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Legal and Social Issues Committee

The state education system in Victoria

Inquiry

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About the Committee

Functions

The Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee inquires into and reports on any proposal, matter or thing concerned with community services, education, gaming, health, and law and justice.

The Committee consists of members of the Legislative Council from the government, opposition, and other parties.

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Terms of reference

Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria

On 17 May 2023, the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:

That this House requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 25 June 2024, on the Victorian education system across government schools, including —

- (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;
- (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;
- (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;
- (4) the administrative burden on teachers and the availability of new technologies to alleviate the burden;
- (5) examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing; and
- (6) school funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing.

On 14 May 2024, the Legislative Council resolved to extend the reporting date to 15 October 2024.

Chair's foreword

Education is something that all of us care about. Parents and young people, most obviously, are deeply invested. So too are governments, policy makers and everyone interested in ensuring we live in a fair and prosperous society.

The challenge for all of us is that education is more complicated than it ever has been. The rapidly changing nature of technology and its place in our lives, combined with evolving social expectations about the role of schools, make this important area a fascinating subject for a Parliamentary Committee.

This is reflected in the broad Terms of Reference the Committee worked with for this Inquiry. As such, this Report is the most comprehensive look at our state education system in many years – certainly since the dramatic impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on all of us.

The Committee approached the Terms of Reference by weighing them against the Department of Education's current policies and programs. In doing so, the Committee hoped to achieve two outcomes:

- To help explain to the public the complexity of issues and challenges facing Victorian government schools and how the Department responds to them.
- To help the Department understand how its work is perceived in the community and suggest improvements.

The structure of this Report reflects the five key areas the Committee focused on:

- Learning outcomes
- Support for students
- The teaching workforce
- Student wellbeing
- Funding.

Learning outcomes are clearly the most important way of measuring how our schools are performing. The Committee looked at the NAPLAN system, to identify both what it can reveal and its limitations. Critical to this discussion as well is the debate around pedagogy – how we teach our young people – and what should and should not be included in the Victorian Curriculum.

The Committee investigated these issues informed by the support that the Department of Education provides to those young people who need it most. Not everyone learns in the same way and not every young person turns up to school ready to learn – two key factors that help us understand why some of our young people disengage from education.

It is therefore vital that we are flexible in how we teach all school students and remain committed to give help when and where it is needed. The Committee has included the stories of parents and young people we met with during this Inquiry throughout this Report. We thank them for taking the time to explain how important education is to themselves and their families.

Victorians should be proud of what our school students achieve, consistently performing well across most fields. We should be equally proud of our teachers and the commitment they show to their students. Teaching is one of the hardest professions to succeed in as teachers must combine a high level of skill with a strong dedication to helping others succeed. When the Committee looked at the issues around attracting and retaining teachers it found that this problem is not unique to Victoria. The great challenge for governments is how to attract more teachers and ensure that they stay teaching for longer.

The wellbeing of our students – especially following the huge disruptions of the pandemic – was a constant topic of discussion throughout this Inquiry. Student behaviour, attendance and engagement are all factors that schools consider when addressing the academic and wellbeing needs of the young people in their care. The Committee appreciates that the Department is very active in this area and hopes that the first-hand evidence it includes in this Report guides further improvements.

Finally, the Committee tackled the issue of funding. Everyone agrees that our public schools are underfunded and we show what this looks like on the ground. This is a longstanding debate between the Commonwealth and States and Territories – a debate that has gone on for far too long. It is imperative that governments confine this debate to the past by giving government schools the funding they need to ensure that every student has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank everyone who made a submission to this Inquiry and spoke with us at our public hearings. The Committee greatly appreciated being able to hear from parents, students, teachers and experts in this field.

I would also like to thank my fellow Committee Members for their hard work and cooperation throughout this Inquiry. Can I also take this opportunity to please thank the Secretariat – Jo Clifford, Julie Barnes, Alyssa Topy, Jessica Summers, Ben Huf, Kieran Crowe and Patrick O'Brien – for their assistance.

I commend this Report to the House.



Trung Luu MLC
Chair

Executive summary

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 of this Report explores how the Victorian state education system is in flux. Community expectations about the role of schools are expanding beyond academic performance to include social development and wellbeing. This is against the backdrop of social, economic and technological change that means the way children are taught, the issues they face and the jobs they are being prepared for are vastly different to the past.

It is beyond the scope of this Inquiry to assess all the complex areas of societal change that press upon the education system. Rather, the Committee was guided by the Terms of Reference in its examination of the Victorian state education system in 2024. The Committee hopes that this Report:

- explores how the Department of Education is approaching the issues facing the Victorian education system, thereby improving community awareness of the Department's existing work
- gives voice to the first-hand accounts of stakeholders who experience the policies and initiatives in practice, including the ways in which this existing work falls short or could be improved.

Chapter 2: Overview of the Victorian state education system

Chapter 2 provides a snapshot of the Victorian state education system in numbers, including how many schools there are in Victoria, where they are and who makes up these school communities. This Chapter also discusses, at a high level, how schools are administered and operated.

Chapter 3: Learning outcomes

Chapter 3 assesses the patterns of learning outcomes in Victoria and the approach to teaching students in Victorian schools.

This Chapter examines NAPLAN testing results, noting that different measures can be used to tell different stories. This is particularly true of a new NAPLAN reporting scale, which makes it difficult to compare recent results with those that used the old scale. The Committee found that while Victoria continues to perform well in NAPLAN against other Australian jurisdictions, more work needs to be done to curtail the widening gaps between high and low performing cohorts. This includes students from

lower socioeconomic backgrounds, rural and regional students, Koorie students, and culturally and linguistically diverse students.

This Chapter also discusses the Victorian Curriculum. The Committee heard that without effective guidance from the Department, individual teachers face enormous workloads converting the Department's curriculum guidance into effective lesson plans and assessments. The Committee considers the Department should review its whole-school materials and lesson plans to ensure these documents achieve their aim of reducing the burden on teachers in planning and delivering the curriculum.

The strategies, methodologies and materials used to teach are also addressed in this Chapter. The Committee identified two major theories of pedagogical instruction: 'inquiry-based learning'; and 'explicit instruction'. The Committee heard that because the Department is generally not prescriptive in how individual schools or teachers teach the curriculum, schools enjoy a degree of autonomy in what pedagogical models they use. This means some schools teach according to 'inquiry-based learning' methods, while others teach according to 'explicit instruction'.

The Committee recommends that the Department assist schools to determine their teaching practices by collecting, analysing and publishing information as to the effectiveness of various pedagogical practices. The Committee received a wealth of evidence that focused on the teaching of literacy in schools. The Committee acknowledges that during the Inquiry, the Victorian Minister for Education announced that the Victorian Government would move to evidence-based teaching and learning, including systematic synthetic phonics as part of reading programs.

Chapter 4: Targeted supports

Chapter 4 explores a range of targeted supports and how they seek to help students overcome the educational inequalities which can significantly impact their learning outcomes. Many of these programs are welcomed by stakeholders and the Committee received suggestions on how they could be improved to deliver the best possible outcome for priority cohorts.

One support is the Tutor Learning Initiative, which provides targeted support for students at risk of falling behind as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee heard that stakeholders were generally supportive of the program. However, there was some concern that instructional methods and modes of delivery may not be meeting best practice standards and that the program was not meeting its aims. The Committee recommends that the Department evaluate the program and review its advice and guidance to ensure the Tutor Learning Initiative aligns with best practice.

This Department's Disability Inclusion Program and Individual Education Plans are also discussed. The Committee heard that there is room to improve these plans by adopting an outcomes framework in partnership with advocacy groups and relevant stakeholders. This would ensure that Government investment is delivering results for students with disabilities.

There are a range of investments and initiatives which seek to support the distinct challenges rural and regional students face. This Chapter explores the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students and the Virtual School Victoria. While these initiatives are welcomed, the Committee heard concerns that educational gaps persist. This is despite the issues facing rural and regional students being well known and longstanding.

In relation to Koorie students, the Committee was informed about the Koorie Education Workforce and Campfire Conversations, which aim to support Koorie students by connecting them to their culture. However, the Committee heard that some students are not experiencing their school environments as culturally safe and that there is little guidance on what constitutes cultural planning in educational settings.

Finally, the Chapter discusses additional supports aimed at supporting students who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, in particular, out-of-school hours learning support programs or homework clubs. The Committee also heard about students experiencing of racism at school and that schools have an important role in addressing racist attitudes and behaviours.

Chapter 5: Teaching workforce

Chapter 5 of the Report explores the workforce issues facing the education sector and how the Department is seeking to address these issues through attraction, recruitment and retention initiatives.

This Chapter discusses the Department's approach to attracting new teachers, particularly through scholarships, paid placements, fast-tracking permission to teach and improving post-graduate employment-based pathways. The Committee heard evidence that suggests such initiatives could be expanded to facilitate more trainee teachers entering classrooms sooner.

There is a discussion on the Department's approach to recruiting teachers, including through targeted financial incentives and visas to attract international teachers. The Committee heard that limited evaluation of financial initiatives makes it difficult to assess their effectiveness. The provision of better housing solutions to aid teaching recruitment, particularly in rural and regional areas, was raised by some. The Committee also examined the use of casual relief teachers and how they may help or exacerbate teacher retention issues.

The Chapter also looks at the Department's approach to retaining existing teachers. Specifically, the reasons why teachers choose to leave the profession and measures that could address these issues, including increased remuneration, improved time-in-lieu arrangements, expanded teacher career paths and reducing the administrative burden. The Committee found that while the Department is placing considerable resources into attracting new teachers, more emphasis should be put on retaining teaching staff already in the system, including school principals. The Committee recommends that the Department develop a standalone teacher retention policy that addresses the issues raised by stakeholders.

Chapter 6: Student wellbeing

Chapter 6 of the Report explores the evolving expectation that schools should cater to both the academic and wellbeing needs of their students.

Following the 2021 Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, education settings are increasingly being viewed as key places where mental health and wellbeing can be supported and promoted. The Department of Education has already implemented several initiatives and policies that aim to support student mental health and wellbeing, including the Mental Health Fund, the Mental Health Menu and various wellbeing workforces in schools.

The Report also discusses student behaviour, attendance and engagement at school. This includes an analysis of existing policies and initiatives, such as school-wide positive behaviour support, flexible learning options and the Navigator Program.

This Chapter aims to improve public awareness of the existing work being undertaken by the Department of Education in this space. The Committee found that some stakeholders called for Departmental action in areas in which it is already active. This suggests there may be a disconnect between the work of the Department and some stakeholders when it comes to being aware of policies and initiatives.

Perhaps most importantly, this Chapter also hopes to guide policy and program improvement by conveying important first-hand stakeholder feedback to the Department. The Committee heard from a broad range of stakeholders, including students, their families and teachers, who spoke about what is, and is not, working well in practice. The Committee makes a number of recommendations in this Chapter, in particular around managing student behaviour, improving flexible learning options and adopting whole-school approaches to trauma. The recommendations have been informed by the valuable evidence, including personal experiences, it heard through submissions and public hearings.

Chapter 7: Funding state schools

Chapter 7 of the Report explores the highly technical and politically charged issue of school funding.

This Chapter explains how Federal and State Governments allocate funding to schools, noting that there has been considerable reform to funding arrangements over the past decade. Specifically, it explores the Student Resource Package, which is the Victorian needs-based school funding model. The Committee heard concerns that the Student Resource Package may be impacted by data issues and would benefit from more transparency to allow schools to better understand how they are allocated funding. This Chapter makes recommendations that aim to improve the implementation of the Student Resource Package.

This Chapter also explores the gap between what the Commonwealth Schooling Resource Standard model indicates is the base rate required to adequately fund schools and the levels of funding agreed to by State and Commonwealth Governments. The Committee heard that Victorian government schools are chronically underfunded and will remain so unless new funding agreements are reached, with many calling for this gap to be closed and for schools to be funded 100% of the Schooling Resource Standard as soon as possible.

Findings and recommendations

3 Learning outcomes

FINDING 1: NAPLAN results do not necessarily give a clear indication of the performance of the state school system. **18**

FINDING 2: 2023 NAPLAN reading scores for Year 3, Year 5, Year 7 and Year 9 are consistently lower for inner and outer regional Victoria compared to major cities. **31**

FINDING 3: Victoria's learning outcomes are relatively higher than other jurisdictions. While socioeconomic disparities in NAPLAN results reflect disadvantage across Australia, it is hard to compare longitudinal results between old and new measuring scales. **32**

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government set:

- a. a long-term target that 90% of students reach proficiency in reading and numeracy, as measured by the proportion of students in the 'strong' or 'exceeding' category in NAPLAN in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9
- b. a short-term target to an increase of 10 percentage points over the next 10 years, based on NAPLAN performance in 2023, pro-rated for the term of the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA). **33**

FINDING 4: The Victorian Curriculum is overcrowded. **38**

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Victorian Government should ensure that the curriculum is regularly reviewed and updated to reduce duplication and ensure best practice. **38**

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government ensure that practical life skills such as personal budgeting and banking, taxation and civic engagement are taught in schools at pre-VCE levels. **39**

FINDING 5: The Department of Education provides school leaders and teachers with some resources to properly sequence and scope teaching and learning programs to support student learning. However, these may not all be known or communicated clearly to teachers. 41

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Department of Education develop and provide adequate template scoping and sequence mapping, template unit plans, template lessons plans and other supporting material to support teachers develop curriculum in their school. 42

FINDING 6: The Committee finds a need for improvement in the depth of support and guidance provided to schools to support whole-school curriculum planning. 46

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Department of Education review its whole-school materials and lesson plans for core subjects, such as English, maths and science, to ensure they achieve their aims of reducing the burden on schools’ planning and delivering the curriculum. 46

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Department of Education where it identifies weaknesses in schools’ whole-school planning during the four-year review provide principals and/or school leadership with the necessary professional development to strengthen the whole-school planning. 46

FINDING 7: The Committee notes that the Victorian Government has adopted in full the recommendations of the Bennett Review into the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority’s examination-setting policies and processes for the Victorian Certificate of Education and report back to Parliament on progress. 51

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Victorian Government report to Parliament on the adoption of the recommendations of the Bennett Review within a 12-month period. 51

FINDING 8: Updates to the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model would improve clarity and useability. 52

FINDING 9: The Department of Education has indicated the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model will be updated. 52

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Department of Education, when devising scoping, sequencing, unit plans and lessons plans:

- a. audit the existing curriculum to identify gaps
- b. develop curriculum support material that is relevant and easy for teachers to use
- c. ensure assessment rubrics are standardised, consistent, reflect the subject being taught and are included in all assessment tasks that are developed.

59

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Department of Education create an equivalent body to the New South Wales Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation with responsibility for commissioning and publishing research and evaluation on all aspects of Victorian education.

61

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Department of Education audit and review existing literacy assessment and student diagnostic tools, ceasing those not consistent or complementary with structured-literacy approaches.

72

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Department of Education:

- a. introduce a 40-word Phonics Check (including 20 pseudo words) in Year 1 in all Victorian Government schools in line with the Commonwealth Phonics Check
- b. set a target of 90% of students to reach the expected level in phonics checks by the end of Year 2
- c. the phonics check should adopt national best practice in line with national phonics checks.

72

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Department of Education look to other states that have mandated phonics testing and structured literacy pedagogies and ensure it offers the same level of support to Victorian teachers, with a view to implementing these updated teaching methods within the next two years.

72

FINDING 10: There is a growing view among students, teachers and education experts that alternative, non-academic student outcomes measures should be incorporated in school assessment to provide a broader reflection of student achievement.

74

RECOMMENDATION 13: The Victorian Government revise and update the Education State targets to reflect new NAPLAN scale.

77

RECOMMENDATION 14: The Department of Education resume publishing progress on Education State targets. 77

4 Targeted supports

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Victorian Government conduct a review into school zoning, with a view to developing a system that promotes safety and inclusion, and as a consequence better learning outcomes. 83

RECOMMENDATION 16: That the Victorian Government review the criteria for school zoning exemptions to make them more accessible to equity cohorts. 83

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Victorian Government consider ongoing funding for the Tutor Learning Initiative. This should be accompanied by a regular review process to evaluate the success of the initiative, and the funding should be dependent on the ability of schools to meet the criteria set by the Department. 90

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Department of Education review its advice on the Tutor Learning Initiative to ensure it aligns with best practice on delivering multi-tiered systems of support. 90

RECOMMENDATION 19: That the Department of Education update its guidance on the Tutor Learning Initiative to reflect the latest mandates on phonics and explicit instruction in literacy. 90

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Department of Education collect and analyse data to promote effective practice for different school types and student groups, consistent with the Victorian Auditor-General's *Effectiveness of Tutor Learning Initiative Report* recommendations. 91

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Department of Education set measurable goals for schools' tutoring performance and establish statewide pilots to better understand the benefits and support needs in schools. 91

RECOMMENDATION 22: That the Department of Education work with advocacy groups to devise an outcomes framework for the Disability Inclusion program. 97

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Department of Education develop a policy on how Augmentative and Alternative Communication should be delivered in schools. **99**

FINDING 11: There is ongoing concern among disability advocates regarding negative impacts of exclusionary practices on the learning outcomes of students with disabilities. **100**

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Department of Education review provision of resources to schools to ensure that exclusionary practices of students with disabilities are phased out, in addition to providing further professional development for school staff to prevent further instances of exclusion practices from occurring in the future. **100**

FINDING 12: Individual Education Plans take a lot of work for teachers to design and implement. There is evidence that Individual Education Plans are not being implemented and reviewed in accordance with Department of Education policy. This is having negative impacts on learning outcomes, particularly for students from equity cohorts. **103**

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Department of Education review current levels of funding for Local Learning and Employment Networks to ensure they are appropriately funded. **107**

RECOMMENDATION 26: That the Victorian Government implement the recommendations of the 2019 Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students. **110**

RECOMMENDATION 27: That the Department of Education reassess funding so that schools do not lose funding when their students enrol in Virtual School Victoria. **110**

RECOMMENDATION 28: That the Victorian Government accept in full all 47 recommendations from the Commission for Children and Young People's *Let Us Learn* report. **111**

FINDING 13: All school students benefit from being taught about Aboriginal language, culture and history. **118**

RECOMMENDATION 29: The Victorian Government investigate the need for additional appropriate supports for culturally and linguistically diverse students, with a view to establishing a program of Multicultural Support Officers. **124**

RECOMMENDATION 30: That the Department of Education commit to funding that ensures the long-term stability of Out-of-School Hours Learning Support Programs. **124**

5 Teaching workforce

FINDING 14: The expected teacher shortfall is a serious issue for the state education system that warrants significant and sustained attention and intervention. **137**

RECOMMENDATION 31: The Department of Education should thoroughly evaluate its teacher recruitment intervention programmes in addressing expected teacher shortfall. **137**

RECOMMENDATION 32: That the Victorian Institute of Teaching adjust the employer requirements of the ‘permission to teach’ category of teacher registration to fast-track the employment of subject matter experts in Victorian schools. **141**

RECOMMENDATION 33: That the Department of Education work with initial teacher education providers to investigate the feasibility of an internship model. **148**

FINDING 15: There is insufficient data to determine the effectiveness of the Targeted Financial Incentives program in achieving the objectives of recruiting new teachers to rural and regional areas. **150**

RECOMMENDATION 34: That the Department of Education conduct a review into the effectiveness of the Targeted Financial Incentives program in achieving the objectives of recruiting new teachers to rural and regional areas. **150**

RECOMMENDATION 35: That the Department of Education collect, analyse and regularly publish data at a regional level on the effectiveness of Targeted Financial Incentives, including the aggregated retention rates of teachers who receive a Targeted Financial Incentive payment. **150**

FINDING 16: Housing shortages in rural and regional areas make it difficult to recruit and retain teachers in those areas, even with financial assistance packages on offer. **153**

RECOMMENDATION 36: That the Department of Education review its policy on teacher housing, with a view to considering group housing in regional areas to address housing shortages in areas with high demand for teaching staff but few accommodation options. **154**

FINDING 17: Teachers are leaving the state government school system due to a number of factors, including:

- a lack of appropriate remuneration, incentives and reward, and better remuneration in the non-government system
 - a lack of career progression or pathways, especially for teachers wanting to stay in the classroom
 - increasing workload burdens
 - behaviour management issues and strategies.
- 160**

FINDING 18: Schools report that the new time-in-lieu arrangements are difficult to fulfil without adequate funding. This is impacting the ability for schools to deliver education and extra-curricular activities such as school camps. **167**

RECOMMENDATION 37: That the Victorian Government provide additional funding to cover the new time-in-lieu arrangements undertaken in schools to deliver education and extracurricular activities. **167**

RECOMMENDATION 38: That the Department of Education develop a standalone teacher retention policy in order to ease current workforce pressures. **174**

6 Student wellbeing

FINDING 19: Schools should support positive wellbeing outcomes for students. This includes providing an environment that is safe from harm. **185**

FINDING 20: Some teachers reported that there is a growing expectation that schools assume a greater role and responsibility for parenting and life skills. Many teachers do not feel qualified or equipped to address these challenges adequately. **186**

RECOMMENDATION 39: That the Department of Education ensure that schools are adequately resourced to respond to the needs of students, including their wellbeing. **186**

RECOMMENDATION 40: That the Victorian Government provide additional resources related to the delivery of the Mental Health Menu, so that all schools, particularly those in rural and regional areas or with complex communities and students, can access programs that meet the needs of their students. **189**

FINDING 21: The success of the Department of Education’s mental health and wellbeing initiatives is challenged by a lack of qualified professionals, particularly in rural and regional areas. **194**

FINDING 22: Despite the existence of a Partnership Agreement between the Department of Education and Victorian Council of Social Service, there may be a need for greater collaboration between schools and community-based supports. This indicates that the current partnership agreement may not be working effectively or is not being implemented at a school or community level as intended. **195**

RECOMMENDATION 41: That the Department of Education increase the number of Koorie Engagement Support Officers to more consistently support Koorie students. **196**

RECOMMENDATION 42: That the Department of Education introduce a behaviour survey in schools to better understand the extent of classroom disruption, as well as what interventions minimise classroom disruption. The survey should inform:

- a. an update to the Department’s behaviour policy in line with contemporary behaviour expectations
- b. new materials to support teachers to manage classroom behaviour and communicate with student’s families about student behaviour.

200

RECOMMENDATION 43: The Victorian Government implement standards consistent with the National Framework for Reducing the Use of Restrictive Practices, including accountability measures for breaching standards. **202**

RECOMMENDATION 44: That the Department of Education review the resources and direction it provides to schools on restraint and seclusion practices to ensure they are always undertaken according to child-centric best practice. **204**

RECOMMENDATION 45: That the Department of Education conduct ongoing longitudinal evaluations of Respectful Relationships education, including whether:

- a. it is achieving its aims
- b. there is appropriate engagement with all stakeholders, including students and parents or guardians.

206

RECOMMENDATION 46: That the Department of Education meet with all principals from flexible learning options schools to determine:

- a. the appropriate funding levels
- b. whether regulations are needed to support the sector
- c. how to increase community awareness of flexible learning options.

215

FINDING 23: Students are more likely to successfully re-engage with education if appropriate interventions are delivered before students become severely disengaged. For example, students do not become eligible for the Department’s Navigator Program, which provides specialised support to re-engage with education, until their attendance rate drops to only 30% of school attended. In many cases, this is too late.

218

7 Funding state schools

RECOMMENDATION 47: That the Victorian Government significantly increase its investment in school capital infrastructure funding in government schools.

226

RECOMMENDATION 48: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for significantly increased capital investment in government school infrastructure.

226

RECOMMENDATION 49: That the Victorian Government work with the Commonwealth Government to ensure additional funding is allocated to state schools to address non-student items (such as capital depreciation costs) so that the entirety of funding allocated under the National Schools Reform Agreement is spent on student learning outcomes.

243

FINDING 24: The Department of Education has begun the process of updating the data used to calculate equity funding for rural and regional schools.

254

FINDING 25: English as an Additional Language reference funding may not be reaching every student requiring support due to the methods used to allocate the funding. 255

RECOMMENDATION 50: That the Victorian Government review English as an Additional Language reference funding with a view to ensuring that every student requiring support is reached. 255

RECOMMENDATION 51: That the Department of Education implement in full Recommendation 6 of the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office’s 2020 report, *Management of the Student Resource Package*. 262

RECOMMENDATION 52: That the Department of Education implement Recommendation 7 of the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office’s 2020 report, *Management of the Student Resource Package*. 262

RECOMMENDATION 53: That the Department of Education publish a detailed accounting breakdown of how the Student Resource Package is used to calculate each government school’s annual budget, including the eligibility, application and calculation of each Student Resource Package reference. 262

RECOMMENDATION 54: That the Victorian Government continue to advocate to the Commonwealth Government that the Commonwealth fund the remaining 5% gap in Schooling Resource Standard funding to bridge the gap with non-government schools that have been fully funded. 262

What happens next?

There are several stages to a parliamentary Inquiry.

The Committee conducts the Inquiry

This report on the Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria is the result of extensive research and consultation by the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee.

The Committee received written submissions, spoke with people at public hearings, reviewed research evidence and deliberated over a number of meetings. Experts, government representatives and individuals expressed their views directly to us as Members of Parliament.

A Parliamentary Committee is not part of the Government. The Committee is a group of members of different political parties (including independent members). Parliament has asked us to look closely at an issue and report back. This process helps Parliament do its work by encouraging public debate and involvement in issues.

You can learn more about the Committee's work at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/lpic-lc>.

The report is presented to Parliament

This report was presented to Parliament and can be found at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/stateeducationinquiry/reports>.

A response from the Government

The Government has six months to respond in writing to any recommendations made in this report.

The response is public and put on the Inquiry page of Parliament's website when it is received at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/stateeducationinquiry/reports>.

In its response, the Government indicates whether it supports the Committee's recommendations. It can also outline actions it may take.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 A system in flux

Are our schools fit for purpose? Is the model of our schools actually right for the 21st century? ... We are trying to staff a system that fundamentally has not changed in decades, so I would pose the question: is that the right thing? Should we be looking at the nature of what a school looks like?

Colin Axup, President of Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 42.

Schools occupy a unique place among contemporary institutions because they engage with some of our most vulnerable members of society: children and young people. Accordingly, any Inquiry into schooling attracts impassioned and divergent views on the role that a school or education system should play in shaping young people and the kinds of opportunities it should afford them.

As is reflected in the high-volume of recent government Inquiries and reports around Australia, including evidence collected in this Inquiry, it is apparent to the Committee the education system is in flux. Principals in the Victorian state school system told the Committee that the expectations placed upon the schools continue to grow, ‘creating a complex landscape that often strains not only schools but also the system’. These expectations include improvements in academic performance, social development, student mental wellbeing, and community engagement.¹

These expectations are being made amid wider societal changes that are challenging schools. Population growth and urban sprawl is driving the demand for new schools and more staff. The increasing centralisation of Victoria’s population into Melbourne and regional cities is creating distinct resourcing challenges in rural areas that impact not only schools but the provision of all essential services. The decline of Victoria’s old manufacturing industries and rise of the service sector is changing the kinds of careers and workforce schools are required to prepare students for. Digital and other technologies, including social media, is changing the way young people interact with each other. Mental illness among young people is growing, with schools being tasked with increasing responsibilities to assist them. The ways in which some parents interact with schools and school communities is also changing, if not always for the better.²

It is beyond the scope of this Inquiry to make comment or assessment of all these complex areas of societal change pressing upon the education system.

¹ Victorian Principals Federation (Victorian Branch), *Submission 266*, p. 8.

² Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 143*, p. 5.

The Committee acknowledges – and heard time and again throughout this Inquiry – the complex nature of schooling in the twenty-first century. In recent decades, Victoria – and the Victorian Parliament – has displayed a strong track record for investigating and improving aspects of the education system. This includes the numerous reports by the Parliament’s Education and Training Committee (2003–2014). It is the Committee’s sense that the time is coming when the Victorian Government will need to take a thorough reassessment of the Victorian state school system as a whole. It is hoped this report might serve as a contribution to that end.

1.2 The scope of this report

The Terms of Reference agreed by the Legislative Council for this Inquiry were distinctively and uniquely broad. Considering the subject matters covered, from learning outcomes to teacher workforce and student wellbeing, the Inquiry is a comprehensive study of the Victorian state education system in 2024.

The Committee resolved to address the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry by considering them in light of the Department of Education’s initiatives and policies outlined in the Department’s submission and on the Department’s website.

In taking this approach, the Committee set itself two tasks:

1. To help explain to school communities and the wider public many of the issues and challenges facing the Victorian state school system, and to detail some of the approaches the Department and other jurisdictions are taking to address these issues, as well as present proposals by experts and practitioners.
2. Provide a granular study of some of the deficiencies in existing policies and initiatives that might assist the Department as it continues to address the challenges facing the school system, drawing on experience of experts and practitioners working in the field.

The Committee found generally that the Department has an extensive range of policies and initiatives covering many of the challenges facing the contemporary education system. These policies and initiatives often face limitations, including:

- Many stakeholders are not aware of, or do not understand, the existence of these policies.
- The policies and initiatives, while well intended, face resource constraints (including lack of government funding). This is especially the case for school communities in regional and rural areas.
- Policies are often poorly implemented at a school level with few mechanisms in place for quality control and a reliance on self-regulation.
- While covering broad issues, there are specific cases that the policies do not cover or address, meaning significant issues fly under the radar. This appears to be the case with equity groups.

A large portion of this report can be read as addressing the Terms of Reference from these four approaches.

In taking this approach to the Terms of Reference, the Committee acknowledges that many important issues were raised by stakeholders, which, each in their own right require due consideration’

This is also the first major Inquiry into the Victorian school system since the COVID-19 Pandemic, which included mandated homeschooling for large portions of 2020 and 2021.

Despite this, stakeholders presented only very limited evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns on the education system. While the Pandemic illustrated the possibilities of flexible learning, the Committee surmises that it may yet be too early to make any longitudinal conclusions about the full impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the cohort of students who experienced it and on the larger education system.

These issues are dealt with more fully in Chapter 6.

1.3 Submissions and public hearings

Following the referral from the Legislative Council of the Terms of Reference on 27 May 2023, the Committee advertised for submissions in newspapers and social media posts. It also wrote to key stakeholders seeking submissions. Submissions closed on 13 October 2023. In total, it received 274 submissions. The Committee received many submissions from teachers, students, families and advocacy groups. It also received a submission from the Parliamentary Budget Office and from the Department of Education.

The Committee conducted seven days of public hearings between March 2024 and June 2024 and heard from 92 witnesses. These public hearings were held in Bairnsdale, Traralgon, Bendigo, Shepparton and Melbourne.

1.4 Other relevant inquiries and agreements

This Inquiry has by no means been conducted in isolation.

Aspects of the school system has been extensively in recent years. This includes the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (VAGO), which has conducted the following reviews, all of which are engaged with in this report:

- VAGO (May 2024) *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement Outcomes for Victorian Students*
- VAGO (2024) *Effectiveness of the Tutor Learning Initiative*
- VAGO (2024) *Follow-up on the Management of the Student Resource Package*

- VAGO (June 2023) *Principal Health and Wellbeing*
- VAGO (March 2022) *Effectiveness of the Navigator program*
- VAGO (2020) *Management of the Student Resource Package*
- VAGO (2017) *Managing School Infrastructure*.

In addition, the Commonwealth Senate recently (2024) concluded a study into *The national trend of school refusal and related matters*.

New Commonwealth-state education funding agreements are currently being negotiated between the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments. The Commonwealth Government announced its new *Better Fairer Schools Agreement* (2024–2034) in September 2024. This document provides the basis for negotiations with State governments and will replace the *National School Reform Agreement* (2019–2023).

In devising the *Better Fairer Schools Agreement*, the Commonwealth Government commissioned several reviews into the Australian schooling system. These reviews are drawn upon throughout this report:

- Expert Panel to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System (2023) *Improving Outcomes For All*
- Teacher Education Expert Panel (2023) *Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel*
- Productivity Commission (2022) *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Study Report*.

Other statutory bodies have also recently completed Inquiries into aspects of the education system. Most significant for this Committee was the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People (2024) *Let Us Learn: systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care*.

1.5 Policies announced during this Inquiry

The Minister for Education, the Hon Ben Carrol MP, announced the following initiatives during the course of this Inquiry (between September 2023 and September 2024). Where possible, the Committee has made comment on these announcements throughout this report. The initiatives include:

- mandated structured literacy
- an Inquiry into teacher administrative burdens
- a new Learning Model
- free student breakfasts to all schools by 2025

- additional funding for hiring international students (2024–5 budget)
- the secondary teaching scholarships portal
- a pilot program to allow education support staff and Koorie Education Support Officers to gain teaching qualifications while working in schools.

Chapter 2

Overview of the Victorian state education system

First Peoples were the first educators and their skill as teachers has kept culture and Country safe and vibrant for tens of thousands of years.

Ben Carroll, Minister for Education, Transcript, Public Hearing, 14 June 2024, Yoorrook Justice Commission.

The Committee acknowledges the ongoing and thriving cultures and traditions of First Peoples in what is now known as the state of Victoria. It acknowledges the First Peoples leaders continuing the sharing of culture and knowledge and pays respect to Elders past and present.

In acknowledging the ongoing work for truth and justice in education, the Committee notes the work that is yet to be undertaken in removing barriers within the school system facing the children of First Nations people. The Committee acknowledges that to achieve equity in education in Victoria, these gaps must be addressed and removed.

2.1 Snapshot: the Victorian education system in numbers

The Victorian government school system was established 151 years ago. In 1872, Victoria became the first Australian colony, and one of the first places in the world, to provide free, secular and compulsory education for its children.

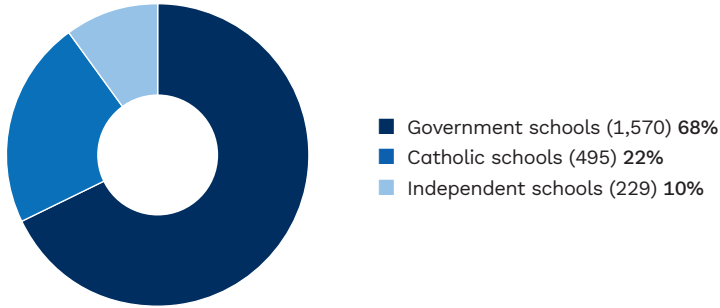
As Australia's second most populous state after New South Wales, Victoria also has the second largest school system in Australia.

As outlined in Figure 2.1, as of 2024 there are 2,294 schools in Victoria. This includes 1,570 government schools, 495 catholic schools and 229 independent schools. This report addresses only Victorian government schools and the system that administers them.

Figures 2.2 to 2.5 give an overview of:

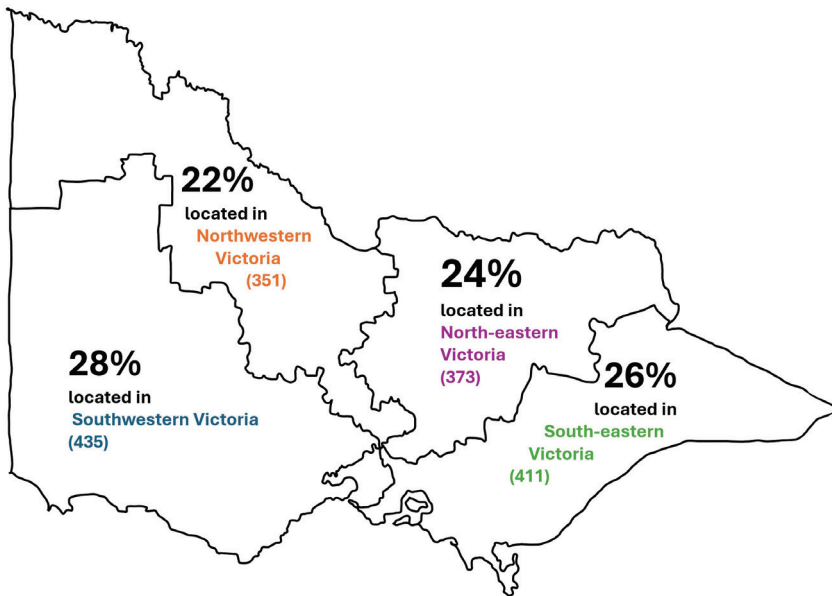
- where government schools are located in Victoria (see also Figure 2.6)
- the number of students enrolled at state primary, secondary, special and language schools
- the backgrounds and diverse needs of Victorian state school students
- the number of teachers at Victorian state schools.

Figure 2.1 There are 2,294 schools in Victoria



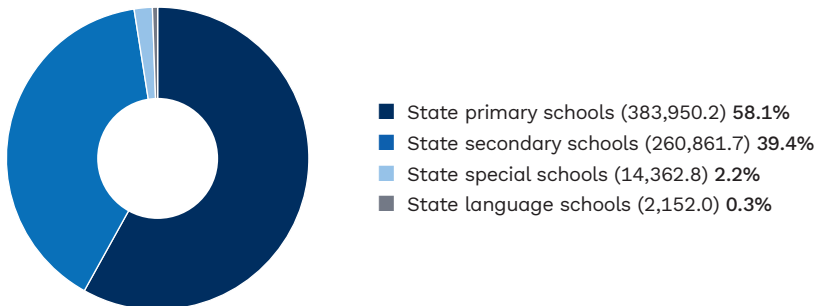
Source: Data extracted from Department of Education, *Victorian Schools Summary Statistics 2024*, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/summarystatssnapshot.pdf>, accessed 1 October 2024.

Figure 2.2 1,570 Victorian government schools are located all across Victoria



Source: Data extracted from Department of Education, *Victorian Schools Summary Statistics 2024*, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/summarystatssnapshot.pdf>, accessed 1 October 2024.

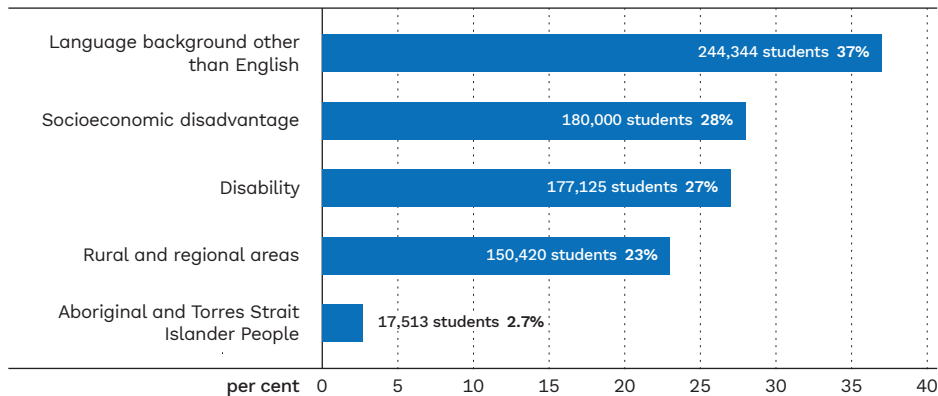
Figure 2.3 There are over 661,000 students enrolled at state government primary, secondary, special and language schools



Note: Data is FTE.

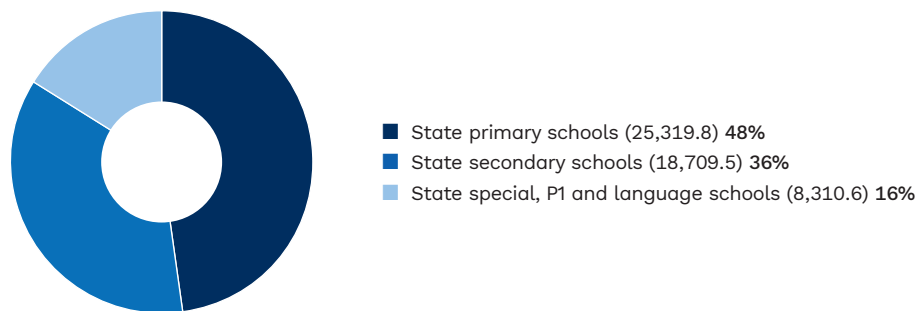
Source: Data extracted from Department of Education, *Victorian Schools Summary Statistics 2024*, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/summarystatssnapshot.pdf>, accessed 1 October 2024.

