively, which can be a considerable challenge.

The provision of additional programs and extra-curricular activities has been further compounded through the implementation of *Time in Lieu* provisions outlined in the Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2022.



Without question, school staff (including principals and assistant principals) should be compensated for hours work beyond the 38-hour week. Acquittal of such extra time should be through means of payment however schools have not been adequately funded for this occur in full. We are hearing of widespread concerns that in attempting to acquit time in lieu via other means than remuneration, this has impacted negatively on school culture and limited the number of extra-curricular activities such as school camps and performing arts programs, which can now be offered.

The expectation for schools to contribute to social change and promote values that reflect community norms adds another layer of complexity. Navigating these expectations while respecting the diverse perspectives within a community is a delicate and highly challenging task for schools.

While community expectations are essential for shaping the goals and direction of schools, the sheer volume and diversity of these expectations can at times be overwhelming. Striking a balance between academic achievement, social development, extracurricular activities, and community engagement requires careful planning and effective resource management. Schools must be supported in order to manage this balance effectively.

Concerningly, members are reporting of increasing challenges relating to inappropriate parent behaviours and conduct. This has been identified as a major issue of concern by members with issues ranging from disagreements and challenges over school policies or teaching methods to more serious concerns such as disruptive behaviour during school events or confrontations within reception areas, classrooms and school grounds.

Equally concerning is the significantly held view that support for principals with respect to dealing with very difficult parents is not adequate. This perception undermines the confidence of school leaders when caught in conflict with unacceptable behaviour, both in person and online, by some parents. The South Australian government, in recognising this issue are in the process of substantially strengthening their legislation with respect to expectations of parent behaviour and the implementation of consequences for those parents who do not comply with the guidelines. Similarly in Victoria, the passing of legislation in parliament which has resulted the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Protection of School Communities) Bill 2021, known as The Scheme, enables authorised employees of the Department to issue school community safety orders in an effort to prohibit or restrain certain behaviours from occurring on school premises.

Members are of the view that existing guidelines do not provide them with sufficient on the ground support and protection in many cases, particularly from the small number of individuals who are deemed to be vexatious and engage in defamatory and slanderous conduct and behaviour.

Inappropriate behaviour by parents, students and community members online has also been cited as a significant issue; one which has a profoundly damaging impact, both on a personal level to school staff and from a public relations perspective on public education.

## 5. INCLUSIVENESS & STUDENT WELLBEING:

There have been welcome reforms initiated in the area of inclusiveness. Nonetheless, the cost in additional administrative and compliance requirements to an already workload burdened school staff, are concerning. Getting the balance right is a major challenge.

Members cited many cases whereby access to specially qualified ancillary staff is severely limited and often inadequate. This is particularly prevalent and presents as an ongoing challenge for regional and rural schools and in particular specialist schools who are located in rural and regional locations. The cost to students, parents and staff because of this becomes intolerable in many instances with the consequent, well-documented fallout.

With the support of departmental initiatives and government funded programs, schools are better placed to manage inclusiveness and student well-being through a combination of policies, practices and supportive environments.

Whilst the list below is by no means exhaustive, several such programs and approaches include:

- Culturally responsive teaching
- Diversity awareness and education
- Student engagement and wellbeing policies and guidelines
- Schools Mental Health Menu
- National Student Wellbeing Program
- Victorian anti Bullying and Mental Health Initiative
- Safe Schools Program

The system is large and extensive, with government schools required to serve the needs of over 65,000 students. Whilst schools have autonomy and are best placed to respond to local needs, students are not the same and therefore schools are not the same. The system unfortunately, due to its sheer size and extensiveness, far too often applies a one size fits all approach.

The disparity between schools and communities that make up the government system requires that change and improvement be differentiated, well planned, implemented with consideration and allowed for it to become embedded before the next initiative is rolled out.

## **6. CURRICULUM:**

The so-called 'crowded-curriculum' issue remains a concern – the expectation of schools to be providers of 'everything' curriculum-wise, whilst simultaneously being expected to prioritise literacy and numeracy learning outcomes above all else, creates unrealistic expectations in the minds of school staff. The inability of states to reconcile their respective curriculum with that of the national curriculum also does not help. There remains a case for national curriculum for all states.

A major emerging issue of concern is the increasing impact of technological change, in particular AI and ChatGPT and their impact on schools. School leaders, already under work stress, are being confronted with leading the implementation of exciting and promising technological innovations, almost on the run with efficacy and safety measures trailing behind.

## **7. CLOSING STATEMENT:**

Victoria's state education system has notable strengths in providing quality education, promoting inclusivity and celebrating diversity. Additionally the system has a workforce that is highly committed to their job, irrespective of the challenges and demands. Irrespective of this however, the value and worth of teachers and school leaders is low with continued decline in public appreciation.

The Department of Education and indeed the Victorian Government, need

to listen to the voices and cries of the school-based workforce and continue to work and engage with key stakeholders in order to address the issues for the betterment of the system and in particular the students whom the system serves. We can no longer keep talking about the issues, for it is time to take them out of the too hard basket.