

## Parents' Voice in Government School Education

### Submission to the Parliament of Victoria

#### Legislative Council - Legal and Social Issues Committee

12 October 2023

Dear Committee Members,

#### Introduction

Parents Victoria (PV) is a state wide democratic organisation representing parents of students in Victorian government schools. PV welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria.

PV's vision is a fully supported Victorian public education system which meets the needs of every student - where parents' voices are sought, heard and valued. We want to ensure the **educational journey for every student in a state government school is holistically supported and achieved in partnership with parents, schools and Government.**

At our PV2023 Conference this year (7/10/2023), we brought parents and education stakeholder representatives together to hear parent voices. To converse, collaborate and construct what we all want to see happen for future Victorian government school communities. Parents and carers prior to conference, were provided the opportunity to submit their questions and concerns.

PV would like to inform the committee that our organisation provided and promoted a [PV School Lunch Order](#) to the 2022 State Election candidates and education community. It was a collection of menu items we believe would address and support our state school communities.

This Inquiry provides us the opportunity to share those and further insights and ideas with the committee under the terms of reference:

#### **(1) trends in student learning outcomes from Prep to Year 12, including but not limited to:**

- (a) the factors, if any, that have contributed to decline;
- (b) disparities correlated with geography and socio-economic disadvantage;

PV believes there has been and continues to be, extensive research and reports on the trends of student learning outcomes pre and post pandemic. The findings of many reports over time, reinforce the causes and contributing factors – highlighting the many inequities in the education system. Pasi Sahlberg nails it, as reported in [The Guardian \(31/01/2022\)](#)

*“We have one of the world’s most examined, researched and reviewed school systems, but when it comes to taking the evidence and respective recommendations seriously, we find ourselves in the same old debates and confrontations over and over again. As international experts have reminded Australia’s education system leaders, we have now lost a decade due to inability to learn from ourselves and from others about how to build a more equitable school system for all children.”*

It has been long argued that a **needs-based funding model needs to be implemented**, allocating resources based on the specific requirements of each school to address the achievement gaps. Some schools in some postcodes, have particular funding profiles that are not accurate or addressing the disadvantage they have within those schools. Schools need to be confident that the Victorian

Government will support them with evidenced based strategies - this must be done in collaboration with the schools, the system and the school community in order to impact change.

It needs to be said that schools (the employees) are working to the best of their ability, to provide the best education outcomes they can for their students, with the funding they are provided - but they do not have the capacity to, nor responsibility to, lobby for the urgent need for the School Resource Standard (SRS) to be 100% for government schools. (See *point 6*)

**(2) the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, including but not limited to:**

- (a) the adequacy of existing measures to recruit and retain teachers;
- (b) training, accreditation and professional development, particularly for teaching students with special needs;
- (c) the adequacy of the Department of Education's measures to support teachers;
- (d) the impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture;

PV believes parents and the students who attend government schools, expect the Victorian government to take all necessary steps to ensure that every classroom is led by a fully qualified and registered teacher.

To our knowledge the job vacancies for teachers, education support and learning specialists is above 3000, possibly even more now and we hear more teachers are retiring or leaving at the end of 2023.

PV acknowledges the Victorian Government has announced and invested in workforce shortage strategies to attract future teachers to the profession and to provide schools with funding for incentives to fill vacancies. However, the teachers and the AEU are pleading that more has to be done to "retain" teachers in the profession. **Many pre-service teachers are abandoning their degrees due to rising debt concerns and financial stress they and many others are experiencing. PV is aware that teachers trained in the public school system are being enticed into independent and catholic school sectors by higher wages.** This impacts the public school system from points of view of both the cost of the training and the loss of workforce.

The AEU is advocating for a retention payment and reduced workloads, to ensure enough people who enter university to study teacher education, complete their studies, and then are provided with the support they need to thrive when they enter the classroom. PV seeks the Victorian Government to **fund paid student teacher placements during their teaching rounds and subsidise loss of income for career changers for the required 75 pre-service teacher (PST) professional placement days.** Also, to **assist with the living away allowances for those undertaking teacher training in our rural and regional schools and who commit to working in a government school.**

The Victorian government gave more priority to remove payroll tax exemptions for some of the state's wealthiest non-government schools vs solving a far more critical issue of teacher shortages in government schools, which directly affects so many more Victorian students and their families right now.

**Experienced and successful school principals should be encouraged and remunerated to take on a mentor role to support a number of schools in their local region.** This would then assist other neighbourhood government schools to be at the desired and expected performance level to attract more local enrolments, so the need to have designated school zones restrictions could be removed.

