

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

**Submission from the Victorian Principals Association
and Victorian Association of State Secondary
Principals**

12 October 2023



**VICTORIAN
PRINCIPALS
ASSOCIATION**



VASSP

Victorian Association of
State Secondary Principals

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student outcomes in the Victorian government school system are among the best in Australia but are declining in line with the rest of the country.

After families, the teachers and principals in our schools have the most significant impact on student outcomes.

This submission shows that the decline in the performance of our school system is directly linked to the challenges faced within the school system to respond to the significant changes in society, the economy and the Victorian population. Victoria is a very different place in 2023 from 1983. Changes to education have been made but more is required.

Change and improvement is hampered however because:

- The government school system is under-funded every year by around \$1.8 billion. Change and improvement needs resources. Government schools are not receiving these resources.
- Significant lack of capacity in the teaching and school leadership workforces prevent schools from devoting the right amount of time and effort to student education. This lack of capacity is caused by:
 - Shortfalls in the supply of teachers and principals
 - The administrative burdens placed on teachers and principals
 - Graduate teachers not being classroom-ready when they start working in schools
- The Department of Education could manage the implementation of new initiatives in the government school system more effectively. Consultation with professional educators in schools could be better served by ensuring there is a focus on co-design. Change is often under-resourced. Change and initiatives are often not designed, planned and implemented with deep engagement of the professionals who are working in schools every day.
- The role of school leaders is increasingly complex and the attendant stress and mental health issues for principals are substantial, and could be better managed by the department involving an element of co-design with the education profession.

To address these issues, we want:

- Appropriate funding for government schools (full funding to 100% of the Student Resource Standard for all government schools)
- Concerted efforts by the Department of Education to increase the supply of teachers and principals
- Action by the Department of Education (as the major employer of teachers in Victoria) to engage with universities to improve their teaching courses in order to make graduate teachers more classroom ready. We have serious reservations about the efficacy of a two-year teaching qualification. Greater emphasis on an intern model is needed.
- Improvement in the way the Department of Education manages the government school system – in particular a genuine co-design approach with the involvement of school leaders in the management of the system
- Renewed efforts by the Department of Education to reduce the stress associated with the principal's role and support in these roles
- A genuine reduction in the administrative burden which keeps teachers and principals away from education and teaching students. This could be addressed by providing additional resourcing support to schools.

Who we are

The Victorian Principals Association is a professional association of 1,000 members from rural, regional and metropolitan Melbourne areas, that recognises the opportunities and challenges that are faced by educational leaders. The VPA is the voice of Victorian government primary school leaders and actively advocates for them on the complex role of school leadership. It is a network of school leaders with a focus on the wellbeing of colleagues ensuring they are connected, united and empowered. The VPA provides a range of key services and support for leaders in Victorian government primary schools. Through the VPA school leaders are kept up to date with information that affects the education sector, provided with professional learning opportunities and are advocated for at State, Federal and International levels.

The Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals (VASSP) is the peak professional association for principals and assistant principals of government secondary education in the state of Victoria. The association provides advocacy, learning and support for the membership which includes over 80 per cent of the current state secondary school principals and many more assistant principals. The membership spans across metropolitan, regional and rural areas in Victoria. The association is governed by an elected Executive Committee and there is an elected advisory group called the State Committee. The State Committee is made up of representatives from each of the 12 VASSP Regional Groups.

Purpose of this submission

School leadership has a significant impact on student learning outcomes, school completion and student wellbeing – we have the third biggest impact on students after their families and teachers.

The data, evidence and research shows that student outcomes are in decline across all school systems in Victoria.

Our submission focuses on what we think are the four most significant issues driving this decline:

- Society has changed and school systems have not been able or encouraged to respond adequately to these changes
- The Department of Education should engage more deeply with the profession to ensure the fidelity of the implementation of improvement initiatives to recognise the diversity and expertise of schools and their leaders
- School leaders and teachers as a workforce lack the capacity to deliver high quality education to all students due to staff shortages and the administrative burden the Department of Education imposes on the workforce
- Funding provided to Victorian government schools is inadequate for successful education delivery as outlined in the recommendations made by the Gonski Review 12 years ago.

These are major issues, however all can be addressed by the Victorian Government, the Department of Education, schools and families working together as a system. These issues are not insurmountable – we recommend actions in this submission to address each issue.

Our members are professional educators and leaders who know their schools and their communities. This is what makes the VPA, VASSP and our members critical to discussion about the school system and what and how improvements should be planned, designed and implemented.

We welcome the opportunity to inform and discuss with the Committee what the situation is ‘on the ground’, what needs to be done and how it needs to be done.

Issue 1- Society has changed significantly

Summary:

Victoria has changed significantly over the last 40-50 years. We live, learn and work in a very different society from that of previous generations.

The government school system is a critical part of Victoria – nearly two-thirds of the population attend government schools as children and young adults. The school system needs to prepare young Victorians to be able to be successful adults in this changing world. To do this the education system needs to reconsider what they teach, how they teach and the structure of schooling. To achieve this, we call on the education system to be bold and courageous and consider what, how and even when we engage in formal education for all young Victorians to better meet these societal changes.