Figure 2.4 Victorian students are diverse



Source: Data extracted from Department of Education, *Victorian Schools Summary Statistics 2024*, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/summarystatisticsnapshot.pdf>, accessed 1 October 2024; Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 4.

Figure 2.5 There are over 52,000 teachers employed at state government primary, secondary, special and language schools



Note: Data is FTE.

Source: Data extracted from The Department of Education, *Victorian Schools Summary Statistics 2024*.

2.2 Administration of government schools

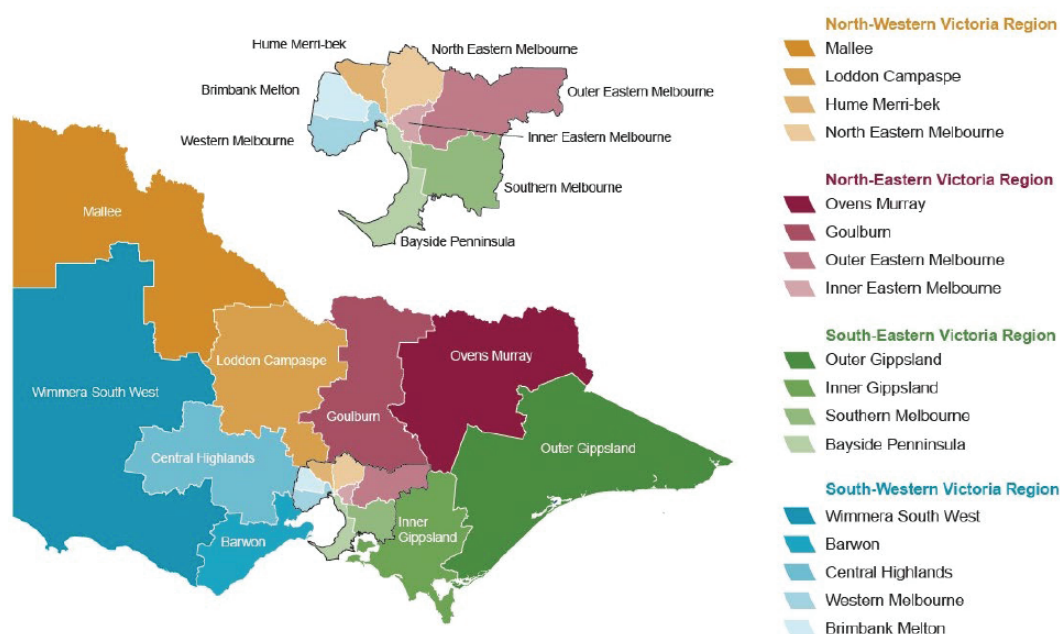
The Department of Education is responsible for leading the delivery of education in Victoria and managing Victorian government schools.¹ It has responsibility for government schools under the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* and the *Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017*.

The Department utilises a regional model, with four regions and 17 areas (see Figure 2.6). Staff in regional and area offices support local schools to deliver education and services to students. Principals ensure that schools operate according to legislative frameworks.

The Committee notes that 17 written submissions called on the Victorian Government to support the return of a physical government secondary school in the township of Mooropna.

¹ The *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* and *Training Reform Regulations 2017* (Vic).

Figure 2.6 The Department of Education's regions and areas



Source: Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 6.

The Department of Education employs school principals, who are responsible for leading and administering each school. They are tasked with ensuring their schools operate according to legislative frameworks, including the 'delivery of their schools education program, leading staff, managing finances and providing a child-safe environment.'²

Principals are assisted by school councils to support 'efficient governance of the school [and] make decisions in students' best interests, enhance educational opportunities, and ensure the school complies with its legislative obligations.'³

Stakeholders informed the Committee the state education system broadly operates on the principle of school autonomy. This allows for each school to exercise a large degree of agency and flexibility in implementing the curriculum, pedagogy, assessments, administration and staffing. These principles are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

2.2.1 School registration and minimum standards

Every Government and non-government school in Victoria must be registered by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority and comply with its minimum standards for schools and the child safe standards, among others. The Victorian Registration and Qualification Authority also renews government school registration through a school review process.⁴

² Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 5.

³ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 5.

⁴ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 5.

2.3 School operations

The Department of Education’s Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO 2.0) is a continuous improvement framework. It assists schools to focus their ‘improvement efforts on practices that have the greatest impact on student outcomes’.⁵

FISO 2.0 was released in 2021. It was updated from the previous framework for improving student outcomes to place ‘both learning and wellbeing at the centre of the school improvement model’⁶ following recommendations made in the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System.⁷ Figure 2.7 below illustrates the framework.

Figure 2.7 Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO 2.0)



Source: Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 7.

Victorian government schools must undertake the following mandated planning and accountability processes as part of the FISO 2.0 cycle:

- **A four yearly school review** – conducted by an independent panel who examine school performance data and support the planning of improvement priorities for the coming four years.

5 Department of Education, Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO 2.0) Evidence Base, November 2021, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/fiso/policy>> accessed 23 August 2024.

6 Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 6.

7 Department of Education, Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO 2.0) Policy, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/fiso/policy>> accessed 23 August 2024.

- **A school strategic plan** – that outlines a school’s goals for improving student learning and wellbeing outcomes. It must also include targets and key improvement strategies that will be used to achieve identified goals.
- **Annual implementation plan** – that operationalises a school’s goals, targets and key improvement strategies in the coming school year.
- **Annual report** – that provides a range of key data sets to their community.⁸

2.3.1 Authorities and regulatory bodies

The *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* establishes four statutory bodies to ‘support the development of curriculum, regulation of schools and teachers, and professional development for teachers’.⁹ They are:

- **The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority** – which is ‘responsible for the delivery of the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy in Victoria and the administration of the VCE examinations’.¹⁰
- **The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority** – which has a range of functions, including regulating school education by registering schools, the accreditation of courses and qualifications and the investigation of complaints from members of the public against schools or other education providers.
- **The Victorian Institute of Teaching** – which regulates the teaching profession by registering teachers and school leaders to practice, accrediting initial teacher education programs and by investigating misconduct, incompetence or a lack of fitness to teach.
- **The Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership** – which offers ‘evidence-informed, inspiring professional learning to Victorian school teachers and leaders’.¹¹

2.4 The National School Reform Agreement

The National School Reform Agreement is a joint agreement between the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments to lift student outcomes across schools. It sets common goals for schooling and establishes several key strategic initiatives where national collaboration provides the best means to achieve outcomes.¹²

⁸ The Department of Education, *Submission 223*, pp. 6–7.

⁹ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 7.

¹¹ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 8.

¹² Council of Australian Governments, *The National School Reform Agreement*, 2018, p. 4.

On 31 July 2024, the Commonwealth Government released the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034*, which will replace the existing National School Reform Agreement.¹³ See Chapter 7 for further information on the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034*.

¹³ Australian Department of Education (2024) *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034*, pp. 5, 15.

Chapter 3

Learning outcomes

3.1 Overview

Learning outcomes are the primary objective of school education. Students at Victorian schools continue to achieve above average learning outcomes as measured on national standardised assessments and indicators. There are, however, broad variations within these outcomes among specific student cohorts.

This Chapter assess patterns of learning outcomes in Victoria and the approach to teaching students in Victorian schools. Evidence regarding targeted supports provided by the Victorian Government and other groups to enhance the learning outcomes of certain cohorts are considered in Chapter 4.

A comparison between Victorian learning outcomes and international learning outcomes has not been included in this Chapter. The only analysis and comparison is among Australian jurisdictions.

3.1.1 Existing policy areas and initiatives

Education in Victoria involves three key components:

- curriculum (what to teach)
- pedagogy (how to teach)
- assessment and reporting (how we know).

This Chapter discusses the Department of Education's approach to these three components. A considerable portion of the evidence received by the Committee regarding learning outcomes related to literacy education. These stakeholders highlighted the importance of explicit learning and structured literacy approaches to teaching reading and writing. This issue was also the subject of a major policy announcement by the Victorian Government midway through this Inquiry. Accordingly, literacy pedagogy is treated as a separate issue in Section 3.5.

Australia's Mparntwe education declaration

In December 2019, Commonwealth and State Education Ministers agreed on a new national declaration on education goals for all Australians, known as the Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Education Declaration.¹ The declaration replaces and builds upon the

¹ Australian Department of Education, *Education Declaration*, The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019, p. 4.

2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. The new declaration has two distinct but related goals:

- Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity
- Goal 2: All young Australians become:
 - confident and creative individuals
 - successful lifelong learners, and
 - active and informed members of the community.²

The Declaration provides for a wide range of commitments agreed to by Australian governments to achieve these goals.

School autonomy in the Victorian state system

A key characteristic of the Victorian state systems is school autonomy and decentralised approaches to administration, curriculum implementation and pedagogy.³

Some stakeholders identified this principle as a legacy of the 1990s Kennett Government.⁴ From a curriculum perspective at least, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) dates the autonomy and decentralisation earlier. In the current curriculum guide, the VCAA states that from the 1970s, there was a ‘major shift’ by the Department of Education away from a ‘centralised, prescribed curriculum’ that had characterised Victorian education since the late nineteenth century, ‘to a strong focus on school-based curriculum development’.⁵

The VCAA notes that the general policy of school autonomy has persisted over the past 40 years, even with the advent of a nationally agreed curriculum and frameworks since the early 2000s.

While acknowledged as an important feature of Victorian schooling culture, stakeholders highlighted numerous challenges presented by school autonomy. These include:

- students can face a ‘postcode lottery’ on how and what they will be taught depending on the school they attend
- teachers face added administrative and planning burdens by having to design and plan their own lessons, albeit with guidance from the Department.

² Australian Department of Education, *Education Declaration*, The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019, p. 7.

³ Australian Principals Federation, Victorian Branch, *Submission 266*, p. 9; Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 34; Ms Sara Dower, *Submission 33*, p. 1; Dr Esme Capp, School Council, Princes Hill Primary School, *Submission 123*, p. 2; Code REaD Dyslexia Network, *Submission 157*, p. 6; Julie Phillips, *Submission 132*, p. 8.

⁴ Disability Advocacy Victoria, *Submission 178*, p. 7.

⁵ VCAA, *Victorian Curriculum F-10 Revised curriculum planning and reporting guidelines*, 2023, p. 6.

Additional issues related to school autonomy are discussed in Chapters 4 (Targeted supports) and Chapter 5 (Teaching workforce).

In its 2023 curriculum guide, the VCAA itself acknowledged aspects of these challenges. It said Victoria’s approach to implementing the Australian Curriculum has been guided by:

- A continued commitment to ‘the Victorian government’s view that schools should retain their primary responsibility for the development and provision of teaching and learning programs, not through a rules-based approach but by building on Victoria’s history of school-based curriculum development’.⁶
- Recognition that the ‘relatively decentralised approach taken to curriculum provision in Victoria has not always been accompanied by a sufficient level of advice and support to schools to enable the development of system-wide high-quality teaching and learning programs. This has led to wide differences in the quality of teaching and learning programs’.⁷

Many stakeholders expressed concern that a sufficient level of advice and support is still wanting. In its evidence to this Inquiry, the Department stated that it is attempting to fill this gap through a number of initiatives, including the development of lesson plans (see Section 3.4.5). Midway through the Inquiry, the Department also announced a mandated approach to teaching literacy, bringing it in line with other states (see Section 3.5).

Accordingly, a major focus of this Chapter is on systems and supports that can better guide how schools and individual teachers deliver the curriculum while preserving cultures of school autonomy. These strategies are discussed at various points throughout the Chapter:

- whole-school curriculum planning (discussed in Section 3.3.2)
- revising Victoria’s Teaching and Learning Model (Section 3.4.1)
- lesson plans (Section 3.4.5)
- assessment targets (Section 3.6.1).

3.1.2 The Auditor-General’s Inquiry into Victorian learning outcomes

In May 2024, the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (VAGO) tabled in the Victorian Parliament an independent assurance report, *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement Outcomes for Victorian Students*.

The report made four main findings:

- Student literacy and numeracy outcomes have been stable since 2012.

⁶ VCAA, *Victorian Curriculum F-10 Revised curriculum planning and reporting guidelines*, 2023, p. 8.

⁷ VCAA, *Victorian Curriculum F-10 Revised curriculum planning and reporting guidelines*, 2023, p. 9.

- The Department has not improved outcomes for Aboriginal students and students experiencing disadvantage since 2012.
- Aboriginal students and students experiencing disadvantage are not learning at a rate that will close the gap with other students.
- The Department's reported measures are not a fair or transparent presentation of student outcomes.⁸

The first three findings are broadly consistent with evidence provided to this Inquiry, as reflected in Section 3.2. Aspects of VAGO's final finding are discussed in Section 3.6, consistent with this Committee's findings that the Department of Education provides insufficient reporting on progress in learning outcomes.

3.2 Measures, trends and patterns in Victoria's learning outcomes

Victoria's learning outcomes are measured using a range of tests:

- The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing, which is conducted annually in all Australian schools in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.
- Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted every three years by the OECD, testing 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics and science.
- Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), conducted every four years by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), testing Year 4 and Year 8 students in mathematics and science.
- Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) conducted every five years by the IEA, testing Year 4 students in reading literacy.

This section evaluates Victoria's learning outcomes over the past decade on each of these measures, with particular focus on NAPLAN outcomes.

The Committee notes that NAPLAN results are typically presented for the state as a whole. This was the case with the Department of Education's submission to this Inquiry. Accordingly, the Committee flags that it is difficult to deduce from NAPLAN results how the state school system – the focus of this Inquiry – is performing.

FINDING 1: NAPLAN results do not necessarily give a clear indication of the performance of the state school system.

⁸ VAGO, *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement Outcomes for Victorian Students*, May 2024, p. 4.

Attendance and completion rates

In addition to these results, a more elemental baseline for assessing learning outcomes in Victoria are school attendance and completion rates. The Department of Education highlighted the following trends:

- Attendance at Victorian government schools in 2023 was the highest in the country, an attendance rate across Years 1 to 10 of 88.6%.
- Victoria is second to South Australia in the rate of students attaining a senior secondary certificate – 82.6% in 2022, compared to national average of 79%.
- Victoria continues to have the highest proportion of young people engaged in education, training or work.
- High retention rate among Koorie students completing Year 12 (62.4%) compared with the Australian average (54.4%).⁹

However, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) report there are also significant challenges.

- Year 12 completion rates for inner regional and outer regional were significantly lower than those in major cities.¹⁰
- Males in inner regional and outer regional have the lowest completion rate of year 12 of 68.2% and 68.9%, respectively.¹¹
- In Victoria, attendance was lower at Government schools compared to Catholic or Independent schools.¹²

3.2.1 Competing narratives

The Terms of Reference to this Inquiry presupposed declining trends in learning outcomes among Victorian students, particularly in literacy. Evidence received by the Committee reflects a number of competing claims about NAPLAN data and how it is most accurately interpreted.

The Department of Education emphasised that Victoria continues to perform well overall against other Australian jurisdictions as measured by standardised testing, particularly NAPLAN. However, results are more mixed when specific cohorts are considered, with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous backgrounds achieving poorer learning outcomes than high socioeconomic students. There have been few significant improvements in this regard over the past decade.

9 Jenny Atta, Secretary, Department of Education, Public Hearing, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 82; Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 29.

10 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Year 12 Certification Rates*, <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-certification-rates>> accessed 30 September 2024.

11 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Year 12 Certification Rates*, <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-certification-rates>> accessed 30 September 2024.

12 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Student Attendance*, <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/student-attendance>> accessed 30 September 2024.

Stakeholders also highlighted that different measures can tell different stories:

- Victorian students, and Australian students generally, consistently score above OECD averages in international tests including PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS.¹³
- On international testing, Australia's scores have declined since the early 2000's.¹⁴
- Both the new NAPLAN reporting scale (introduced in 2023) and the international testing demonstrate that up to 30% of Victorian students are consistently found to be not proficient in reading. The rate of non-proficiency is higher in mathematics.¹⁵

3.2.2 NAPLAN results

NAPLAN testing was introduced in 2008 as nationwide standardised test of student learning outcomes. It is conducted in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Parents can decide whether their child takes part. On average, around 90% to 95% of students in each year level participate each year.¹⁶

NAPLAN results are also cross-assessed by the following categories:

- gender
- people identified as being indigenous
- language background other than English status
- parental occupation and education
- remoteness.¹⁷

The Committee received a range of cross-sectional analyses of NAPLAN results that reflect a complex and uneven set of results. Overwhelmingly, these analyses indicate widening gaps between various cohorts of students. These cohorts include socio-economic; background of parents; rural and regional; Koorie; and culturally and linguistically diverse students.

The new NAPLAN reporting scale

The NAPLAN reporting scale changed in 2023. Previously, students were measured across six bands at each year level – and ten bands in total – that determined if they were meeting 'national minimum standard' (Figure 3.1). Now, student achievement is reported against four levels of proficiency: Exceeding; Strong; Developing; Needs Additional Support (Figure 3.2).¹⁸

¹³ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 30

¹⁴ Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 58*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, Attachment 5, p. 9.

¹⁶ ACARA, *NAPLAN National Results*, <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-results>> accessed 30 September 2024.

¹⁷ National Assessments Program, *Results and reports*, 2024, <https://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/results-and-reports>> accessed 7 August 2024.

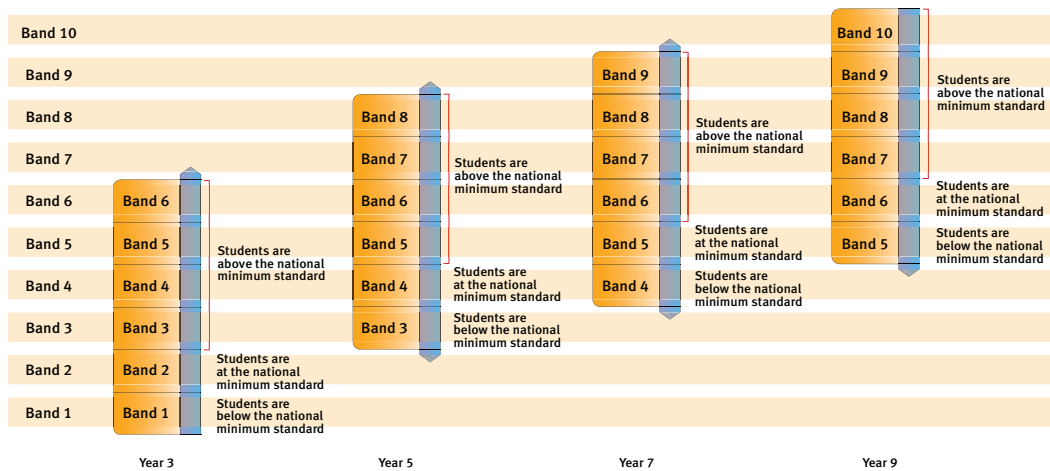
¹⁸ National Assessments Program, *Results and reports*, 2024, <<https://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/results-and-reports>> accessed 7 August 2024.

The changed reporting framework makes it difficult to compare between the most recent and earlier NAPLAN results. Stakeholders that provided longitudinal summaries of NAPLAN results (including the Department) focused on results from 2022 and earlier.

According to the National Assessment Program, the body which runs NAPLAN testing:

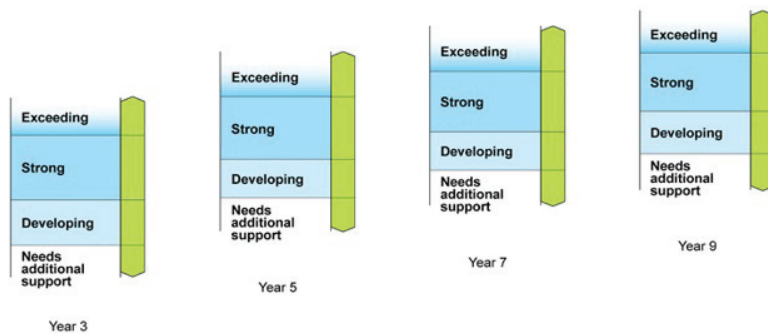
The proficiency levels allow teachers and parents to see a measure of each student's achievement and show more clearly whether a student is meeting expectations for their current stage of schooling ... The previous bands required background knowledge of which bands related to the expectations at each year level tested.¹⁹

Figure 3.1 The old NAPLAN reporting scale, 2008–2022



Source: National Assessments Program (2021) *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy: National Report for 2021*, p. vi.

Figure 3.2 The new NAPLAN reporting scale, 2023 onwards



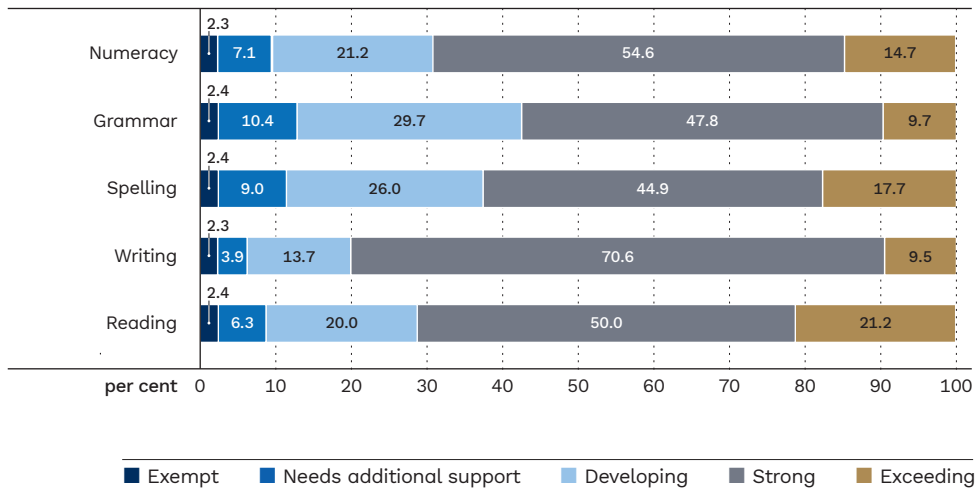
Source: National Assessments Program, *Results and reports*, 2024, <<https://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/results-and-reports>> accessed 7 August 2024.

19 National Assessments Program, *Results and reports*, 2024, <<https://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/results-and-reports>> accessed 7 August 2024.

The 2023 NAPLAN results

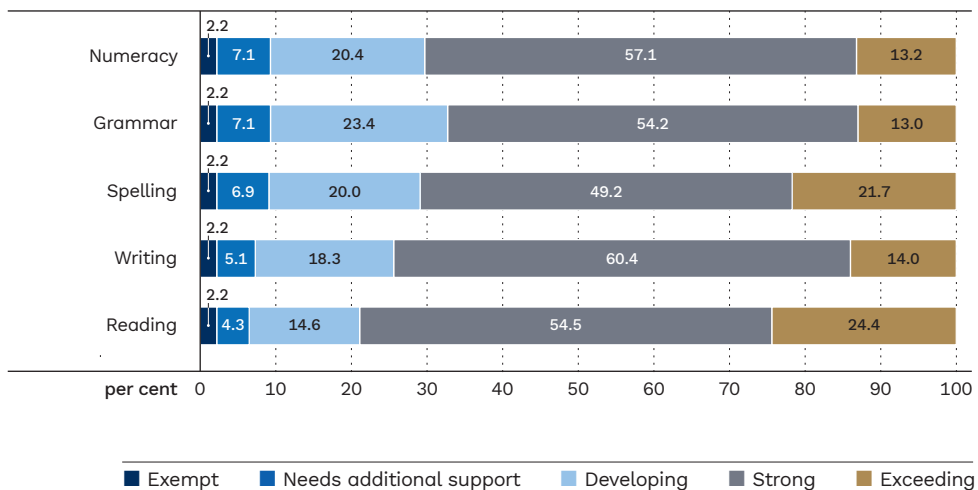
The figures below provide an overview of Victorian NAPLAN results of student proficiency for each level and in each discipline. According to ACARA, students in the top two categories (Exceeding and Strong) have reached proficiency and those below have not. ACARA considers the proficiency cut-off point (between the ‘Strong’ and ‘Developing’ categories) to be ‘a reasonable expectation of student achievement at the time of testing’.²⁰

Figure 3.3 Victorian Year 3 NAPLAN results, 2023



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Naplan National Results 2008–2022*, 2024, <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-report-archive>> accessed 5 July 2024.

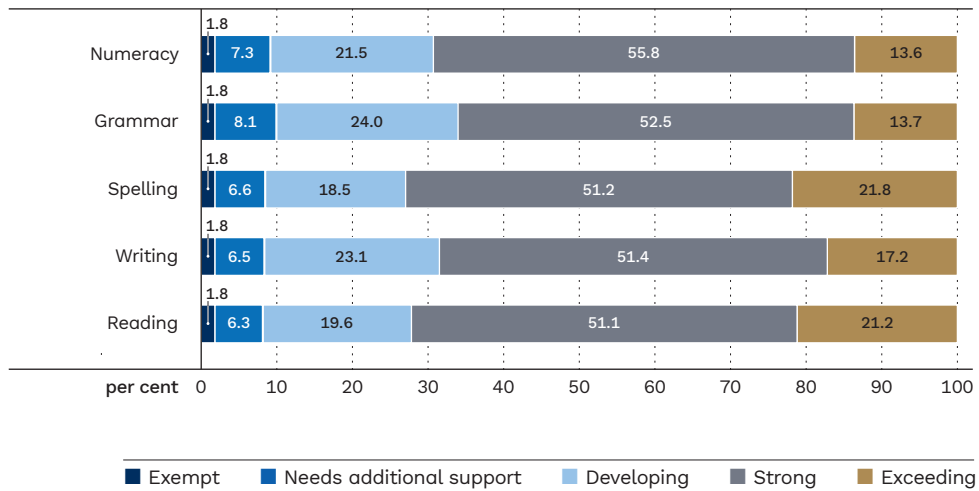
Figure 3.4 Victorian Year 5 NAPLAN results, 2023



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Naplan National Results 2008–2022*, 2024, <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-report-archive>> accessed 5 July 2024.

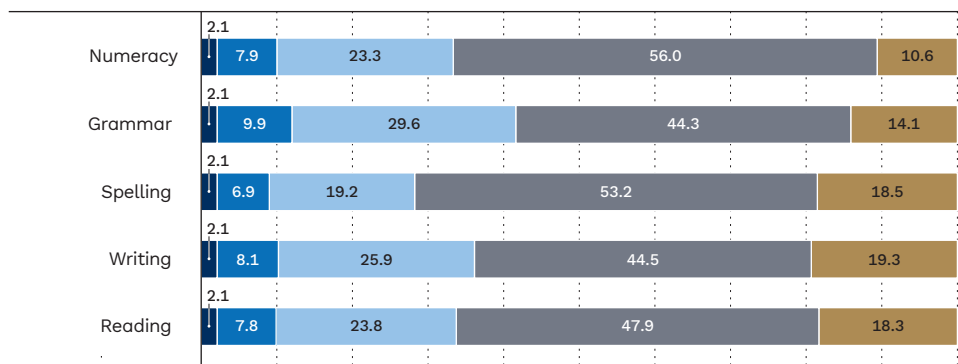
²⁰ Grattan Institute, Submission to the review to inform the next National School Reform Agreement, *Submission to Department of Education*, Review into inform a better and fairer education system, 2023, p. 9.

Figure 3.5 Victorian Year 7 NAPLAN results, 2023



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Naplan National Results 2008–2022, 2024*, <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-report-archive>> accessed 5 July 2024.

Figure 3.6 Victorian Year 9 NAPLAN results, 2023



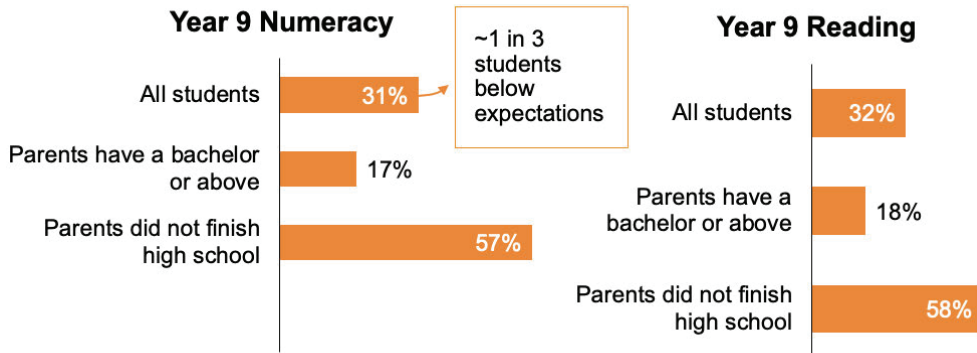
Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Naplan National Results 2008–2022, 2024*, <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-report-archive>> accessed 5 July 2024.

The Grattan Institute reported on the 2023 NAPLAN results:

- The Grattan Institute defines 'Below expectations' as students who fall into the "Need Additional Support" or "Developing" categories.
- Similar performance patterns were observed across different year groups.
- Approximately 40,000 Year 9 students whose parents have a bachelor's degree or higher took the test and answered at least one question.
- Around 7,000 Year 9 students whose parents' highest education level is Year 11 or below also took the test and answered at least one question.

These findings are based on data from ACARA (2023) NAPLAN results and outlined in Figure 3.7 below.

Figure 3.7 Percentage of year 9 students identified as below expectations by the Grattan Institute in NAPLAN 2023



Source: Grattan Institute, *Submission 193.7*, p.2.

The view of the Department of Education

The Department of Education reports that Victoria is the highest performing jurisdiction in terms of academic outcomes as measured by NAPLAN assessments. In 2023, Victoria ranked first or second nationally in 16 out of the 20 NAPLAN areas (see Figure 3.8).²¹

Figure 3.8 Number of top two rankings in 2023 and 2022 NAPLAN results, by jurisdiction

	Vic	NSW	ACT	WA	Qld	SA	Tas	NT
2023 (new scale)	16	15	7	2	0	0	0	0
2022 (old scale)	12	14	11	3	0	0	0	0

Out of a possible 20 rankings (Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, for reading, numeracy, spelling, writing, and grammar and punctuation).

Source: Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 21.

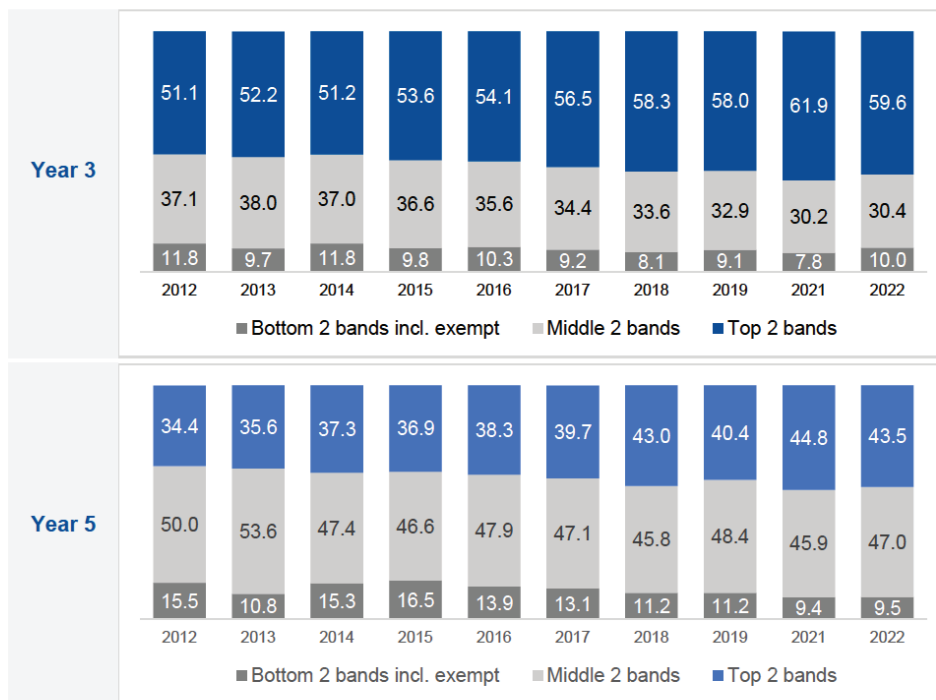
The Department also highlights that Victoria ranks better than all other states in terms of lowest performing students. In 2023, Victoria had the lowest or second lowest proportion of students classified as ‘Needs Additional Support’ for all NAPLAN areas.

The Department also provided longitudinal assessments of Victoria’s NAPLAN results in reading at a primary level using the old reporting scale. The Department reports that Victorian primary school students have improved in average reading at both Year 3 and Year 5 in the period 2012 and 2022, while remaining stable in numeracy. It also highlighted that improvement in NAPLAN reading was evident in both high and low performing students (Figure 3.9).²²

²¹ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 21.

²² Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 28.

Figure 3.9 Victorian Year 3 and Year 5 NAPLAN reading results, under old NAPLAN scale, 2012–2022



Source: Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 28.

For secondary results, the Department only made reference to the most recent 2023 results. It highlighted Victoria’s results including:

- In reading and numeracy, Victoria achieved among the highest mean scores of any jurisdiction nationally.
- In Year 7 reading, the Victorian mean score was the second highest of any Australian jurisdiction, behind only the Australian Capital Territory.
- In Year 9 reading, Victoria was the third highest performer of all Australian jurisdictions, behind Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory.
- In Year 7 numeracy, only New South Wales had a higher mean score.
- In Year 9 numeracy, only Western Australia and New South Wales had a higher mean score.
- Victoria had the lowest proportion of students classified as ‘Needs Additional Support’ in Year 7 and Year 9 in both NAPLAN reading and numeracy compared to all other states and territories.²³

²³ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 29.

The Department did note two areas requiring attention:

- Numeracy results have been declining nationally over the years 2019–2022, although Victoria remained relatively highly ranked in these years, outperformed only by New South Wales in Year 7 numeracy, and New South Wales and Western Australia in Year 9 numeracy.²⁴
- The gap in learning outcomes between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students remains a ‘national challenge’, as reflected in a 2022 Productivity Commission study report of the National School Reform Agreement.²⁵

While praising the ‘excellent results being achieved in Victoria’, the Department of Education stressed to the Committee it acknowledged ‘there is more work that we need to do’.²⁶ Key areas of attention highlighted by the Department included:

- addressing students who need additional support because of their circumstances
- achieving the same levels in numeracy as with literacy.²⁷

The views of other stakeholders

Stakeholders broadly agreed with the Department’s generally positive overview of Victoria’s NAPLAN performances, however, others disagreed.²⁸

The Australian Education Union warned that perceptions that Victoria’s achievement levels are declining are often politically motivated and can be:

disparaging towards the work of schools, demoralising for staff, and can purposefully seek to undermine the community’s confidence in public education and the status of the teaching profession.²⁹

Nonetheless, stakeholders noted several major caveats with Victoria’s NAPLAN results:

- NAPLAN is a relatively low bar (particularly on the old scale) and does not always reflect a widening gap between low and high achieving students in Victoria as well as between metropolitan and regional students.³⁰
- Victoria, along with the ACT, is the most ‘advantaged’ student cohort in the country. The Grattan Institute argues that after taking account of socioeconomic factors, Victoria’s students’ learning progress is – on the whole – largely the same as the national average.³¹

²⁴ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 21.

²⁵ Productivity Commission, *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Study report*, 2022, p. 24.

²⁶ David Howes, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education, public hearing, *Transcript of Evidence* 9 May 2024, p. 81.

²⁷ David Howes, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education, public hearing, *Transcript of Evidence* 9 May 2024, p. 81.

²⁸ La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 1.

²⁹ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 7.

³⁰ La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 1.

³¹ Grattan Institute, *Measuring student progress: A state-by-state report card, Report*, 2018, p. 39; Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 2.

- Unlike other states, Victoria has only two small areas that are classified as ‘geographically remote’; in other states and territories, remote areas tend to be the areas with the lowest NAPLAN scores. Victoria also has a smaller proportion of first nations students than New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory. On average, across all domains (reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy) a higher proportion of first nations students are in the ‘Needs Additional Support’ proficiency level than non-Indigenous students.³²

Impacts of the new NAPLAN reporting measures

The Grattan Institute stressed that the new NAPLAN regime provides a more accurate reflection of learning outcomes in Victoria than the previous band-system, which measured national minimum standards.

On the old measure, between 2011 and 2022, around 95% of students across all year levels in all disciplines returned results ‘at or above the national standard’.³³

According to the Grattan Institute, the old NAPLAN scale that measured if students were achieving a ‘national minimum standard’ was ‘set far too low and misidentified too many struggling students as on track with their learning’.³⁴ By contrast, rather than testing for a low bar minimum standard, the new four-level proficiency scale draws a harder distinction between students who do and do not show ‘proficiency’.³⁵

On this measure – as reflected in Figures 3.3 to 3.6 – closer to 30% of students across all year levels in all disciplines are not proficient. Grattan says this result aligns closer with the results reflected in PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS (see Section 3.2.4).³⁶

Disparities faced by low socioeconomic and Indigenous students

The Committee received a considerable body of evidence highlighting disparities in NAPLAN results achieved by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous backgrounds. (Disparities between metropolitan and rural and regional students are discussed further below.)

In a detailed analysis, Save Our Schools identified multiple ways of quantifying the growing gap in learning outcomes (as reflected in the NAPLAN results) of high socioeconomic students and low socioeconomic and/or Indigenous students. These signifiers included:

- the rate of cohorts failing to achieve minimum literacy and numeracy standards

³² La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 1.

³³ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Naplan National Results 2008–2022, 2024*, <<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-report-archive>> accessed 24 August 2024.

³⁴ Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, attachment 5, p. 9.

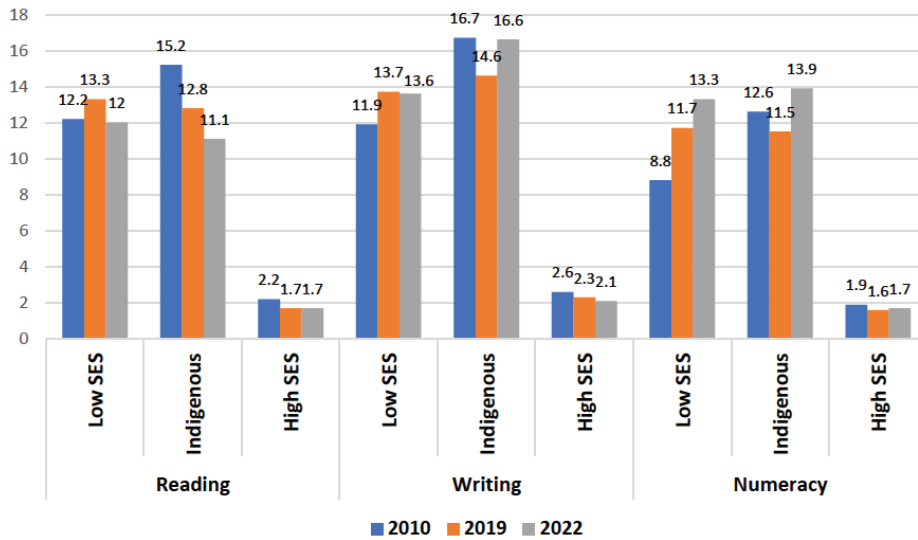
³⁵ Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, attachment 5, p. 9.

³⁶ Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, attachment 5, p. 9; Dyslexia Victoria, *Submission*, p. 1; Code Read Dyslexia Network, *Submission*, p. 6.

- little to no learning improvement in scores by disadvantaged students
- a growing gap in NAPLAN scores between advantaged and disadvantaged students.³⁷

The persistently high rates of disadvantaged students failing to achieve minimum standards (on the old scale) over the past decade is an illustrative example. Drawing on data up to 2022 – which stakeholders including La Trobe University and the Grattan Institute consider to be a ‘much lower bar’ than the current proficiency scale³⁸ – Save Our Schools noted the persistently high rates of students from low socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds not meeting minimum standards.³⁹ This is shown in Figures 3.10 and 3.11.