PV believes there needs to be **increased funding to the learning institutions to deliver the required initial teacher education to train teachers** in trauma informed practice; understanding poverty; special education; strategies around social emotional and complex behaviours; effective communication; parent engagement and Relationship based Education (RbE).

PV's view on the impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture is for all Victorian Government schools to engage (and be funded to engage) with **Relationship based Education (RbE)**, a John Hendry OAM initiative in partnership with Parents Victoria to offer professional learning on how to embed quality relationships in every school. We know that things don't always run smoothly; misunderstandings and conflicts occur between teachers

and students, between school and home. We believe that quality relationships are the key to quality education for our children.

By way of examples we would like to reference here:- [Ocean Grove PS case study](#); [What schools and others are saying](#) (about RbE); A recent article in [The Educator](#).

PV would also like to add - as an education stakeholder we understand the role and responsibilities of the various education statutory and regulatory bodies but many in the profession and public don't. As previously mentioned, **we must explain and communicate how the education system works** – how it's funded, structured, governed and regulated to the community and the workforce. This would then prevent and address the anxiety and angst within the system and wider community.

### **(3) the current state of student wellbeing in Victoria, including but not limited to the impact of State Government interventions, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to address poor mental health in students, school refusal, and broader student disengagement;**

We recommend the Committee refers to PV's submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee Inquiry into School Refusal (# 68, 9 December 2022). *Copy Attached/uploaded.*

PV would like to draw the Committee's attention to the [Framework for Improving Student Outcomes \(FISO 2.0\)](#) which sets out five core elements that together, realise the goals of excellence and equity through developing the learning and wellbeing of every student. It is our expectation that this revised framework will be used and delivered in all Victorian Government school effectively. FISO 2.0 was revised in collaboration with education stakeholders (including Parents Victoria).

In 2023 conversations with parents and carers - at school visits and at our recent conference - they raised issues which include :-

student discipline; classroom disruption and management; VCE Vocational Major; learning adjustments; pandemic impact of student isolation and socialisation; mobile phones and social media; educational resources; school communication with families; student teacher placements; school infrastructure and planning; neurodiversity; connecting the learning pathway from birth, kinder, to school and beyond to training and employment - what that looks like locally and what supports are there; how best to direct parents who are seeking information on next steps - building trust and confidence; attention to learning barriers vs the emotional fall out/impact post pandemic; parents supportive of teachers who are feeling they are hamstrung; parents feel there are more barriers to schools now; parents constantly hearing about all the problems in schools/society but not the consequences or impacts; how do we bottle the best habits of teaching and learning (routines; habits; repetition) for students to flourish; and many mentioned the increase in student mental health is due to loneliness and social isolation (how can we shift this?).

#### **Insights:**

- Some schools unable to cope and students spending large amounts of time out of school
- Parents awaiting external professional supports for students and return to school plans/meetings
- Initial Teacher Education training – prioritise how to build relationships vs teaching content
- Parents concerned about the increased level of anxiety of students
- Students waiting too long for external medical assessments
- Parents advise there is no continuity with medical practitioners (multiple doctors in clinics and little or no oversight of family context)
- Increased parent concerns about students vaping and schools having to implement preventative measures in schools (ie locking bathrooms and students reporting they are being searched for vapes)

## Ideas:

- Schools having access to dedicated “temporary / interim transition teachers” to re-engage students who can’t access school
- Initial and Return Education training for teachers on parent engagement; Relationship based Education (RbE); trauma informed practice and understanding poverty impact on families
- Interim funding arrangements for students waiting on assessments and funding approvals
- Installation of Care Teams for students with complex behaviours to support schools and families
- Having access to a regular family GP
- To reduce administration burden for schools and families - that students with a disability have a digital passport for ease of transition from pre-school; school; further training and employment
- Appropriate learning spaces and accessible resources (buildings and facilities)
- Effective handover and transition from pre-school to school
- Increased student support services workforce and partnerships with community allied health professionals. Schools need to be funded to deliver these integrated services for ease of local access
- Increased student agency in relation to their learning and wellbeing needs and aspirations
- Focus on strength-based learning rather than the deficits
- Education Support (staff) in every classroom

**The benefits to schools and the system** are that students will develop strengths which build trust and confidence to achieve better outcomes. Primary prevention is key; schools and families would experience a greater level of support and this in turn would reduce workload and fatigue on the workforce.