Particular societal changes which have and continue to challenge the ability and capacity of schools to provide young Victorians with the education they need and deserve include:

- Rapid increase in population is driving demand for many new schools and bigger schools and hence more staff
- Increasing centralisation of Victoria's population into Melbourne and the big regional cities is challenging many rural and regional schools to have the resources needed for education
- The fall of manufacturing and rise of the services sector has changed the types of careers young people need to be prepared for and the key skills they need to be taught
- Social media and other changes to the way we interact socially has increased peoples' feelings of isolation and cyberbullying. The instance of mental illness in young people is significant. Schools have become heavily involved in assisting and working with their students and other support organisations to address these changes
- The way some parents interact with their children's schools has changed and in many instances these changes have not necessarily been for the better.

Taken together changes in society have been significant and continue to change. Schools will adapt to these changes however most don't just mean that a school has to do things differently with the same resources. What they do mean is that schools need more and different resources.

Population and demographic changes:

Victoria's population has increased substantially – from 4.7 million in 2000 to more than 6.7 million people by the end of 2022. Much of this growth is being driven by migration.

Migration is also a key contributor to Victoria's demographics:

- We are an aging population – together with sustained low fertility and increasing life expectancy, migration is reducing the proportion of school-age to adult Victorians
- Multiculturalism is changing – in recent years Australia's biggest source of migrants has changed to Asia, particularly India and China. Fifty years ago half of our migrants were from the United Kingdom and most of the remainder were from the rest of Europe
- Rural population is declining – people are moving away from rural Victoria into the large regional cities and greater Melbourne – almost 80 per cent of Victorians live in greater Melbourne.

These changes affect the government school system in many ways:

- Significant numbers of new schools have had to be constructed and staffed in the growth areas of Melbourne and the larger regional cities (eg the surf coast of Greater Geelong) as Victoria's population has increased and slowly become more centred on Melbourne and large regional cities

- Large numbers of schools in remote and rural Victoria have seen enrolments tumble as families move to regional cities – these schools must adapt to providing comprehensive education experiences with small enrolments and reduced government funding
- Support for students with English as a second language has needed to change as the profile of migrants changes.

Victoria's economy has changed:

The structure of Victoria's economy has changed substantially¹. The manufacturing sector across Australia has reduced as a portion of the total economy from 40 per cent to less than 25 per cent. This has hit Victoria (which traditionally was Australia's manufacturing powerbase) particularly hard.

Despite this the economy has grown with the rise of the business services sector to more than 40 per cent of the economy. This sector includes:

- consulting services
- financial advisors
- professional, scientific and technical services
- information, media and telecommunications
- information technology.

These changes to the structure of the Australian economy have had profound impacts on the Australian labour market:

- more high-skilled labour is required and less routine manual labour
- many occupations now demand higher level cognitive skills including:
 - systems analysis
 - persuasion
 - originality
 - written expression
 - complex problem solving
 - critical thinking.

Technology has also made many jobs redundant and created new jobs. The recent and rapid development of Generative Artificial Intelligence is only magnifying the impact of this. Schools will once more be required to be at the forefront of this significant technological evolution.

Globalisation of the economy has also driven much of this change.

Again, these changes present new challenges to the government school system. A role of all school systems is to prepare young people to be able to be successful members of the community as adults. This means young people must be able to meet the needs of the economy and also society in general. Changes to the labour market mean schools need to continually update their curriculum provision for the new skills and types of jobs emerging.

This also means working with individual students in different ways to plan their pathways through secondary and tertiary education. The growth of school-based apprenticeships and traineeships is an example of how this affected education provision already.

¹ [Structural Change in the Australian Economy | Bulletin – March 2018 | RBA](#)

Employment and careers have changed:

There have been significant changes in the way people are employed in Victoria's economy and how peoples' careers progress.

Significant changes to employment laws since the 1980s have seen the casualisation of many roles. People are employed on fixed term contracts and often as casuals which has given rise to workers and staff being in tenuous employment circumstances. Adding to this is the rise of the gig economy and people being engaged as sub-contractors rather than employees.

These new kinds of employment arrangements and other employment laws have reduced union membership markedly and left many workers with little support in their employment.

Concurrently with this and the rapid change in the economy's structure, current-day workers are expected to have an average of six career changes during their working lives.

Preparing young people to thrive in this environment is yet another issue schools must now address in their pathways programs for secondary students.