Figure 3.10 Percentage of Year 5 Victorian students below national minimum standards in reading, writing and numeracy, 2010–2022



Note: the writing percentages are for 2011, 2019, 2022.

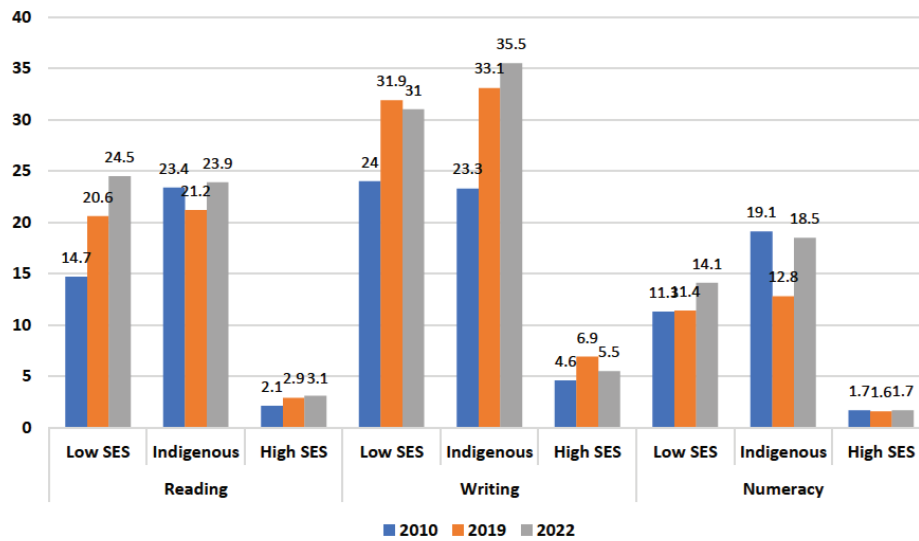
Source: Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 3; ACARA, *NAPLAN National Reports*.

³⁷ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p.2

³⁸ Grattan Institute, *Submission 193.5*, attachment 5, p. 9; La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 5

³⁹ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 2–4.

Figure 3.11 Percentage of Year 9 Victorian students below national minimum standards in in reading, writing and numeracy



Note: the writing percentages are for 2011, 2019, 2022.

Source: Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 3; ACARA, *NAPLAN National Reports*.

Similarly, the Australian Education Union drilled into NAPLAN data to highlight strong disparities in student NAPLAN outcomes in Victoria based on parent education and parent occupation. The union highlighted:

- Year 9 students of parents whose highest level of education was a Bachelor's degree scored 76.4 points higher on average than Victorian Year 9 students whose parents' highest level of education was Year 11. This gap was the highest it has ever been in Victoria in 2022.
- Year 9 children of occupation group 1 parents (senior management and qualified professional roles) scored 55.1 points higher on average than children of group 4 parents (machine operators, assistants, labourers, and related workers) for NAPLAN reading tests. This gap was similar to that reported in 2016 (56.7).⁴⁰

Turning to the most recent 2023 results, La Trobe University noted that on the new proficiency scale:

- on average, across all domains (reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy) a higher proportion of First Nations students are in the needs additional support level than non-Indigenous students
- at each year level tested (3, 5, 7 and 9), over 30% of First Nations students fall into this category compared to less than 10% of non-Indigenous students.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 10.

⁴¹ La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 3.

Against these findings, while acknowledging ‘Victoria’s disadvantaged students had lower NAPLAN scores than their advantaged counterparts’,⁴² the Department of Education concluded: ‘they nonetheless achieved higher NAPLAN mean scores in reading compared with disadvantaged students in other jurisdictions and attained the first or second highest mean scores in 19 of 20 NAPLAN measures’.⁴³

The Department noted specifically the following achievements in NAPLAN and other learning outcomes for Indigenous students:

- Since 2015, the proportion of Aboriginal students achieving in the top 2 NAPLAN bands for reading has improved in Year 3 and Year 5 and increased slightly for numeracy in Year 7. In addition, in 2023, Victoria’s Koorie students outperformed their interstate peers, achieving the first or second highest mean scores in 18 of 20 NAPLAN measures.
- Year 9 reading improved for Koorie students from 2012 to 2022, and the outcome gap for Koorie students decreased for both Year 7 and Year 9 reading between 2014 and 2022.
- Year 12 completers’ employment outcomes have risen from 24.7% in 2018 to 32% in 2022 and there was an 8.2% increase in Year 12 completers securing an apprenticeship or traineeship (15.5% in 2018 to 24.2% in 2022).

As a result of these achievements, Victoria is one of the few jurisdictions to have made progress against the National Agreement on Closing the Gap targets in education, and there are signs of long-term improvement.⁴⁴

Disparities in NAPLAN results in regional and rural schools

Stakeholders similarly noted disparities in NAPLAN results between metropolitan and rural schools. For example, the Australian Education Union highlighted Year 5 students in major cities achieving higher reading scores than students in inner and outer regional schools for all year levels (Figure 3.12).⁴⁵ Similarly, gaps persist and have been growing at Year 9 level, especially in reading (Figure 3.13).⁴⁶

⁴² Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 30.

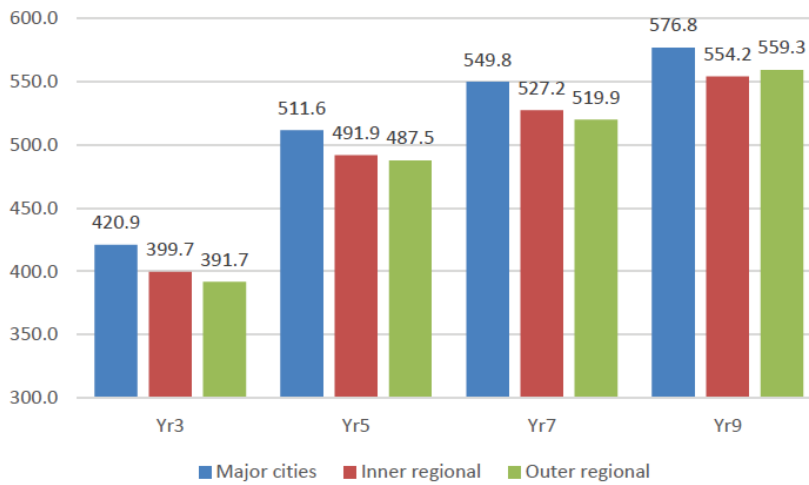
⁴³ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 27.

⁴⁴ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 8.

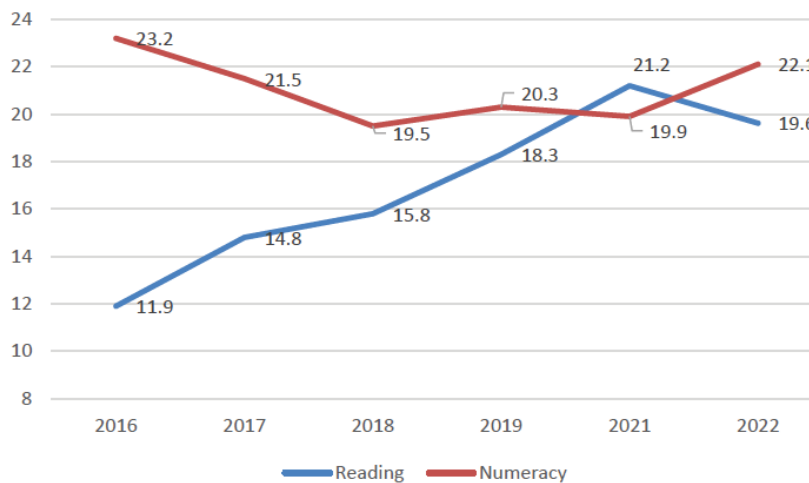
⁴⁶ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 9.

Figure 3.12 2023 NAPLAN reading scores by geographic location for Victorian students



Source: Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 8.

Figure 3.13 Gap between Victorian Year 9 reading and numeracy scores for students in major cities and inner regional schools



Source: Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 8.

FINDING 2: 2023 NAPLAN reading scores for Year 3, Year 5, Year 7 and Year 9 are consistently lower for inner and outer regional Victoria compared to major cities.

Making sense of disparities in NAPLAN results

Stakeholders interpreted the significance of these disparities in NAPLAN results, which reflect a more general disparity in learning outcomes in Victoria, in several ways:

- results presented do not reflect an equitable education system as defined by the Gonski Report (see Chapter 7) where ‘personal and social circumstances are not an obstacle to achieving educational potential’.⁴⁷
- Victoria is not delivering on its commitments under the Mparntwe Education Declaration (see Section 3.1.) or its targets under the Education State strategy, including ‘breaking the link between disadvantage and outcomes for students’.⁴⁸
- Persistent differences in NAPLAN test results may reflect cultural biases in the testing system that disadvantage non-urban students and First Nations students, which ‘undermine the validity of NAPLAN tests, on the basis that it appears that tests like NAPLAN may not be measuring real aptitudes but instead students’ access to specific types of cultural capital’.⁴⁹

The design and future of NAPLAN testing is beyond the remit of this Inquiry. The Committee is of the view that persistent disparities highlight the need for increased and refined targeted supports for these cohorts, as discussed in Chapter 4.

FINDING 3: Victoria’s learning outcomes are relatively higher than other jurisdictions. While socioeconomic disparities in NAPLAN results reflect disadvantage across Australia, it is hard to compare longitudinal results between old and new measuring scales.

Committee comment

The Grattan Institute recommends that Australia’s governments set ambitious academic achievement targets for reading and numeracy in the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).⁵⁰ It suggests using the new NAPLAN proficiency categories—‘exceeding,’ ‘strong,’ ‘developing,’ and ‘needs additional support’—as a benchmark to monitor student performance over time.⁵¹ The goal is to have at least 90% of students achieve proficiency (‘strong’ or ‘exceeding’) in reading and numeracy across Years 3, 5, 7, and 9.⁵² This proficiency benchmark is considered more robust and meaningful than the previous NAPLAN standards.

The Grattan Institute also recommends an intermediate target for each state and territory to improve the percentage of students reaching proficiency by at least

⁴⁷ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 11.

⁴⁸ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, attachment 7, pp. 8–10.

⁵¹ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, attachment 7, p. 10.

⁵² The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, attachment 7, p. 10.

10 percentage points by 2033.⁵³ These targets should be adjusted to account for different starting points and be proportionate to the term of the agreement. Progress should be tracked for both high-achieving students and disadvantaged groups, with transparent public reporting to ensure accountability.⁵⁴

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Victorian Government set:

- a. a long-term target that 90% of students reach proficiency in reading and numeracy, as measured by the proportion of students in the ‘strong’ or ‘exceeding’ category in NAPLAN in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9
- b. a short-term target to an increase of 10 percentage points over the next 10 years, based on NAPLAN performance in 2023, pro-rated for the term of the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).

This target would encourage focused efforts on enhancing teaching quality, providing targeted support for students, and implementing evidence-based educational strategies to ensure more students reach higher levels of proficiency. Progress toward this target should be regularly monitored, with adjustments made as needed to address challenges and optimize strategies for success.

3.2.3 Other measures

Victorian school students are also tested and benchmarked on several international standard testing: PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS.

In assessing Victorian students’ performance against these international benchmarks, the Department of Education noted:

- In PISA testing: Victorian students performed above the OECD average in reading and science. While several Australian jurisdictions experienced a decline in average performance, Victoria experienced no decline across reading, mathematics or science.⁵⁵
- In TIMSS testing: Victorian schools performed above the OECD average and Victoria has consistently performed above the Australian average since 2015.⁵⁶

These international benchmarks do not occur annually and only test a sample of students. For this reason, these tests have not been analysed by the committee in detail.

⁵³ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, attachment 7, p. 10

⁵⁴ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, attachment 7, p. 10

⁵⁵ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 30.

⁵⁶ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 30.

3.3 Curriculum

The curriculum in Victorian state schools comprises two key components:

- Victorian Curriculum F–10, for students in foundation to year 10, including the Towards Foundation Level Victorian Curriculum.
- Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), for students in years 11 and 12, which since 2023 has included the VCE Vocational Major and the Victorian Pathways Certificate.

A small number of government schools offer an alternative curriculum approved by ACARA alongside a Victorian curriculum, such as the International Baccalaureate, Steiner or Montessori.⁵⁷

The Department of Education provides a range of resources, including whole-school curriculum planning, to support schools implement the curriculum. Issues associated with such planning are discussed in Section 3.3.2.

The Victorian Curriculum F–10

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) describes the Victorian Curriculum F–10 as ‘the common set of knowledge and skills required by students for life-long learning, social development and active and informed citizenship’.⁵⁸

The F–10 curriculum is organised under eight learning areas and four capabilities (Table 3.1). Within each area or capability, the curriculum broadly defines the questions, concepts, skills and practices relevant to each learning level and the demonstrable achievement standard for successfully completing that level.⁵⁹

According to the VCAA, the curriculum is designed assuming knowledge and skills are developed, practised, deployed and demonstrated by students across the curriculum and therefore are not duplicated. For example, where skills and knowledge such as asking questions, evaluating evidence and drawing conclusions are defined in Critical and Creative Thinking, these are not duplicated in other learning areas such as History or Health and Physical Education.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 22.

⁵⁸ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 45.

⁵⁹ VCAA, *Curriculum design, Standards and Levels*, <<https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/curriculum-design/standards-and-levels>> accessed 3 July 2024.

⁶⁰ VCAA, *Curriculum design, Learning areas and capabilities*, <<https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/curriculum-design/learning-areas-and-capabilities>> accessed 3 July 2024.

Table 3.1 Victorian Curriculum F-10, learning areas and capabilities

Learning areas	Capabilities
The Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical and Creative Thinking • Ethical • Intercultural • Personal and Social
• Dance	
• Drama	
• Media Arts	
• Music	
• Visual Arts	
• Visual Communication Design	
English	
Health and Physical Education	
The Humanities	
• Civics and Citizenship	
• Economics and Business	
• Geography	
• History	
Languages	
Mathematics	
Science	
Technologies	
• Design and Technologies	
• Digital Technologies	

Source: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Learning Areas and Capabilities, <<https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/curriculum-design/learning-areas-and-capabilities>> accessed 3 July 2024.

This version of the curriculum has been used in Victoria since 2016 and is currently being reviewed (see Section 3.3.1).⁶¹

The Victorian Curriculum F-10 incorporates the Australian Curriculum, while reflecting Victorian priorities and standards. According to the VCAA, the key differences include:

- Structured by learning bands and levels rather than age cohort, providing school leaders flexibility to design teaching and learning programs that best meet the learning needs of their students.
- Includes additional curriculum areas relevant to Victorian priorities: English as an Additional Language; curriculum for students with significant intellectual disabilities; and curriculum for Victorian Aboriginal Languages.
- ‘Reframes the seven general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum into four: Critical and Creative Thinking; Ethical; Intercultural; and Personal and Social’.⁶²

⁶¹ Appendix 3, VCAA Submission, in Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 45.

⁶² Appendix 3, VCAA Submission, in Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 45.

The Victorian Curriculum F–10 is available to schools through a website. The website includes a range of curriculum resources, whole-school curriculum planning resources, and professional learning provided by the VCAA.⁶³ Plans and ideas to bolster these resources are discussed below in Section 3.4.2.

The Victorian Certificate of Education

The VCE is undertaken in Years 11 and 12. It provides students with access to pathways to further study, training and employment.⁶⁴

The VCE includes more than 90 areas of study. Schools individually decide which VCE studies they offer. Studies comprise four units, with a unit typically completed over the course of a semester (two terms). Satisfactory completion requires students to complete 16 units over the two years of the VCE.⁶⁵

Each VCE study is specified in a study design. The curriculum is benchmarked against curriculum from leading national and international jurisdictions, including the Australian Senior Secondary Curriculum maintained by ACARA. All VCE studies are accredited by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA).⁶⁶

Vocational Education and Training and the VCE Vocational Major

The VCE includes 26 VCE Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs, as well as other school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. Schools decide which VCE VET programs they offer. VCE VET programs are designed to be taken as part of the VCE. Students gain credit in the VCE and credit for national training qualifications.

In 2023, the VCAA introduced the VCE Vocational Major (VCE VM) as a new way of certifying vocational education, replacing the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning intermediate and senior levels. Students completing the VCE VM may access apprenticeships, traineeships, university pathways not requiring an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR), or the workforce.⁶⁷

The Victorian Pathways Certificate

In 2023, the VCAA also introduced the Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC). The VPC is designed to meet the needs of students who are not able or ready to complete the VCE VET or VCE VM.⁶⁸

⁶³ Appendix 3, VCAA Submission, in Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 45.

⁶⁴ Appendix 3, VCAA Submission, in Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 47.

⁶⁵ Appendix 3, VCAA Submission, in Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 47.

⁶⁶ Appendix 3, VCAA Submission, in Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 47.

⁶⁷ Department of Education and Training, Melbourne, *Review into vocational and applied learning pathways in senior secondary schooling: Final Report, 2020*.

⁶⁸ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 48.

According to the VCAA:

The VPC is designed to be delivered in Year 11 and is suitable for students whose previous schooling may have been disrupted, including students with additional needs, students who have missed significant periods of learning, and vulnerable students at risk of disengaging from their education. On completion, students may access pathways into a qualification such as the VCE, vocational education and training, or employment.⁶⁹

Students undertake units in literacy, numeracy, personal development, and work-related skills, and may undertake units from the VCE and VCE VM, VET units of competency, as well as undertaking structured workplace learning.⁷⁰

3.3.1 Revising the Victorian Curriculum

The VCAA informed the Committee it is currently developing 'Version 2.0' of the Victorian Curriculum F-10.

The Committee received a range of ideas from stakeholders on how the curriculum might be improved or refocused. Those ideas are presented here with a view to informing the development of Version 2.0.

Background to the Victorian Curriculum Version 2.0

This updated version of the Victorian F-10 curriculum will adopt and adapt Australian Curriculum Version 9.0.⁷¹

Australian Curriculum Version 9.0 was approved by Australian Education Ministers on 1 April 2022. Ministers agreed that each state and territory would decide how they would use it to meet the needs and priorities of their respective jurisdictions. The new Australian curriculum follows a review in 2020–22 led by ACARA and involving state and territory bodies, including the VCAA.

According to the VCAA, in adapting the new Australian curriculum, the new Victorian curriculum will:

- 'continue to support a discipline-based approach to learning, with learning areas regarded as both enduring and dynamic'⁷²
- be 'strongly informed by the expertise of Victorian teachers, and their feedback on the current Victorian Curriculum'⁷³

⁶⁹ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 48.

⁷⁰ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 48.

⁷¹ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 45.

⁷² Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 46.

⁷³ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 46.

- ‘ensure the next version of the Victorian Curriculum F–10 better enables teachers to plan, assess and report on student learning’.⁷⁴

An overcrowded curriculum

The Committee received some evidence from teachers that the current curriculum is overcrowded and may be contributing to declines in learning outcomes. Some teachers expressed concerns there was ‘too much’ to teach and the curriculum should be ‘scaled back to basics’. However, these submissions did not provide a uniform indication of which aspects of the curriculum should be revised.⁷⁵

Cindy Growcott, a teacher, advised the Committee on an overcrowded VCE curriculum:

We have to rush through content due to time constraints, there is too much to cram into the kids’ brains, and you don’t have enough time to consolidate learning as you have to move onto the next dot point. I could teach Unit 3 of my subject all year and do it so kids actually understand the course - but I have to also rush through unit 4 to prepare for the end of year exam.⁷⁶

Committee comment

The Department of Education informed the Committee that the VCAA ‘have invested some time trying to make the curriculum clear to address any duplication’.⁷⁷ The outcomes of these efforts are reflected in an emphasis on transferable skills between the curriculum’s learning areas and capabilities noted above.

FINDING 4: The Victorian Curriculum is overcrowded.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Victorian Government should ensure that the curriculum is regularly reviewed and updated to reduce duplication and ensure best practice.

Focus of the curriculum

The Committee acknowledges that there are a range of concerns in the community about the focus, or perceived focus, of the Victorian curriculum.

An underlying theme among a small group of submissions from parents and some teachers was the need to ‘return’ to focusing on key areas in foundational study areas of mathematics, English and science, and especially literacy.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 46.

⁷⁵ Mrs Cindy Growcott, *Submission 46*; Amanda Kent, *Submission 214*; Name withheld, *Submission 39*; Name withheld, *Submission 135*; Australian Principals Federation, Victorian Branch, *Submission 266*, p. 11.

⁷⁶ Mrs Cindy Growcott, *Submission 46*, p. 1.

⁷⁷ David Howes, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education, public hearing, Melbourne, 9 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 79.

⁷⁸ See for example: Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 58*.

The Committee also received recommendations from some parents and teachers that religious education be provided in schools.⁷⁹

A small number of stakeholders expressed concern with teaching about gender diversity, sexuality, relationships and sex education in schools, and often with specific reference to the Respectful Relationships and Safe Schools programs.⁸⁰

Equally, the Committee received strong endorsements of these programs.⁸¹

While appreciating the diverse views on what should be included in school curriculums, these views lacked specificity and coherence in changes that ought to be made to the curriculum. The Committee also notes that Respectful Relationships and Safe Schools do not constitute a formal part of the Victorian F-10 Curriculum but are programs implemented to aid student wellbeing. These programs are discussed in Chapter 6.

Vocational skills and employment pathways

Notwithstanding the changes the VCAA has recently made regarding the VCE VM and the VPC, the Committee received evidence of ongoing deficiencies in how vocational skills and employment pathways are developed in Victoria's education system.

Several stakeholders highlighted that significant challenges remain for rural and regional students accessing VET subjects. These are dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Committee comment

While the focus of the recent reform has been at VCE level, the Committee received evidence – including from students – that the curriculum should include skills for lower grade level students in 'real world skills' including banking, budgeting skills and taxation.⁸² Students saw these as necessary life skills.⁸³

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Victorian Government ensure that practical life skills such as personal budgeting and banking, taxation and civic engagement are taught in schools at pre-VCE levels.

3.3.2 Whole-school curriculum planning and implementation

In addition to the content of the Victorian curriculum, the Committee received evidence regarding how it is implemented at a school and individual classroom level.

⁷⁹ Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 58*; Miss Ngoc, *Submission 5*; Mrs Sarah Moffat, *Submission 24*; Name withheld, *Submission 117*; Miss Sheranpreet, *Submission 17*.

⁸⁰ Stop Gender Education, *Submission 158*, p.1.

⁸¹ Our Watch, *Submission 222*, p.5.

⁸² Miss Ngoc, *Submission 5*; Hope, *Submission 11*; Mrs Dorothy Long *Submission 51*.

⁸³ Mr Aly, *Submission 12*.

The Australian Curriculum and state variants provide high-level direction only to schools and teachers on what is to be achieved and taught at each level. The Committee heard that without effective guidance and leadership, individual teachers face enormous workloads in converting the mandated, high-level curriculum documents into detailed and effective lesson planning and assessment.

These are issues are not necessarily unique to Victoria. A clear example of this challenge was provided in a recent Grattan Institute report discussed the Australian curriculum:

The new Australian Curriculum's Year 7 History course expects teachers to choose one of five ancient civilisations (Greece, Rome, Egypt, India, or China) and teach students about the 'organisation and roles of key groups in ancient society such as the nobility, bureaucracy, women, and slaves'. Once a teacher has chosen an ancient civilisation, such as ancient Egypt, this still leaves them to make a huge number of decisions, including which social groups to cover, the depth of study, and how to assess learning. It is simply assumed teachers will have a sufficiently solid grasp of ancient Egyptian history— a period that spans more than 1,500 years— to make these choices, and the time needed to construct detailed, high-quality lessons on this topic. This is a tall order, especially for new or out-of-field teachers. Even experienced history teachers who have specialised in different periods, such as modern history, may struggle.⁸⁴

Regarding the Victorian curriculum, the Centre for Independent Studies similarly found that while some resources are available to teachers, there is little guidance on sequenced planning over the course of a term, semester or year. Sampling a resource provided by the VCAA to assist planning secondary school mathematics, the Centre reported to the Committee that:

It is divided into 18 weeks per semester, it contains the three mathematical strands, allocates a certain number of weeks per sub-strand, and contains a sequence for Years 7–10. However, this is not particularly helpful. There is no indication here about how — or whether — skills build sequentially and hierarchically, or why decisions have been made to allocate time to particular strands. The necessity of regular review is not included, nor is it advised. Here the strands are combined (e.g. statistics and probability) but on the VCAA Victorian Curriculum website, the content descriptors are separated into statistics (three descriptors) and probability (three descriptors). On a separate website, the strands each have what is termed a 'scope and sequence' across the four year levels, but this does not provide any additional information besides the text of the content descriptors.⁸⁵

Additionally, teachers may have to provide material and assessment tools that allow for varying ability within their classroom.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Grattan Institute, *Ending the lesson lottery: How to improve curriculum planning in schools*, Report, p. 6.

⁸⁵ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, pp. 38–39.

⁸⁶ Kieran Kenneth, Yallourn North Primary School, Public Hearing, Traralgon, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 31.

FINDING 5: The Department of Education provides school leaders and teachers with some resources to properly sequence and scope teaching and learning programs to support student learning. However, these may not all be known or communicated clearly to teachers.

To mitigate these challenges, the Committee was informed that the Department of Education should provide more detailed assistance to schools and teachers in developing whole-school curriculum planning. Greater assistance would both improve learning outcomes and reduce the administrative burden on teachers (see Chapter 5).

Dr Jordana Hunter, Education Program Director at the Grattan Institute advised the Committee that ‘curriculum materials created, be they by government departments, not-for-profits or commercial providers should be reviewed by an independent quality assurance body’.⁸⁷

Dr Hunter also emphasised the need to look particularly at Curriculum material planning, advising that this is a huge time sink for teachers:

It is a really big challenge for them, and if we could support them to get whole-school established curriculum plans in place, we could save the average teacher about three hours a week.⁸⁸

The Grattan Institute, which has provided the most comprehensive overview of whole-school planning viewed by the Committee, defines a whole-school approach as planning that ‘carefully sequences learning of key knowledge and skills across subjects and year levels’.⁸⁹ Grattan lists a whole-school curriculum as comprising the following key components:

- **Whole-school curriculum map**, detailing every unit being taught, content and skills covered, mode of assessment, a birds-eye-view of entire school curriculum.
- **Unit plans**, lesson-by-lesson plan of what is taught for a specific topic.
- **Classroom materials**, resources including worksheets, PowerPoints, assessments.⁹⁰

For effective whole-school curriculum planning, Grattan recommends school leaders receive professional development in devising coordinated plans (see Chapter 5) and regular evaluations on the effectiveness of whole-school curriculum planning (discussed below).

⁸⁷ Dr Jordana Hunter, Education Program Director, Grattan Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 55

⁸⁸ Dr Jordana Hunter, Education Program Director, Grattan Institute, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 60.

⁸⁹ Grattan Institute, *Ending the lesson lottery: how to improve curriculum planning in schools*, 2022, p. 3.

⁹⁰ Grattan Institute, *Ending the lesson lottery: how to improve curriculum planning in schools*, 2022, p. 7.

The benefits of whole-school curriculum planning include:

- Ensuring teachers know what preparation students have had in previous years before reaching their classroom.
- Teachers have a clear understanding of how that day's teaching connects to the knowledge and skills students will learn over several years at school, and across multiple subjects.
- Enables teachers to switch focus from *what* to teach to *how* to teach the content in the most effective way for their students.⁹¹

Committee comment

In the absence of such planning, the Grattan Institute found, teachers may waste time planning for, and re-teaching concepts and skills students have already mastered. They may also overlook critical concepts and skills when wrongly assuming students have already been taught them. Meanwhile, students may experience a curriculum that comprises a poorly connected series of activities that can be highly repetitive or leave critical gaps.⁹²

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Department of Education develop and provide adequate template scoping and sequence mapping, template unit plans, template lessons plans and other supporting material to support teachers develop curriculum in their school.

Building on Victoria's whole-school planning requirements

The Committee recognises that the Department of Education currently provides materials and requirements supporting whole-school curriculum planning. These include:

- The Department of Education's *Whole-School Guide to Curriculum Planning*, produced in 2020.
- The VRQA's requirement for registered schools to comply with the Curriculum and Student Learning Minimum Standard, which includes evidence of a curriculum plan.
- A review every four years as part of a strategic planning cycle, which includes assessment of compliance with VRQA minimum standards.

However, the Committee received evidence on a range of limitations and opportunities with these existing materials and requirements.

⁹¹ Grattan Institute, *Ending the lesson lottery: how to improve curriculum planning in schools*, 2022, pp. 7-8.

⁹² Grattan Institute, *Ending the lesson lottery: how to improve curriculum planning in schools*, 2022 pp. 7-8.

The current guidance is inadequate

First, stakeholders informed the Committee the Department's current guidance on curriculum planning is inadequate.

The *Whole-School Guide to Curriculum Planning* is an 18-page document that 'presents a series of guiding questions and key actions to support planning for the whole school, for a curriculum area or year level, and for units and lessons'. In accordance with Victoria's school autonomy principle, it is deliberately not a list of actions for schools or checklist for curriculum coverage but invites:

reflection and self-assessment, to encourage teachers, instructional leaders and school leaders to build collective efficacy and plan for the implementation of the curriculum throughout the school to improve learning for all students.⁹³

The guidelines define whole-school planning as 'sequential across year levels and integrated across curriculum areas',⁹⁴ to minimise 'the risk of repetition or serious gaps occurring'.⁹⁵ In 2023, the Department of Education released an updated 34-page *Revised curriculum planning and reporting guidelines*.⁹⁶

Stakeholders found the guidance provided in these materials limited.⁹⁷ At general level, the Grattan Institute reported 'huge gaps between policy documents and real-world practice in many schools'.⁹⁸

More specifically, the Centre for Independent Studies was concerned about a disconnect between policy expectations of whole-school planning and the guideline strategies provided by the Department. It recommends the Department 'provide more explicit materials such as unit plans and scope and sequences that show how HITS (High-Impact Teaching Strategies) can be implemented over a series of lessons, not simply in a single one'.⁹⁹ Similarly, Kieran Kenneth, a primary school principal in Traralgon, told the Committee the current material lacked scope and sequence guidance on what schools should be teaching on a week-by-week basis.¹⁰⁰

⁹³ Department of Education, *A Whole of School Guide to Curriculum Planning*, <<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-10/curriculumplanning/Pages/Index.aspx>> accessed 14 August 2024.

⁹⁴ Department of Education, *A Whole of School Guide to Curriculum Planning*, <<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-10/curriculumplanning/Pages/Index.aspx>> accessed 14 August 2024.

⁹⁵ Department of Education, *A Whole of School Guide to Curriculum Planning*, <<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-10/curriculumplanning/Pages/Index.aspx>> accessed 14 August 2024.

⁹⁶ Department of Education, *Victorian Curriculum F-10: Revised curriculum planning and reporting guidelines*, 2023.

⁹⁷ Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, attachment 3, pp. 26–27.

⁹⁸ Grattan Institute, *Ending the Lesson Lottery: How to improve curriculum planning in schools*, 2022, p. 11.

⁹⁹ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Keiran Kenneth, Principal, Yallourn North Primary School, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 31.

Current minimum standard requirements should be turned to all schools' advantage

Second, stakeholders recommended current minimum requirements that schools possess a curriculum plan, and require the Department to provide more explicit advice on such planning.

All schools must be registered with the VRQA and must comply with the Minimum Standards and other requirements for school registration (including the Child Safe Standards) to obtain and maintain their registration.¹⁰¹ The VRQA issues a *Guidelines to the Minimum Standards and Requirements for School Registration*, which requires of schools:

There must be evidence of:

- a curriculum plan showing how the learning areas will be substantially addressed and how the curriculum will be organised and implemented, including the number of teaching hours delivered in the 8 key learning areas
- timetables that demonstrate how the 8 key learning areas are delivered
- an explanation of how and when the curriculum and teaching practice will be reviewed
- an outline of how the school will deliver its curriculum.¹⁰²

Stakeholders stated that through this compliance process, the Department and VCAA had ample resources to collate and provide firmer guidance on curriculum planning. As Kieran Kenneth told the Committee, VRQA compliance 'in effect' asks '1500-plus schools to do the same thing 1500 times'.¹⁰³

Four-year school evaluations should be tied to professional development opportunities

Third, stakeholders told the Committee that the four-yearly school reviews should be tied to professional development opportunities.

All Victorian government schools participate in a four-year strategic planning cycle to support school improvement. All schools must prepare an annual implementation plan which outlines how they will implement their four-year school strategic plan for that forthcoming year.¹⁰⁴

Every four years, schools are reviewed according to this plan. This process is a key element of the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes 2.0 (FISO 2.0) cycle.

¹⁰¹ The Department of Education, *Minimum Standards and School Registration*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/minimum-standards/policy>> accessed 9 July 2024.

¹⁰² VRQA, *Guidelines to the Minimum Standards and Requirements for School Registration*, 2022, p. 20.

¹⁰³ Keiran Kenneth, Yallourn North Primary School, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 31.

¹⁰⁴ Department of Education, Annual Implementation Plan (AIP), <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/annual-implementation-plan/policy>> accessed 9 July 2024.

Reviews include both a self-evaluation and a review by an independent assessor.¹⁰⁵ The school reviewer also completes an assessment of the school's compliance with the curriculum and student learning minimum standard.¹⁰⁶

It appears to the Committee that given the Department already makes efforts conducting four-yearly reviews to ensure schools are compliant and are producing whole-school curriculum plans, a further step should be taken in this review process to evaluate the efficacy of those plans.

In materials provided to the Committee, the Grattan Institute has provided detailed recommendations on how such reviews of whole-school curriculum planning might be conducted. This includes:

- Developing agreed rigorous benchmarks for a high-quality, whole-school curriculum approach.
- Independent reviewers who are well trained in understanding and applying quality benchmarks and providing constructive feedback to schools.
- Reviews should take three to five days (including two days on-site), where reviewers consider the alignment between the planned, taught, and learnt curriculum, using classroom walk-throughs, observations, and student assessment data.
- School leaders should receive specific feedback on their progress, and targeted support based on the results of their review.
- Governments should synthesise and report publicly on aggregated review findings, to support and prioritise ongoing curriculum research and professional development.¹⁰⁷

Committee comment

The Committee finds that the Department of Education and VRQA have in place support material to advance whole-school planning, however it is under-utilised and is not readily used by teachers and school leaders to best effect.

The Committee believes the Department could either draw on this existing body of plans to develop a best-practice sequencing, or use those plans as exemplary templates for schools to adapt to their circumstances.

These materials should be delivered in accordance with the detailed lesson plans the Department has announced it tends to develop (see Section 3.4.5).

¹⁰⁵ Department of Education, School Review, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-review/policy>> accessed 9 July 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Department of Education, School Review, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/school-review/policy>> accessed 9 July 2024.

¹⁰⁷ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 14; The Grattan Institute, *Ending the lesson lottery: How to improve curriculum planning in schools*, 2022 p. 52.

FINDING 6: The Committee finds a need for improvement in the depth of support and guidance provided to schools to support whole-school curriculum planning.

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Department of Education review its whole-school materials and lesson plans for core subjects, such as English, maths and science, to ensure they achieve their aims of reducing the burden on schools' planning and delivering the curriculum.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Department of Education where it identifies weaknesses in schools' whole-school planning during the four-year review provide principals and/or school leadership with the necessary professional development to strengthen the whole-school planning.

3.4 Pedagogy

Pedagogy refers to the strategies, methodologies and materials used to teach the Victorian Curriculum.

3.4.1 The Victorian Department of Education model and guidelines

Consistent with its approach to school-led curriculum planning, the Department of Education is not prescriptive in how individual schools or teachers teach the curriculum. Schools enjoy a degree of autonomy in what pedagogical models, resources and materials they use to deliver the curriculum.¹⁰⁸

However, the Department of Education does provide non-compulsory pedagogical resources to assist teachers achieve curriculum outcomes.¹⁰⁹

The Victorian Teaching and Learning Model (VTLM), sets out endorsed teaching approaches and provides school leaders and teachers with a framework to systematically review student outcomes, reflect on the impact of current teaching practices and implement evidence-based strategies to improve student learning. It was introduced in 2019 for use in Victorian government schools.

The VTLM encompasses four components:

- The **practice principles for excellence** in teaching practice (practice principles) are nine signature pedagogies to improve student achievement, motivation and engagement.

¹⁰⁸ Trisha Jha, Research Fellow, The Centre for Independent Studies, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 61.

¹⁰⁹ The Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 22.

- The **pedagogical model** describes what effective teaching looks like in the classroom and helps teachers effectively apply the practice principles.
- The **high-impact wellbeing strategies** are seven practical, evidence-based strategies to improve student wellbeing.
- **High-Impact Teaching Strategies** are a bank of ten instructional practices for improving learning outcomes.¹¹⁰

Additionally, to support teachers deliver the curriculum, the Department provides the following:

- **Literacy Teaching Toolkit**, the **Mathematics Teaching Toolkit** and the **High-Ability Toolkit** are a suite of resources to support teachers to plan and implement the Victorian Curriculum F–10.
- Over 15,000 teaching resources are available on FUSE and Arc, online resource libraries available to state system teachers.
- **Lesson plans** are currently being developed to support the introduction of the revised Victorian curriculum in the key areas of English, mathematics, science and technologies.

The Committee received detailed critiques of the VTLM and suggestions for its reform. These are summarised in Section 3.4.4. During this Inquiry, the Department of Education announced a forthcoming update to VTLM. The Committee hopes stakeholder concerns regarding the model will be considered in its update.

3.4.2 Pedagogical philosophies

Pedagogical models and practices are underpinned by theories of teaching practice. The Committee received considerable evidence regarding ongoing debates concerning these theories and their presentation and endorsement by the Department of Education.

Before discussing the technical concerns with the VTLM, it is useful to briefly delineate some of these competing theories.

Notwithstanding significant divergence in the specific practices that might be ascribed to each approach, the Committee discerned two major ‘schools’ of pedagogical instruction:

- **Inquiry-based learning**, also referred to as student-led/controlled, interest-led inquiry, self-directed/play learning¹¹¹ or, more pejoratively, ‘choose your own adventure’.

¹¹⁰ The Department of Education, Victorian Teaching and Learning Model 2.0, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/victorian-teaching-learning-model/policy>> accessed 9 July 2024.

¹¹¹ Name withheld, *Submission 260*, p. 7.

- **Explicit instruction**, also referred to as teacher-led/controlled learning, structured learning, science of learning.

Dr Greg Ashman, an expert in pedagogy and Deputy Principal at Ballarat Clarendon College and strong advocate for explicit instruction – provided the Committee with an overview of key characteristics and thinking behind each approach. According to Dr Ashman, inquiry-based learning is predicated upon:

- Historical views about the role of education as ‘moulding’ student and student learning experiences.¹¹²
- Theories of learning based on observations of how toddlers learn language.¹¹³
- The view that explicit instruction stifles creativity and that creativity should be an aspiration of good educators.¹¹⁴

Dr Greg Ashman explained to the Committee:

There are many issues facing education in Victoria. Three of these are the quality reading instruction, the quality of mathematics instruction and classroom behaviour and the impact this behaviour has on wellbeing. We need to adopt evidence-based methods for teaching reading, embracing structured literacy and a knowledge-rich curriculum. We need to adopt an explicit approach to teaching mathematics and support this by producing detailed curriculum materials. We need to conduct a classroom behaviour survey to begin identifying good practice and moving to a more pragmatic approach.¹¹⁵

By contrast, explicit instruction entails the following premises:

- All concepts are fully explained and all procedures are fully demonstrated to students before you ask them to apply those concepts or use those procedures.¹¹⁶
- Teachers aren’t instructing students as ‘sage on the stage’, but planning impactful learning experiences that are sensitive to students’ cognitive load limitations.¹¹⁷
- Rejects inquiry-based learning implicit assumptions that figuring something out for oneself is necessary beneficial. Rather, ‘working out for yourself’ rapidly overwhelms the working memory because there are too many things to attend to.¹¹⁸

¹¹² Dr Greg Ashman, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 72.

¹¹³ Dr Greg Ashman, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 72.