## **(4) the administrative burden on teachers and the availability of new technologies to alleviate the burden;**

As PV suggested in our School Lunch Order (*see Introduction*) we recommend **administration and resource assistants** to alleviate workload to allow more time for teaching and professional learning opportunities. The people employed to do these roles may consider future careers in teaching or education support roles. Recruitment of Executive Assistants or part-time Facility Officers for school leaders.

Fully fund school to home communication, student assessment and **reporting platforms** in the Student Resource Package (SRP) - parents should not have to pay.

**Digital literacy and technology training for teachers.** As the new technologies evolve and advance, teachers need to be familiar with, or know how students can use them in their learning. **Schools need to be funded for the technologies they are expected to provide to give equitable access to all students and staff.** This includes the Department being responsible for all the required policies and procedures around technology, for consistency across the government school system to make sure there are safeguards to protect student, parent and staff personal information, privacy and data protection. Victorian Government schools have autonomy with their local decision-making when securing providers and entering into commercial contracts. These costs should not be a burden to families and to potentially impact on students’ ability to access their education i.e. expensive devices that families are expected to purchase and upgrade every couple of years.

Australian & Victorian Government initiatives – by way of example, a 12-month [School Student Broadband Initiative \(SSBI\)](#) has been accessible since Term 1, 2023. According to accessible information these types of good intentions can add further administration workload to school administrators as they are expected to facilitate applications (we assume to verify the family eligibility).

At the National Education Ministers Meeting (EMM) on 5 October 2023, the Ministers agreed to the Australian Framework for Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in schools to be implemented from Term 1, 2024. PV awaits to hear more about the Framework once it is released. **It will be important once again to effectively communicate with students, parents and teachers on how AI will be permitted to be used in schools and future learning.**

### **(5) examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing;**

Visit Pasi's article here <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jan/31/the-australian-school-system-has-a-serious-design-flaw-can-it-change-before-its-too-late>

Best practice examples are often much closer to home but we acknowledge many academics, educators and community members like practices that have been implemented in New Zealand; parts of Canada, USA and UK as well as the popular inclusive practices of public education in Finland.

### **(6) school funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing**

School funding is a hot topic and it does have a direct and indirect impact on student learning and wellbeing.

An education system that was once free, secular and compulsory. Over time these principles have changed or are being challenged – are government schools affordable and accessible to all? **Cost of schooling has now translated to parent payment policies** that schools have been delegated to execute and enforce by their employer. Added to this, cost of school supplies and uniforms is another impact on family budgets. Schools are endeavouring to balance school budgets with many more competing and increased costs to maintain and improve school facilities, to have the required resources to deliver the curriculum and to provide the needed student support services.

**To do this more effectively the School Resource Standard (SRS) has to be 100% for government schools.** The SRS is the basis of the Commonwealth's recurrent funding arrangements. The Commonwealth funds at least 20 per cent of each government school's SRS and 80 per cent of each non-government school's SRS. **This has to be changed, we can't wait until 2029 for this to be fairer for Victorian government schools.**

We include a link to "[The Facts About School Funding in Victoria](#)", a presentation by Trevor Cobbold, National Convenor, Save Our Schools (SOS) at our recent PV Conference.

#### **Insights:**

- Parents are questioning transparency of current school funding arrangements
- Parents are questioning why non-government schools are registered charities and still receive substantial funding from the Commonwealth?
- It is not a level playing field - funding needs to be fairer for government schools and **children's needs should always be at the centre**

#### **Ideas:**

- SRS at 100% will assist schools to provide immediate assistance for increased costs due to staff shortages; time in lieu shortfalls regarding camps and to remove the pressure to seek parent payments
- Change parent payments to tax deductible contributions
- Non-school based expenditures need to be shared by ALL schools, not just government schools picking up the tab (examples here could be the VRQA and VCAA)
- Needs analysis/means test of the student cohort and what additional funding is required for that school (especially when they have high numbers of EAL and students with additional needs)
- Equity of remuneration incentives to retain teachers

- Address the percentage of government funding for assets development, which goes to private business vs benefitting students directly.

**The benefits** would include fairer distribution of tax payer funds to public education. Government schools would not be viewed as government collection agents by shifting those school budget shortfalls to parents and carers; having to write grant applications and having to fundraise for student support resources and facility improvements where a disparity already exists in Victoria. Victorians would feel more confident that funding is being targeted to the students with the most needs and providing the needed support to reduce workloads that will assist to retain teachers and attract more to the profession (leaders and teachers).

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. Please don't hesitate to contact Parents Victoria if you require clarifications or further information.

Gail McHardy  
Chief Executive Officer