Changes to lifestyles and culture:

The way people live in the 21st century has changed substantially. These changes include:

- **Social interaction** – with the growth in the power and use of the internet and social media, social interaction is very different this century. Whilst there are benefits to their use (eg it is much easier to interact with family and friends in distant locations with video calls etc), the changes to how people interact has for many people led to feelings of increased isolation and significant cyberbullying
- **Working families and the cost of living** – for many families the increases to costs of living have reduced their ability and opportunities to spend significant time with their children. This has led to an increase in demand for childcare and before and after school care.
- **Mental health** – mental health has now become the significant health issue for young people.² Data on self-reported long-term mental and behavioural conditions shows 26 per cent of young people aged 15–24 reported having a long-term mental or behavioural condition. That is one in four young people.
- **Physical health** – obesity has become a major problem across all age groups in Australia. It has been estimated that 40 per cent of the diets of 14-18 year olds in Australia are made up of unhealthy meals.
- **Sexuality and gender** – in a welcome move people across Australia can now live their lives recognising their sexuality and gender. LGBTQ+ is now a key part of how we live.
- **Homelessness** – more than one in six Australians have experienced homelessness. Housing options can be particularly difficult now for low- and middle- income households.
- **Family units** – Fifty years ago the typical family unit was a mother, father and several children. This is no longer the 'typical' family unit in Australia. We now have many 'typicals' including hetro-couples; single parent families (both male, female and other genders), same-sex couples and blended families.

These changes to lifestyles and culture have required schools to adapt and change how they operate. Many of these changes have required schools to become an integral partner with other organisations and family members to support their students as they grow up with these changes and still try to provide the education they deserve.

² [Australia's youth: Mental illness - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au)

Cyberbullying, youth mental health and ‘helicopter’ parents are particular issues which schools need to be supported and resourced appropriately by Government.

Further work can, and must be undertaken, to ensure schools are at the forefront of building significant, positive and purposeful relationships with students, their families and the communities they serve.

[**What this means for the government school system:**](#)

These changes to society mean we must change:

- what we teach*** – our schools continue to update their curriculums with changes in the economy. New jobs mean new skills are required. We cannot do this alone however. We need to work as a system more with the Department of Education taking the lead role in helping us to understand what knowledge and skills our students will need as adults.
- how we teach*** – changes to the economy, the rise of technology and social media and changing lifestyles mean we need to continue to explore how we can deliver better differentiated and individualised education to our students.
- how we operate in our communities*** – now more than ever schools need and do partner with many and varied community and other organisations to support our students and deliver better learning experiences.

Our school system needs the Department of Education to:

- work with the profession to co-design improvement strategies and find a better balance between system wide support and the freedom for individual and groups of schools to pursue improvement
- resource schools to the level needed to address the challenges and opportunities of our changing society
- reduce the administrative burden on school leaders and teachers to free up more time to deliver education in a more complex world.

Issue 2- Lack of capacity in the teacher and school leadership workforces.

Summary

The teacher and school leadership workforces are finding it increasingly difficult to devote adequate effort and time to teaching and learning. Our schools have far too many vacancies and the teachers and leaders we do have spend too much time on unnecessary and unproductive administrative tasks.

These issues are being driven by:

1. The administrative burden DE has imposed on teachers and school leaders over time
2. The combination of under-resourcing of school leadership teams and DE's unrealistic expectations of what school leaders must be responsible and accountable for
3. The stress of the principal's role is preventing principals from focusing on educational leadership
4. Shortages in the supply of teachers including in many subject specific teachers
5. Evidence of a reluctance of teachers willing to take on school leadership roles particularly reflecting the well-understood stress of these roles
6. New graduate teachers requiring further preparation in the science of teaching, in particular student and classroom management before commencing their teaching careers

Together these issues are impacting on the capacity of schools to provide the education young people deserve.

The administrative burden- Work that unnecessarily uses up teacher and principal time

There are several factors that hinder teachers and school leadership (i.e., the principal class) from delivering quality classroom results for students. The first of these is the sheer volume of work expected of teachers and principals. Australian teachers spend the third highest number of hours on management and administration in the OECD.³ (*)

As schools are asked to engage in more activities (e.g., Respectful Relationships, consent education, mandated swimming,) additional burdens are placed on staff. A common complaint is that “they (the government) keep putting more things on our plate, but they never take anything off the plate”. As described elsewhere in this submission, demands on teacher time dealing with student welfare and mental health problems have increased. Compared to previous decades there is an increase in time-consuming complaints by parents.

A principal's job – too big and under resourced

School leaders have complex jobs. A key role of any leaders' role is to make sure your people are adequately trained and skilled to do their jobs well. The Productivity Commission recently reported that principals are only able to spend five per cent of their time on professional learning for their staff.

One only has to look at a principal's employment contract to understand why this is the case. These contracts require principals to achieve sixty-two ‘accountabilities’ - many of which have little to do directly with student outcomes.

³ [TALIS 2018 Results \(Volume II\) : Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/talis/TALIS_2018_Results_Volume_II_Teachers_and_School_Leaders_as_Valued_Professionals.pdf)

'Deliverables' which don't directly impact student outcomes should be managed and undertaken elsewhere in the system where they can be done better and without the impact on student outcomes they are having now. In particular, small schools need assistance, because, as the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's Review of Red Tape⁴ has pointed out, the administrative burden is not reduced in proportion to the school size, i.e., a four-teacher rural school does not have compliance requirements one tenth that of a forty-teacher school. Administrative matters therefore take up a proportionately bigger portion of the principal's time.

Principal stress and mental health – prevents enough focus on educational leadership
A recent Rand Corporation report about the US school system⁵ found that:

teachers are nearly twice as likely as other working adults to report having difficulty coping with job-related stress, and 10 percentage points more likely to experience burnout. Frequent and long-term stress increases the risk of mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression.