¹¹⁴ Dr Greg Ashman, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 73.

¹¹⁵ Dr Greg Ashman, *Submission 170*, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ Dr Greg Ashman, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, pp. 70–71.

¹¹⁷ Professor Joanna Barbousas, Dean of the School of Education, La Trobe University, public hearing, Melbourne, 8 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 52.

¹¹⁸ Greg Ashman, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 71.

The Committee was informed these debates are long running. Rival views have been presented since the 1960s.¹¹⁹ According to stakeholders, explicit instruction approaches predominated up to the 1980s before being overtaken by inquiry-based approaches.¹²⁰

The Committee makes the following general observations on this evidence:

- terms are often loosely defined in these debates, especially what constitutes ‘evidence-based’ or ‘science of learning’
- consistent with school autonomy principles, the Department of Education does not categorically endorse either position; its materials reflect a mix (although stakeholders noted its materials for literacy education were geared towards a balanced literacy/inquiry-based approach)
- teachers will typically use a mix of approaches as they see appropriate in individual student and classroom contexts.

The overwhelming view of stakeholders was that the materials provided by the Department of Education do not present explicit instruction – defined in multiple ways – as an essential component of teaching. Several schools informed the Committee they had ‘switched’ or ‘returned’ to explicit pedagogy.¹²¹ The general thrust of evidence was that while inquiry-based learning has predominated, there is a significant push to revive or mandate explicit instruction.

Stakeholders also pointed to several recent Commonwealth Government-sponsored Inquiries and research that endorsed placing a stronger focus on explicit instruction in schools.

In its 2023 report, *Strong Beginnings*, the Expert Panel on Initial Teacher Education, found that based on latest neurological research on why specific instructional practices work, teachers should be taught:

Effective pedagogical practices: practices including explicit modelling, scaffolding, formative assessment, and literacy and numeracy teaching strategies that support student learning because they respond to how the brain processes, stores and retrieves information.¹²²

In its 2024 report, *Improving Outcomes for All*, the Expert Panel Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System drew on the *Strong Beginnings* report, stating:

The Panel is recommending that there should be a reform focus by governments, school systems and approved authorities to include embedding explicit instruction as part of a whole-school approach to effective teaching in their schools.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Heidi Gregory, Founder, Dyslexia Victoria Support, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 June 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 21.

¹²⁰ Mattew Kell, Bairnsdale Secondary College, public hearing, Bairnsdale, *Transcript*; Jo Rogers, *Submission 114*, p. 2.

¹²¹ Victorian College for the Deaf, *Submission 208*; Kieran Kenneth, *Submission 45*.

¹²² Department of Education, *Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel*, p. 9.

¹²³ Expert Panel Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System, *Improving Outcomes for All*, 2024, p. 59.

Dr Greg Ashman explained to the Committee his approach to using explicit instruction in mathematics, also noting the importance of prepared lesson plans (see Section 3.4.4):

If you saw me teaching maths, you would see me demonstrating how to do a mathematical problem on the board at the front, and then the students would do one immediately on their mini whiteboards. Or I might get them to do a step of the problem, show me, and then I would use that step to do the next bit. It is fully guided; the teacher is guiding the learning ... The way you teach maths is never going to be quite the same as the way you would teach English or history or analyse a source or something like that, but the key principle is that the teacher is there to actively show and to demonstrate. We do not let kids go for a long period potentially doing the wrong thing, making errors that then get embedded and that they fall into and continue.¹²⁴

Jessica McManus, who teaches maths at Lakes Entrance Primary School, told the Committee that explicit instruction had proven especially useful in advancing the learning outcomes of disadvantaged students. Rather than ‘open-ended learning tasks that have multiple entry and exit points’, Ms McManus said it is important students are equipped with tools – ‘hands-on models and manipulatives’ – with which they can approach defined problems:

My belief is kids do not learn how to solve worded problems by looking at, ‘How many ways can I arrange 25 apples?’ They build that knowledge by becoming confident mathematicians, by knowing that they have got the skills to go and solve problems, and we have really, really seen that come through in our NAPLAN results last year, in which in numeracy our 3s and 5s were higher than the state average.¹²⁵

The bulk of evidence the Committee received regarding this issue was in relation to teaching literacy and the so called ‘reading wars’. The Committee covers this issue in detail in Section 3.5.

3.4.3 The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority examination

John Kermond advised the Committee:

For many years the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) has written mathematics examinations that contain errors. Students and teachers should have confidence that the VCAA exams do not contain errors and are not marked using a marking that contains errors. The mathematical mistakes the VCAA makes and refuses to acknowledge undermine student and teacher confidence and trust in the VCAA.¹²⁶

The Herald Sun reported in an article on 17 July 2024:

The 2022 maths errors have since been affirmed in a 2023 review by Dr John Bennett prompted by an open letter by more than 70 leading mathematicians.

¹²⁴ Greg Ashman, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 71.

¹²⁵ Jessica McManus, Lakes Entry Primary School, public hearing, Bairnsdale, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 18.

¹²⁶ John Kermond, *Submission 32*, p. 1.

The 2023 VCE exam period also contained a multitude of errors in maths, chemistry and Chinese language exams and led to some maths students getting a bonus mark. Dr Ross has questioned the role played by the new head of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), Stephen Gniel.¹²⁷

The independent review panel, led by Dr John Bennett AM, submitted their findings in March 2024 and made 6 high-level recommendations for improvement:

1. Increasing the representation of suitably qualified academics on the Mathematics examination development panels.
2. Strengthening the examination-setting process and construction of the Mathematics examination papers to ensure they are of sufficient rigour and quality. This includes simplifying the development of examinations for the 3 Mathematics study designs by requiring multiple-choice questions in all examination papers to have 4 options instead of 5, to bring them into line with the examinations in all other VCE subjects and examinations conducted by other comparable Australian jurisdictions.
3. Strengthening the examination review processes for Mathematics and Chemistry.
4. Updating training and guidance for the in-house editors and desktop publishers involved in the Mathematics and Chemistry examinations.
5. Updating guidance for staff at examination centres to reduce the possibility that students could receive the incorrect examination paper.
6. Publishing examinations material in a timelier manner and updating its policies and processes relating to the management of errors and alleged errors.¹²⁸

FINDING 7: The Committee notes that the Victorian Government has adopted in full the recommendations of the Bennett Review into the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's examination-setting policies and processes for the Victorian Certificate of Education and report back to Parliament on progress.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Victorian Government report to Parliament on the adoption of the recommendations of the Bennett Review within a 12-month period.

3.4.4 Changing the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model

Consistent with concerns regarding whole-school curriculum planning (see Section 3.3.2), the Committee received evidence expressing a variety of concerns over support provided for the VTLM. An overview of the VTLM is provided in Figure 3.14.

In summarising these concerns, the Committee recognises that the Department of Education has flagged its intention to update the VTLM with a new model, VTLM 2.0.

¹²⁷ Susie O'Brien, Damning Review of VCE Specialist Maths Exam Lays Bare Serious Failures, The Herald Sun, 17 July 2024.

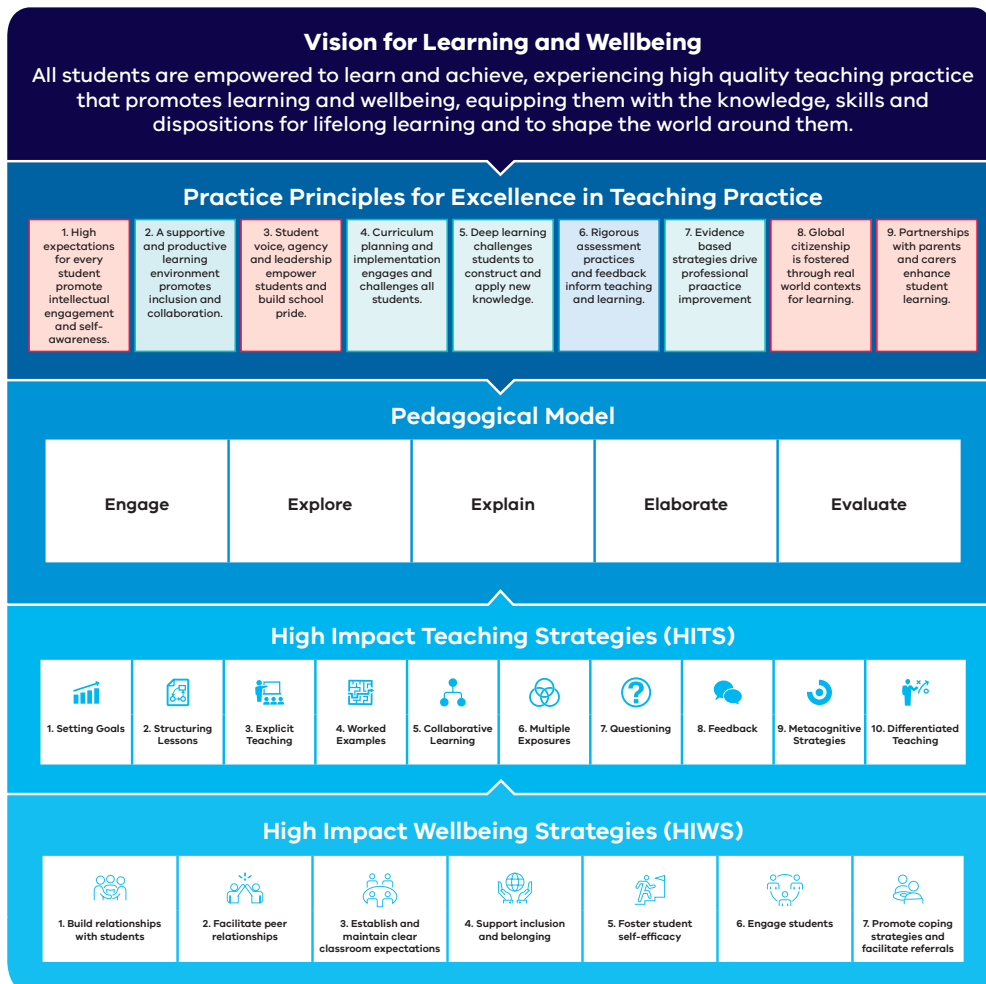
¹²⁸ Independent Review Panel, *Independent Review into the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's Examination-Setting Policies, Processes and Procedures for the Victorian Certificate of Education, Report*, John Bennet AM, 2024, pp. 22–34.

A general concern for stakeholders was that the guidance materials are vague and sometimes misleading as to what constitutes ‘proven teaching methods’.¹²⁹ Stakeholders also noted that explicit instruction is presented only as an option rather than a required method, and that the materials insufficiently deal with phonics.¹³⁰

FINDING 8: Updates to the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model would improve clarity and useability.

FINDING 9: The Department of Education has indicated the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model will be updated.

Figure 3.14 The Victorian Teaching and Learning Model



Source: https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/teachingresources/practice/VTLM_Posters.pdf accessed 8 July 2024.

¹²⁹ Square Peg Round Hole, *Submission 209*, p. 41.

¹³⁰ For example, see La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 3–4; Name Withheld, *Submission 98*, p. 1.

The Centre for Independent Studies provided the Committee with a detailed critique of each element of the VTLM. The Committee includes these here for the benefit of the Department in revising the VTLM.

Practice Principles for Excellence in Teaching Practice:

- They are complex and confusing. There are nine principles and each have between three and four related actions intended to guide teacher practice.
- Some of the actions are specific and clear, others are less clear and not as well supported by evidence or rely on concepts that are not clearly defined and substantiated in literature.
- There is no clear sense of which actions are supported by the strongest evidence and which have the largest demonstrated impact on student outcomes.¹³¹

Pedagogical Model:

- The Pedagogical Model, which is inquiry-based in its approach, contradicts the High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS), which is largely explicit instruction in approach.¹³²
- The Pedagogical Model's five 'E' words are based on the 5E or e5 model of pedagogy, which is a method to support inquiry-based teaching and learning, and therefore obscuring explicit instruction approaches to learning.¹³³ Victorian College for the Deaf informed the Committee the 5E approach, with its reliance on self-evaluation was especially inappropriate for students with a disability, have experienced emotional and social trauma, or have not been immersed in a rich language environment prior to school.¹³⁴
- The CIS proposed an alternative model for teaching published by the Australian Education Research Office in September 2023:
 - 'Enabling' a learning-focused environment with rules and routines, respectful interactions, cultural safety, family engagement
 - 'Planning' a develop a teaching and learning plan for the knowledge students will acquire e.g. define knowledge, chunk content, sequence instruction, plan to assess
 - 'Instruction': manage the cognitive load of learning tasks e.g. explain learning objectives, teach explicitly, scaffold practice, monitor progress, support tiered interventions
 - 'Gradual release': maximise retention, consolidation and application of learning e.g. revisit and review, vary practice, organise knowledge, extend and challenge.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 29.

¹³² Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 31.

¹³³ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 31.

¹³⁴ Victorian College for the Deaf, *Submission 208*, p. 1.

¹³⁵ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 31.

High Impact Teaching Strategies:

- They do not show how the strategies must overlap in order to have maximum effect and do not propose a practical model for lesson-level or unit-level implementation.
- Explicit teaching should be positioned as an overarching pedagogy which contains multiple high-impact strategies. The present menu-like approach of the HITS suggests that explicit teaching is no more effective than the other strategies.¹³⁶

Based on its analysis, the Centre for Independent Studies recommended:

- Removing the Practice Principles from the VTLM.
- Revise the content of the HITS and provide more explicit materials such as unit plans and scope and sequences which show how HITS can be implemented over a series of lessons, not simply in one.
- Replace the Pedagogical Model with more explicit guidance on how to structure lessons, units and sequences, potentially based on the current work of the Australian Education Research Organisation, which more closely reflects the latest developments in learning science.¹³⁷

Comparing Victoria's guidance materials with best practice in other jurisdictions, the Centre for independent Studies contrasted the VTLM with the NSW Department of Education's 'What Works Best' document. In comparison to the guidance material that instructs teachers on how to implement components of the VTLM, the Centre found:

- WWB [What Works Best] 'is much clearer in its evidence base and contextualises advice with research on student performance'.¹³⁸
- Student surveys are used to track use of explicit teaching practices and measure against NAPLAN Numeracy scale scores.¹³⁹
- Compared to the 'explicit instruction' entry in Victoria's HITS, the WWB [What Works Best] document is clearer in its explanation as to what constitutes explicit instruction and provides more detailed implications for classroom practice, (as illustrated in Figure 3.15).¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 31.

¹³⁷ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, pp. 3–4.

¹³⁸ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 33.

¹³⁹ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁰ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 33.

Figure 3.15 Extract from the New South Wales Department of Education's *What Works Best* guide on explicit instruction

Implications for schools and teachers

The evidence strongly supports teachers' use of explicit teaching practices, including:

- telling students what they will be learning, and being clear about the purpose of tasks
- demonstrating or explaining new ideas, and checking that students understand
- giving time for asking and answering questions
- giving specific feedback based on success criteria
- systematically delivering skills, concepts and content knowledge in the right sequence to provide the building blocks towards mastery
- asking students challenging questions, such as 'why, why-not, how, what-if, how does X compare to Y, and what is the evidence for X?'
- assessing and confirming whether students understand what they are learning before progressing
- reviewing learning and explaining how it contributes to related and more complex skills
- providing opportunities for guided, and then independent, practice as students gain proficiency and understanding of concepts and skills.

Consistent use of explicit teaching practices across the whole school supports teachers' use of effective practices. A whole-school approach creates a common language around practice which in turn supports teacher collaboration and strengthens classroom observation practice.

Source: Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 33.

The Victorian Teaching and Learning Model 2.0

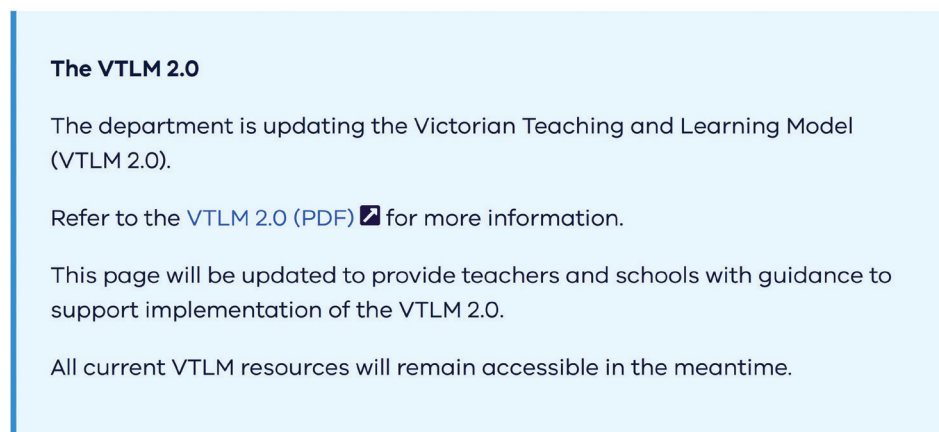
On 13 June 2024, the Department of Education website was updated indicating the VTLM would be reformed with VTML 2.0. (see Figure 3.16)¹⁴¹ The Committee understands these updates will reflect:

- The rollout of the new Victorian F-10 curriculum.
- The announcement by the Victorian Education Minister on 12 June 2024 that from 2025 all teachers would be required to adopt explicit-instruction methods in teaching literacy (see Section 3.5).¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ The Department of Education, *Victorian Teaching and Learning Model 2.0*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/victorian-teaching-learning-model/resources>> accessed 8 July 2024.

¹⁴² The Department of Education, *Victorian Teaching and Learning Model 2.0*.

Figure 3.16 Message on Department of Education website outlining new VTLM 2.0



Source: Department of Education, Victorian Teaching and Learning Model 2.0, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/victorian-teaching-learning-model/resources>> accessed 8 July 2024.

There are few details on the proposed new VTLM 2.0. Based on the graphic describing the new model (see Figure 3.17), the Committee is confident some of the concerns with the existing VTLM will be addressed in the updated version.

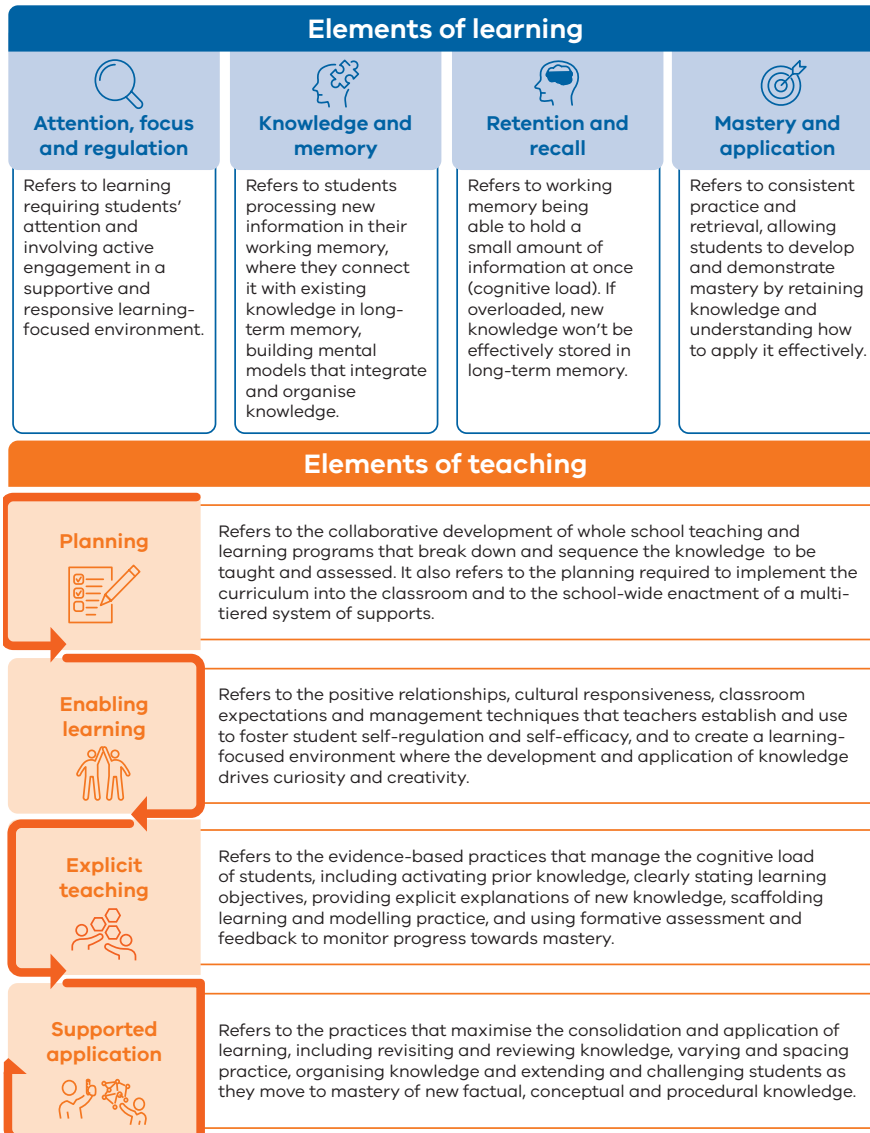
The Committee has provided the foregoing critiques of the old VTLM to provide a measure against which the new VTLM 2.0 can be assessed. It appears to the Committee that some of the details concerns highlighted by the Centre for Independent Studies and other stakeholders have been addressed.

The Committee notes:

- both the ‘practice principles for teaching excellence’ and the ‘pedagogical model’ have been removed and replaced with a simplified ‘elements of learning’ and ‘Elements of Teaching’ modules
- the elements of teaching component resembles the Australian Education Research Office’s alternative pedagogical model, as recommended by the Centre for Independent Studies above.

Further details about VTLM 2.0 need to be provided before the Committee can make a full assessment if the new model addresses stakeholder concerns.

Figure 3.17 The proposed Victorian Teaching and Learning Model 2.0
Victorian Teaching and Learning Model 2.0



Source: Department of Education, Victorian Teaching and Learning Model 2.0, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/victorian-teaching-learning-model/resources>> accessed 8 July 2024.

3.4.5 Lesson plans

I just want the government to supply teachers with quality resources that are aligned to the Victorian Curriculum. We are teachers and not designers.

Bradd Topp-Lowe, *Submission 2*, p. 1.

As noted in Section 3.3.2, high-quality lesson plans are a necessary component for building whole-school curriculum planning capacity in Victorian government schools.

The Department of Education informed the Committee it is in the process of creating detailed lesson plans to provide teachers with materials to more easily prepare lessons.

The Committee received evidence proposing that similar tools to lesson plans should be developed for teachers and schools. Other names used to describe the tools included ‘curriculum banks’ and ‘common curriculum’.¹⁴³ As with whole-school curriculum planning tools, stakeholders making such proposals were concerned with improving learning outcomes. This would be achieved by aiding teachers in developing the scope and sequencing of their classes, and reducing the administrative burdens on teachers in preparing lessons.¹⁴⁴

The Committee heard that high-quality teaching and lesson planning materials are in high demand by teachers across Victoria. Teachers are time poor and it is typical to consult online sources, social media, artificial intelligence apps or other media to help plan lessons.¹⁴⁵

A 2022 Grattan Institute survey of 243 teachers and school leaders across Australia found that half all teachers are planning lessons on their own without access to lesson plans, materials or curriculum planning. It also found teachers typically spend six hours a week sourcing and creating lesson materials. About a quarter of all teachers spend 10 hours a week on these tasks. Only 15% of surveyed Australian teachers have access to a shared bank of high-quality curriculum materials for all their classes, and this is even less likely for teachers in disadvantaged schools.¹⁴⁶

These stresses both impact how students are taught and their learning outcomes. They also represent a significant administrative burden on teachers (see Chapter 5.)

The Grattan Institute has consistently made detailed recommendations for Australian education departments to provide teachers with access to high-quality curriculum materials. This includes the creation of materials where there are gaps and ensuring materials are quality-assured by an independent body.

Key features of the Grattan Institute’s recommendations are:

- Governments should audit available high-quality, comprehensive curriculum materials in Australia – focusing on subject-specific materials that are fully-sequenced across year levels and include detailed lesson-level materials along with student assessments, workbooks and teacher guides – and invest to fill gaps.
- Governments should seek to make a wide range of high-quality options available, so schools have choice about what would work best for their students in their context.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Kieran Kenneth, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 28; Dr Greg Ashman, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 74.

¹⁴⁴ Trisha Jha (CIS), *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 63.

¹⁴⁵ Name Withheld, *Submission 262*, p. 1; Kieran Kenneth, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p.28–29; Katherine Neall, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, pp. 10–11.

¹⁴⁶ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193, attachment 5*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁴⁷ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193, attachment 5*, pp. 15–17; Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, pp. 13–14; Grattan Institute (2022) *Ending the Lesson Lottery*.

The Committee also received evidence from teachers that standardised rubrics should be provided by the Department of Education.¹⁴⁸

Committee comment

The Committee finds that lesson plans are an essential component of lesson planning which need to be provided in conjunction with whole-school curriculum planning.

RECOMMENDATION 8: That the Department of Education, when devising scoping, sequencing, unit plans and lessons plans:

- a. audit the existing curriculum to identify gaps
- b. develop curriculum support material that is relevant and easy for teachers to use
- c. ensure assessment rubrics are standardised, consistent, reflect the subject being taught and are included in all assessment tasks that are developed.

3.4.6 Evaluating pedagogical material

While the Department provides a large and diverse range of material and resources to assist teachers there are little to no evaluations of its materials and resources are made publicly available. Publication of such evaluations, where they exist, are essential for:

- Critical reflection on practices that do and do not improve student learning outcomes.
- Fostering a skilled, professional and empowered workforce (which links with issues of teacher career development and workforce retention see Chapter 5).
- Democratic accountability of the effectiveness of public expenditure on education programs and outcomes.

Illustrating the paucity of such evaluative documentation, the Centre for Independent Studies informed the Committee that:

- Since 2014, only four documents containing evaluations of Department policies and initiatives have been published.
- The \$1.2 billion tutor learning initiative (see Chapter 4) had been the subject of a Deloitte review, but only a 350-word summary was made available. (By contrast, New South Wales has published four reviews into its equivalent initiative. The Victorian Auditor-General's Office has since reviewed Victoria's initiative finding issues with the program's effectiveness.¹⁴⁹)

¹⁴⁸ Name Withheld, *Submission 39*, p. 1; Northcote High School Australian Education Union Sub-Branch Executive, *Submission 179*, p.5; Katherine Neal, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, pp. 10–11.

¹⁴⁹ Trisha Jha, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 6.

- In June 2023, *The Age* reported the Department had commissioned La Trobe University to conduct a report into shifts in literacy pedagogy at six individual schools, yet the report was not published, the study's authors were prevented from publishing findings in an academic journal, and the version provided to *The Age* under a Freedom of Information request was heavily redacted.¹⁵⁰

The Centre for Independent Studies noted it is difficult to know what, if any, evaluation the Department is conducting of its policies, guidelines, initiatives and advice. It stated it is likely there are a large number of evaluations that have been conducted for commercial purposes (such as the tutor learning initiative) and some of these evaluations may be available on the teacher-only part of the Department of Education website. However, it believes that the lack of transparency diminishes good decision-making about pedagogical practices in Victoria.¹⁵¹

The Centre for Independent Studies contrasted this lack of transparency with New South Wales, which has a Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation that acts as a 'clearinghouse for multiple aspects of education data and reporting'.¹⁵² The remit of the NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation includes:

- collecting and maintaining 'data for the whole education and training sector'¹⁵³
- completing 'qualitative and quantitative research on evidence-based practices'¹⁵⁴
- trialling 'new initiatives and evaluating key policies and programs to improve outcomes'¹⁵⁵
- providing access to 'research, data and evaluation for schools, teachers, independent researchers and members of the public'¹⁵⁶
- providing a centralised portal for statistics about education, school numbers, student numbers and attendance.¹⁵⁷

Committee comment

The Committee received recommendations from multiple stakeholders that Victoria should establish a system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of practices in Victorian schools, and for collecting, analysing and publishing data on student learning outcomes in relation to those practices.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁰ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, pp. 43–44.

¹⁵¹ Trisha Jha, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 62.

¹⁵² Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 44.

¹⁵³ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 44.

¹⁵⁴ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 44.

¹⁵⁵ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 44.

¹⁵⁶ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 44.

¹⁵⁷ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 44.

¹⁵⁸ Dyslexia Victoria, *Submission 77*; Grattan Institute, *Submission 193, Attachment 5*.

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Department of Education create an equivalent body to the New South Wales Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation with responsibility for commissioning and publishing research and evaluation on all aspects of Victorian education.

3.5 Teaching literacy

The Committee received repeated advice from stakeholders that the Department of Education should mandate Victorian state schools to teach literacy using explicit instruction approaches, otherwise known as structured literacy. Structured literacy includes, but is not limited to, teaching phonics and conducting systematic synthetic phonics checks.¹⁵⁹

3.5.1 The Government's announcement on phonics and explicit instruction in literacy

On 13 June 2024, a day after this Inquiry's public hearings concluded, the Victorian Minister for Education, Ben Carroll, announced the Victorian Government would 'embed evidence-based teaching and learning in the Education State'.¹⁶⁰

The announced changes include:

All students from Prep to Grade 2 will be taught using a systematic synthetic phonics approach as part of their reading programs, with a minimum of 25 minutes daily explicit teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness.

Systematic synthetic phonics will be a core component of a comprehensive reading program that also includes explicit teaching of oral language, vocabulary, reading fluency and comprehension.¹⁶¹

In the announcement, the Minister said the changes were a response 'to the latest evidence by putting explicit teaching in every classroom'.¹⁶² The Minister cited research by the Australian Education Research Organisation and the Grattan Institute as

¹⁵⁹ Iain Wallace, *Submission 25*; Dyslexia Victoria, *Submission 77*; David Newman, *Submission 86*; Jo Rogers, *Submission 114*; Name Withheld, *Submission 125*; Joseph Sirianni, *Submission 129*; Jo Lamansey, *Submission 134*; La Trobe University, *Submission 136*; Anthony O'Brien, *Submission 139*; Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 142*; Code REaD Dyslexia, *Submission 157*; Dr Greg Ashman, *Submission 170*; Learning Difficulties Australia, *Submission 174*; The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*; Elizabeth Howes, *Submission 180*; Name Withheld, *Submission 216*; Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*.

¹⁶⁰ Premier of Victoria, *Making Best Practice Common Practice In The Education State*, media release, 13 June 2024.

¹⁶¹ Premier of Victoria, *Making Best Practice Common Practice In The Education State*, media release, 13 June 2024. Importantly, the announcement was interpreted in the press as a 'mandate'. See for example, Robyn Grace, *The way children are taught to read in Victoria is about to change*, *The Age*, 13 June 2024. Minister Carrol had evidently flagged the changes at a speech in the weeks prior, and was referred to on the final day of public hearings. See: Heidi Gregory, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 17.

¹⁶² Premier of Victoria, *Making Best Practice Common Practice In The Education State*, media release, 13 June 2024.

informing the decision, for 'showing explicit teaching works best for the largest number of students, particularly capturing those who may be struggling'.¹⁶³

As noted in Section 3.4.4, this announcement appears to be part of a wider rollout of new guidelines for explicit instruction in VTLM 2.0.

The Committee acknowledges that the announcement marks a significant departure in Department of Education policy in two respects:

- The advice on best practice has shifted from balanced literacy approaches (a form of inquiry-based learning) – as reflected in materials in the Victoria's VTLM, HITS and Literacy Teaching Toolkit¹⁶⁴ – to structured literacy (a form of explicit instruction).
- A pedagogical approach is being mandated, whereas the Department mostly prefers schools to operate with autonomy.

The mandate will be welcomed by many stakeholders who were concerned that Victoria's decentralised approach to literacy education 'creates high variability and therefore works against the achievement of consistently high-quality instruction at a system-level'.¹⁶⁵

This variability appears to have increased in recent years. The Committee received anecdotal evidence that a much larger number of schools and school principals had or were in the process of moving away from balanced literacy approaches endorsed in current Department of Education guidance material to structured literacy.¹⁶⁶

Given the Minister's announcement, the Committee sees no reason for making recommendations on mandating structured literacy in the Department's pedagogical guidance materials. In fact, the announcement goes further than what was recommended by some stakeholders, who, aware of Victoria's tradition for school autonomy, had hoped only for narrower or more targeted advice and materials.¹⁶⁷

The Committee makes the observation that this initiative should be rolled out quickly to ensure schools can take up the new explicit instruction techniques and assist struggling students as soon as possible.

Box 3.1 gives an overview of the shifts in pedagogical approaches to literacy in recent decades, referred to by some as 'the reading wars'.

¹⁶³ Premier of Victoria, *Making Best Practice Common Practice In The Education State*, media release, 13 June 2024.

¹⁶⁴ See: Grattan Institute, *The Reading Guarantee*, 2024, p. 48.

¹⁶⁵ La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 2.

¹⁶⁶ Joanna Barbousas, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 50; La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 3. Kieran Kenneth, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 27.

¹⁶⁷ Trisha Jha, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 64. See also, Joanna Barbousas, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 52; Joanna Barbousas, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 49.

Box 3.1 The 'reading wars'

When Education Minister Ben Carroll announced the new literacy policies for Victorian schools, he declared 'the reading wars over'. The Minister was referring to a 50-year debate among educators and experts over the best way to teach literacy in the English-speaking world. The intensity and endurance of the debate has earned the label, the 'reading wars'.

The debate has centred on differing approaches to teaching reading and writing, which reflect variations on the inquiry-based and explicit instruction approaches discussed in section 3.4.2.

The **whole-language approach** – popularised in the 1970s – follows the idea that learning to read is a natural, unconscious process. Teachers use 'predictable' or 'levelled' texts to build students' skills and use meaning cues, such as pictures and context, to help students arrive at the right word. According to critics, while this approach works for some students, it doesn't work for all students. For example, some students can quickly become overwhelmed by how many words they need to memorise. This is problematic because reading is a language-based task, not a visual one.

Structured literacy, sometimes also called the 'science of reading', begins from the premise that unlike speaking, which is a process that humans biologically and naturally 'pick up', reading and writing are cultural inventions which require neural networks to be developed through explicit and systematic instruction. Structured literacy takes into consideration the 'cognitive load' of students at various stages to acquire skills in reading and writing. Structured literacy has been considered by whole-language proponents as a prescriptive and oppressive approach to learning a phenomenon that appears natural. However, proponents say it is 'evidence-based', encompassing education, linguistics and cognitive psychology.

In the early 2000s, the **balanced literacy** approach emerged as a compromise position after three national Inquiries dismissed whole language instruction. Its proponents argue it draws on both sides of the reading debate. Critics say because it takes a 'light-touch' approach to teaching phonics and phonemic awareness balanced literacy is not as effective for all students.

Sources: Grattan Institute (2024) *The Reading Guarantee*, p. 23; Greg Ashman, *Submission 170*; Australian Education Research Organisation (2023) *Introduction to the science of reading*.

3.5.2 Structured literacy in other Australian jurisdictions

The adoption of structured literacy has been a live issue across Australia for some time. Prior to the Minister for Education's June announcement, Victoria was 'virtually alone in not having fully embraced structured literacy'.¹⁶⁸ Victoria now follows all Australian jurisdiction except the Northern Territory in mandating structured literacy in state school classrooms.

Australian governments have been advised to adopt structured literacy pedagogies, including phonics, since at least the 2005 national Inquiry into the teaching of literacy.¹⁶⁹ That Inquiry found 'that direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read'.¹⁷⁰

Since 2018, following consistent findings by bodies such as the Australian Education Research Organisation and the Grattan Institute, most Australian jurisdictions have announced mandated structured literacy, or at a minimum the teaching of phonics and phonics checks, as outlined in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Structured literacy policies in other jurisdictions

State or Territory	Year implemented	Details of policy
South Australia	2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandatory Year 1 phonics screening check at government schools. Established a literacy guarantee unit that provides 3 to 4 days' training and time release for all Year 1 teachers. A team of 30 literacy coaches to work with schools to build teachers' expertise in reading instruction.
New South Wales	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraged structured literacy reading instruction from Foundation to Year 2 across all sectors in an updated syllabus, starting from 2023. Mandated the Year 1 phonics screening check for public schools in 2021. Mandated 'check-in assessments' for Year 3 to 9, mapped onto the NSW syllabus and national literacy learning progressions. Invested in 'decodable' books for all foundation students. Discontinued funding for ineffective reading programs and updated the NSW syllabus to align with evidence.
Western Australia	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 2022, revised the state curriculum to remove references to non-evidence-informed practices. Introduced a 'phonics initiative', including a published list of endorsed phonics programs and assessments. Mandated a Year 1 phonics assessment in public schools (although has not prescribed a uniform test, government makes tracking progress across the state difficult).

¹⁶⁸ Trish Ja, *Transcript of Hearings*, 9 May 2024, p. 56.

¹⁶⁹ Name Withheld, *Submission 98*, p. 1.

¹⁷⁰ Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy*, December 2005.

State or Territory	Year implemented	Details of policy
Tasmania	2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Committed to a 'minimum guarantee' that every Tasmanian primary school will teach according to the evidence by 2026. Introduced Year 1 phonics screening check in every school.
Queensland	2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announced a 'reading commitment' to teach reading consistently using an evidence-informed approach, which includes teaching systematic synthetic phonics, and building comprehension by teaching background knowledge and vocabulary. Investment in comprehensive reading materials for schools and training for teachers.
ACT	2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ACT Literacy and Numeracy Education Expert Panel's final report recommended a structured literacy approach in ACT classrooms. The Minister has accepted these recommendations in principal and is now designing a four-year implementation plan to begin in 2025.

Source: Grattan Institute (2024) *The Reading Guarantee: How to give every child the best chance of success*, p. 40; Bridie Smith (2024) 'Teachers told to ignore Victoria's phonics push as union lashes deputy premier,' *The Age*, 14 June.

3.5.3 Approaches to teaching phonics

In his announcement, the Minister said the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics will be a core component within 'a comprehensive reading program that also includes explicit teaching of oral language, vocabulary, reading fluency and comprehension'. The Committee understands these six components to constitute what is known as the 'Big 6' of a structured literacy approach to teaching reading and writing. The big six are:

- oral language
- phonological awareness
- phonics
- vocabulary
- fluency; and
- comprehension.¹⁷¹

Stakeholders informed the Committee that in debates over literacy pedagogy, there is often overemphasis on the merits of phonics. As La Trobe University's Professor Joanna Barbousas told the Committee, 'phonics is not a pedagogy', but only one important aspect of 'sophisticated language development'.¹⁷²

With this caveat in mind, teaching phonics nonetheless occupied both a central place in the Minister's announcement and in the evidence tendered to this Inquiry.

¹⁷¹ Commonwealth Government Literacy Hub, *The Big Six of Literacy: a guide for families*, <<https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/families/the-big-six-of-literacy-a-guide-for-families>> accessed 2 October 2024.

¹⁷² Joanna Barbousas, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 50.

Phonics can be taught incorrectly

In the Government's announcement, the Minister for Education specified that teachers would be required to use 'a systematic synthetic phonics approach as part of their reading programs'.¹⁷³

Numerous stakeholders in this Inquiry similarly endorsed this specific approach to teaching phonics.¹⁷⁴ However, the Committee also finds it is important the Department of Education develop guidelines to ensure this approach is taught correctly.

The Committee was advised that 'phonics can be done wrong'.¹⁷⁵ Dr Greg Ashman told the Committee that a common misconception of phonics – and poorly practiced phonics – involves 'just sitting down and doing lots of worksheets'.¹⁷⁶

More technically, phonics can be delivered in numerous ways which vary on how the components of word comprehension are taught. Systematic synthetic phonics refers to a method of teaching which first teaches the letter(s)-sound correspondence before moving on to the blending or synthesising of the sounds to pronounce unknown words.¹⁷⁷

The Committee was provided with other examples of teaching phonics which do not fit this systematic synthetic approach:

- Embedded /Analytic phonics looks at the whole word then breaks it into letters and sounds that allow children to memorise whole words without knowing the letter-sound correspondences. This 'incidental phonics' (sometimes called implicit phonics) does not teach synthesising (blending) skills nor effective spelling of words.¹⁷⁸
- Onset (initial sound)–rime (following sounds) looks at the whole word first, then the onset as one unit and the rime as one unit.¹⁷⁹

La Trobe University argues that such distinctions in approaches to phonics are not clear in the Department of Education's present version of the Literacy Learning Toolkit. It acknowledged this may be intentional, in that the Department did not prescribe a particular teaching approach, however added that 'greater clarity would be helpful with making extrapolations to different phonics teaching approaches and their relative merits'.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷³ Premier of Victoria, *Making Best Practice Common Practice In The Education State*, media release, 13 June 2024.