Principal stress and mental health are major issues in the Victorian government school system. The recent performance audit by the Victorian Auditor General⁶ underlines the extent of this problem. Relative to the teaching staff in schools, principals:

- Lodge more workers compensation claims
- More of these claims are for mental health issues
- Have higher attrition.

Further evidence of these issues is provided in the Australian Principals Occupational Health and Safety and Wellbeing Survey 2022⁷ (hereafter "the OHSW Survey"), conducted by the Australian Catholic University. This survey found that the major causes of stress for principals are:

- The sheer quantity of work that is expected of them
- The lack of time to focus on teaching and learning
- Managing teacher shortages
- The mental health of students
- The mental health of staff
- Violence (in just twelve years the percentage of school principals subjected to physical violence and verbal abuse has increased from just over 25 per cent to almost 45 per cent).

In 2022 principals had the highest rates of stress since the OHSW survey began, including sleep disorders, depression and burnout. This was contributed in part by declining workplace cultures including lower levels of trust between school staff and lower confidence in management.

The Victorian Auditor General is particularly critical of DET's ineffectiveness in managing this issue:

The department is not effectively protecting the health and wellbeing of its school principals. The department has identified the key challenges that principals face. It has developed numerous strategies and initiatives to address them. Many principals use and appreciate these services. However, they have not improved principals' health and wellbeing.

⁴ [Review to reduce red tape for teachers and school leaders \(aitsl.edu.au\)](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/reviews/review-to-reduce-red-tape-for-teachers-and-school-leaders)

⁵ <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/heres-what-teachers-say-they-need-most-to-manage-stress-mental-health/2023/07>

⁶ [Principal Health and Wellbeing | Victorian Auditor-General's Office](https://www.vao.vic.gov.au/our-work/audit-reports/principals-health-and-wellbeing)

⁷ [Principals' health suffers amid threats, violence, and chronic staff shortages \(acu.edu.au\)](https://www.acu.edu.au/principals-health-suffers-amid-threats-violence-and-chronic-staff-shortages)

Shortages in the supply of teachers including in many specialist subjects

The issue of shortages in the supply of teachers generally, and also in some specific subject areas has received significant analysis and reporting over the last 10-15 years. The shortages are real and increasing. It has been estimated that when Victorian government schools opened in term one this year that there were over 900 vacant teaching positions.

We know that the shortages are being driven by:

- Poor perceptions amongst young people about pursuing teaching as a career
- Low retention of new teachers in the workforce after the first 3-5 years
- Difficulties in attracting teachers to live and work in regional and rural areas
- Renumeration and other rewards being relatively low in the medium term compared with other careers.

Comments by our members in recent surveys reinforce these difficulties:

I used to have 160 applications for a teaching position. I now am lucky to get 3. The manifestations of being unable to choose the best from a pool of people commence from there. How can we provide quality education when we consider ourselves lucky to have anyone apply at all?

It's not just teacher shortage, it is replacement teachers.

The system is held together with sticky tape. Get the teachers out of central and regional offices and back into classrooms, change visa requirements. Do whatever it takes to find teachers. Ultimately it is the kids who are losing out. Incredibly behaviour management workload as a result of less experienced or inconsistent teachers, a result of not being able to fill positions appropriately.

I just can't get casual relief teachers. (There were multiple comments along these lines.)

Staffing is challenging across the state and not just in those areas, like regional and rural Victoria, that have traditionally faced additional challenges.

These shortages impact student outcomes in many ways:

- Class sizes are often increasing as schools are forced to merge classes because of insufficient teachers
- Specialist subjects being taught by teachers with no significant expertise in the subject area
- Difficulties in obtaining casual relief teachers to cover absent teachers
- Principals and other school leaders having to return to the classroom (which means less time for leading the school)
- Lack of consistency of teaching directly impacts on student outcomes
- Additional time to recruit, induct and mentor new staff. Again, this takes time away from other tasks.

Leadership shortages are large and growing.

Just as there are shortages in the supply of teachers for schools, there has been a growing problem emerging with the supply of candidates for school leadership roles.

The reasons for this are straightforward and obvious:

- People who work in schools see the stress that school leaders currently must operate with. As a result, fewer and fewer teachers see becoming a school leader as a career move.

- Existing school leaders are leaving the system as a result of burnout and stress associated with their jobs
- The demographics of school leaders sees a significant number reaching retirement age
- The large number of new schools opening in Victoria's growth areas is creating the need for larger numbers of school leaders at the same time as supply is shrinking
- The renumeration package for school leaders does not reflect the size, complexity and stress of the roles relative to other positions in school workforces.

These shortages have real impacts on student learning. It is generally accepted that the quality of the leadership in schools has a direct impact on student outcomes. Too many schools are now trying to manage education provision with incomplete, temporary and/or under-prepared leadership teams.

New graduate teachers are not prepared adequately in the science of teaching, in particular student and classroom management.

In October 2021 the final report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review, *Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review* was published⁸. This Commonwealth Government report laid bare the inherent issues in teacher training at Australian universities. In particular the Review found that graduate teachers were underprepared in a number of critical areas of teacher practice:

- phonemic awareness and phonics in teaching reading
- classroom management
- cultural responsiveness
- supporting diverse learners and students with a disability
- working with families and carers
- working in regional settings.

Compounding this issue of teacher training not being adequate is actions education systems have taken across Australia to 'fast-track' trainee teachers from university into schools.⁹ The Conversation and other research articles have also been investigating the impact of Teaching Performance Assessments on the readiness of trainee teachers to enter the workforce. Inconsistencies in the standards universities have been using in applying Teaching Performance Assessments indicates that this initiative is not assisting the problem of under-prepared graduate teachers.

We are alarmed about the potential fallout here. Under-prepared and fast-tracked teachers cannot be well-supported. Nor can they be expected to perform as highly effective graduate teachers when they are drawing on disrupted university preparation and limited placements.

Surveys by our organisations support these findings and the issues they cause for education provision. The comment below from one of our members summarises this well:

The most difficult thing around the staffing shortages is the complexity of supporting staff that are under prepared for the profession, yet have needed to be employed due to a lack of applicants.

⁸ [Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

⁹ [Growing numbers of unqualified teachers are being sent into classrooms – this is not the way to 'fix' the teacher shortage \(theconversation.com\)](#)

What this means for the Victorian government school system:

In thinking about the difficulties schools face in recruiting and retaining leaders and teachers and then giving them the right amount of time to spend on teaching and learning, it is obvious what this means for the school system and student outcomes:

- Classes have more students than optimal
- Classes are taught by teachers without sufficient expertise in the subject being taught
- Classes are taught by graduate teachers who lack all the skills necessary to teach and manage student behaviour
- School leaders cannot devote the time and effort they should to instructional leadership.

Our school system needs the Department of Education to:

- Work with all parts of the system to improve the attraction of people to careers as teachers and school leaders
- As the major employer of teachers and principals in Victoria, work with the school system to compel universities to properly prepare graduate teachers for their future work
- Resource schools to the level needed to address the challenges and opportunities of our changing society
- Reduce the administrative burden on school leaders and teachers to free up more time to deliver education in a more complex world
- Address the issues raised by the Auditor General and our organisations about principal stress and mental health.

Issue 3- Management of the Victorian Government School System

Summary:

- The impact of education on peoples' lives is profound.
- The system needs to continually improve to stay relevant and useful.
- The system is large, diverse and complex.
- Education is a science – success needs expertise.
- Implementing improvement and change is not straightforward.

We contend that the Department of Education can improve its management of the system if:

- Students and schools are at the centre of all decisions
- More educational expertise is recruited into its head and regional offices
- The Department genuinely engages with its education experts in the school system through the co-design of improvement initiatives and structured and respectful consultation processes
- The Department recognises that the school system is large and diverse so change needs to be tailored to individual circumstances rather than the all too frequent one-size fits all approach
- The Department better plan change and resource it properly.

The impact of education on peoples' lives is profound:

The World Bank makes it very clear why education is such a powerful enabler for success in peoples' lives. For individuals, education promotes employment, earnings, health, and poverty reduction. For societies, education drives long-term economic growth, spurs innovation, strengthens institutions, and fosters social cohesion.¹⁰

This analysis is not new. Low education attainment reduces the likelihood of gaining ongoing employment in life. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare contends that low employment reduces the health outcomes for people in many ways:

- Low and insecure income can lead to poor diet, exercise and other lifestyle choices
- Low employment can lead to homelessness, poor quality or overcrowded housing.

Low education achievement also correlated strongly with the likelihood of committing crimes and spending time in prison. Over 30 per cent of prisoners in Australian jails have only completed Year 9 or under at school. However, Australian adults who fail to complete Year 10 only comprise 6.5 per cent of the total population. ¹¹

The system needs to continually improve to stay relevant and useful:

The Victorian government school system does not and should not operate in a vacuum. We believe our school system needs to continually respond, evolve and improve as society and its expectations changes.

We also believe we need to use new thinking and learning about schools and education to improve what our school system delivers when it makes sense.

¹⁰ [Education Overview: Development news, research, data | World Bank](#)

¹¹ [Prisoners more likely to be homeless, unemployed and suffer poor mental and physical health - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

There have been many examples of significant change in our system over many years. Below are a few:

- **What is taught** – technology has changed the way we operate as communities and how our economy works. Young people today are born into and are growing up in worlds of technology unimagined by their parents. Technology is now a key part of a young person's education.
- **How we teach** – the understanding of how the human brain works continues to grow and that understanding has been used to change the way we teach. There is now a much greater focus on differentiating students' learning needs rather than the previous 'industrial teaching model' of everyone learns the same thing at the same time in the same way.
- **How schools are managed and led** – the move to self-managed schools from the 1980s has better positioned schools to tailor what they provide and how they provide it to better serve the needs and aspirations of their local communities. For example, staff are now selected by the school not the department.

As a system and as individual schools we need to keep exploring and implementing opportunities for the education of our young people.

[The system is large, diverse and complex:](#)

Our school system is very large. We have over 1,550 schools. These schools educate over 645,000 students and do this with more than 50,000 staff. Each school is self-managing so they can better respond to their local community.