¹⁷⁴ Jo Rodgers, *Submission 114*; Jo Lomasney, *Submission 134*, p. 1; Code REaD, *Submission 157*, p. 1; Disability Advocacy Victoria, *Submission 178*, p. 12; Dyslexia Victoria, *Submission 77*, p. 1.

¹⁷⁵ Dr Greg Ashman, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 72.

¹⁷⁶ Dr Greg Ashman, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 72.

¹⁷⁷ Jo Rodgers, *Submission 114*, p. 7.

¹⁷⁸ Jo Rodgers, *Submission 114*, p. 7.

¹⁷⁹ Jo Rodgers, *Submission 114*, p. 7.

¹⁸⁰ La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 4.

Given the systematic synthetic phonics approach is now mandated, it is essential the Department of Education suitably amends its guidance materials.

Year 1 phonics screening checks

A key aspect of teaching phonics are periodic phonics screening checks.

Phonics checks are an assessment of students' decoding skills (using knowledge of phonics) by presenting them with a series of words and made-up words. Made-up words are included in phonics checks to determine whether students are reading the words (decoding). If they have been memorising or guessing words, they will not be able to read the made-up words because they have never seen these words before.¹⁸¹

The Commonwealth Government provides a best-practice 40-word phonics check through its Literacy Hub. The tests involve 40 words of increasing difficulty, with 20 real words and 20 made-up. They typically take five to seven minutes and are conducted one-on-one with a teacher. The tests are recommended for Term 1 or Term 3 and can be used to assess Year 1 and Year 2 students, as well as older struggling readers.¹⁸²

This version of the phonics check has been adopted in the mandated testing in South Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania.¹⁸³

In his announcement, the Minister for Education did not indicate how phonics would be tested. Currently, Victoria mandates the English Online Interview assessment in Foundation and Year 1. The phonics component of the English Online Interview assessment only includes 6-to-10 words and pseudo (made-up) words.¹⁸⁴

Numerous stakeholders consider the current Victorian test an ineffective assessment of students' decoding phonics skills. Compared to the Commonwealth Government 40-word test, stakeholders say the Victorian English Online Interview test takes an inadequate sample of a student's knowledge and does not enable an informed decision to identify which students require additional support.¹⁸⁵

The test assesses students' use of predictable picture-book texts, which the Committee heard encourages guessing rather than reading.¹⁸⁶ La Trobe University told the Committee small testing samples may also generate too many false positives and false negatives for the data to be the valid and reliable early warning system that these tests should be.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸¹ Code REaD, *Submission 157*, p. 9.

¹⁸² Commonwealth Government Literacy Hub, *Year 1 Phonics Check*, <<https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/plan-teach-and-assess/year-1-phonics-check>> accessed 2 October 2024.

¹⁸³ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁴ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, pp. 11–12.

¹⁸⁵ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 38; Trisha Jha, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 57; Code REaD, *Submission 157*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁶ Victorian Department of Education, *English Online Interview (EOI) Guide*, 2023, pp. 12–13.

¹⁸⁷ La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 4.

Numerous stakeholders recommended that Victoria should implement a 40-word test during Year 1 across all government, Catholic and independent schools in Victoria.¹⁸⁸ (Dyslexia Victoria recommended testing begin in kindergarten.¹⁸⁹)

Achievement levels and targeted outcomes

The Australian Government Literacy Hub reports that an expected achievement level in Year 1 phonics screening tests is correctly identifying at least 28 out of 40 items. This is a guide for what is reasonable to expect for Year 1 students in the second half of the year, in line with the requirements of the Australian Curriculum.¹⁹⁰

South Australia and New South Wales uses this measure to determine the proportion of students achieving the expected achievement level. The results these jurisdictions have achieved since introducing mandated Year 1 phonics screening tests are shown in Tables 3.3 and 3.4.

Table 3.3 South Australia Year 1 phonics screening tests, 2018–2023

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Percentage of students who scored at or above the expected achievement score	43%	52%	63%	67%	68%	71%
Number of participating students	13,817	13,899	13,817	13,184	12,774	12,196

Source: South Australian Government, *Phonics screening check fact sheet*, 2018–2023.

Table 3.4 New South Wales Year 1 phonics screening tests, 2021–2023

	2021	2022	2023
Percentage of students who scored at or above the expected achievement score	56.7%	55%	59%
Number of participating students	66,385	65,045	64,719

Source: New South Wales Government, *Year 1 Phonics Screening Check (2021–2023)*.

The New South Wales Government said the decline in 2021 to 2022 scores may reflect difficulties in testing dates associated with Covid-19 lockdowns.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, pp. 11–12; Code REaD, *Submission 157*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁹ Heidi Gregory, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 21.

¹⁹⁰ Commonwealth Government Literacy Hub, *Year 1 Phonics Check Administration Guide*, 2020, p. 7.

¹⁹¹ NSW Government, *Year 1 Phonics Screening Check 2022 update*, 2023, p. 1.

The Grattan Institute recommended students who do not meet the ‘expected level’ in Year 1 should be re-assessed in Year 2.¹⁹² It also recommended the Victorian government set a target that at least 90% of students who do re-sit the test achieve the ‘expected level’ in Year 2, with appropriate interim targets established once baseline data is collected. This is based on evidence from England, where 90% of students met the ‘expected level’ by the end of Year 2 within four years of introducing its phonics screening check.¹⁹³

The Grattan Institute also recommended that these results be published in a standalone annual report on Victorian government school learning outcomes. This proposal for an annual report is returned to in Section 3.6.2.

Reviewing alternative literacy assessments

As part of its transition towards mandated structured literacy and phonics testing, the Department of Education will need to review current literacy testing tools, which may be incompatible with the methods and goals of structured literacy.

The Committee received evidence in relation to:

- **Running Records:** which are an assessment tool that allows educators to observe what readers do as they are reading aloud and problem-solving, using a variety of texts. The Department advises this tool should only be administered by teachers with adequate training.¹⁹⁴ Stakeholders identified the Department’s endorsement of this tool as reflecting its support for a balanced literacy approach.¹⁹⁵
- **Reading Recovery:** which is an early literacy intervention for Year 1 students struggling to read and write, where students work one-on-one with a trained specialist in addition to classroom work to gain confidence reading and writing. According to Reading Recovery Australia, students should discover their own strategies for reading and writing.¹⁹⁶ Advocacy groups for students with learning difficulties told the Committee the program was not ‘evidence-based’, the effects were not long lasting, and shown to be not suitable students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties.¹⁹⁷
- **Levelled Literacy Intervention [also known as Fountas & Pinnell levelling assessments]:** La Trobe University informed the Committee that in its dealings with schools and teachers moving away from balanced literacy, it heard that Department of Education leaders had continued to pressure using the balanced literacy-aligned Fountas and Pinnell levelling assessments for progress monitoring

¹⁹² Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, pp. 11–12.

¹⁹³ Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 12.

¹⁹⁴ Arc, *Literacy Teaching Toolkit*, <<https://arc.educationapps.vic.gov.au/learning/sites/literacy/1786>> accessed 30 September 2024.

¹⁹⁵ Joanna Barbousas, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 50.

¹⁹⁶ Reading Recovery Australia, *What is reading recovery* <<https://www.readingrecovery.org.au/about>> accessed 30 September 2024.

¹⁹⁷ Code REaD, *Submission 157*, p. 8; Learning Difficulties Australia, *Submission 174*, p. 11; Dyslexia Victoria Support, *Submission 77*, p. 6.

(especially for comprehension assessment). La Trobe University informed the Committee that ‘Fountas and Pinnell is not an evidence-based approach to reading instruction and support’, with one study finding ‘its placement of students is no more accurate than a coin toss’.¹⁹⁸

3.5.4 Supporting teachers and schools through the mandated changes

As noted at beginning of in this Chapter, Victorian state schools are largely free to choose what they consider to be the most appropriate pedagogical methods.

The Minister’s announcement marks a departure from this norm. While the mandated approach will be welcomed by many stakeholders, the Committee recognises that teachers and schools with longstanding experience deciding on the most appropriate learning approaches for their classroom may find this announcement challenging in several respects.

Travis Eddy, Principal at Kennington Primary School near Bendigo, told the Committee that teachers typically draw on a range of approaches to decide the most effective strategies for each student or classroom circumstance:

At the moment there is that narrative around whole language versus phonics instruction within schools. We try to utilise our teachers as the people who pick and choose what they teach and how they use that with kids. We have a teaching and learning model, and within that model we would expect our teachers to make equitable decisions for what children need. So if a child needs phonics instruction, the teacher should be skilled enough to give that phonics instruction. If a student does not need that phonics instruction and needs whole language, they should be skilled enough to do that.¹⁹⁹

Such views were presented more forcefully by the Australian Education Union in response to the Minister’s announcement. The AEU claimed that explicit instruction in reading and writing was already occurring in many classrooms, that the changes were not properly consulted and would compound the workload faced by teachers, as well as demonstrated a lack professional respect.²⁰⁰ (However, the Committee notes reporting that many teachers do not agree with the AEU stance.²⁰¹)

The Committee was also informed teachers and educational leaders may find it challenging to ‘change the manner in which they have been teaching, or instructing

¹⁹⁸ La Trobe University, *Submission 136*, p. 4; Code REaD, *Submission 157*, p. 8.

¹⁹⁹ Travis Eddy, Principal, Kennington Primary School and Bendigo Deaf Facility, public hearing, Bendigo, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 20.

²⁰⁰ Australian Education Union, *AEU Branch Council demands consultation on teaching announcements*, media release, 2024; Bridie Smith ‘Teachers told to ignore Victoria’s phonics push as union lashes deputy premier’, *The Age*, 14 June 2024, <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/teachers-told-to-ignore-government-s-phonics-push-as-union-lashes-deputy-premier-20240614-p5ilvh.html>> accessed 14 July 2024.

²⁰¹ Caroline Schelle, ‘Teachers slam their own union over ‘outrageous’ phonics stance’, *The Age*, 26 June 2024, <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/teachers-slam-their-own-union-over-outrageous-phonics-stance-20240624-p5jod0.html>> accessed 14 July 2024.

their primary school to teach, for the last 20 or 30 years, because there will need to be an acknowledgement that perhaps what they have been doing previously was not right'.²⁰²

In South Australia and New South Wales, the mandated changes to the teaching of reading and writing have been accompanied by significant departmental support.

The Committee heard that South Australia made its changes under a Literacy Guarantee, which included:

- Establishing a Literacy Guarantee Unit, which employs about 30 literacy coaches with expertise in phonics and teaching students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties. The Unit provides intensive coaching to classroom teachers, advice and support in the teaching of reading in identified primary schools. The unit provides three statewide conferences for teachers each year.
- Provision of high-quality curriculum materials for schools.
- Professional development for teachers.
- Screening tools to identify students at risk of not reaching grade level standards.²⁰³

Other states also provided major support as part of their changed approach to literacy education:

- New South Wales invested in 'decodable' books for all foundation students and training for early year teachers on effective reading instruction and systematic synthetic phonics.
- Queensland provided a \$35 million investment for reading materials for schools and training for teachers.
- Western Australia introduced a 'phonics initiative', which includes a published list of 'endorsed' phonics programs and assessments.²⁰⁴

Committee comment

The Committee welcomes the mandated changes to teaching literacy in Victorian state schools announced by the Minister for Education. It finds these announced changes are consistent with current best-practice evidence on teaching reading and writing.

The Committee also acknowledges that in making these commitments, the Victorian Governments is fulfilling obligations that will be required under the new funding agreements with the Australian Government outlined in the *Better Fairer Schools Agreement* (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 7 for an overview of the agreement).

²⁰² Amelia Matlock, Vice Chairperson, Code REaD Dyslexia Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 June 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 17.

²⁰³ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 37.

²⁰⁴ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 38.

Based on experience and best-practice in other jurisdictions that have already mandated structured literacy in state education, the Committee finds there are a number of measures the Department of Education can take to effectively implement the changes and support teachers and schools.

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Department of Education audit and review existing literacy assessment and student diagnostic tools, ceasing those not consistent or complementary with structured-literacy approaches.

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Department of Education:

- a. introduce a 40-word Phonics Check (including 20 pseudo words) in Year 1 in all Victorian Government schools in line with the Commonwealth Phonics Check
- b. set a target of 90% of students to reach the expected level in phonics checks by the end of Year 2
- c. the phonics check should adopt national best practice in line with national phonics checks.

RECOMMENDATION 12: That the Department of Education look to other states that have mandated phonics testing and structured literacy pedagogies and ensure it offers the same level of support to Victorian teachers, with a view to implementing these updated teaching methods within the next two years.

3.6 Assessment

Assessment regimes are the third pillar of education delivery in Victorian schools. The Victorian state education system includes the following assessment resources and requirements (some of these requirements relate to both government and non-government schools):

- Government school teachers can access free assessment tools hosted by the VCAA through the **Digital Assessment Library** and the **Insight Assessment Platform**.
- All students in Foundation and Year 1 must complete the **English Online Interview** assessment to enable to early detection of literacy learning difficulties.
- Students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 participate in the **NAPLAN assessment**.
- VCE students complete VCE assessments, including the Year 12 **General Achievement Test**

- Student learning progress, based on teacher judgement, is reported twice a year to parents and carers.²⁰⁵

The Committee received a wide range of responses regarding this assessment regime. Some concerns included:

- The suitability of VCE as a form of end-of-school examination, including the ‘culture of competitiveness’ it fosters.²⁰⁶
- The performance of the VCAA regarding mistakes found in VCE exams.²⁰⁷
- Concerns with the aims, practices and uses of NAPLAN testing.²⁰⁸

While acknowledging the importance of these viewpoints, the Committee did not receive substantial evidence to make findings or recommendations on these issues.

3.6.1 Expanding metrics of student achievement

The Committee also acknowledges a growing trend reflecting in the evidence received for a wider set of metrics and forms of assessment to capture student achievement that better reflect the diversity of student challenges and experiences.²⁰⁹

In its submission to the *Better Fairer* review of the National Schools Reform Agreement Children and Young People with Disability Australia recommended that measuring student outcomes should be expanded to include the following to provide a greater insight into the learning outcomes of students with disabilities:

- student voice and satisfaction
- student wellbeing
- attendance
- learning and engagement
- educational adjustments
- educational achievement
- post-school transition and outcomes
- accessibility, support and adjustments
- funding provided and spent.²¹⁰

²⁰⁵ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, pp. 22–23.

²⁰⁶ See, for example, *Submission 153*; *Submission 220*; Cindy Growcott, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 April 2024, p. 3.

²⁰⁷ John Kermond, *Submission 32*, p. 1; Mia Fenton, *Submission 122*, p. 1.

²⁰⁸ Name Withheld, *Submission 42*; Ahmed El, *Submission 106*; Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*.

²⁰⁹ Brotherhood of St Laurance, *Submission 202*, p. 5.

²¹⁰ Children and Young People with Disability Australia, *Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, 2023, p. 15.

The Victorian Student Representative Council made similar recommendations in its 2023 Congress Report, based on student perspectives, which it submitted as evidence to the Committee. The Schools Representative Council suggests that success at school should be measured by personal progress and achievement, in addition to test scores.²¹¹ The Victorian Council of Social Service supports this advice.²¹²

The Committee received evidence of various models being developed that incorporate alternative measures of student achievement. These include:

- The Mastery Transcript (Mastery Transcript Consortium Australia)
- New Metrics (University of Melbourne)
- Edapt (Edapt Education, Melbourne).²¹³

However, the Committee did not receive evidence on how these alternative metrics could be incorporated or used within the Department of Education's existing assessment regimes.

FINDING 10: There is a growing view among students, teachers and education experts that alternative, non-academic student outcomes measures should be incorporated in school assessment to provide a broader reflection of student achievement.

3.6.2 Reporting student outcomes

The Committee did receive substantial evidence that the Department of Education should revise how it reports on Victorian students' learning outcomes and the targets it sets for those outcomes. Stakeholders informed the setting and reporting on ambitious targets are essential to lifting learning outcomes results.

This evidence was consistent with findings of the 2024 VAGO Inquiry, *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement Outcomes for Victorian Students*.

Education State targets

The Education State targets are part of the Education State reforms package introduced by the Victorian Government in 2015, which aimed at building 'an education system that produces excellence and reduces the impact of disadvantage'. The Government has invested \$10.8 billion in this initiative.

²¹¹ Victorian Student Representative Council, *VicSRC 2023 Congress Report, 2023*, p. 10; (appendix in Victorian Student Representation Council, *Submission 198*.)

²¹² Victorian Council of Social Services, *Submission 237*, p. 13.

²¹³ The Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 202*, p. 5.

The Education State reforms identified four target areas with outcomes set for each area (Table 3.5):

Table 3.5 Education State targets

Area	Measurable outcomes
Learning for life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over the next five years for Year 5, and the next ten years for Year 9, 25% more students will be reaching the highest levels of achievement in reading and mathematics. A 33% increase in the proportion of 15-year-old students reaching the highest levels of achievement in scientific literacy. More students achieving the highest levels of achievement in critical and creative thinking More students excelling in the arts.
Happy, healthy and resilient kids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A 20% increase in students who report high resilience. The proportion of kids doing physical activity five times a week increase by 20%.
Breaking the link	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By 2025, there will be a 15% reduction in the gap in average achievement between disadvantaged and other students in Year 5 and Year 9 reading. By 2025, the proportion of students leaving education during Years 9 to 12 will halve.
Pride and confidence in our schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing community pride and confidence in government schools.

Source: Premier of Victoria (2015) Education State: Ambitious Targets For Schools To Prepare Kids For Work And Life, Press release, 14 September; VAGO (2024), Education State: Ambitious Targets For Schools To Prepare Kids For Work And Life, pp. 7–8.

The Education State reforms continue to be a key framework of education policymaking, occupying a significant place on the Department of Education website.²¹⁴

The Department began reporting progress towards Education State targets in 2016 in its annual reports. These reports compared that year's achievement to the 2025 targets. However, as VAGO found, the Department of Education stopped reporting on the target outcomes in 2019. It has not updated information about progress since then.²¹⁵

VAGO concluded that based on available reporting and NAPLAN data, the Department is not on track to make the significant improvement in student outcomes sought by the Education State targets.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Department of Education, *The Education State*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/education-state>> accessed 16 July 2024.

²¹⁵ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement Outcomes for Victorian Students*, 2024, p. 25.

²¹⁶ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement Outcomes for Victorian Students*, 2024, p. 11.

Numerous stakeholders wrote to the Committee expressing support for the general principles and ambitions outlined in the Education State targets.²¹⁷ Along with VAGO, several recommended improvements that could be made to the targets:

- The targets include students in both government and non-government schools. The Department should set targets explicitly and solely for government schools, given these are the schools it manages.²¹⁸
- The targets should be updated to reflect the changed proficiency scale now used to report NAPLAN results.²¹⁹
- The targets should incorporate goals of the Mparntwe Education Declaration.²²⁰

Setting ambitious targets

The Grattan Institute recommended that Victoria adopt ambitious new learning outcome targets and report on them annually. Similarly, recommendations were also made by the Productivity Commission in its 2022 study report of the National School Reform Agreement.²²¹

There is now stronger alignment between NAPLAN proficiency scales and the reporting methods of international tests such as PISA. The Grattan Institute sees the NAPLAN proficiency categories as a good measure to set targets and monitor system performance over time.²²²

Grattan recommends that the Victorian Government should set a long-term goal of ensuring that at least 90% of students meet this new ‘proficiency’ benchmark (i.e. exceeding and strong) in reading and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9. It argues that ‘students who meet the “reasonable expectation” of achievement at each of these year levels are more likely to remain on track with their learning as academic demands increase from year to year’.²²³

The Grattan Institute argue that setting such ambitious targets have been effectively implemented in other jurisdictions (see Box 3.2). It also recommended that the Victorian government closely track progress towards these goals, producing a stand-alone annual report to the Victorian Parliament that tracks progress against the specific targets ‘in order to create greater political and policy focus on the reforms needed and clearer accountability’. The annual report should include:

- performance of the overall state school sector
- performance for student cohorts of interest.²²⁴

²¹⁷ For example, Victorian Council of Social Services, *Submission 237*, p. 13.

²¹⁸ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement Outcomes for Victorian Students*, 2024, p. 3.

²¹⁹ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 9.

²²⁰ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 11.

²²¹ Productivity Commission, *Review of the National School Reform Agreement Study report (Overview)*, p. 18.

²²² Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 11.

²²³ Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 11.

²²⁴ Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 12.

Committee comment

The Committee fully appreciates that measure of academic achievement, such as NAPLAN, do not provide a full picture of students learning outcomes in Victoria. This is either because they don't capture sufficient information about certain cohorts (such as students with disabilities) or because some groups of students have low NAPLAN participation rates.²²⁵

The Committee also recognises the calls for more comprehensive learning outcomes measure that better reflect the diversity of student achievements at school.

Nonetheless, the Committee is also of the view that schools maintain a primary function to advance the learning outcomes of young people and that high targets can help drive those outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 13: The Victorian Government revise and update the Education State targets to reflect new NAPLAN scale.

RECOMMENDATION 14: The Department of Education resume publishing progress on Education State targets.

²²⁵ Victorian Council of Social Services, *Submission 237*, p. 12.

Box 3.2 Overseas examples of setting higher achievement standards

In making the case that Victoria should set setting ambitious targets to lift NAPLAN proficiency rates, the Grattan Institute presented case studies of international jurisdictions where setting high achievement targets had significantly lifted learning outcomes.

Ireland

In 2011, the Irish National Strategy for Numeracy and Literacy set specific targets to improve reading and mathematics, in particular setting targets to lift poor performers and stretch high achievers. Later, Ireland added targets for closing the gap between students from disadvantaged and advantaged schools. The strategy aimed to improve reading and numeracy performance, as measured by Ireland's national assessments and by PISA, by five percentage points over nine years. In the event, Ireland overshot most of its original targets in half the time. This was reflected in improved performance against other international benchmarks. In the 2011 PIRLS reading assessment, 85% of Irish Year 4 students were identified as proficient readers. By 2016, the proportion had improved to 89%, pushing Ireland's international ranking up from 10th place to 4th place.

Ontario

Ontario, in Canada, set a bold goal to lift the proportion of Grade 6 students meeting the 'expected level' of reading, writing, and mathematics performance from 54% in 2003 to 75% in 2008. While Ontario did not meet its 2008 target, by 2014 it had reached 72% – an 18 percentage point improvement in 11 years.

Mississippi

Mississippi, one of the poorest states in the United States of America, also significantly improved student performance through a concerted approach to lifting the quality of reading instruction. While it did not adopt specific performance targets, it lifted the proportion of students proficient in reading in Grade 4 from 21% in 2013 to 31% in 2022 – a 10 percentage point improvement over ten years.

Source: Grattan Institute (2024) *The Reading Guarantee*, pp. 37, 47.

Chapter 4

Targeted supports

4.1 Overview

Chapter 3 highlighted that Victoria’s relatively high and stable learning outcomes are not consistent across all student cohorts. Students from ‘priority cohorts’ face education inequities that can significantly impact the learning outcomes of those students. Some of those impacts were reflected in NAPLAN data presented in Chapter 3, Section 3.2.

This Chapter turns attention to targeted supports that can help assist those cohorts. In its submission to the Committee, the Department of Education presented its target support initiatives under seven programs:

- literacy and numeracy support
- students with disability
- high-ability students
- pathways to further learning and work
- rural and regional students
- Koorie students
- students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The first program, literacy and numeracy support, refers not to a single cohort of students but a set of initiatives available to all students requiring added assistance in these learning areas. The Committee understands that these initiatives are especially utilised by students from priority cohorts.

This Chapter examines each of these support programs.

4.1.1 Defining priority equity cohorts

The National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) (see Chapter 7), which sets the goals that are tied to funding of the education system defines ‘priority equity cohorts’ as including:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- students living in regional rural and remote locations

- students with a disability
- students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.¹

Defining these cohorts is important. They inform the funding loadings that are applied to calculating the Schooling Resource Standard (see Chapter 7). As the NSRA ties goals to funding, they also inform the kind of targeted supports state governments implement to fulfil their obligations under the NSRA.

The targeted supports outlined by the Department of Education broadly align with these categories.

The Commonwealth Government recently undertook a review to inform the next round of agreements with the states and territories under the National School Reform framework titled *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*. In submissions to the review, some stakeholders commented that the current definitions of ‘priority equity cohorts’ are too narrow and imprecise to identify and target students from different disadvantaged backgrounds. This is particularly the case of the category ‘educationally disadvantaged backgrounds’.²

The Productivity Commission, in its 2023 study report of the NSRA, found that:

more than half of underperforming students are not from one of these cohorts (at least, not the priority equity cohorts identified in the NAPLAN data). Indeed, the majority (85 per cent) of students who identify as being from a priority equity cohort, achieve at or above national minimum standards. As such, the underlying causes of students falling behind cannot be wholly attributed to the barriers uniquely or disproportionately affecting students from priority equity cohorts.³

[Underperforming here means not achieving national minimum standard on the old NAPLAN scale, see Chapter 3, Section 3.2].

Both the Productivity Commission and the Commission for Children and Young People have recommended the next NSRA agreement should consider including the following cohorts as priority equity cohorts:

- students living in out-of-home care
- students with English as an additional language or dialect background
- students in youth detention
- refugee students.⁴

¹ Council of Australian Governments, *National School Reform Agreement*, 2023, p. 8.

² Save Our Schools, *Submission to the Review of the National Schools Reform Agreement*, 2023, pp. 3–5.

³ Productivity Commission, *National School Reform Agreement: study report*, 2023, p. 104. Cited to this Committee by VCOS, *Submission 237*, p. 14.

⁴ Productivity Commission, *Overview of National School Reform Agreement: study report*, 2023, p. 36. The Commission for Children and Young People’s 2024 report, *Let us learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care*, p. 91, also endorsed including children-out-of-care in the priority cohorts.

Stakeholders to the *Better and Fairer* review recommended further expanding the cohorts to include:

- unaccompanied students experiencing homelessness
- students who are mature minors and living independently.⁵

Stakeholders making submissions to this Inquiry similarly recommended refining the definitions of priority cohorts. Launch Housing, for example, recommended that the Department of Education ‘recognise and prioritise children and young people experience homelessness as a unique group that require tailored and intensive support to overcome significant educational disadvantage’.⁶

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) highlighted a broad range of ‘well-established factors that are associated with poorer student outcomes’. These include:

- Exposure to adverse experiences in childhood or adolescence:
 - racism, stigma, and discrimination
 - exposure to family violence, abuse, or neglect
 - the death of a family member
 - having a family member with a mental health or substance abuse problem
 - instability due to parental separation
 - having a household member who is incarcerated
 - experiencing traumas linked to poverty such as not having enough food to eat, homelessness or unstable housing.
 - living in out of home care.
- Coming from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background
- Living rural and remote locations; and
- Living with a disability.⁷

Such experiences were reflected in anecdotal evidence provided to the Committee. Cindy Growcott, a teacher with over 20 years’ experience in Bendigo, highlighted the kinds of pressures faced by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds that are not necessarily captured by the priority equity cohort groupings:

There are a lot of other pressures on students that mean that education takes a back seat sometimes. Poverty is a huge issue. Some kids have to work. I would have kids that were working until midnight at Macca’s the night before and then rocking up to school

⁵ Hester Hornbrook Academy, *Submission to Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, 2023, p. 7.

⁶ Launch Housing, *Submission 173*, p. 2.

⁷ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 237*, pp. 13–14.

the next day. You are expecting them to concentrate, and they have not had breakfast and they are exhausted. That does not help with the levels of engagement as well. Some parents, I think, do not value education, and so then that continues on through the next generation. It is just somewhere to go when they feel like it, but they are not really getting the best or the most out of the opportunities that are provided for them.⁸

It is beyond the scope of this Inquiry to recommend how priority cohorts are defined in the NSRA. The Committee does find, however, that the Department can expand the scope of cohorts to which it provides targeted supports. For this reason, the final section of this Chapter provides evidence of how cohorts not identified in the Department's submission might also be supported to improve their learning outcomes.

Following advice of VCROSS, the Committee also acknowledges that in being identified as belonging to 'equity cohorts', such students:

find themselves the subject of deficit discourse and a culture of low expectations not experienced by other students. This is having a damaging effect on their learning and wellbeing. It is felt particularly acutely by First Nations students, students with disability and some migrant groups.⁹

Accordingly, VCROSS recommends that the education system provides all students with the support they require to succeed in ways that does not stigmatise or perpetuate disadvantage. To this end, the Committee reinforces the importance of establishing high learning outcome targets that apply to all students, with the aim of lifting the outcomes of all cohorts.¹⁰

4.1.2 School zoning

School zoning was identified as an impediment to learning outcomes for students in various target cohorts. Parents of students in target cohorts or with special needs who sent their children to a state schools noted a 'postcode lottery' as to whether their child received adequate support.¹¹

In the absence of ensuring all schools provide adequate support and services, stakeholders recommended a shorter-term fix would be to allow for more flexible attendance of schools outside zoned areas, or greater advice from the Department of Education as to how students in need might best attend an alternative school.

Stakeholders note that presently, 'applying for exemptions [from zoning] is arduous and fraught with no guaranteed outcome'.¹²

⁸ Cindy Growcott, Teacher, Virtual School Victoria, public hearing, Bendigo, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, pp. 3-4.

⁹ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 237*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 237*, p. 14.

¹¹ Ameila Matlock, Vice Chairperson, Code REaD Dyslexia Network, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 June 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, pp. 15-16.

¹² Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, pp. 11-12.

Examples of students that would benefit reviewed zoning restrictions include:

- Aboriginal students, who are highly dispersed across Victoria, and whose carers who may wish for their children to attend a school with a larger Aboriginal student population and/or dedicated Aboriginal Programs and support than available within their zone. Families and carers report that Department of Education will argue all schools are set up to support Aboriginal students, however this has not been the experience of many families the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency support, including for children in out of home care.¹³
- Students in out of home care, who are prevented from attending their school of choice, impacting on their engagement in education.¹⁴
- LGBTIQ+ children and young people, as well as children from rainbow families, who wish to move between schools outside their residential address zone to avoid disruption or stress, especially where homophobic or transphobic bullying, harassment or discrimination has occurred.¹⁵

Additionally, the Committee received evidence from parents whose children had suffered bullying, assault and school-based trauma but given zoning restrictions, found no option but to continue to send their child to the same school.¹⁶

Committee comment

The Committee believes that exemptions for school zoning should be easier to access for equity cohorts such as indigenous students, those in out of home care, LGBTIQ+ children who face discrimination. Students who had suffered serious bullying or assault should also be considered. The focus of the Department should be to ensure that these students have the right environment to keep them engaged in school and reach their potential.

RECOMMENDATION 15: That the Victorian Government conduct a review into school zoning, with a view to developing a system that promotes safety and inclusion, and as a consequence better learning outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION 16: That the Victorian Government review the criteria for school zoning exemptions to make them more accessible to equity cohorts.

¹³ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, pp. 11–12.

¹⁴ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, pp. 11–12.

¹⁵ Rainbow Families, Switchboard, *Submission 274*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Name withheld, *Submission 37*, p. 1; Square Peg Round Whole, *Submission 209*, p. 31; Craig Thomson, *Submission 167*, p. 6.

Case Study 4.1 Alisha's story

Alisha is a mother of four children; three of her children have been diagnosed with autism-spectrum disorder.

Alisha has found it challenging to enrol her eldest child in a school with adequate autism spectrum accommodations due to zoning. She 'sent Lucas in year 7 to [their] zone school. He lasted three days. He cried for three days non-stop.' Alisha explained:

He was not going well. He lasted three days at his first high school; all he did was cry. I had to take him out. I sent him to a flexible learning high school – disaster. I tried a normal school. I could not get him into a classroom.

Alisha emphasised how she has struggled to reach a positive outcome for Lucas regarding his school environment. Lucas has attended 'a mainstream school for one term, back to flexible learning, back to the mainstream and back to flexible learning, because [she] just could not get it to work.'

Alisha was informed of a school '[t]wo streets away' that 'was amazing for children with autism'. The school 'had different spaces and it had programs; it sounded amazing on paper.' However, Alisha 'could not get in' as the school was not located in her local zoning.

Alisha 'fought for Lucas for probably about two years' to attend the school. She described the lack of responsiveness from the Department of Education:

I was going into the office, I was emailing them. They knew who I was when I rang them – 'Oh, you just need to wait. You just need to wait.' Then the person that I spoke to would not be available, so the next person would talk to me, and I would have to start it all over again. Then they were like, 'Put it in writing.' So I put it in writing. Then I would wait and I would wait, and the same thing would happen over and over again.

She emphasised that the Department of Education 'should have had more pull. They should have been able to help [her] more.'

Source: Alisha Bennett, public hearing, Melbourne, 8 May 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 31-38.

4.2 Literacy and numeracy support

The Victorian Department of Education provides two key major programs providing students in need with extra literacy and numeracy support:

- The **Tutor Learning Initiative (TLI)** provides funding to government (and low fee non-government) schools to deliver small group tutoring to students who need additional support, with a focus on literacy and numeracy.

- The **Middle Years Literacy and Numeracy Support** initiative provides funding to government schools to provide intensive support to students in Year 10 who need additional help with the literacy and numeracy skills needed to succeed beyond school. In 2023, the program supported more than 5,000 students.

The Committee received evidence broadly supporting small group tutoring generally, and the TLI more specifically. The TLI was also the subject of a Victorian Auditor-General's Office review, tabled in June 2024, which found deficiencies in the implementation of the initiative. Stakeholders making submissions to this Inquiry also made recommendations on how the delivery of the TLI could be improved.

With a view to recommending continued funding for the TLI, this section focuses on improvements that might be made to it.

The Committee received no substantive evidence regarding the Middle Years Literacy and Numeracy Support initiative.

4.2.1 The Tutor Learning Initiative

In October 2020, the Victorian Government announced \$250 million in funding to support small group tutoring in Victorian government and selected non-government schools. This program was extended in October 2021, in September 2022 and again in September 2023, extending the program until the end of the 2025 school year. With this latest extension, the total cost of the program is estimated by the government to be approximately \$1.2 billion and to have employed over 5,400 government school tutors.¹⁷

The September 2023 announcement included a new tailored education support for 500 students in the care system who have become disengaged from school.¹⁸

The Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) has noted the initiative is the largest single initiative in targeted learning support in Victoria's history. Over 1,500 government schools have participated in the initiative every year since 2021. Around 600 low-fee non-government schools have also participated in the initiative since 2021, with 44,000 low-fee non-government school students participating in 2023.¹⁹

The Department identify the TLI as part of a multi-tiered approach to classroom learning. Within the response to intervention framework, the TLI is a 'Tier 2' approach. Tier 1 refers to whole-class instruction, Tier 2 to targeted learning and Tier 3 to Intensive teaching and comprehensive evaluation (see Figure 4.1).²⁰

The delivery of, and relationship between, each of these tiers are important to the critiques stakeholders made regarding the TLI, as discussed further below.

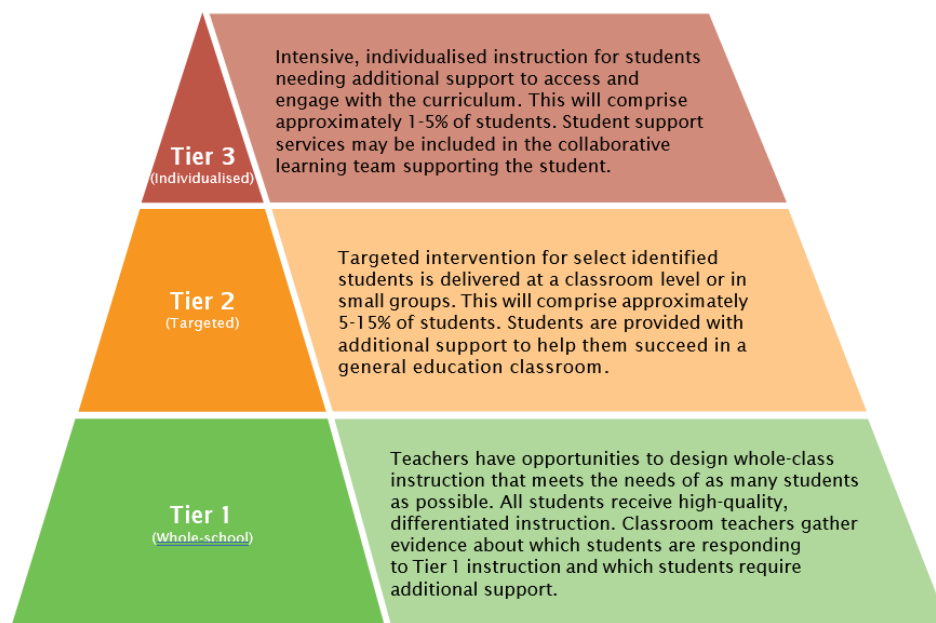
¹⁷ Centre for Independence Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 40; Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Premier of Victoria, *Backing Our Tutor Program To Keep Supporting Kids*, media release, 5 September 2023.

¹⁹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Effectiveness of the Tutor Learning Initiative*, 2024, p. 1.

²⁰ Department of Education, *Use data to inform targeted intervention*, <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/use-data-inform-targeted-intervention>> accessed 2 October 2024.

Figure 4.1 Multi-tiered response to intervention framework



Source: Department of Education, *Tutor Learning Initiative: Tutor Practice Guide*, 2024, p. 3.

Instructional approaches and delivery methods

The Department of Education provides a *Tutor Learning Initiative: Tutor Practice Guide* (updated 2024) to guide schools and individual tutors on how to deliver the initiative.

The Guide recommends that for ‘accelerated learning growth’, students should ideally participate in three 45-minute small group learning sessions per week, lasting anywhere from 6 to 20 weeks.²¹

The guide also states that ‘explicit teaching and well-structured sessions are particularly important for effective tutors’. The Guide gives general advice on explicit teaching and structuring sessions, referring teachers to for further details.²² For a discussion of high impact teaching strategies see Chapter 3, Section 4.

The Guide advises that tutors should work with small groups (typically up to five students). Sessions can be delivered either in-class, out-of-class or in a hybrid model.²³

The Guide summarises these delivery methods:

In-class support can include:

- providing intensive, ongoing small group or individual student learning
- teaching mini lessons to a small group of students (or individual students, where appropriate) to support skills required in the whole-class setting.

²¹ Department of Education, *Tutor Learning Initiative: Tutor Practice Guide*, 2024, p. 5.

²² Department of Education, *Tutor Learning Initiative: Tutor Practice Guide*, 2024, p. 5.

²³ Department of Education, *Tutor Learning Initiative: Tutor Practice Guide*, 2024, p. 5.

Out-of-class support can include:

- students being withdrawn from the classroom for small group or individual learning which has been differentiated to their point of need
- students attending an additional scheduled session for small group or individual learning differentiated to their point of need
- students attending a session immediately prior to a classroom lesson to preview vocabulary, skills or concepts, enabling students to be better prepared to access content
- students remaining in the classroom during introductory instruction, engaging in application activities in a separate space with the tutor during the middle of the lesson, and returning to class at the conclusion of the lesson to share in whole-class reflection.