Our students are not all the same. We educate people from young children (4 years old) to adults (18 years old). Over these 13 years our students will grow through many stages of their lives. The government school system, being the major provider of education in our State, brings together enormous numbers of students from many backgrounds:

- Around 220,000 have a language background other than English
- 30,000 students have a disability
- 16,000 students identify as aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- More than half attend schools in disadvantaged communities.

Our school system is also very complex. We are not Bunnings stores featuring the same store layout and products. We have:

- Many different settings – 1,140 primary schools, 251 secondary colleges, 79 P-12 schools, and 83 specialist schools
- Different sizes – over 20 per cent of our schools have less than 100 students and almost 10 per cent have more than 1,000 students
- Different communities – half of our schools are located in metropolitan Melbourne and half are located in rural and regional Victoria. There is also a wide range in the socio-economics of our communities – from the most disadvantaged to the most advantaged.

These huge differences in the schools and communities that make up our school system mean that change and improvement must be planned, implemented and managed with care, evidence and expertise. 'One size fits all' and rapid changes that do not seek the engagement of the profession are bound to fail and unnecessarily interrupt and at times derail successful education. Change is a complex and time consuming process and all too often changes in education are not given time to be embedded and evaluated before another change is rolled out by the system.

Education is a science – success needs evidence and expertise:

One of the features of education in Victoria is that everyone, at one stage of their lives, has been to school. This generally translates into everyone having an opinion on education which they think is right.

As principals and education leaders we need to continually remind the ‘system’ that education is a science. Successful education planning and provision is more likely when it is informed by evidence and expertise from those who have that expertise and evidence.

Education, just like many other sectors of the economy, is open to the risk of ‘fad-ism’. The latest fads or trends in education can and do, at times, take hold without any comprehensive thinking, analysis and testing of the idea with those that know their schools and communities.

We provide two examples of policy decisions by the Department of Education which featured what could at best, be described as knee-jerk reactions to social issues without any considered analysis and evidence of what schools could contribute to addressing these social issues and whether schools should be responsible for solving these social issues.

- ***Swimming and water safety education:*** In 2017 the Department and the Minister for Education announced and directed every primary school to deliver swimming and water safety education. Schools were required to demonstrate students (by the end of Year 6) had acquired the knowledge and skills identified in the Victorian Water Safety Certificate. School principals and councils were informed of this change via media release.
- ***Consent education:*** in 2021, following weeks of national debate surrounding issues of sexual harassment and consent, the Victorian Government announced that all schools would introduce consent education for all students from foundation year to year 12. This additional curriculum was to be introduced during the same year it was announced, well after schools had planned and implemented their curriculum and timetables for that year.

There is no doubt that the two above changes make good sense on many levels. What sadly was lacking in the process to develop and implement these policy decisions was any effort by the Department to seek out the expertise and experience of its on-the-ground experts – their school principals and leadership teams. These are valuable examples of missed opportunities to build better policy decisions.

Successful education must be based on evidence and expert analysis and advice.

Successful improvement and change is not straightforward, but not impossible:

Implementing change and improvement in large, diverse and complex systems and organisations is not easy or straightforward. However, there are guiding principles which most change experts agree can increase the likelihood of success. Essentially, they are:

- Treat your people how you want to be treated:
 - Engage early and often
 - Listen and acknowledge
 - Be honest and respectful
 - Deliver on commitments
- Make the change compelling and real:
 - Use evidence to support why change is needed
 - Be very clear on what is the change
 - Ensure you have performance measures to assess the impact of the change and how it is being implemented

- Don't be trapped by 'one-size-fits-all' thinking
- Plan and manage the change:
 - Plan what is to be done by whom
 - Resource the change properly
 - Review and report progress to all regularly
- Learn as you go:
 - Think about change
 - Review what worked and what didn't work.

We believe that the Department of Education can learn the following lessons from the approaches it takes to change and improvement in the Victorian government system:

- The people on the frontline of schools need to be engaged and listened to at all stages through the change process – the people who work in the schools have significant expertise and understanding of what is and isn't working well enough in our system. Improvement initiatives should be co-designed by the Department with school leaders and teaching professionals in the room.
- The need and reason for change needs to be compelling and communicated – if you can't convince someone why they should change, then they won't
- One-size does not fit all – change has to be tailored to be the best-fit for each school
- Change needs to engage directly with the people impacted by the change – change won't happen if people don't believe in the change
- Change needs to be planned and resourced – it doesn't just happen.

[What this means for the Victorian government school system:](#)

The evidence and analysis we have presented leads us to the following recommendations for the Department to better manage the government school system:

- Students and schools need to be at the centre of all decisions
- Recruit more educational expertise within its head and regional offices
- Engage more and in better ways with its education experts (in particular school principals, leadership teams and teachers) in the school system to co-design improvement initiatives
- Better recognise that the school system is large and diverse so improvement initiatives need to be tailored to individual circumstances rather than the too frequent one-size fits all approach
- Better plan change and resource change properly if the change is to be implemented successfully.