Hybrid support combines or adapts the above approaches.²⁴

Schools recruit tutors using the Department of Education’s online job advertising and recruitment portal. Tutors must be one of the following:

- a teacher currently registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT)
- a teacher with VIT Permission to Teach (employed as an education support class employee)
- a pre-service teacher (employed as an education support class employee) working under the supervision of a registered teacher
- a speech therapist or occupational therapist (employed as an education support class employee) tutoring in specific identified student needs
- a retired teacher who has re-registered with the VIT – retired teachers may contact the VIT for support.²⁵

The Auditor General’s report on the Tutor Learning Initiative

In June 2024, VAGO tabled its report, *Effectiveness of the Tutor Learning Initiative*. The report assessed whether the program had improved the learning and engagement outcomes for participating students.²⁶

Drawing on Department of Education data about the initiative, VAGO made the following key findings:

- The initiative has not achieved its intended outcome, which is for tutored students to improve their literacy and numeracy skills to succeed in the general classroom.
- Many schools’ tutoring practices in 2023 were not fully effective.

²⁴ Department of Education, *Tutor Learning Initiative: Tutor Practice Guide*, 2024, p. 5.

²⁵ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Effectiveness of the Tutor Learning Initiative*, 2024, Appendix D-2.

²⁶ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Effectiveness of the Tutor Learning Initiative*, 2024, p. 1.

- The Department can do more to improve schools' delivery of the initiative, including giving greater support and guidance to schools and using monitoring data to evaluate student learning outcomes to generate system-wide improvements.²⁷

VAGO's findings contrasted with the findings of an independent assessment of the TLI conducted for the Department, which reported that 88% of primary school principals and 75% of secondary school principals surveyed reported improvements in students' achievements attributed to the tutors.²⁸

Stakeholder support for the initiative

Stakeholders making submissions to this Inquiry were generally supportive of the TLI and fully supportive of multi-tiered systems of support, of which the TLI is an example.²⁹ This includes the Commonwealth Government's recent Teach Education Expert Panel, which highlighted a wide variety of evidence showing the positive impact of multi-tiered systems of support on student learning outcomes.³⁰

Regarding the TLI specifically, stakeholders were supportive and want to see the initiative continued:

- The Australian Education Union called for 'this type of approach...to be expanded and permanently embedded in our schools', although this would also require strengthening measures to 'attract and retain staff'.³¹
- The Country Education Partnership said TLI is 'a positive initiative despite reducing the CRT [casual relief teacher] pool in many rural areas' and has 'increased teachers in schools'.³²
- VCOSS called for TLI to be made 'an enduring feature of Victoria's education system'.³³
- Anglicare Victoria and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare welcomed the extension of the program to 2025, especially the provisions supporting students in the care system and disengaged from school.³⁴

Stakeholder concerns with the initiative

While generally supportive of the TLI, and recommending a continuation of the program, several stakeholders were concerned about specific elements of the instruction and delivery methods outlined in the *Tutor Practice Guide*.

²⁷ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Effectiveness of the Tutor Learning Initiative*, 2024, p. 8.

²⁸ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 23.

²⁹ Code REaD Dyslexia Network, *Submission 157*, p. 8; Dyslexia Victoria, *Submission 77*, p. 4.

³⁰ Code REaD Dyslexia Network, *Submission 157*, p. 8; Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 12; Square Peg, Round Whole, *Submission 209*, p. 21.

³¹ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 28.

³² Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, p. 7.

³³ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Submission 237*, pp. 6, 16.

³⁴ Anglicare, *Submission 199*, p. 14; Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Submission 207*, p. 3.

In its review, VAGO assessed the effectiveness of the initiative based on scores from self-assessments schools made against criteria provided by the Department. On the Department's own criteria and school self-assessments, VAGO found many schools' tutoring practices in 2023 were not fully effective.³⁵

By contrast, stakeholders reporting to this Committee were concerned that guidance on both instruction methods and modes of delivery of the TLI did not meet best practice standards as recommended by expert bodies.

For example, some stakeholders were concerned that the *Tutor Practice Guide*, does not stipulate explicit instruction methods be used in small group sessions.³⁶ These criticisms are consistent with the Department's handling of explicit instruction methods in the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model (VTLM) generally, discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.4. The Committee noted that the *Tutor Practice Guide* does highlight that 'research' shows explicit and direct instruction have the 'greatest effect' and are 'highly effective' in delivery small group material.³⁷

The Committee again notes the Department's preference for teaching and school autonomy in delivering its material. However, with the announcement of mandated systematic phonics and explicit instruction in early years learning, the Committee finds it necessary that the Department revise the *Tutor Practice Guide* to ensure it is consistent with new mandates for teaching literacy.

Regarding model of delivery, some stakeholders were concerned regarding the open-ended options in the *Tutor Practice Guide* for tutors to choose either in-class, out-of-class or hybrid methods of delivery.³⁸ The Centre for Independent Studies found this flexibility did align with the international best practice for delivering multi-tier structured support, in which Tier 2 and 3 supports are provided in addition to receiving the full suite of Tier 1 instruction. International best practice also provides for consistency of instruction method (e.g., explicit instruction) across all tiers.³⁹

In evidence of this best practice, the Centre for Independent Studies cited a Monash University study commissioned by the Australian Education Research Organisation which found:

Within RTI and MTSS, instruction across the tiers should be aligned so that Tier 2 supplements and complements Tier 1, but does not replace it ... Rather, the logic of RTI and MTSS is that evidence-based instruction at higher tiers should be an intensified version of Tier 1 practice, achieved by increasing the frequency and duration of instruction and reducing the group size. That is, students access a higher 'dosage' of quality instruction.⁴⁰

³⁵ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Effectiveness of the Tutor Learning Initiative*, 2024, p. 3.

³⁶ Dyslexia Victoria, *Submission 77*, p. 8; Learning Difficulties Australia, *Submission 174*, p. 2.

³⁷ Department of Education, *Tutor Learning Initiative: Tutor Practice Guide*, 2024, p. 5.

³⁸ Learning Difficulties Australia, *Submission*, p. 2.

³⁹ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 255*, p. 42.

⁴⁰ Kate de Bruin, Eugénie Kestel, Mariko Francis, Helen Forgasz, Rachelle Fries, *Supporting students significantly behind in literacy and numeracy A review of evidence-based approaches*, 2023, p. 24.

Drawing on this survey, the Centre concluded: 'By giving schools the option to implement Tier 2 support in the general education classroom, schools may be implementing neither Tier 1 nor Tier 2 support with fidelity'.⁴¹

A factsheet published by the Department to help guide tutors in 2021, *What Works*, stated that:

- 46% of primary schools were using an out-of-class approach and 41% of primary schools use a hybrid approach
- 62% of secondary schools use a hybrid approach.⁴²

Committee comment

The Committee finds the TLI is a worthwhile program and has potential to provide significant and lasting support to students with learning difficulties and numeracy and literacy. The initiative should receive long term funding to give schools and tutors an opportunity to refine its delivery as advised by VAGO.

The Committee finds that the guidance provided to TLI tutors is consistent with the principal of school autonomy that generally applies across the Victorian state education system, giving practitioners freedom on how to deliver learning outcomes. However, the Committee has been advised this flexibility allows for teaching practices that do not align with evidence-based best practices. The guidance on how to implement the TLI should be updated to reflect these best practices, and to ensure that it is also consistent with new mandates regarding phonics and explicit instruction.

RECOMMENDATION 17: That the Victorian Government consider ongoing funding for the Tutor Learning Initiative. This should be accompanied by a regular review process to evaluate the success of the initiative, and the funding should be dependent on the ability of schools to meet the criteria set by the Department.

RECOMMENDATION 18: That the Department of Education review its advice on the Tutor Learning Initiative to ensure it aligns with best practice on delivering multi-tiered systems of support.

RECOMMENDATION 19: That the Department of Education update its guidance on the Tutor Learning Initiative to reflect the latest mandates on phonics and explicit instruction in literacy.

⁴¹ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 42.

⁴² Department of Education, Tutor Learning Initiative (TLI) – What works? Implementation insights for 2022, fact sheet, p. 2.

RECOMMENDATION 20: That the Department of Education collect and analyse data to promote effective practice for different school types and student groups, consistent with the Victorian Auditor-General's *Effectiveness of Tutor Learning Initiative Report* recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION 21: That the Department of Education set measurable goals for schools' tutoring performance and establish statewide pilots to better understand the benefits and support needs in schools.

4.3 Supporting students with disabilities

According to the Department of Education, in 2022, just over a quarter of students in Victorian government schools required additional supports or adjustments at school due to disability.⁴³

The Department's primary policy tool supporting this growing cohort is a new funding program called 'Disability Inclusion', which commenced in 2021 and to be available to all schools by 2025, Disability Inclusion replaces the program for students with disabilities and the language and learning disabilities support program.⁴⁴

Disability Inclusion involves three main components:

- a new funding stream for students with disability to support inclusive practice in schools⁴⁵
- a Disability Inclusion Profile process to assist schools and families identify the strengths, needs and educational adjustments schools can make to assist students with disabilities. Each profile is completed by a disability inclusion facilitator with input from family and schools.
- funding and scholarships teachers and regional employees to complete postgraduate study in inclusive education
- capability-building initiatives to ensure that school workforces are equipped to meet the diverse learning needs of all students, including coaching and professional learning, evidence-based guidance and resources, and more professionals in schools who are experts in disability.⁴⁶

⁴³ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 23.

⁴⁴ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ Tier 1 is Core student learning funding. This is the funding for all students' core learning needs through the Student Resource Package. (See Chapter 6); Department of Education, *Disability Inclusion Funding and Support*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/disability-inclusion-funding-support/policy>> accessed 10 July 2024.

⁴⁶ Department of Education, *Disability Inclusion: a new approach for students with disability*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/disability-inclusion-extra-support-children-disability>> accessed 10 July 2024.

Schools can also access an Inclusive Schools Fund that has funded more than 420 projects enabling schools to build new facilities, such as outdoor sensory gardens and learning areas.⁴⁷

4.3.1 Barriers to learning outcomes for students with disabilities are longstanding

Disability advocates told the Committee that learning barriers facing students with disability have been presented in numerous reports over the past decade from statutory authorities, parliamentary committees and human rights organisations. These reports included significant criticisms of the Victorian government education system.⁴⁸

The links between poor education, disability and the criminal justice system are now well documented.⁴⁹

In 2012, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission tabled its report, *Held Back: The Experience of Students with Disabilities in Victorian Schools*.

The *Held Back* report was referenced in the submission from Disability Advocacy Victoria, who sent a survey to disability advocacy agencies in Victoria asking the main issues being advocated on. It used the chapter headings from the 2012 *Held Back* report to compare if they were currently advocating for the same issues in 2023 as a decade ago. The findings, from responses from 21 agencies, are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Percentage of Victorian disability advocacy agencies advocating on various issues (21 respondents)

Advocacy issue (drawn from 2012 <i>Held Back</i> report)	Percentage (%)
Schools failing to put in place reasonable adjustment/supports	100.00
Teachers don't know enough about disabilities	90.48
Suspension	80.95
Bullying	80.95
No or substandard individual education plan	80.95
Not enough funding	71.43
Limited access to therapies (speech pathologist, occupational therapist, psychologist)	71.43
Schools restricting hours of attendance	66.67
No student support group	66.67
Schools not allowing students to be involved in camps/excursions, etc.	61.90

⁴⁷ Department of Education, *Inclusive Schools Fund*, <<https://www.schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au/inclusive-schools-fund>> accessed 3 October 2024.

⁴⁸ Disability Discrimination Legal Service, *Submission 185*, p. 2.

⁴⁹ Disability Discrimination Legal Service, *Submission 185*, p. 2.

Advocacy issue (drawn from 2012 <i>Held Back</i> report)	Percentage (%)
Schools knocking back enrolments by suggesting they don't have the appropriate resources	52.38
Complaints process not working	47.62
Lack of Auslan interpreters/communication supports	42.86
Expulsion	38.10
Restrictive Practices (Restraint and Seclusion)	33.33

Source: Disability Advocacy Victoria, *Submission 178*, p. 10.

The Committee received evidence on most of these issues. Some are dealt with in Chapter 6 on student wellbeing and Chapter 7 on funding.

In addition to the Department's Disability Inclusion initiative, the following issues as they relate to the learning outcomes for students with disabilities are discussed below:

- supporting students with communication difficulties, including access to therapies, Auslan and communication supports
- the impacts of segregation on learning outcomes
- deficiencies with individual learning/education plans.

4.3.2 The Disability Inclusion program

The Department of Education reports the Disability Inclusion program is an investment of almost \$1.6 billion over 4 years.⁵⁰ Tier 1 funding is the baseline funding provided for all students.

This funding provides for two new streams of funding: Tier 2 (school-level) and Tier 3 (student-level) funding are a form of equity funding made available through the calculation of student resource funding (see Chapter 6 for explanation).

Tier 2 school-level funding is allocated through the Student Resource Package, which is the mainstream of funding schools receive from Government. The level of additional funding is based on a range of factors such as school-level enrolment and parental education data.⁵¹ Tier 2 funding can be used for: professional learning for school-based staff; additional workforce requirements; teaching and learning resources; equipment, adaptive technologies and devices; minor building or internal environmental modifications under \$5,000; and casual relief teaching replacement.⁵²

⁵⁰ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 11.

⁵¹ Department of Education, *Student Resource Package – Equity Funding (Student-Based Funding)*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/student-resource-package-srp-equity-funding-student-based-funding/guidance/disability-inclusion>> accessed 10 July 2024.

⁵² Department of Education, *Tier 2 school-level funding expenditure requirements*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/disability-inclusion-funding-support/guidance/tier-2-school-level-funding-expenditure>> accessed 10 July 2024.

Tier 3 student-level funding is also allocated through the Student Resource Package. The level of additional funding is based on a student's disability inclusion profile.⁵³ Tier 3 funding can be used for evidence-based teaching strategies and programs; teaching staff; specialist staff; teacher professional development; specialist equipment and materials, educational support staff.⁵⁴

Stakeholders informed the Committee that the student and co-design aspects of disability inclusion profiles could be strengthened. Nicole Antonopolous from Amaze told the Committee: 'Amaze report that 'families have been looking for more information to support their involvement in that process and also to support the involvement of students; it is really important that their voices are heard throughout that process'⁵⁵

Co-design with impacted students and families was identified by several stakeholders as a general best practice principle for creating and implementing disability learning supports.

At the time of writing, it was not clear what funding is being provided beyond the completion of the rollout in 2025. As such, the Committee makes no further comment.

The Committee received evidence of the importance for comprehensive disability supports to be provided by the Department of Education (see Case Study 4.2).

Case Study 4.2 Catherine's story

Catherine's son has been diagnosed with high functioning autism. He has attended four schools with two of them being special schools. Catherine has experienced several challenges in trying to ensure that her son's needs were accommodated at school. She explained:

Because of the nature of his type of autism, he prefers to deal with just one person. He does not really like to engage with different people. The other thing is it has got to be a lot quieter as well ... [The special schools] did put him in a room with other high-functioning students, but some of those were very active and vocal and very loud. My son did respond to that and lash out with his behaviour ... He would just try to escape from the classroom – again, so absconding is a big thing.

...

(Continued)

53 Department of Education, *Student Resource Package – Equity Funding (Student-Based Funding)*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/student-resource-package-srp-equity-funding-student-based-funding/guidance/disability-inclusion>> accessed 10 July 2024.

54 Department of Education, *Tier 2 school-level funding expenditure requirements*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/disability-inclusion-funding-support/guidance/tier-2-school-level-funding-expenditure>> accessed 10 July 2024.

55 Nicole Antonopolous, Public Policy Consultant, Amaze, public hearing, 12 June 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 26.

Case Study 4.2 Continued

[W]ith the mainstream schools there are no spaces, especially in the older style schools. There is absolutely no room. ... In his second mainstream school there was absolutely nowhere. He had to sit in the principal's office ... a lot of the time because there was nowhere he could go ... Then the teachers could not manage the classroom because my son just kept absconding, and they would have to run after him. He could not even do a full day at school.

Catherine 'felt blamed all the time' for her son's behavioural problems. She was 'made to believe that it was all because of [her]'. She explained:

[B]ad parenting ... is a stigma usually given to First Nations families. Child protection became involved because of my inability to control my emotions, I guess. It is so typical that women get blamed for being overly emotional when we are struggling. I was a sole parent. I have one son. He really struggles; he struggles at school. He cannot go to school ...

Catherine felt the Department of Education's response was 'dismissive' and 'no[t] genuine'. She said that 'if your child's needs do not fit into the box' then the department '[does]n't want to deal with it'. Catherine called more 'respect' and expressed that the department should focus on 'listening instead of dismissing'.

Catherine explained that '[t]here is this misunderstanding of what autism is, and it is embedded in policies, so a lot of the targeted funding goes to intellectual disability, which is not autism.' She emphasised the importance of comprehensive behavioural and psychological assessments which '[a] lot of First Nations children do not have access to' at all. Catherine explained:

[the] assessments within the department – I realise that there is a change now to the way the disability inclusion program works, but before, there was a lot of emphasis on ... intellectual disability. There needs to be more education about what autism is and even ADHD, because I think those two have a lot of impact on society in general. So you have got to think about the social cost.

Catherine advised the Committee that 'children need to be put first. At the moment they put the department first'.

Source: Catherine Civelle, public hearing, Melbourne, 8 May 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 31–38.

The need for an outcomes framework

The Disability Inclusion program is in its infancy. Some schools are yet to receive funding.⁵⁶

An area for improvement identified by stakeholders is the need to measure the outcomes funding is intended to achieve. Amaze, an autism advocacy group, noted that in ‘the absence of clear targets and outcomes measures it is difficult to evaluate the true impacts of these reforms’.⁵⁷

Amaze recommended implementing an outcomes framework to measure the impacts of Disability Inclusion funding reform. According to Amaze: ‘The Framework should include targets for change and transparent outcome measures across key indicators’.⁵⁸

Amaze listed the following indicators for students with autism specifically. The Committee finds these indicators should be applied for tracking the progress of students with a Disability Inclusion profile generally:

- Increased Year 12 completion rates, including increasing the numbers of students with a disability profile attaining a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or a Victoria Pathways Certificate (VPC).
- Increased proportions of students with a disability profile completing VCE, compared to a VPC.
- Increased uptake of further and higher education, including TAFE and university.
- Increased proportions of students with a disability profile sustaining their enrolment in a mainstream school.
- Increased day-to-day attendance of students with a disability profile, including reducing practices of decreased hours for Autistic students.
- Decreased rates of disciplinary absences, suspensions, expulsions, and exclusionary practices.⁵⁹

These outcome measures should be disaggregated by disability type to help further refine targeted supports and assist the advocacy work of various groups (e.g., students with autism, dyslexia, deafness).

Several other disability advocacy groups also recommended that the Department collect and publish data on similar learning outcomes for students with disabilities.⁶⁰ This should include greater transparency around the amount of disability funding

⁵⁶ Stephanie Feldt, Teacher, Albert Street Primary School, public hearing, Traralgon, 27 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Amaze, *Submission 145*, p. 1.

⁵⁸ Amaze, *Submission 145*, p. 2. See also, Nicole Antonopoulos, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 25.

⁵⁹ Amaze, *Submission 145*, p. 2.

⁶⁰ Disability Advocacy Victoria, *Submission 178*; Principal Association of Specialist Schools, *Submission*, pp. 3–4.

allocated per school and transparency on how that funding is being spent by schools to meet the needs of students with disabilities.⁶¹ (Issues of funding transparency are discussed further in Chapter 7.)

Committee comment

Stakeholders did not provide evidence regarding targets for these outcomes measures. However, following the discussion in Chapter 3 regarding the importance of setting high targets to improve learning outcomes, the Committee finds that any outcomes framework developed for the Disability Inclusion initiative should include targets set over the medium to long term. The Department should work with advocacy groups to devise targets relevant to the outcome measures.

RECOMMENDATION 22: That the Department of Education work with advocacy groups to devise an outcomes framework for the Disability Inclusion program.

4.3.3 Supporting students with communication needs

The Committee received considerable evidence from disability advocacy groups regarding the issues facing students with communication needs. This might include, for example, difficulties caused by deafness, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Acquired Brain Injury, Cerebral Palsy, Motor Neurone Disease and stroke.⁶²

The Department of Education employs speech pathologies within student support service teams. However, Speech Pathology Australia informed the Committee that the demand for supports is outstripping capacity and funding, especially in schools in Melbourne's growth corridors. They informed the Committee that depending on the school one attends, the wait may be one month to over one year for an assessment, irrespective of the severity of communication difficulties.⁶³

The Committee was told that one area of immediate support could be the provision of Augmentative and Alternative Communication. According to Speech Pathology Australia, this type of communication is when a person uses something other than speech to communicate, including body movements, gestures, sign language, a computer or device, or communication books.⁶⁴

Multiple disability advocacy stakeholders highlighted that the Department of Education presently has no policy or procedures upholding the rights of students

⁶¹ Square Peg Round Whole Victoria, *Submission 209*, p. 24.

⁶² Communication Rights Australia, *Submission 169*, p. 2.

⁶³ Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 142*, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Speech Pathology Australia, *Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)*, <https://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/Communication_Hub/Resources/Fact_Sheets/Augmentative-and-Alternative-Communication.aspx> accessed 5 July 2024.

with communication needs to have access to a communication device (low-tech or high-tech), or to an Auslan interpreter.⁶⁵

The Committee heard that in the absence of such a policy, students with communication support needs faced the following negative learning outcomes:

- Many students who cannot use speech as a form of communication, are unnecessarily or inappropriately placed into segregated school settings in the belief that these settings have the expertise and resources to meet their needs.⁶⁶
- A lack of oversight of curriculum delivery in segregated schools, including oversight of whether students who do not speak are being provided with appropriate communication devices in every class.⁶⁷
- Teachers and support workers have prejudiced assumptions that students who cannot speak, have an intellectual disability. While some students may have an intellectual disability this automatic assumption negatively influences the effort and capacity put into educating such students. Such assumptions might be overcome if students were better equipped to express themselves.⁶⁸
- Communication Rights Australia told the Committee students who rely on Augmentative and Alternative Communication but do not have the appropriate supports are not being taught a vocabulary, often leaving school with under 100 words. Adults without disabilities leave school knowing tens of thousands of words.⁶⁹

Committee comment

The Committee heard that an absence of an Augmentative and Alternative Communication policy is compounded by other policy deficiencies, particularly the integrity of individual lesson plans (see Section 4.3.5). Communication Rights Australia also told the Committee that students with communication needs ‘commonly do not have plans in place that clearly set out how they are going to acquire language. They do not have speech pathology, either directly, or via a speech pathologist overseeing a communication plan’.⁷⁰

As noted in Table 1, this issue is long standing. Speech Pathology Australia highlighted the absence of specific guidelines for communication supports to a 2012 Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission’s 2012 Inquiry.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Communication Rights Australia, *Submission 169*, p. 3; Disability Discrimination Legal Service, *Submission 185*, p. 6; Disability Advocacy Victoria, *Submission 178*, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Communication Rights Australia, *Submission 169*, p. 2.

⁶⁷ Disability Discrimination Legal Service, *Submission 185*, p. 4; Communication Rights Australia, *Submission 169*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Communication Rights Australia, *Submission 169*, p. 5.

⁶⁹ Communication Rights Australia, *Submission 169*, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Communication Rights Australia, *Submission 169*, p. 4.

⁷¹ Communication Rights Australia, *Submission 169*, p. 5.

RECOMMENDATION 23: That the Department of Education develop a policy on how Augmentative and Alternative Communication should be delivered in schools.

4.3.4 Segregation, exclusion and integration in mainstream schools

The Committee received considerable evidence from disability advocates of segregating, exclusionary and isolating practices that students with disabilities in mainstreams schools sometimes face.

So-called inclusive segregation is when a student is ‘enrolled in mainstream schooling but spend significant time amounts of time in specialised, disability-specific programs or classrooms’.⁷² However, stakeholders highlighted the evidence of gatekeeping practices recorded by the Commonwealth Disability Royal Commission, commenced in April 2019 and which tabled its final report in September 2023. These practices include:

- reduced attendance at the insistence of the school
- impromptu requests for students to be collected early
- being refused attendance at school events, camps, and excursions.⁷³

These practices often stem from school leadership. Disability advocates report that education support staff are sometimes utilised and instructed to take children out of the classroom instead of supporting their engagement in it.⁷⁴

Committee comment

The Committee also received evidence where such practices are useful in increasing attendance, engagement and learning of students with disabilities, but only when done collaboratively with parents and supplemented with support officers in the classroom and professional learning for teachers.⁷⁵

Exclusion also extends to exclusionary discipline. The Royal Commission heard that students with a disability received between 14% and 73% more suspensions than students without disability. Figures for Victoria are difficult to obtain, and official overall figures do not include informal expulsions or suspensions. For example, one disability advocacy group reported that suspensions were ‘frequently used as a bargaining tool’, whereby schools would ‘not accept a student back after a suspension unless the parent agrees to a previously rejected strategy, such as a planned use of restrictive practices or part-time attendance’.⁷⁶

⁷² Square Peg, Round Whole, *Submission 209*, p. 4.

⁷³ Square Peg, Round Whole, *Submission 209*, p. 9; Karen Dimmock, CEO, Association for Children with Disability, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Association for Children with Disability, *Submission 189*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Karen Dimmock, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Square Peg, Round Whole, *Submission 209*, pp. 8–9.

Stakeholders informed the Committee that such exclusionary practices arise because teachers or schools are ill-equipped to provide the necessary support.⁷⁷ They face both time and resource pressures in being able to adequately prepare and inadequate professional training.⁷⁸

Consistent with evidence received in Section 4.2.2 regarding collecting data for an outcomes framework, stakeholders said these issues can begin to be understood and addressed with improved data on such practices. The Department should collect and make public detailed information on:

- violence against students with disabilities through physical restraint by type of disability
- seclusion of students with disabilities by type of disability
- school attendance - specifically restrictions on attendance, and every time parents are contacted before the end of the school day to attend school premises, pick up their child and take them home.⁷⁹

FINDING 11: There is ongoing concern among disability advocates regarding negative impacts of exclusionary practices on the learning outcomes of students with disabilities.

RECOMMENDATION 24: That the Department of Education review provision of resources to schools to ensure that exclusionary practices of students with disabilities are phased out, in addition to providing further professional development for school staff to prevent further instances of exclusion practices from occurring in the future.

4.3.5 Individual education plans

A key device teachers use to assist students with disabilities and other learning challenges are individual education plans (IEPs), also sometimes called individual lesson plans.

IEPs are written statements devised to assist students who require a range of supports with their education. They describe the adjustments, goals and strategies required to meet a student's individual educational needs so they can reach their full potential.

IEPs are required for:

- students in statutory out-of-home care
- Koorie students (as required by Marrung – Victorian Aboriginal Education Plan 2016 to 2026)

⁷⁷ Round Peg, Square Whole, *Submission 209*, p. 14.

⁷⁸ Association for Children with Disability, *Submission 189*, p. 6; Stephanie Feldt, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 7.

⁷⁹ Round Peg, Square Whole, *Submission 209*, p. 13; Disability Advocacy Victoria, *Submission 178*; Principal's Association of Specialist Schools, *Submission 254*, pp. 3–4.

- students supported under individualised disability funding programs including Disability Inclusion
- students in youth justice (custody and community)
- students in re-engagement programs under contract arrangements with another school or provider
- students undertaking flexible learning options (see Section 6.6.2).⁸⁰

IEPs are highly recommended for:

- students with additional needs
- students not achieving their potential (this may include high-ability students)
- students at risk of disengagement
- students who are young carers (where appropriate)
- any other students determined by the school as needing an IEP.⁸¹

The Department of Education provides detailed guidance and resources on how to prepare IEPs, including setting clear goals, giving student voice, being strengths-based, mixing short- and long-term goals, developed in consultation with a student support group comprising teachers, parents and relevant wellbeing support workers.⁸²

The Department notes in its guidance material that IEP short-term goals should be ‘SMART’, encompassing goals that are Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Relevant Time-bound.⁸³ The Department provides a template for creating an IEP, including a quality assurance checklist.⁸⁴

The Committee received detailed evidence from disability advocates about IEPs either:

- not being prepared for students with disabilities, or⁸⁵
- being prepared in a way that does not meet the guidance criteria set out by the Department.⁸⁶

As noted in Table 4.1, this issue remains a recurring issue for disability advocates since at least the 2012 *Held Back Report*.

⁸⁰ Department of Education, *School operations: Individual Education Plans (IEPs)* <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/individual-education-plans-ieps/policy>> accessed 18 July 2024.

⁸¹ Department of Education (2024), *School operations: Individual Education Plans (IEPs)* <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/individual-education-plans-ieps/policy>> accessed 18 July 2024.

⁸² Department of Education (2024), *School operations: Individual Education Plans (IEPs)* <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/individual-education-plans-ieps/policy>> accessed 18 July 2024.

⁸³ Department of Education (2024), *School operations: Individual Education Plans (IEPs)* <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/individual-education-plans-ieps/policy>> accessed 18 July 2024.

⁸⁴ Department of Education (2024), *School operations: Individual Education Plans (IEPs)* <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/individual-education-plans-ieps/policy>> accessed 18 July 2024.

⁸⁵ Name withheld, *Submission 191*, p.2. See also the dossier provided by Julie Phillips, Submission 132, *attachment 1*.

⁸⁶ Disability Advocacy Victoria, *Submission 178*, pp. 8–9.

Karen Dimmock from the Association for Children with a Disability told the Committee:

There are very clearly laid out mechanisms from the Department in relation to student support group meetings, individual education plans and things like that. How they are implemented in practice obviously varies school by school, and it is that practice that we really want to see improve.⁸⁷

Disability Advocacy Victoria provided evidence that IEPs prepared for students with disabilities in both mainstream and specialist schools:

- lack SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time Bound)
- don't include measures to test if IEPs are effective
- are not subject to any kind review.⁸⁸

Julie Philips, a disability legal advocate, provided the Committee with a dossier summarising the 85 discrimination complaints she has lodged at the request of parents or students with disabilities attending Victorian state schools since 2000. 23 pertained to the failure to provide the student with an IEP. All except two of these 23 cases were students with disabilities in mainstream schools.⁸⁹

Ms Phillips said examples of deficient IEPs included those that:

- are not consistent with the Department template, with other best practice models, or even with other IEPs in that school
- are in place for an entire year with no change in the very few goals and strategies they contained
- provided goals but no strategies to achieve the goals
- were provided to parents without their input, despite guidelines requiring plans to be developed with parents⁹⁰
- included criticisms of the child within the body of the plan, despite guidelines requiring plans to be 'strengths based'.⁹¹

Ms Phillips told the Committee that the Department of Education has 'a very strong legal department, and that legal department gets involved in all complaints'.⁹²

The Committee also heard evidence from principals in mainstream schools regarding the demands placed on teachers in preparing IEPs. These plans can be highly time consuming, especially for large cohorts. Kieran Kenneth told the Committee that 50%t of students in his school were on IEPs, varying from students on disability

⁸⁷ Karen Dimmock, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 7.

⁸⁸ Disability Advocacy Victoria, *Submission 178*, pp. 8–9.

⁸⁹ Julie Philips, *Submission 132, attachment 1*.

⁹⁰ See also Amaze, *Submission 145*, p. 2.

⁹¹ Julie Philips, *Submission 132*, p. 5.

⁹² Julie Phillips, Chief Executive Officer, Disability Discrimination Legal Service, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 June 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p. 9.

inclusion programs and higher achieving students performing 12 months ahead of the curriculum.⁹³ Mr Kenneth said even at this rate, the school does not target fulfilling the full number of students who technically require an IEP, ‘because it is already, with half the school, overwhelming’. Mr Kenneth described to the Committee:

There is the writing of the plans, there are the assessments that go into that, there are the family meetings that we do every term to make sure that all of those things happen, and that in itself is hours and hours of work for teachers, which cannot be done at any time but when the students are not there. And we have a very, very small window as primary school teachers in which to actually not face to face get that done.⁹⁴

The Committee acknowledges that the ability of teachers to deliver effective IEPs for students with disabilities or from other equity cohorts are determined by wider workforce constraints, discussed in Chapter 5.

Nonetheless, the Committee finds that while having rigorous guidance in place, the Department needs to be aware of the challenge schools face in preparing IEPs.

As stakeholders noted, the Auditor-General similarly found in an Inquiry into *Program for Students with Special Learning Needs* more than a decade ago (2012) that schools were not developing or implementing effective, consistent, high-quality Individual Learning Plans.⁹⁵

FINDING 12: Individual Education Plans take a lot of work for teachers to design and implement. There is evidence that Individual Education Plans are not being implemented and reviewed in accordance with Department of Education policy. This is having negative impacts on learning outcomes, particularly for students from equity cohorts.

4.4 High achieving students

In addition to a range of select entry and specialist schools (listed in the Department of Education submission), the Department provides targeted supports for high-ability students. These include:

- The **Student Excellence Program**, which provides funding to all primary and secondary schools to expand their support for high-ability students, including the appointment of high-ability practice leaders to drive whole-school approaches.
- The **Victorian High-Ability Program**, which has allowed almost 70,000 high-ability government school students in Year 5 to Year 8 to participate in 10-week online enrichment programs in English and mathematics

⁹³ Kieran Kenneth, Principal, Yallourn North Primary School, public hearing, Traralgon, 27 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 25.

⁹⁴ Kieran Kenneth, 27 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 25.

⁹⁵ AGO (2012) *Programs for Students with Special Learning Needs*, p. 21. The report was cited by: Disability Advocacy Victoria, *Submission 178*, pp. 8–9.

- The **Victorian Challenge and Enrichment Series** has supported almost 119,000 students from Foundation to Year 12 with extension activities.
- The **high-ability toolkit** provides advice and information for primary and secondary school teachers in the classroom.⁹⁶

The Department of Education reported to the Committee that there are no plans to expand the number of government schools exclusively targeted to high-ability students.⁹⁷

The Committee received no other substantive evidence on supports for high-achieving students.

4.5 Pathways to further learning and work

As summarised in Chapter 3, Section 3.3, the Department of Education has recently implemented significant reform to vocational and applied learning following the 2020 *Review into vocational and applied learning pathways in senior secondary schools* (Firth Review). Key elements of the reforms include:

- a new Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) vocational major and the Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC), both introduced in 2023
- a core offering of 12 Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways aligned to student interests and local industry needs, including a new clean energy pathway
- free VET subjects, essential VET materials and support for VET-related transport for students in regional and rural areas
- establishing VET clusters and place-based planning for every Victorian school to improve access to and quality of VET provision
- the state-wide roll out of Head Start, which provides wrap-around supports for students participating in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships while completing senior secondary
- work to continue to strengthen careers education, including through personalised student insights, and improved access to vocational and applied learning prior to senior secondary, including work experience.⁹⁸

4.5.1 Supporting place-based vocational education and training in rural areas

These developments were generally welcomed by stakeholders. However, the practicality of delivering on policies are hampered by lack of resources or access

⁹⁶ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 24.

⁹⁷ Department of Education, response to Question on Notice No. 11, pp. 24–25.

⁹⁸ Department of Education and Training, *Review into vocational and applied learning pathways in senior secondary schooling*, 2020, pp. 19–23.

to resources caused by geographical distance from metropolitan centres. These limitations are especially felt by regional and rural schools and student cohorts.

Rural community and advocacy groups recommended further refinement of supports provided to place-based initiatives that assist delivering VET and work-based learning by supporting, leveraging and expanding Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN's), which are discussed in depth in the next section, as a crucial support system for rural schools lacking equitable access to support services for their students.⁹⁹

The Committee received general, broad-ranging evidence of the increasing reliance of rural school communities on place-based initiatives supported by community groups, philanthropy, local business and religious groups.¹⁰⁰

The Department's VET cluster framework

The Department has established a VET cluster framework to meet this goal. A VET cluster is a network of schools in an area that collaborate, often with the support of a LLEN to improve student access to VET delivered to school students.¹⁰¹

LLENs are program providers that work with industry partners and schools to improve students' access to work-based learning opportunities. Established in the early 2000s, each LLEN is an incorporated association governed by a volunteer board. There are 31 LLENs in Victoria, 11 of which are based in rural areas (and cover 56% of the state of Victoria).¹⁰²

The Victorian Government funds LLENs to deliver the School to Work program, which includes work experience, structured workplace learning, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, workplace visits and industry tours and life skills programs and work-readiness activities. Some work-based learning is part of VET programs.¹⁰³

According to the Department:

VET cluster transition funding is available to both new and existing clusters to support their implementation of the framework. For new clusters, it will support the employment of dedicated cluster coordinators through the LLEN. For existing clusters, this funding will be available in partnership with the LLEN to support enhanced functionality of the cluster.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ See for example, the Great South Coast Youth Strategic Advocacy Group, *Submission 264*; Beyond the Bell, *Submission 270*.

¹⁰⁰ Divina Forth, Executive Officer, Beyond the Bell, public hearing, Melbourne, 8 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 41; Tomorrow Today, *Submission 218*, p. 5.

¹⁰¹ Department of Education, *School operations: Vocational Education and Training Delivered to School Students*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/vet-delivered-school-students/guidance>> accessed 13 August 2024.

¹⁰² VicLLENs, *About us*, <<https://www.vicllens.org.au/about>> accessed 13 August 2024; Great South Coast Youth Strategic Advocacy Group, *Submission 264*, p. 10.

¹⁰³ Department of Education, *School to work*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/school-to-work>> accessed 13 August 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Department of Education, *Vocational Education and Training Delivered to School Students*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/vet-delivered-school-students/guidance>> accessed 25 September 2024.

These initiatives appear to be a response to Recommendation 30 of the Firth Review, a report into vocational and applied learning pathways in senior secondary schooling.¹⁰⁵ The Firth Review recommended the Department take a place-based approach to building school-industry partnerships, including greater coordination with industry and employers.¹⁰⁶

Existing clusters, initiatives and Local Learning and Employment Networks needing greater support

The Committee heard that a large range of community and place-based initiatives are well-established to deliver larger and ongoing vocational learning opportunities to rural students. However, these existing networks need greater support.

LLENs have now functioned for almost 25 years as ‘honest brokers’ building support bridges between schools, industry, government and community. The Committee were informed many of these now reviewing their operations due to funding cuts. According to rural advocacy group, Great South Coast Youth Strategic Advocacy Group, eleven LLENs faced significant funding cuts in 2023–2025, with 10 of the 11 based in rural areas, including their local LLEN. According to the Advocacy Group: ‘These cuts have seriously undermined their ability to provide place-based supports to our rural schools into the future’.¹⁰⁷

Great South Coast Youth Strategic Advocacy Group said funding needs to be reinstated as a matter of urgency and that the role of LLENs should be broadened beyond the current ‘school to work’ contract. Additional funding should be provided to ensure that these networks have the remit to build the partnerships required to address the health and wellbeing concerns of students in rural communities, providing more holistic support as rural students transition from school to workplaces.¹⁰⁸

Similarly, an existing cluster, the North Central Cluster, which comprises nine schools in northwestern Victoria, and works closely with the North Central LLEN, reported funding and resource difficulties. In 2014, the North Central cluster opened the North Central Trade Training Centre, based in Charlton. The centre is a resource-sharing partnership delivering access to VET courses that individual schools would not be able to run on their own. It facilitates the delivery of Certificate II and III qualifications in community services, agriculture, allied health, automotive, construction, engineering, hairdressing, and hospitality. The centre reports a lack of access to funding to ensure it can update and maintain its state-of-the-art facilities. The North Central Cluster also report that while Education Department transport funding has enabled students in outlying

¹⁰⁵ Department of Education, *Review into vocational and applied learning pathways in senior secondary schooling*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/review-vocational-and-applied-learning-pathways-senior-secondary-schooling>> accessed 5 September 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Department of Education and Training, *Review into vocational and applied learning pathways in senior secondary schools*, 2020, p. 203.