Issue 4- Government funding to government schools is not enough to deliver an acceptable education to young Victorians

Summary

Since the Gonski review of education funding was completed, it is generally accepted by all governments in Australia that schools require funding levels consistent with the Student Resource Standard if those schools are going to be able to deliver this generation of students the education they need and deserve.

In Victoria, the government school system continues to be under-funded by the Victorian Government to the Student Resource Standard level. This under-funding is around \$1.8 billion every year – equivalent to \$2,800 per student every year.

In this same environment the non-government school system in Victoria is over-funded by around \$400 million every year.

This is not the way for governments to treat the more than 60 per cent of total students who attend government schools in Victoria. Government schools also enrol the highest proportion of students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

How our schools are currently funded:

Victorian government schools are funded by government via the Student Resource Package (SRP). Essentially schools are paid a core amount per enrolled student. This amount varies depending on the year levels of each student. In addition, schools can receive further government funding under the following SRP formulas:

- Equity funding** – this provides additional funding to assist students with particular needs including Social Disadvantage, Catch Up, Students with Disabilities, English as an Additional Language (EAL).
- School Infrastructure funding** – this funding assists schools to maintain their buildings and grounds including cleaning, grounds, utilities and maintenance.
- School-based funding for school specific infrastructure and programs** – this funding meets costs for schools which administer programs and services accessed by groups of schools in their area including MARC/MACC Teachers, Instrumental Music Programs, Local Native-speaker Language Assistants Program, Bus coordination and Alternative Settings Teachers
- School-based funding for programs with specific targeted criteria or defined life spans** – this funding is not ongoing and hence can be problematic for schools in their medium- and long-term planning. Examples of the targeted initiatives include Primary Welfare, Doctors in Secondary Schools, Respectful Relationships and Head Start.

The Victorian Government funds the SRP using state funding and funding from the Commonwealth Government. Elements of the SRP are reviewed and adjusted annually by DET.

The enormous gap in funding for Victorian government schools:

In 2011 the Commonwealth Government released the *Review of Funding for Schooling (Gonski Review)*. A key recommendation of that review was the establishment of a Student Resource Standard (SRS). The SRS is an estimate of how much total public funding a school needs to meet its students' educational needs.

Implementation of the SRS would mean all government funding would be distributed to schools based on a model that gave every student a funding benchmark amount plus extra money, or

“loadings”, for specific disadvantages¹². It was estimated in 2011 that \$6.5 billion would need to be distributed to Australian schools to meet this standard.

Government school students are expected to receive 100 per cent of the SRS. Non-government schools were expected to receive a proportion of the SRS based on their school’s estimated ability to raise private income (i.e. fees) using census data from students’ neighbourhoods.

Successive federal and state governments have committed to funding government schools at 100 per cent of the SRS. Implementation of the first tranches of additional funding commenced some ten years ago. The table below shows the current state of play across Australia. A spokesperson for the Victorian government recently said Victoria would reach the SRS for government schools as planned by 2028.¹³

Where state and federal governments are up to in meeting their school resourcing commitments in 2023

Department of Education Senate estimates briefing

	Public schools			Private schools		
	Fed	State	Total	Fed	State	Total
NSW	20%	72.20%	92.20%	84.10%	22.57%	106.68%
VIC	20%	70.43%	90.43%	82.50%	20%	102.50%
QLD	20%	69.26%	89.26%	83.64%	20.58%	104.22%
SA	20%	75%	95%	82.41%	19.72%	102.13%
WA	20%	75%	95%	83.61%	20%	103.61%
TAS	20%	74.08%	94.08%	81.61%	20%	101.61%
ACT	20%	80%	100%	86.21%	20%	106.21%
NT	21.55%	59%	80.55%	82.60%	15.09%	97.66%

Four sad facts come from this analysis:

1. Victorian government schools only receive 90 per cent of the government funding they need to provide to young Victorians the education they deserve
2. Victoria’s non-government schools receive funding, on average, in excess of the SRS – 103 per cent.
3. Moving funding for government schools towards 100 per cent of the SRS commenced in 2014. The Victorian Government by its own admission has recently confirmed that government schools will not receive 100 per cent of the SRS until 2028.

¹² The loadings would cover six identified forms of disadvantage – low socioeconomic background, indigenous background, limited English, rural or small schools and disability. These would be fully publicly funded for all schools.

¹³ [Australian public school funding falls behind private schools as states fail to meet targets | Australian education | The Guardian](#)

4. Given most students are at schools for 13 years, a whole generation of Victorian young people are being deprived of the education they deserve whilst the Victorian Government over-funds non-government schools and under-funds government schools.

Commonsense would tell the person on the street that the Victorian Government as a minimum should re-direct the overfunding of non-government schools back to the underfunded government school system at a minimum.