¹⁰⁷ Great South Coast Youth Strategic Advocacy Group, *Submission 264*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ Great South Coast Youth Strategic Advocacy Group, *Submission 264*, p. 10.

areas to access the facility, transport costs continue to be a barrier to expanding opportunities and programs.¹⁰⁹

The North Central Cluster recommend:

- A commitment from the Department of Education to ongoing maintenance, updating and resourcing of this critical community facility.
- A commitment to encouragement and incentives to support collaborations with industry to explore place-based, more sustainable, grow your own solutions.
- Subsidies for transport costs to address inequity in access to a range of opportunities and support aspiration in rural schools including camps, camps, excursions and work experience.¹¹⁰

The need for alternative collaborations is felt across the state. Great South Coast Youth Strategic Advocacy Group reported that in one shire in southwestern Victoria, only 4 of the 12 core VET offerings are available. Students travel over 3 hours to access the closest VET training in their career of choice. A difficult undertaking even with transport funds available.¹¹¹

Place-based initiatives also face other barriers, particularly access to appropriate qualified staff to deliver VET programs in schools and centres. According to the Brotherhood of St Laurence, a 2021 study found 84% of VET teaching in schools is conducted by out-of-field teachers.¹¹²

Committee comment

The Committee appreciates that the Victorian Government and Department of Education have significantly reformed and improved student pathways to further study and work following the Firth Review.

As with other schooling policy areas, the Committee finds that the Department of Education has at its disposal existing and well-established infrastructures to support the delivery of future pathways that are not being fully utilised or supported.

While the Firth Review noted the important role LLENs can play in facilitating place-based school-industry relationships, it did not at the time identify funding or resourcing issues with those bodies. Evidence to this Committee suggests that since 2020, when the Firth Review was completed, that funding issues have since arisen.

RECOMMENDATION 25: That the Department of Education review current levels of funding for Local Learning and Employment Networks to ensure they are appropriately funded.

¹⁰⁹ North Central LLEN, *Submission 176*, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ North Central LLEN, *Submission 176*, p. 3.

¹¹¹ Great South Coast Youth Strategic Advocacy Group, *Submission 264*, p. 7.

¹¹² Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Submission 202*, p. 10.

4.6 Rural and regional students

A focus of this Inquiry are disparities in learning outcomes correlated with geographic and socio-economic disadvantage. The Committee heard from numerous stakeholders of the distinct challenges regional and especially rural schools face in achieving effective learning outcomes. These include:

- difficulty attracting and retaining experienced teachers
- distance from key services and opportunities provided only in Melbourne
- higher levels of low socio-economic families and backgrounds
- socioeconomic status of rural communities limiting the aspirations of rural students, making it challenging to pursue opportunities outside their local towns¹¹³
- students not reaching their full potential as they do not want to add to their family's financial burden by moving away to attend university or TAFE.¹¹⁴

4.6.1 Department of Education initiatives

The Department of Education has broad range of investments and initiatives in addressing learning outcomes in rural and regional areas. Some of these issues are returned to elsewhere in this report:

- support for workforce attraction and retention (see Chapter 5)
- additional school 'equity' funding to address challenges disproportionately affecting rural and regional students and schools, such as Equity Funding for socioeconomically disadvantaged schools (see Chapter 4)
- funding loadings for small and isolated schools (see Chapter 7).

The Department reported other initiatives aimed at improving access and quality in rural and regional education:

- **Virtual School Victoria** which offers the largest range of subjects of any Victorian school, providing choice for students who live in regional and rural areas. From 2024, this includes almost all VCE subjects. Enrolment fees at Virtual School Victoria were also removed so all rural and regional students can access virtual subjects.
- From 2024, a new **Regional Blended Learning Hub in Gippsland** providing students access to a wider range of VCE subjects and specialist teachers.
- The **Victorian Virtual Learning Network**, based out of Bendigo Secondary College, which offers online senior secondary subjects to over 2,000 students across Victoria.

¹¹³ North Central LLEN, *Submission 176*, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ North Central LLEN, *Submission 176*, p. 2.

- Blended language programs for small rural and regional schools, which are available through live virtual lessons delivered by the **Victorian School of Languages**.
- The **Collaboration and Curriculum Access Fund**, and the **VCE Collaboration Fund** which support rural and regional schools to form partnerships to share VCE offerings. Funding is also available to support smaller schools offer the new VCE Vocational Major and the VPC.
- Place-based support is available to clusters of schools to provide students in rural and regional areas with access to VET aligned to their strengths and interests.
- Six **Science and Mathematics Specialist Centres** which build STEM learning through onsite and outreach programs to rural and regional students.
- Seven new **Regional Academies**, which provide access to localised professional learning to help raise the teaching and leadership capability in regional schools.¹¹⁵

4.6.2 The Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students

Issues facing regional and rural schools are longstanding. In June 2019, the Minister for Education established an Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students. The Panel examined education gaps between rural and regional students and metropolitan students in both primary and secondary government schools. It consulted with key stakeholders across Victoria in July and August 2019 and delivered a report late that year. It made 23 recommendations across eight areas.¹¹⁶

The panel was established following a 2014 Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) report into rural and regional Victoria's access to high-quality education, which found students in rural areas were underperforming compared to their metropolitan peers.¹¹⁷

Some rural stakeholders reported to this Committee concerns that no progress has been made by the Department of Education to implement recommendations made by the Expert Panel.¹¹⁸

Committee comment

The Committee requested an update from the Department on its responses to the Expert Advisory Panel. The Department's responses are provided in Appendix B.

¹¹⁵ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 26.

¹¹⁶ Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students, *Recommendations for the Minister for Education on improving educational outcomes for students in Rural and Regional Victoria*, 2019, p. 5.

¹¹⁷ Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students, *Recommendations for the Minister for Education on improving educational outcomes for students in Rural and Regional Victoria*, 2019, p. 5. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Access to education for regional students*, 2014, p. xiii.

¹¹⁸ Tony Shaw, *Submission 63*, p. 2.

RECOMMENDATION 26: That the Victorian Government implement the recommendations of the 2019 Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students.

4.6.3 Virtual School Victoria

Virtual School Victoria has proved an important initiative providing students with alternative education opportunities, both to access diverse subjects and education experiences and as a release from inappropriate or unsafe environments (see Case Study 4.1).

Importantly, students using the virtual school program are still affiliated or enrolled with a host school. Typically, students will not engage all their education through Virtual School Victoria but take a mix of subjects in both.

Stakeholders did note several unintended consequences of this arrangement:

- Schools which host students that attend the Virtual School Victoria are penalised the Student Resource Package paid for that student (see Chapter 7). Schools receive a percentage of the time students are being taught at the school, not the fact that they are at school.¹¹⁹
- For example, a school may have 80 students enrolled in VCE, but only be funded for 60 because 20 of them are doing virtual schools or other programs. Yet the school still needs to provide infrastructural supports for those students when they are at school.¹²⁰

Committee comment

Virtual School Victoria is an important program that provides flexibility and allows students from rural and regional areas as well as those in inappropriate or unsafe situations to access education opportunities they might have otherwise been denied. The Committee believes it is important to the long-term future of this program that schools should not be financially disadvantaged for helping students to access it.

RECOMMENDATION 27: That the Department of Education reassess funding so that schools do not lose funding when their students enrol in Virtual School Victoria.

4.6.4 The Commission for Children and Young People

The Commission for Children and Young People's *Let Us Learn* report made 47 recommendations. The report examines the educational experiences of students in

¹¹⁹ Matt Jenkins, President, Orbst Community College, public hearing, Bairnsdale, 26 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 34.

¹²⁰ Matt Jenkins, 26 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 32.

care and reveals substantial disparities in outcomes for this group when compared to the general student population, and concerningly, further disparities in outcomes for Aboriginal children in care (further examined in Section 4.7).

Data from the Department of Education revealed that when compared with students in the general population, students in care are:

- absent from school at consistently higher rates compared to their peers
- five times more likely to be suspended and expelled
- seven times more likely to be subject to incidents of restraint or seclusion
- receiving lower NAPLAN results and are much less likely to finish secondary school.

Committee comment

Principal Commissioner Liana Buchanan strongly encouraged the Committee to support and prioritise the educational needs of children and young people in care.

RECOMMENDATION 28: That the Victorian Government accept in full all 47 recommendations from the Commission for Children and Young People’s *Let Us Learn* report.

4.7 Koorie students

If we want to see our retention rate rise in education, we need to be able to change the way it is delivered to Aboriginal kids – simple as that – otherwise we are always going to be dragging the chain.

Dozer Atkinson, public hearing, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 April 2024, p. 13.

Koorie is the term used by the Department of Education to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria.¹²¹ Approximately 2.6% of full-time students in government schools identify as Koorie students – almost three times the proportion in non-government schools.¹²² In 2022, there were 16,564 Koorie students in Victorian government schools, a substantial increase on 9,200 Koorie students in 2011. In 2022, 88% of Victorian government schools had at least one Koorie student.¹²³

Students in out-of-home-care system face added challenges achieving learning outcomes. Aboriginal children make up 29% of the 90,000 children and young people

¹²¹ Department of Education, *Koorie Education*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/koorie-education/policy>> accessed 5 September 2024.

¹²² Department of Education, *Submission 225*, p. 5.

¹²³ Department of Education, *Submission 225*, p. 26.

in the care system.¹²⁴ The Commission for Children and Young People gave additional statistics about Aboriginal children in out of home care:

- 59% of Aboriginal students in care were recorded as having chronic absences in 2022, with a 61% increase in chronic absences from 2018 to 2022.
- seven Aboriginal students in care completed VCE.¹²⁵

4.7.1 Department initiatives for Koorie students

The Department of Education reports it is 'committed to strengthening self-determination in education for improved learning and wellbeing outcomes for Koorie students'.¹²⁶ Self-determination requires:

the transfer of power, control, decision making and resources from government and the non-Aboriginal service sector to Aboriginal communities and their organisations in recognition that Aboriginal Victorians hold the knowledge and expertise about what is best for their communities.¹²⁷

The Department notes self-determination in education helps 'meet the needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal community, including the changes that will be necessitated by Treaty in Victoria and through the work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission'.¹²⁸

In meeting these objectives, the Department has initiated:

- The **Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026**, which guides the Department's approach to supporting Koorie learners of all ages. The plan was developed in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated.
- The **Koorie Education Workforce** which consists of approximately 150 staff across the state. It, guides schools on strategies to support the learning and wellbeing of Koorie students, enhancing cultural inclusion practices, and facilitating strengthened school-community partnerships.
- **Community Understanding and Safety Training**, which is being delivered in all government schools to build the capacity of all school staff to provide culturally inclusive learning environments and better support their Koorie students. As at June 2023, over 90% of government schools have completed the training.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Liana Buchanan, Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People, Commission for Children and Young People, public hearing, Shepparton, 17 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 31.

¹²⁵ Meena Singh, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, Commission for Children and Young People, public hearing, Shepparton, 17 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 35.

¹²⁶ Department of Education, *Submission 225*, p. 26.

¹²⁷ Department of Education, *Submission 225*, p. 26.

¹²⁸ Department of Education, *Submission 225*, p. 26.

¹²⁹ Department of Education, *Submission 225*, pp. 26–27.

4.7.2 Campfire Conversations

In addition to these initiatives, in 2022 the Department of Education conducted a series of Campfire Conversations on self-determination in education across Victoria. Completed in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, the process involved 3,100 people at 180 Campfire Conversations held at 89 schools and 12 Aboriginal organisations.¹³⁰

In May 2024, the Department released a report summarising the findings. Six ‘reform directions’ were identified from the Campfire Conversations. They are:

- truth-telling
- capacity building
- strong partnerships
- Aboriginal voice in decision-making
- a culturally safe and responsive school system
- accountability.¹³¹

In the 2024/25 Victorian budget, \$51 million was allocated to build on these reform areas. These include:

- \$31 million to increase the capacity of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to support education outcomes and inclusion for Aboriginal students
- funding to support the development and delivery of locally tailored First Nation curriculum resources and truth-telling through the curriculum.¹³²

4.7.3 Culturally safe learning environments

Stakeholders contributing to this Inquiry identified culturally safe learning environments, including representation of Aboriginal identity and culture in education systems, as primary to advancing learning outcomes for Koorie students in Victoria.¹³³ A culturally safe and responsive school system was one of the key areas of reform identified by the Campfire Conversations.

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) reported to the Committee that:

For Aboriginal children and young people, connection to culture is essential for building strong social and emotional wellbeing. It allows young people to know where they come from, who they are and to be proud and strong in their cultural identity.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Premier of Victoria, *Boosting Aboriginal Self-Determination In Education*, media release, 30 May 2024.

¹³¹ Department of Education, *Strengthening Aboriginal Self-Determination in Aboriginal Education*, 2024. p. 13.

¹³² Premier of Victoria, *Boosting Aboriginal Self-Determination In Education*, media release, 30 May 2024.

¹³³ Dozer Atkinson, Senior Cultural Advisor, Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation, public hearing, Bendigo, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 16; Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 9.

¹³⁴ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 7.

Consequently:

a lack of cultural safety and representation has been a longstanding issue in Victorian schools and contributes to Aboriginal students having a more challenging experience of schooling compared with their peers. This can result in increased disengagement from learning.¹³⁵

Meena Singh, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People said that, by law, child safe standards in Victoria require organisations to create culturally safe environments for Aboriginal children and young people. However, the Commission has found Aboriginal students in many instances are not enjoying this safety: ‘What Aboriginal children and young people tell us, whether they are in care or not, is that they do not experience their school environments as culturally safe.’¹³⁶

Ensuring cultural safety was a key focus of the Disability Royal Commission’s volume on First nations people with disability, including Aboriginal school students with a disability.¹³⁷

Creating culturally safe learning environments

In 2022, VACCA hosted a series of community yarns from May-July as part of the Self-Determination in Education Reform initiative led by the Koorie Outcomes Division, to look at how Victorian schools can be improved for Aboriginal children. It found that:¹³⁸

- some students experienced bullying based on their Aboriginal identity, and reported not trusting, or feeling comfortable around other students
- some had their identity undermined and told they were ‘not black enough’
- many participants noted that schools were slow to include and teach Aboriginal perspectives and culture in the curriculum
- some teachers were seen to be sharing false information about Aboriginal perspectives, or a white version of Aboriginal history.

The Committee acknowledges racism continues to be an ongoing and unacceptable barrier to the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students. Strategies for dealing with racism in schools are addressed in the following Section 4.8.

On the other hand, VACCA reported in its findings from the community yarns positive educational experiences when schools cultivate a space that is experienced as culturally safe and representative of Aboriginal people and culture. Young people spoke of positive experiences when:

¹³⁵ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 7.

¹³⁶ Meena Singh, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 36.

¹³⁷ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, *First Nations people with disability, Volume 9*, 2023, Chapter 3.

¹³⁸ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 8.

- seeing culture acknowledged taught and celebrated, through visibility of the Aboriginal flag, Acknowledgment of Country in assembly, and school excursions to Aboriginal places of cultural significance
- presence and visibility of Aboriginal staff at school, both Koorie Engagement Support Officers and teachers, visits from Aboriginal Elders, and creating Indigenous native gardens
- holding Aboriginal ceremonies such as smoking ceremonies, visibly celebrating Aboriginal art and culture through workshops and presence and visibility of Aboriginal art, running Aboriginal programs, allowing students to wear Aboriginal designed clothes, and providing a greater focus on Aboriginal history and culture for all students, not only Aboriginal students.¹³⁹

In a submission to the Committee, VACCA outlined the following strategies schools can implement to create culturally safe learning environments:

- role models programs, including inviting Aboriginal Elders or Aboriginal community members into the school to inspire aspirational thinking (e.g., artists, sports people, and musicians)
- cultural connections, by offering opportunities for Aboriginal children and young people to learn more about their culture (e.g., return to country trips) or with physical representation of culture around the school (e.g., fly the flags, artwork on walls, books by Aboriginal authors in the library)
- celebrate significant days with all the students at the school so everyone learns about Aboriginal culture
- cultural awareness training for teachers and education staff about the importance of respect and conversations about racism, with training that is meaningful and tailored to local areas
- more Aboriginal staff in schools (particularly in regional areas).¹⁴⁰

VACCA also recommend that the 'Department of Education ensure the right to self-determination is upheld and voices of Aboriginal children and young people are listened to and respected in education settings'.¹⁴¹ This includes:

- ensuring IEPs, career action plans, and transition plans are completed in a timely manner and revisited frequently for every Aboriginal student
- holding regular community yarns that centre the voices of Aboriginal children, families and carers in education reform

¹³⁹ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁰ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁴¹ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 10.

- establishing a joint planning forum with other key stakeholders from the Aboriginal community-controlled sector to share decision making on new early years investments for the Aboriginal community.¹⁴²

Other strategies for creating culturally safe environments recommended by stakeholders included:

- committing to developing an Aboriginal specific stream in the Department's Navigator Program, which assists children to re-engage with school who reach a particular absentee threshold¹⁴³
- cultural awareness training for all school staff, from principals to cleaners¹⁴⁴
- Reconciliation Action Plans¹⁴⁵
- teaching of Aboriginal languages as part of the curriculum
- support staff present for the entirety of Aboriginal students' education journey
- ensuring parents and families feel welcome at school, whether by changing the office structure, or making available different meeting spaces¹⁴⁶
- forms of material assistance, such as free uniforms, can help alleviate non-attendance¹⁴⁷
- safe spaces within the school system for elders to be part of the learning journey.¹⁴⁸

Impacts of Aboriginal students not feeling culturally safe at school

Stakeholders informed the Committee of direct connections between Aboriginal students not feeling culturally safe and disengagement from schooling.¹⁴⁹

Mr Dozer Atkinson, an Elder representing Mungab, Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation, informed the Committee that the advent of Aboriginal-centred kindergartens had observed retention rates of 95% of young children attending every day. However, attendances drop in primary school and significantly decline between Years 7 and 9.¹⁵⁰ He told the Committee 'The system is not set up to support black children on the journey towards successful education'.¹⁵¹

¹⁴² Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 10.

¹⁴³ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ Dozer Atkinson, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁵ Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Submission 207*, p. 5; Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁶ Jess McManus, Teacher, Lakes Entrance Primary School, public hearing, Bairnsdale, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March, p. 14.

¹⁴⁷ Jess McManus, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March, p. 14.

¹⁴⁸ Meena Singh, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 35.

¹⁴⁹ Dozer Atkinson, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Hearing*, p. 14.

¹⁵⁰ Dozer Atkinson, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Hearing*, p. 13.

¹⁵¹ Dozer Atkinson, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Hearing*, p. 13.

The issue of transition from primary school to secondary school is discussed in Section 4.7.5.

Mr Atkinson said culturally safe teaching environments involved recognising that Aboriginal children come from backgrounds characterised by transgenerational trauma which shapes how Aboriginal communities raise children. He added that retention in the system depends on involving ‘what remaining knowledge holders and elders we have in our communities’.¹⁵²

4.7.4 Embedding Aboriginal languages within the curriculum

The Committee was informed that a key strategy for creating culturally safe school environments is teaching Aboriginal language in schools. Dozer Atkinson told the Committee teaching language both creates culturally safe environments for Aboriginal students and makes for more inclusive experiences for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children:

The reason why we share language ... is because it belongs to the countries that we come from, where the schools sit, where the systems are. The language belongs to where every state school sits, so the state schools have an obligation, which drags along the system, to learn about what the language means and where it is placed and where it belongs ... Every single child in our state has a birthright to be part of the oldest living culture on this planet. And through our state schools, through our young youth, that is the opportunity that they are missing out on – showing pride and being proud of being part of the oldest living culture on this planet. What we can do is just keep sharing and keep forging forward until we find common ground with each other and find true reconciliation.¹⁵³

The Committee received evidence on how the teaching of language had correlated with improved learning outcomes in several schools across the state:

- VACCA told the Committee that Thornbury Primary School, which has one of the largest concentrations of Aboriginal students in the Melbourne metro area, provides a strong language and culture program to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. In 2018, an attitudinal survey found that Aboriginal students outperformed non-Koorie students in areas including classroom behaviour, respect and connection to school. NAPLAN results for Aboriginal students have reportedly also significantly improved since the introduction of this school wide approach.¹⁵⁴
- VACCA told the Committee that Reservoir East Primary School provides an example where Aboriginal parents and carers are highly engaged and active at the school, including in the literacy program, providing great opportunities and role models for children.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Dozer Atkinson, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 13.

¹⁵³ Dozer Atkinson, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 12.

¹⁵⁴ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 21.

¹⁵⁵ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 21.

- Mr Atkinson told the Committee that at Yarrunga Primary School, where 40% of the students are Aboriginal and all who are in out-of-home care are in non-Indigenous care, the Bangerang language is taught to all children. Mr Atkinson says the children in out-of-home care 'are leaping forward in leaps and bounds with their education because their culture is part of their education'.¹⁵⁶

FINDING 13: All school students benefit from being taught about Aboriginal language, culture and history.

Case Study 4.3 Teaching Bangerang language at Yarrunga Primary School

In his work with the Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation, Dozer Atkinson is a Senior Cultural Advisor, providing advice to schools on sharing culture. He explained to the Committee how primary schools he has worked with schools in northern Victoria have Aboriginal language in their curriculum:

What we are doing at Yarrunga and at Rutherglen and Chiltern – just a few of the towns in the north-east where we are working with these schools – and Carraragarmungee, is we are spending time with these teachers and teaching them. We have our language already that is documented, so we are teaching the teachers what the languages mean and the words. And we only give them 50 words. We are limiting the words. We are not throwing a thousand words at these children and expecting them to understand or to speak it fluently. We are throwing the words that are meaningful to them, like 'welcome', 'hello', 'arm', 'leg', 'head', 'tree' – all words that these children can adapt to, but we are teaching the teachers first, and the teachers are teaching this language, so it is not only alongside an elder that sits beside the teacher when they do the class or when they sit outside underneath a gum tree ... We have got whitefellas teaching language – Bangerang language here – and that is the way it is supposed to be and that is the way we want it to be because our language does not only belong to us as blackfellas now, it belongs to everybody in our country. We have the right to teach anybody and everybody that wants to learn it and share that. That is the way we go about it in the north-east, and I think it would be quite easy to mirror image right across our state.

Source: Dozer Atkinson, Senior Cultural Advisor, Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, pp. 14–15.

4.7.5 Transition to high school for Koorie students

Several stakeholders identified the transition from primary to secondary school as especially challenging for some Aboriginal children.¹⁵⁷ A key reason is that the cultural

¹⁵⁶ Dozer Atkinson, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Hearing*, p. 15.

¹⁵⁷ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 16.

safety and cultural awareness supports outlined in Section 4.7.3 can be harder to deliver in larger settings.¹⁵⁸

VACCA noted that changing school contexts are also important. Where primary school students typically have one teacher each year, in high school, young people are taught by multiple teachers with varying styles and expectations. VACCA said such transitions can 'experienced as disruptive and confusing', particularly for children in out of home care.¹⁵⁹

Jess McManus, a teacher of a significant Aboriginal cohort at Lakes Entrance Primary School (20% of enrolments), provided evidence of how this transition can be experienced by students:

There is definitely a disconnect between the high school model that is in place and the primary school mode ... I think that there is a huge difference in pedagogy: there are a lot of textbook examples on a board, and kids copying down that does not suit the wide variety of learners in our classroom.¹⁶⁰

The Department of Education provides a Primary to Secondary School Transition Policy, which outlines how schools can implement effective transition programs and support for their students from Year 5 to Year 8. The policy provides a four-phrase approach:

- preparation
- transfer
- induction
- consolidation.¹⁶¹

It also provides advice on the transfer of student information. Details of implementation are left to school leaders, who are identified as 'best placed to determine how to implement this policy and use the associated guidance and resources to fit their local school context, considering school size, location and student cohort needs.'¹⁶²

The transition planning policy is therefore aimed at informing practices at a general school level. The Committee did not find Department guidance on transition plans for equity cohorts, especially Aboriginal students.

¹⁵⁸ Dozer Atkinson, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Hearing*, p. 16.

¹⁵⁹ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 16.

¹⁶⁰ Jess McManus, Teacher, Lakes Entrance Primary School, 26 March 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, p.19.

¹⁶¹ Department of Education, *School operations: Primary to Secondary School Transition*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/primary-secondary-school-transition/policy>> accessed 14 August 2024.

¹⁶² Department of Education, *School operations: Primary to Secondary School Transition*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/primary-secondary-school-transition/policy>> accessed 14 August 2024.

Outside these planning policies, the Committee heard there were two major supports to assist Aboriginal children transitioning from primary to high school: Koorie Engagement Support Officers and effective IEPs.

VACCA told the Committee that Koorie Engagement Support Officers provide a key support to families and students transitioning Aboriginal students across all learning stages. The Department employs approximately 150 support officers and Koorie Engagement Coordinators across the state.¹⁶³ The role of Koorie engagement workers in assisting student wellbeing is discussed further in Chapter 6.¹⁶⁴

However, as discussed in Chapter 6, there is a shortage of Koorie Engagement Support Officers. This necessitates support officers to take on a large caseload of students. As VACCA notes, current staffing 'often cannot provide the level of support required for each and every student due to resourcing limitations'.¹⁶⁵ One solution to improving primary to secondary transition is to significantly increase investment in the Koorie engagement support workforce. This option is further discussed in Chapter 6.

A second avenue for supporting transitions to high schools are effective IEPs.

VACCA drew the Committee's attention to the Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026, which recommends IEPs to achieve Marrung goals for Koorie students at school, including retaining students through to the end of school.¹⁶⁶

As noted in Section 4.3.5, in relation to supporting students with disabilities, while the Department provides strong guidance on IEPs, there is evidence that IEPs are not well implemented or even used. VACCA finds this is also the case for supporting Aboriginal students, including Aboriginal students in out-of-home-care. VACCA education workers have found that IEPs 'are not being completed in a timely manner, not being used or followed up on adequately'.¹⁶⁷ In some cases, education workers report that Aboriginal young people in residential care with an IEP had not been followed up on for four or five months, even though that had not attended school in that period.¹⁶⁸

The Commission for Children and Young People's recent report into education outcomes for children in out of home care, *Let Us Learn*, relayed mixed findings on the use of IEPs to support Aboriginal students transitioning to high school. In some instances, it found that IEPs are often used to monitor and regulate behaviour and attendance of Koorie secondary students rather than academics and career pathways. Yet is also provided examples were Koorie Engagement Support Officers had worked closely with Koorie students, family members and school leaders to form a student support group and implement effective IEPs that resulted in students successfully

¹⁶³ Department of Education, *Submission 225*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁴ On Koorie Engagement Support Officers see Meena Singh, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 42.

¹⁶⁵ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 15.

¹⁶⁶ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 15; Department of Education, *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026*, 2016, pp. 26–27.

¹⁶⁷ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁸ Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 17.

progressing to high school. In this instance, department procedures, properly implemented ‘contributed to the children experiencing significant growth with their literacy and numeracy’.¹⁶⁹

The Committee notes that Recommendation 31 of the *Let us Learn* report recommends that ‘cultural plans inform Individual Education Plans’ and that:

Cultural plans to be shared by care teams and case managers with education settings to inform their Individual Education Plan and cultural connections in schools and early childhood education centres.¹⁷⁰

The Committee also notes that Department of Education guidance on IEPs already states cultural plans should be used to inform IEPs. However, there is little guidance on what constitutes cultural planning in an education setting, specifically as it relates to the transition from primary to secondary school. Resources for the Cultural Planning for Aboriginal Children fall under the remit of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.¹⁷¹

The Committee finds that if the Department adequately addressed Recommendation 31 it would help rectify the current issues with IEPs and First Nations’ students transition to high school. Recommendation 31 states in full:

That DE, DFFH and partners of the Wungurilwil Gagapduir working group strengthen the requirements in the Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment for relevant information from Aboriginal students’ cultural plans to be shared by care teams and case managers with education settings to inform their Individual Education Plan and cultural connections in schools and early childhood education centres.¹⁷²

The Victorian Government provided its response to the Commissions’ *Let us Learn* report in May 2024, which was made public in August 2024. The Committee notes that the Victorian Government has only accepted Recommendation 31 in principle. The Victorian Government supports the intent of the recommendation, noting implementation approach is subject to consultation and codesign with Aboriginal community partners.¹⁷³

4.8 Cultural and linguistically diverse students

Over one-in-three Victorian government students come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

¹⁶⁹ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let Us Learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care*, 2024, p. 204.

¹⁷⁰ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let Us Learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care*, 2024, Recommendation 31.

¹⁷¹ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Cultural planning for Aboriginal children, <<https://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/advice-and-protocols/specialist-resources/cultural-planning-aboriginal-children>> accessed 3 October 2024.

¹⁷² Commission for Children and Young People, *Let Us Learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care*, 2024, Recommendation 31.

¹⁷³ Victorian Government *Response to Let Us Learn*, 2024, pp. 27–28.

Schools and the Department deliver a suite of additional support:

- Newly arrived students have access to an English language school or centre for between 6 and 12 months after arrival (depending on their educational background and/or refugee status).
- Mainstream schools are provided with English as an Additional Language (EAL) Index funding, based on the number of EAL students in their school. This allows schools to deliver programs that develop students' English language proficiency, delivered by qualified EAL teachers or multicultural education aides.
- Community language schools are funded to provide language programs to pre-school and school-aged children after school or on weekends.
- Interpreting and translation services for parents and carers.
- Cultural inclusion training for school staff.
- Other resources to help schools and students to tackle racism and bullying.¹⁷⁴

4.8.1 Out-of-school hours learning support programs (homework clubs)

While the Department provides a broad range of supports for EAL students, the Committee received evidence from advocacy groups working with students from multicultural backgrounds that effective programs are also delivered outside school.

The Committee received detailed evidence on the positive impacts of out-of-school-hours learning support programs (often called homework clubs), which were developed by and are administered by the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

Homework clubs are volunteer operated before- or after-school programs that provide space for students to receive assistance with schoolwork. It is especially targeted at refugee students and students where English is not the primary language.

The Centre for Multicultural Youth provide training and support to tutors and volunteers running homework clubs. The Centre estimates that in 2023, 365 learning support programs were conducted across Victoria reaching approximately 6,500 students each week and relying on roughly 2,000 volunteers. It estimates approximately:

- 50% of all Victorian homework clubs are community-run and community-based, coordinated by a local community agency and run outside of a school.
- 20% are community-run and based in a school
- 30% of programs being school-run and school-based.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, pp. 27–28.

¹⁷⁵ Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Homework Club Resource Kit*, p. 4.

Richard Filer from the Centre for Multicultural Youth explained the arrangements of the Homework club he volunteers with:

[My club] runs on Mondays and Wednesdays from 5:30 to 7, and it is accessed by a few dozen kids, and it has two different elements – an early childhood literacy program and then a standard homework tutoring. And for the volunteers, we do not teach – we support kids with their homework. If you have ever had the value of just someone sitting next to you while you do your homework, that is what we do.¹⁷⁶

Soon-Lin Quek, Executive Manager of Policy at the Centre for Multicultural Youth told the Committee homework clubs typically run sporting activities beforehand. 'It is basic 101 youth work in some ways – how you bring young people in and engage them, make them want to come back again.'¹⁷⁷

The Centre ascribed the following benefits to the homework club program, which extended well beyond individual student learning outcomes. They include:

- Supporting social skills, wellbeing and the settlement journey for families coming into Australia.
- Linking participating students with other community agencies and supports.
- Bringing together a diverse a mix of people, from volunteer tutors to a mix of students, into a space where normally they would not be able to come in contact with each other.
- Providing a space for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to go and socialise if they are not able to go home straight after school due to complex family issues.
- Promoting volunteerism in communities.¹⁷⁸

The Centre reported to the Committee many clubs are facing uncertain futures, including some that have been operating for 10 or more years.¹⁷⁹ Clubs typically operate on rolling budgets of \$10,000 or less, which pays for catering, stationery and other basic supplies.¹⁸⁰

Committee comment

The Department of Education provides some funding, which the Centre for Multicultural Youth seeks to match with philanthropic funding sourced through Australian Communities Foundation. Last year, for example, an \$80,000 grant from the Department was matched by philanthropic bodies. This pool provides for a grant

¹⁷⁶ Richard Filer, Team Leader of Education, Centre for Multicultural Youth, public hearing, Melbourne, 9 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 52.

¹⁷⁷ Soon-Lin Quek, Executive Manager of Policy, Sector & Business Development, Centre for Multicultural Youth, public hearing, Melbourne, 9 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 48.

¹⁷⁸ Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Homework Club Resource Kit*, p. 3.

¹⁷⁹ Richard Filer, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 48.

¹⁸⁰ Richard Filer, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 48.

process for local councils or communities to apply to establish new homework clubs. These applications are oversubscribed every year.¹⁸¹

The Centre argued that a grant of \$1 million in annual funding from the Department of Education would provide for the long-term stability of the program. The funds would be granted directly to organisations delivering best practice homework clubs across Victoria. It would be distributed through the existing Homework Club Partnership Fund that is managed by the Centre and the Australian Communities Foundation, supported by the Department of Education.¹⁸²

The Centre for Multicultural Youth estimate that the actual cost of funding a state-wide network of clubs available to young people facing disadvantage is \$8 million per year. The Centre recommends an initial \$1 million 'to demonstrate the scalability of the initiative, with outcomes to be effectively documented'.¹⁸³

RECOMMENDATION 29: The Victorian Government investigate the need for additional appropriate supports for culturally and linguistically diverse students, with a view to establishing a program of Multicultural Support Officers.

RECOMMENDATION 30: That the Department of Education commit to funding that ensures the long-term stability of Out-of-School Hours Learning Support Programs.

4.8.2 Responding to racism

Advocacy groups for both Aboriginal students and students from refugee and multicultural backgrounds advised the Committee that racism continues to be a significant problem.

The Centre for Multicultural Youth provided findings from a 2021 Australian National University study. It found that since the beginning of 2020, 85% of multicultural young people report experiencing at least one instance of direct racism since the pandemic started. The study also found that indirect, or vicarious racism involving third-party exposure was experienced by 93% of young people.¹⁸⁴

The Centre also reported that in its own consultations held with over 250 students across Victoria in 2022, racism was raised as an issue in every consultation session. Students consistently expressed a lack of confidence in their schools to effectively address racism.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Soo-Lin Quek, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 50.

¹⁸² Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Questions on Notice*, 23 May 2024, p. 2.

¹⁸³ Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Questions on Notice*, 23 May 2024, p. 2.

¹⁸⁴ Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Submission 196*, p. 20.

¹⁸⁵ Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Submission 196*, p. 17.

Stakeholders provided diverse accounts of how racism manifests in school settings, such as:

- Outwardly racist comments from students and teachers between students in playgrounds.¹⁸⁶
- Unconscious bias that teachers or curriculums do not speak to the student's experience.
- Comments made to Aboriginal students in the lead up and aftermath of the 2023 referendum.¹⁸⁷
- Aboriginal culture and history taught as part of the curriculum in derogatory terms.¹⁸⁸

Stakeholders reported that such experiences make students feel unsafe and unable to speak up, making schools an exclusionary space.¹⁸⁹ This increases disengagement and makes transition to high levels of education more difficult.

Stakeholders also reported that such issues stem from teacher training and school leadership support. The Centre for Multicultural Youth reported that in consultations with school staff, many reported 'they have not had adequate training to possess the skills, knowledge or confidence to prevent and respond to racism in their school'.¹⁹⁰

The Centre recommends supporting schools to implement anti-racism best practice by:

- Funding and scaling up models such as schools standing up to racism that support schools to address racism and discrimination.
- Providing training opportunities to all school staff to adequately implement anti-racism practices in their schools.
- Establishing compulsory anti-racism strategies at every government school that is distinct but related to a bullying policy.
- Learning from other jurisdictions, including NSW where the NSW Government's Anti-racism Policy commits all NSW public schools to address and eradicate racism.¹⁹¹

VACCA recommended anti-racism and anti-vilification can be advanced by:

- Requiring all schools to develop and register a Reconciliation Plan, that is publicly available on their website by 2027.
- All schools conducting an Acknowledgement of Country at all school assemblies and staff and Council meetings.

¹⁸⁶ Soo-Lin Quek, 9 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 44; Meena Singh, 17 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 34.

¹⁸⁷ Meena Singh, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 34.

¹⁸⁸ Meena Singh, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 34.

¹⁸⁹ Meena Singh, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 34.

¹⁹⁰ Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Submission 196*, p. 17.

¹⁹¹ Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Submission 196*, p. 17.

- Each school developing and publishing a racism and vilification policy that is signed by all students and parents at the start of the year, outlining the consequences of racism and vilifying behaviours.¹⁹²

The Committee also notes a set of important recommendations made by the Commission for Children and Young People in its 2024 report, *Let Us Learn*, to address racism in schools:

- Recommendation 19: Support Aboriginal children and young people to report racism, and respond appropriately when they do.
- Recommendation 20: Audit the effectiveness of the Report Racism Hotline.
- Recommendation 21: Implement recommendations from the Community Understanding and Safety Training evaluation.
- Recommendation 22: Develop youth relevant cultural safety resources.
- Recommendation 23: Require schools to report on actions taken to address racism.¹⁹³

Committee acknowledges racism is an ongoing, societal-wide problem which schools have an important role to play in addressing. It details the recommendations made by stakeholders listed above to help highlight the broad range of initiatives that might be undertaken to combat racism in schools.

The Committee notes that in its response to the *Let Us Learn* report, the Victorian Government accepts recommendations 19, 21, 22 and 23 in full, while recommendation 20 was accepted 'in part'.

Recommendation 20 stated:

Audit the effectiveness of the Report Racism Hotline: That DE conduct and publish an audit of the Report Racism Hotline to examine the types of complaints it receives and from whom, in addition to the effectiveness of processes for addressing complaints of racism.¹⁹⁴

The Victorian Government responded:

Analysis of issues raised through the Report Racism Hotline will inform broader work on strengthening the response to incidents of racism.¹⁹⁵

The Committee agrees an analysis of the hotline will help to address the broad range of racism issues in schools addressed above. However, in order to conduct this analysis, the Victorian Government should commit to a full and independent audit of the initiative.

¹⁹² Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 2.

¹⁹³ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let Us Learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care*, 2024, pp. 43-44.

¹⁹⁴ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let Us Learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care*, 2024, Recommendation 20.

¹⁹⁵ Victorian Government, *Response to Let Us Learn*, 2024, p. 12.

Chapter 5

Teaching workforce

5.1 Overview

It would be fair to say that staffing is the number one game in town at the moment.

Colin Axup, President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 42.

Teacher shortages are a widely recognised challenge in Victoria and across Australia. The Department of Education identified several reasons for the national teacher workforce shortage, including:

- national labour market shortages and increased competition across a range of industries for tertiary students and professionals
- a national decline in initial teacher education enrolments
- increased demand for teachers because of population growth and increased investment in schools¹
- the pause in immigration during the pandemic which challenged the system.²

Workforce pressures are particularly acute for specialist schools, schools in rural and remote areas, in areas of rapidly expanding population growth, and in specific subject areas such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).³

In December 2022, the Australian Government released a National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, outlining 27 actions to address teacher workforce shortages. The Action Plan was developed in collaboration with state and territory governments and key stakeholders. The actions are grouped into five priority areas:

- improving teacher supply
- strengthening initial teacher education
- keeping the teachers we have
- elevating the profession; and
- better understanding future teacher workforce needs.⁴

¹ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 31.

² Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 87.

³ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 31.

⁴ Australian Government Department of Education, *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan*, December 2022, p. 4.

In response, in 2023 the Victorian Government has established a strategy to address workforce issues across five focus areas:

- attracting new teachers
- recruitment (for difficult to staff areas)
- supporting early career teachers
- retention; and
- career development.⁵

The Committee received substantial evidence on the Department's efforts to attract, recruit and retain teachers. These three strategic areas are addressed in the sections below. The final section of this Chapter addresses leadership in schools, particularly Victoria's principal workforce. This section both fulfils a requirement of the Terms of Reference and highlights a key gap in the Department's workforce strategy.

Regarding the Department's policies for early career development:

- The Committee received complaints from individual teachers questioning the role and function of the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT), including its role supporting early career teachers.⁶ This evidence did not amount to a significant finding or recommendation regarding the VIT. Aspects of the accreditation processes required by VIT are discussed in Section 5.3.2.
- The Committee received general evidence that early career teachers should receive more formalised mentoring. The Committee acknowledges that the Department has in place a substantive policy, Career Start, which is aimed at providing such assistance to early career teachers. Options and challenges for instigating formalised mentoring are discussed in Section 5.5.5, in relation to establishing 'mentors' as a senior role in teacher career progression.