Unfortunately, commonsense can't happen whilst two important pieces of Victorian and Commonwealth education funding legislation lock all schools into these inequitable funding arrangements for the foreseeable future:

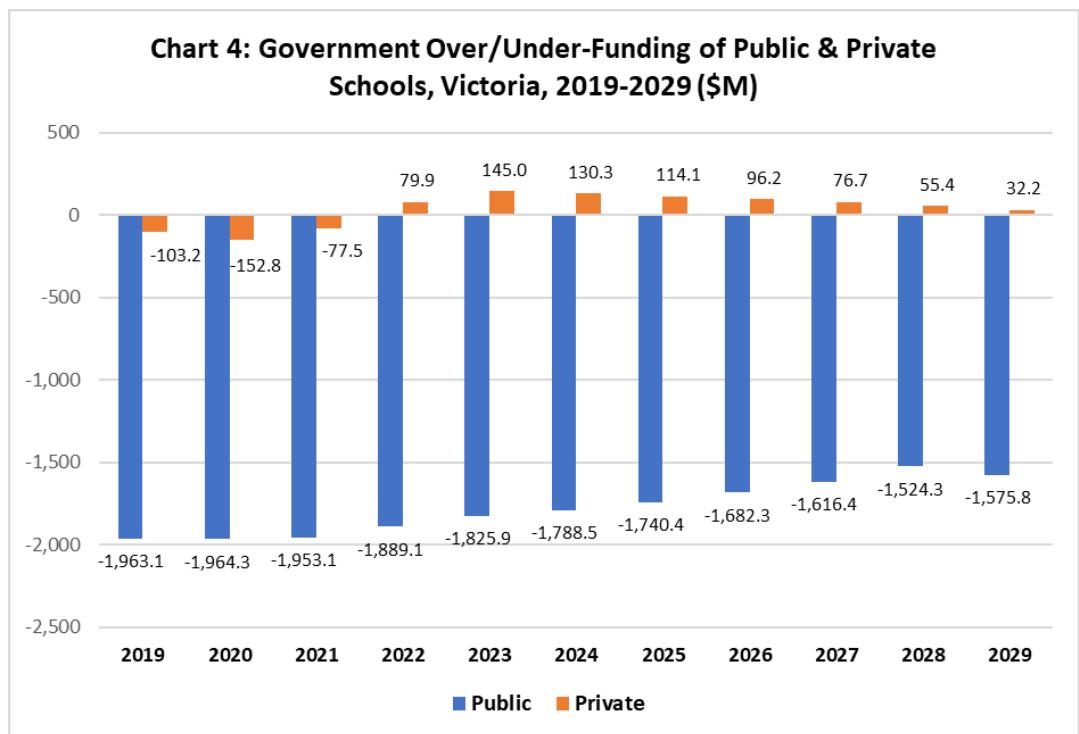
- the Victorian Government's 2014 amendment to the *Education and Training Reform Act* guarantees non-government schools at least 25 per cent of per-student funding that goes to government schools, regardless of whether those non-government schools need the money.
- The 2018 *Bilateral Agreement Between Victoria and the Commonwealth on Quality Schools Reform* (updated in 2022) sees the Victorian Government committing itself to increase by 2023 combined State and Commonwealth funding of non-government schools to 96.52 per cent (on average) of the SRS and increase combined State and Commonwealth funding of government schools to 87.11 per cent (on average) of the SRS.

The government school system educates well over 60 per cent of all students in Victoria and by far the greater majority (over 80 per cent) of students at social disadvantage, with disabilities and other special needs. **Hence the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments have locked most students into arrangements where their schools will struggle substantially to have the resources to provide them with the education they need and should expect.**

[**What this means for the Victorian government school system:**](#)

The financial effect

The chart below (published by Save Our Schools Australia) estimates that the Victorian government school system will be underfunded by \$19.5 billion in the period 2019 to 2029. During the same period the non-government school system will be over-funded by around \$400 million. The average annual underfunding of the government school system is around \$1.8 billion.



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The educational impact

We know that teachers have the largest impact on a young person's education outcomes. Some 650,000 students attend Victorian government schools currently. The evidence presented above shows that the Victorian government under-funds government schools by \$1.8 billion every year. This underfunding means every school in the government school system should receive an additional \$2,800 every year for every student.

The average class size in Victorian government schools is around 21.5¹⁵. Based on the shortfall in government funding this means that an average class in a Victorian government school is under-funded by \$60,200 annually. With this additional funding the average classroom could engage, at a minimum, an additional half time teacher or a full-time aide.

We know that the education outcomes of Victorian students have declined. We know that providing more tailored teaching and education experiences to each student is a powerful way of improving student outcomes¹⁶.

Government schools' efforts to provide these individualised teaching and education experiences are hampered by this under-funding. The first Term of Reference for this Inquiry asks what has contributed to the decline in student outcomes in Victoria. It is clear that the under-funding of Victorian government schools is a major contributor to this decline.

¹⁴ [Public Schools in Victoria Face a Funding Crisis – SOS Australia \(saveourschools.com.au\)](https://www.saveourschools.com.au/public-schools-in-victoria-face-a-funding-crisis)

¹⁵ [SUMMARY STATISTICS \(education.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/sos/statistics/Pages/default.aspx)

¹⁶ The Victorian Government promotes this view also. Evidence of this includes the Tutor Learning Initiative which was introduced in 2021 to assist students who fell behind due to the disruption to their education in the COVID period. This initiative has been continued in 2023 for students who are below or at risk of falling below the National Minimum Standards in education.