Regarding the Department's policies for career development, the Committee received evidence largely pertaining to career progression. This issue is treated as a sub-section of teacher retention and addressed in Section 5.5.5.

5.1.1 Teacher workforce issues in wider perspective

Teacher workforce issues need to be understood in relation to broader labour market trends. The Committee was informed that:

- Teacher shortages and retention issues are evident across multiple countries.

⁵ Department of Education, Ensuring a strong, sustainable and supported school workforce, 2024 <<https://www.vic.gov.au/ensuring-strong-sustainable-and-supported-school-workforce>> accessed 9 July 2024; Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 33.

⁶ Cindy Growcott, *Submission 46*, p. 1; Brigitte Riscica, *Submission 47*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 49*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 111*, p. 1; Name withheld, *Submission 221*, p. 1 Charles Spicer, *Submission 151*, p. 3; Northcote High School Australian Education Union, *Submission 179*, p. 6; Rohan Davis, *Submission 267*, pp. 1-4.

- In Australia, there are workforce shortages in multiple industries and the labour market has been unusually tight.
- Younger generations of workers are much more likely to change careers multiple times throughout their working lives, regardless of the industry in which they work. Current day workers are expected to have an average of six career changes during their working lives.
- Changes in employment and industrial law over the past 30 years have increased casual and fixed-term employment, reducing union membership and workplace support.
- In rural settings, it is not only schools struggling to attract workers: hospitals, aged care and other sectors in a similar situation.⁷

Given these complexities, some stakeholders criticised the recurring emphasis placed by Australian governments on initial teacher education as a ‘panacea’ to address school workforce challenges. Initial teacher education is the qualification that a person must gain to become a registered teacher. This is most commonly a four-year higher education teaching course.⁸ According to one teacher education provider, teacher training ‘has become highly politicised’,⁹ with system-level reviews presupposing that best practice teacher training is the primary solution for workforce challenges.¹⁰ Stakeholders advocated more support for teachers ‘across the whole of the career’¹¹ to ensure experienced teachers remained in the system.¹²

School principals informed the Committee that adequate staffing meant not just retaining sufficient numbers. It also meant recruiting a workforce with skills and experience to meet the changing expectations of contemporary schools. Colin Axup, President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, told the Committee:

I would argue that once you understand the nature of the organisation you have got, you then staff that organisation ... With the complexity of running a school and the expectations of what is being delivered in the school, the question then becomes: are we staffing them correctly? So, talking about ‘Are we going to get enough?’ – I do not think that is necessarily the right question.¹³

7 Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 13; Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 143*, p. 7; Matt Jenkins, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 32; Rod O’Connell, *Submission 187*, p. 1.

8 Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, *Submission 259*, p. 2

9 Victorian Institute of Teaching, Qualifications and other prerequisites for new teachers, 2024 <<https://www.vit.vic.edu.au/education/new-teachers>> accessed 3 September 2024.

10 Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, *Submission 259*, p. 2.

11 Larissa McLean Davis, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 1.

12 Larissa McLean Davis, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 13.

13 Colin Axup, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 42.

Tina King, President of the Australian Principals Federation (Victorian Branch), said these complexities were reflected in an increasingly diverse student cohort with different requirements to be motivated and engaged when compared to 20 years ago.¹⁴

Two key themes emerged from the Committee's findings into Victoria's teacher workforce:

- Equal weight should be given to retaining the existing teacher workforce as attracting or recruiting new teachers. Highly experienced teachers are leaving the sector not only as a consequence of remuneration, but also recognition, incentives, workloads, administrative burdens and system support.
- Workforce issues are not just numerical but qualitative – the Department needs to emphasise the kinds of teachers being trained and developed.

5.2 Workforce patterns and trends

The Victorian Government school workforce comprises of teachers, principals, other school leaders, education support staff and allied health professionals. As of June 2023, the Victorian Government teaching service consisted of approximately 85,250 staff (72,750 Full Time Equivalent (FTE)), including 53,100 teachers (47,400 FTE).¹⁵

These totals include '3,580 principal class employees in the Victorian government school system, including 1456 principals, 2095 assistant principals and 29 liaison principals'.¹⁶

In 2022, there were 141,291 teachers registered in Victoria.¹⁷ This includes teachers working across government, Catholic and independent schools and early childhood services, as well as other teaching contexts such as hospitals, zoos and museums. The total number of teachers registered includes those who have:

- full registration, including for school, early education or both
- provisional registration, either for graduate teachers ready to commence teaching, early career teachers who have completed their studies interstate or overseas or returning teachers who have not taught or taught overseas for the past five years
- non-practising registration
- permission to teach registration, for students teachers granted permission to work in schools early (see Section 5.3.2).¹⁸

¹⁴ Tina King, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 42.

¹⁵ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 5.

¹⁶ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report, 2022*, p. 17.

¹⁸ Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, p. 17.

Registration numbers include those working casually as casual relief teachers (see Section 5.4.4), in fixed term positions and not working.¹⁹

According to the Centre for Independent Studies, the number of registered teachers not employed was 40,751 in 2021, an increase from 39,426 in 2020, but lower than each year in the period.²⁰ Among registered teachers not employed in 2021, 36% were aged 55 or older.²¹

Approximately 530 allied health staff were also working in government schools.²²

5.2.1 Teacher supply and demand

Each year, the Department of Education produces a *Teacher Supply and Demand Report* to assess Victoria's early childhood and school teaching workforces. Each report provides a forecast of the teaching workforce over a six-year horizon. The latest report overviewed the workforce for 2022.²³

Box 5.1 provides definitions of key terms in the Departments supply and demand projections.

Key findings of the 2022 report, providing for 2028 supply and demand forecasts, include:

- a supply shortfall of 5,036 teachers expected by 2028, if no incentives to attract and retain teachers are put in place
- the shortfall is largely driven by increasing demand in secondary schools
- demand pressures come from increased enrolments, increased funding per student for new programs and staff improvements
- in primary schools, supply is largely forecast to meet demand over the five years.²⁴

¹⁹ Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, p. 17.

²⁰ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission*, p. 14.

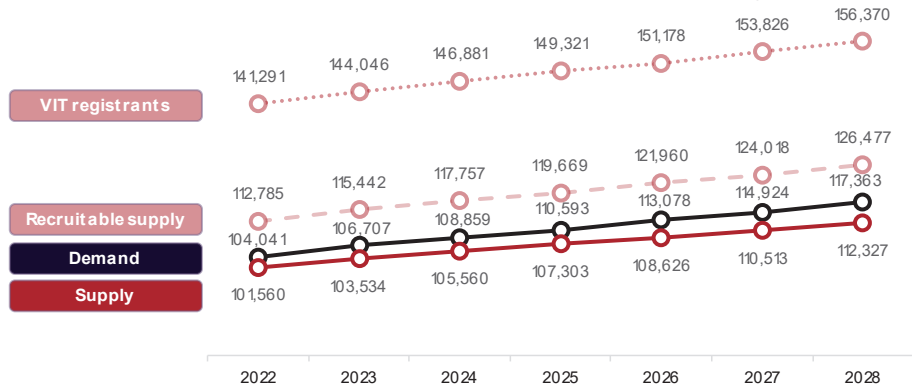
²¹ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission*, p. 14.

²² Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 5.

²³ Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, p. 17.

²⁴ Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, p. 17.

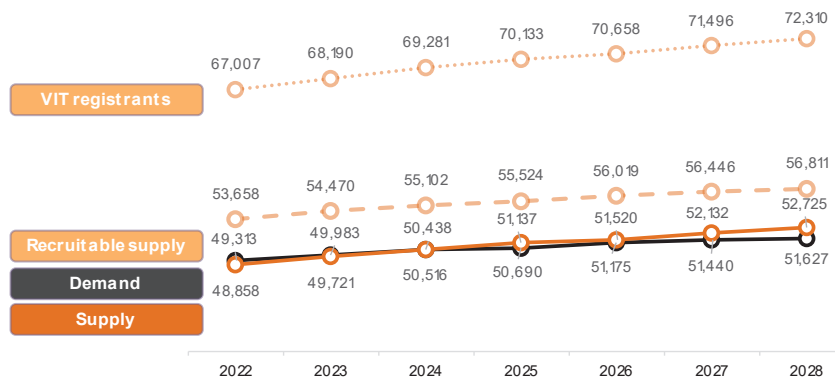
Figure 5.1 Summary of 2028 supply and demand forecasts in all Victorian government schools



Recruitable supply is employed teachers plus an estimate of registered teachers who are not currently employed who may take on teaching roles with sufficient incentives.

Source: Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, p. 17

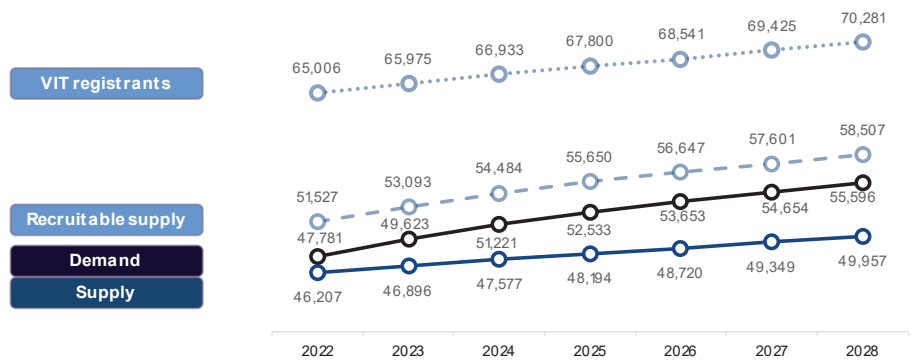
Figure 5.2 Summary of 2028 supply and demand forecasts in Victorian primary schools



Recruitable supply is employed teachers plus an estimate of registered teachers who are not currently employed who may take on teaching roles with sufficient incentives.

Source: Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, p. 18.

Figure 5.3 Summary of 2028 supply and demand forecasts in Victorian secondary schools



Recruitable supply is employed teachers plus an estimate of registered teachers who are not currently employed who may take on teaching roles with sufficient incentives.

Source: Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, p. 18.

Box 5.1 Supply and demand report definitions

The *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report* uses specific, data-driven definitions for the key areas of investigation:

VIT registrants – All teachers who are on the VIT register. The total registered workforce is forecast based on estimated new graduates registering with VIT, additional VIT registrants registering through other methods such as interstate, overseas or deferred registrants, and the number of registrants who depart the register each year.

Recruitable supply – Employed teachers plus an estimate of registered teachers who are not currently employed who may be recruitable to teaching roles with sufficient incentives, defined as VIT-registered teachers who have engaged in ongoing teaching employment in the last 5 years.

Demand – Demand is measured by the number of teachers counted in the Australian Bureau of Statistics National Schools Statistics Collection, along with administrative data for early childhood settings, adjusted to account for unmet demand, changing teacher-student ratios, and population growth in future years. Demand largely comprises teachers in ongoing roles, as teachers in casual relief teacher positions are not included. Unmet demand is estimated using recruitment datasets from the Department from which unfilled vacancy rates can be estimated.

(Currently available) Supply – Employed teachers plus an estimate of the number of registered teachers who are not currently employed in teaching roles and are willing to accept an ongoing teaching role at current employment conditions. This is estimated based on the historical proportion of employed teachers in ongoing roles relative to total VIT-registered teachers.

Source: Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report, 2022*, pp. 6–7.

5.2.2 Vacancies and application rates

A key measure used by the Department in assessing workforce trends in the *Supply and Demand* reports are vacancy rates and application rates across the state. This includes the number of jobs being offered each year and the number of applications for each vacancy.

In the most recent 2022 report, almost all vacancy indicators point to increasing challenges between 2021 to 2022 in matching supply and demand at the state level.

Figure 5.4 Vacancy rates in Victorian state schools, 2021–2022

Indicator	Primary	Secondary
Vacancies	13,416 (↑ 4,421 (49%) from 8,996 in 2021)	12,863 (↑ 5,202 (68%) from 7,661 in 2021)
Graduate teachers employed by government schools	1,600 (↑ 343 from 1,358 in 2021)	979 (↑ 32 from 947 in 2021)
Applications per vacancy*	5.3 (↓ 9.4 from 14.7 in 2021)	2.8 (↓ 3.6 from 6.4 in 2021)
<i>Major City</i>	5.9 (↓)	3.2 (↓)
<i>Inner Regional</i>	3.7 (↓)	1.6 (↓)
<i>Outer Regional/ remote</i>	1.9 (↓)	1.1 (↓)

Note: Vacancies include fixed-term backfilling in addition to fixed-term roles of varying length and ongoing roles. If an advertised vacancy is not filled and readvertised, it is counted as an additional vacancy. Applications per vacancy decrease substantially during times of recruitment difficulty, as schools may post multiple sequential advertisements to seek an adequate candidate field for the same underlying role, and the mix of short- and longer-term recruitment strategies may change. Applications per vacancy should therefore not be taken as an indication of attraction to actual underlying ongoing vacant roles in schools.

Source: Department of Education, *Supply and Demand Report*, p. 20

The most recent data indicates that schools in outer regional and remote areas are facing acute stress in finding sufficient applicants to fulfil vacant roles.

The stresses were reflected in anecdotal evidence provided to the Committee:

- **Wodonga Middle Years College:** has a teaching staff of about '80 teachers and opened the 2023 school year with 13 vacancies, many in core subjects'.²⁵ Since then, there have been up to 20 vacancies at the college at any given time, or approximately 25% of the teaching body.²⁶ Consequently, 'learning and wellbeing have been impacted, staff morale has diminished and the path forward is uncertain'.²⁷
- **Bairnsdale Secondary College:** had eight jobs advertised collectively around 100 times between terms 1 and 4, but only two filled for the year, even after teaching financial incentives were attached.²⁸
- **A 'small school'²⁹ in western Victoria:** has 40 students with two teachers. At the beginning of term 2, 2023, the school lost one teacher to a car accident injury for almost half the year. The teacher returned to work in late Term 3 and then then resigned soon after. The other teacher informed the principal they would be leaving at the end of the year. Neither role has been filled, even advertising for a higher paid teacher which will put the school budget in deficit. The principal has had to teach full time in addition to their leadership duties.³⁰

²⁵ Wodonga Middle Years College, *Submission 204*, p. 1.

²⁶ Wodonga Middle Years College, *Submission 204*, p. 1.

²⁷ Wodonga Middle Years College, *Submission 204*, p. 1.

²⁸ Matt Kell, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 5.

²⁹ The name of the school was not supplied by the submitter.

³⁰ Name withheld, *Submission 55*, p. 1.

Some stakeholders said teacher shortage issues are worse than reflected in official data because schools devise strategies to cope on a day-to-day basis that are not reflected in the vacancy and application data. One teacher explained the range of measures employed at a rural eastern Victorian school, which included:

- requiring assistant principals and principal, who are contracted to have no face-to-face teaching time, to be in classrooms
- increasing the number of weekly sessions teachers are required to teach
- refusing leave-without-pay, such as to younger teachers who often take a year to go travelling
- refusing requests of senior staff to reduce workloads from five to four or three days per week.³¹

The Committee notes that these strategies serve as a short-term fix but can have long term consequences such as resignations, teacher and principal burnout. Kate Kapolos told the Committee:

We are really well aware of the staffing shortages in schools in outer Gippsland. We live in outer Gippsland, and they are metro-based support systems ... It is available and it is there, but there are no service providers down here. There is a lot happening for the schools but they have not got access to it, or they have funding for counsellors or wellbeing staff but they cannot recruit.³²

Josie Howie, Principal of the Pavilion School, advised the Committee: ‘Schools are not able to run classes and get programs off the ground because they do not have the staff there, and I think that is really urgent’.³³

The Committee also heard that teacher shortages affect Leading Teachers and Learning Specialists, who are employed to provide support to early career teachers and instructional or curriculum leadership (see Section 5.5.5). These roles are being used in many schools to cover classes and such staff are unable to perform the duties they are employed to undertake.³⁴

5.2.3 Supply trends and department policies

The Department of Education told the Committee the objective of its five-pronged strategy was to make up the forecasted shortfall of 5,036 teachers by 2028. This goal is notwithstanding wider changes in economic and employment conditions and competition from other professions. Future *Supply and Demand* reports will update those changing conditions.³⁵

³¹ Matt Kell, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 9.

³² Kate Kapolos, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 52.

³³ Josie Howie, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 86.

³⁴ Name Withheld, *Submission 255*, pp. 1–2.

³⁵ Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 87.

The Department said the strategy is designed to deal with supply issues that are ‘lumpy’.³⁶ While some schools are well resourced and have choice for teachers, in other parts of the state – regional Victoria and the growth corridors especially – schools face greater challenges. The strategy is geared to assist these deficiencies.³⁷

The Department told the Committee it identified the major interventions for closing the gap were:

- scholarships for new teachers to begin study (see Section 5.3.1)
- paid placements (Section 5.3.1)
- the Career Start initiative (see Section 5.4)³⁸

The Department informed the Committee that it is also investigating how to better utilise the approximately 146,000 teachers registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching.³⁹

Committee comment

Given the evidence provided below, the Committee is concerned that a greater emphasis is not being placed on teacher retention.

The Department informed the Committee that forecasted teacher supply and demand assumes an attrition rate of 4% per annum, which is subtracted from the projected supply pipeline of registered teachers.⁴⁰ The Department added:

The number of teachers leaving the workforce is projected to grow in line, linearly, with the increasing pool of total registered teachers. The forecast for total registered teachers is based on forecast initial teacher education graduates, forecast migration, and forecast deferred registrants.⁴¹

The Department of Education submitted that in 2022 it had identified the requirement for a net increase of 5036 new teacher positions by 2028, however did not provide the calculation of the larger gross recruitment figure required allowing for teacher attrition, retirements or other forecastable variables across this period.

While the Department implemented a range of recruitment intervention programmes in 2023, it was not able to quantify the degree to which any of these individual measures would address the 2028 shortfall, merely that this was their objective collectively.⁴²

³⁶ Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 75.

³⁷ Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 75.

³⁸ Andrea Del Monaco, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 87.

³⁹ Andrea Del Monaco, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 87.

⁴⁰ Question on Notice, Department of Education, 30 May 2024, p. 24.

⁴¹ Question on Notice, Department of Education, 30 May 2024, p. 24.

⁴² Andrea Del Monaco, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, pp. 87–88.

FINDING 14: The expected teacher shortfall is a serious issue for the state education system that warrants significant and sustained attention and intervention.

RECOMMENDATION 31: The Department of Education should thoroughly evaluate its teacher recruitment intervention programmes in addressing expected teacher shortfall.

5.3 Attracting new teachers

A major component of the Department's strategy to address workforce challenges is to attract new recruits to the teaching system by enrolling into initial teacher education programs. Key initiatives aimed at this end include:

- **Scholarships** for eligible students who enrol in a secondary school teaching degree with a Victorian initial teacher education provider in 2024 and 2025. Recipients who work for a Victorian government secondary school or specialist school after graduating will receive additional payments. These graduates will also receive support with their HELP fees.
- **Teach Today** and **Teach Tomorrow** initiatives are postgraduate programs that enable people with an undergraduate degree to work in schools while studying to become qualified teachers. These programs will provide up to 1,200 places for teaching degree students between 2023 and 2025.
- **Teach the Future**, a largely scale television recruitment campaign.⁴³

The Committee notes a policy announced in July 2024 after public hearings for this Inquiry had concluded. This announcement launched a new pilot program enabling 300 Education Support Staff and Koorie Engagement Support Officers to gain teaching qualifications while working in schools. These staff, who are currently employed in Victorian schools in various roles such as teaching assistants, integration aides, and cultural liaison officers, will undertake teacher training with Federation University and La Trobe University. They will continue to work in schools whilst undertaking undergraduate studies.⁴⁴

The policy marks an expansion of employment-based teaching degrees to include undergraduate degrees, in addition to the post-graduate Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow initiatives.⁴⁵

⁴³ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ Premier of Victoria, *Support education support staff to become teachers*, 11 July 2024, <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-07/240711-Supporting-Education-Support-Staff-To-Become-Teachers.pdf>> accessed 2 October 2024.

⁴⁵ The Department flagged this expansion without detail in its submission. See Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 33.

The Committee received evidence regarding three aspects of the Department's new teacher attraction policies, as discussed below:

- scholarships and paid placements, with recommendations to expand these initiatives into longer, formal paid placement internship models
- fast-tracking the existing permission to teach initiatives⁴⁶
- securing funding for existing post-graduate employment-based pathways.

5.3.1 Scholarships, paid placements and internship models

The Department offers a range of incentives to attract new trainee teachers into undergraduate and post-graduate teacher degrees.

In early April 2024, midway through this Inquiry, the Victorian Minister for Education announced a new round of scholarships for students training to become teachers. The \$93.2 million investment will offer up to 4,000 secondary teacher scholarships to assist with cost of living while studying.⁴⁷

The scholarships are available to all Victorian students enrolled in accredited school or dual primary-secondary teaching degrees in 2024 and 2025 and meet study load criteria. Graduates who work in government secondary or specialist schools after completing their degree will be eligible for further incentives available for two years after they start their teaching degree.⁴⁸

This announcement is in addition to the Pre-Service Teacher Placement Grants Program, funded in 2023 to the end of 2025. The rates are:

- \$140 a day, for placements in specialist schools
- \$290 a day, for placements in regional schools
- \$420 a day, for placements in rural schools.⁴⁹

Some stakeholders told the Committee all trainee teachers should be paid a stipend while on teaching rounds.⁵⁰ Other thought paid placements might serve as the basis for a formal internship model of initial teacher education (see Section 5.3.4).

5.3.2 Fast-tracking permission to teach

'Permission to teach' is an existing VIT registration category that enables approved trainee teachers to begin teaching in a classroom prior to graduating from their degree.

⁴⁶ Permission to teach is a teacher registration category that allows approved trainee teachers to begin teaching in the classroom before they have completed their degree (see Section 5.3.2)

⁴⁷ Department of Education, *Pre-Service Teacher Placement Grants Program, 2023*, <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-07/240711-Supporting-Education-Support-Staff-To-Become-Teachers.pdf>> accessed 20 August 2024.

⁴⁸ Department of Education, *Pre-Service Teacher Placement Grants Program*.

⁴⁹ Department of Education, *Pre-Service Teacher Placement Grants Program*.

⁵⁰ Cindy Growcott, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 April 2024, p. 9.

Those eligible for permission to teach are still required to complete the process of VIT registration prior to commencing work in classrooms.

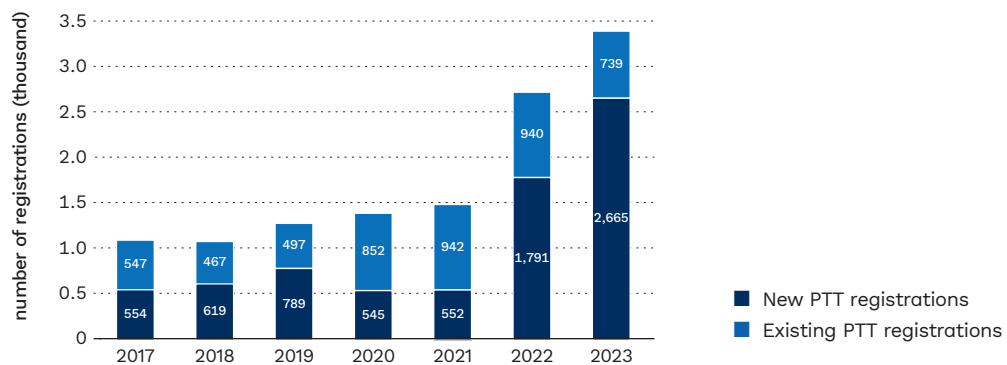
Trainee teachers are deemed ready to teach prior to graduation and enter full-time teaching duties while still completing their studies and registration.⁵¹ In this sense, permission to teach registered teachers are not ‘interns’ or ‘apprentices’ as envisaged in the proposals made in Section 3.5.4.

It is not a renewable form of registration and is limited to a maximum of three years for any grant. Unless explicitly exempt, holders of permission to teach registration are expected to progress toward full teacher registration. These registrations are initiated by the employing school wishing to fill a position and completed by the applicant/graduate-teacher once the school’s request has been approved by VIT.⁵²

According to the VIT annual report, 2022–23 saw an unprecedented increase in school’s requesting ‘permission to teach’ registrations to support schools to manage the impacts of workforce shortages and COVID-19 (see Figure 5.5).⁵³

Evidence from stakeholders reflected this increasing reliance on ‘permission to teach’ candidates to fill roles. Particularly, the specialist school sector said they had increasingly relied on ‘permission to teach’ candidates to cover shortfalls that arose with pandemic lockdowns.⁵⁴ Stakeholders in rural and regional areas have found the initiative positive, especially for helping to find staff to conduct the Tutor Learning Initiative (see Section 3.7.1).⁵⁵

Figure 5.5 Increase in Permission to Teach registrations, 2017–2023



Source: Victorian Institute of Teachers, Annual Reports, 2017/18–2022/23.

⁵¹ The Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 14.

⁵² Victorian Institute of Teaching, *Permission to Teach, 2024* < <https://www.vit.vic.edu.au/register/categories/ptt> > accessed 1 October 2024.

⁵³ Victorian Institute of Teaching (2023) *Annual Report 2022–23*, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Principal Association for Specialist Schools, *Submission 225*, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, p. 4.

Reviewing the process for permission to teach registration

Trainee teachers must fulfill several VIT requirements in order to be granted a 'permission to teach' registration. In addition to the three-year limits on registration, requirements include:

- Applications must only be made 'to positions where the duties to be undertaken are those of a teacher delivering an educational program in a school.'⁵⁶
- 'To teach specific subjects or subject areas at a particular school, and therefore cannot be used to undertake casual relief teaching.'⁵⁷
- 'Confers the same professional obligations of a registered teacher.'⁵⁸
- 'The suitability and English language competence requirements for registration apply to permission to teach.'⁵⁹
- 'Unless specifically exempt, schools are required to provide evidence of workforce shortages, this must include evidence that the position was advertised in state-wide media in the last 3 months and information about unsuccessful candidates.'⁶⁰

Some stakeholders expressed concerns that the 'permission to teach' process and requirements were more arduous than necessary. They proposed a refined registration process that would both expedite teachers available in classrooms and attract new teachers by getting them into paid roles more quickly.⁶¹ The Centre for Independent Studies compared the requirements in Victoria with those in New South Wales, which has similar conditional registration.⁶² The Centre noted that the barriers to entry in Victoria were higher than NSW. The Centre explained:

- In both states, the conditional/permission to teach status can be given if the prospective teacher's degree covers discipline knowledge relevant to the subjects or disciplines in which they are employed to teach.
- However, in Victoria, such a person could only be employed after the employer has first provided information to the VIT about why a registered teacher was unable to be recruited. This, to the Centre, seems to be an extra barrier that delays getting teachers into classrooms.⁶³

The Centre recommends that the VIT and the Department review the employer requirements of the 'permission to teach' category to get subject matter experts into schools faster.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Victorian Institute of Teaching, *Permission to Teach*, 2024.

⁵⁷ Victorian Institute of Teaching, *Permission to Teach*, 2024.

⁵⁸ Victorian Institute of Teaching, *Permission to Teach*, 2024.

⁵⁹ Victorian Institute of Teaching, *Permission to Teach*, 2024.

⁶⁰ Victorian Institute of Teaching, *Permission to Teach*, 2024.

⁶¹ For example, see Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, p. 5; Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, pp. 17–19.

⁶² Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, pp. 19–20.

⁶³ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, pp. 19–20.

⁶⁴ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 20.

A structural barrier to the ‘permission to teach’ registration is that trainee teachers are required to complete their studies within three years of being granted the registration in order to attain full teacher registration. This requirement can make it difficult for rural schools to appoint permission to teach-registered teachers, as it often requires them to take time off to travel back to Melbourne to complete their studies. Travelling to fulfil the university requirements cuts into the classroom teaching requirements the teacher was hired to fill. Matt Jenkins, President of Orbost Community College, told the Committee:

We would have loved to have been able to get him to have permission to teach for his final year. But again, that is where the tertiary education became a problem, because he had to be in Melbourne three days a week, whereas we could have had a student teacher who was doing well and would have filled one of our positions if he could have done it online ... It would be a good opportunity for rural areas if we could have student teachers come out and do the rest of their learning online while training on the job. It would make a huge difference for us.⁶⁵

Some stakeholders did express concern with an expanded use of ‘permission to teach’ registrations:

- there is a possibility that individuals may not be ready for full teaching loads, which may lead to poor student outcomes, teacher burnout and accelerated staff turnover⁶⁶
- de-professionalising teaching by accrediting fast-tracked initial teacher education courses for teacher registration does not improve the status of the profession, nor does not it support effective practice.⁶⁷

Committee comment

The Committee appreciates some stakeholder’s hesitations with initiatives that fast-track teachers via ‘permission to teach’ registration. To this end, the Committee is sympathetic to a formal internship or apprenticeship model which would properly support trainee teachers to be fast-tracked into classroom settings.

However, as per experience in New South Wales, given teacher shortages in specific subject matter areas, the Committee also sees scope to refine ‘permission to teach’ registrations to help fill subject-specific shortages in state schools.

RECOMMENDATION 32: That the Victorian Institute of Teaching adjust the employer requirements of the ‘permission to teach’ category of teacher registration to fast-track the employment of subject matter experts in Victorian schools.

⁶⁵ Matt Jenkins, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, pp. 35–36.

⁶⁶ Wodonga Middle Years College, *Submission 204*, p. 2.

⁶⁷ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 14.

5.3.3 Employment-based pathways

The Committee received recommendations that greater efforts be made to encourage or enable people who have conducted careers outside the education system to quickly gain accreditation as teachers.⁶⁸

The Committee acknowledges that the Department already has initiatives in place aimed at achieving these objectives.

The Department provides a series of employment-based pathways programs to attract new cohorts of teachers into the system. For example, the Teach Today programs involve an intensive study period before paid employment begins (See Table 5.1). The Teach Tomorrow programs offer a \$15,000 scholarship as candidates study for the first 6–12 months (See Table 5.2).⁶⁹

To be eligible for these programs, applicants need an undergraduate degree. Each higher education provider has their own requirements for admission. Selection is based on merit and availability of places in the course.

Table 5.1 Teach Today programs

Provider	Outcome	Duration	Employment
Deakin University: Master of Applied Learning and Teaching	Secondary teacher	18-month course Minimum of 10 weeks study prior to commencing employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 or 24 months of employment as a paraprofessional under Permission to Teach (Internship) Employment time fraction ranges between 0.8 FTE (includes 0.2 FTE paid study leave)
University of Melbourne: Master of Teaching	Secondary teacher	12- or 24-month course Intensive study period prior to commencing employment (November - January)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Up to 18 months of employment as a paraprofessional under Permission to Teach (Internship) Employment time fraction ranges between 0.8 FTE (includes 0.2 FTE paid study leave)
La Trobe University: Nexus Program	Primary or Secondary teacher	18- or 24-month course Intensive study period prior to commencing employment (term 1, year 1)	<p>Work in schools year 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment as an Education Support employee at a 0.2 FTE (term 2) Employment as an Education Support employee at a 0.4 FTE (term 3 & 4) <p>Work in schools year 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12-months of employment as a paraprofessional under Permission to Teach (Internship) Employment time fraction is 1.0 FTE (includes 0.2 paid study leave)

⁶⁸ Kiera Clarke (Brotherhood), *Transcript of Hearings*, 8 May 2024, p. 72.

⁶⁹ Department of Education, Paid, employment-based teaching degrees, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/paid-employment-based-teaching-degrees>> accessed 12 July 2024.

Provider	Outcome	Duration	Employment
Teach for Australia: Leadership Development Program	Secondary teacher	24-month course In-person intensive study period prior to commencing employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 24 months of employment as a paraprofessional under Permission to Teach (Internship) Employment time fraction is 1.0 FTE (includes 0.2 FTE paid study leave)

Source: Department of Education (2024) Paid, employment-based teaching degrees [online], accessed 12 July 2024.

Table 5.2 Teach Tomorrow programs

Provider	Outcome	Duration	Employment
Australian Catholic University: Master of Teaching	Secondary teacher	24-month course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intensive study in the first year of the program while undertaking 2 teaching placements in Victorian Government secondary schools 12 months of employment in the second year of the program as a paraprofessional under Permission to Teach (Internship) at a 0.8 FTE (includes 0.2 paid study leave)
Federation University: Master of Teaching	Secondary teacher	18 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intensive study in the first year of the program while undertaking 2 teaching placements in a Victorian Government secondary or specialist school 6 months of employment in the second year of the program as a paraprofessional under Permission to Teach (Internship) at 0.8 FTE (includes 0.2 FTE paid study leave)
RMIT: Master of Teaching Practice	Secondary teacher	18 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intensive study in the first year of the program while undertaking 60 days placement in a Victorian Government secondary school 6 months of employment in the second year of the program as a paraprofessional under Permission to Teach (Internship) at a 0.8 FTE (includes 0.2 FTE paid study leave)
Victoria University: Master of Applied Teaching	Secondary teacher	18 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phase 1: Intensive study for 6 months while undertaking placement in a Victorian Government secondary school Phase 2: Employment as an education support employee for 6 months at 0.6 FTE Phase 3: Employment as a paraprofessional under Permission to Teach (Internship) at a 0.8 FTE (includes 0.2 paid study leave)

Source: Department of Education (2024) Paid, employment-based teaching degrees [online], accessed 12 July 2024.

The Department reported general success with these programs, stating they are seeing:

better retention rates, and schools saying that teachers are ready when they come out to teach.⁷⁰

The Department also noted that there are more specialist maths and science teachers coming through these pathways and ‘more diverse cohorts’.⁷¹ The Department considers it is now ‘reaching a level of maturity’⁷² with these programs. It told the Committee:

- 750 people were involved in these programs over the past two years and were funded in the 2022–23 budget
- funding has been secured for these cohorts in 2023, 2024 and 2025.⁷³

Teach for Australia

Teach for Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that provides the Department’s Teach Tomorrow employment-based pathway through its flagship initiative, the Leadership Development Program. Teach for Australia recruits, trains and supports people from diverse professional backgrounds. Its focused on recruiting people qualified to teach in their subject areas. It partners with schools serving low-socioeconomic and regional communities.⁷⁴

Teach for Australia provided information on the success rates of its program. Notably, teachers who train and are recruited through employment-based pathways have much higher rates of retention in the education system.⁷⁵ 94% of candidates complete the two-year Teach for Australia program in Victoria, whereas only 78% of postgraduates and 51% of undergraduates complete mainstream teaching courses.⁷⁶

Since commencing in 2010, the program has trained 861 candidates who have been placed across more than 120 schools.⁷⁷ Of these:

- 98% have been placed in eligible government schools
- 50% have been placed in regional, rural or remote schools
- 44% teach STEM subjects

⁷⁰ Andrea Del Monaco, *Transcript of Hearings*, 9 May 2024, p. 74

⁷¹ Andrea Del Monaco, *Transcript of Hearings*, 9 May 2024, p. 74.

⁷² Andrea Del Monaco, *Transcript of Hearings*, 9 May 2024, p. 74.

⁷³ Andrea Del Monaco, *Transcript of Hearings*, 9 May 2024, p. 74.

⁷⁴ Teach for Australia, *Submission 197*, p. 1.

⁷⁵ Leo Fieldgrass, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 33.

⁷⁶ Teach for Australia, *Submission 197*, p. 2

⁷⁷ Teach for Australia, *Submission 197*, p. 2

- 55% have advanced degrees; and
- 59% came to TFA as career-changers or young professionals.⁷⁸

From assessing 16,000 applications for the program, Teach for Australia have noted the following major barriers:

- the financial and opportunity cost of completing a two-year, full-time Master of Teaching degree
- subject-eligibility limitations for enrolment to the Master of Teaching
- recognition of prior professional experience
- personal circumstance and responsibilities.⁷⁹

Teach for Australia is the only initial teacher education provider that is required to produce data each year on the pathways of its alumni.⁸⁰

Teach for Australia's current contract with the Department is not ongoing and ceases in 2025. Long term funding would give Teach for Australia greater certainty of recruitment of candidates and lock in longer term agreements with partner schools who endorse the scheme.⁸¹

In 2022, Teach for Australia's leadership development program was evaluated as part of an assessment by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment. The evaluation found that:

- 'Schools are very satisfied with leadership development program participants in their schools.'⁸²
- '88% of schools would hire the leadership development participants again and most are highly likely to recommend hiring participants to a friend or colleague.'⁸³
- 'Participants generally start at a lower base compared to graduate teachers, but progress more rapidly over the medium term (particularly from the 6–12-month point).'⁸⁴
- 'In 2020, half of principals surveyed said that leadership development participants were more or much more effective than graduate teachers "as involved and participating members" of school staff. Over a third said they were more or much more effective in building school capacity.'⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Teach for Australia, *Submission 197*, p. 2; Leo Fieldgrass, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 33.

⁷⁹ Teach for Australia, *Submission 197*, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Leo Fieldgrass, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 37.

⁸¹ Leo Fieldgrass, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 37.

⁸² Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *High Achieving Teachers program evaluation: interim report*, 2022, p. 15.

⁸³ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *High Achieving Teachers program evaluation: interim report*, 2022, p. 15.

⁸⁴ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *High Achieving Teachers program evaluation: interim report*, 2022, p. 27.

⁸⁵ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *High Achieving Teachers program evaluation: interim report*, 2022, p. 28.

- ‘Further, principals overwhelmingly agreed that participants had been successful in demonstrating leadership among school staff; improving the teaching practice of other teachers and contributing to the professional culture of the school.’⁸⁶

5.3.4 Internship models

Several stakeholders advised that the paid placement scheme (Section 5.3.1) could be effectively transitioned into a longer and more formal internship model.

One submitter recommended a model which involved:

- undergraduates entering the profession after three years of study, not four
- the completion of a final fourth year while working full-time in a school
- trainee teachers would require blocks of time to do university training online from their base school
- trainee teachers would undertake a registration project required by VIT in this year
- trainees would complete their degree, gain full registration and earn a wage.⁸⁷

Principals and teachers told the Committee they were supportive of such proposals:

You look at medicine, you look at nursing: people do their rounds. They do all that sort of stuff; they work together. In education they do, what, a four-week block, a five-week block, and then they walk in. Honestly, they walk in and they start teaching, and it is like walking into a brick wall. There is so much more to it than what that gives. So to have a proper internship like they used to do would be my recommendation for the panel.⁸⁸

The Committee was informed of several other models being informally and formally trialled across Victoria. Travis Eddy, Principal of Kennington Primary School near Bendigo, told the Committee his school effectively already run internships for new graduate students. In order to expedite teacher upskilling and experience, the school pairs graduate teachers with a learning specialist on Monday and Friday, while the graduate teacher works individually on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.⁸⁹

La Trobe University advised the Committee it had recently reconfigured its four-year Bachelor of Teaching degrees to include a heavier focus on classroom work experience:

- the first two years are 80 per cent coursework content and 20 per cent in schools or engaging with professional experts
- in years 3 and 4, the student spends 80 per cent in schools and 20 per cent on content.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *High Achieving Teachers program evaluation: interim report*, 2022, p. 28.

⁸⁷ Charles Spicer, *Submission 151*, p. 1.

⁸⁸ Katherine Stiffe, *Submission 4*, p. 2; Travis Eddy, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 April 2024, p. 25.

⁸⁹ Travis Eddy, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 April 2024, p. 26.

⁹⁰ Joanna Barbousas *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 52.

La Trobe University advised that one advantage of this model, is providing the student, school and university/provider an opportunity to evaluate if schools are an appropriate site for training before committing students to the longer placements in years 3 and 4.⁹¹

The Institute of Special Educators advised that longer internships, where trainee special educators worked under a qualified special educator, would improve instructional decision-making in challenging classroom contexts. It suggested longer internships could involve employment with reduced workload, as well as a time allowance for mentors.⁹²

The establishment of mentors as a defined career position that support interns and early career teachers is discussed in Section 5.5.

Committee comment

The Committee finds considerable merits in the Department exploring options to develop an internship model of teacher training which would get trainee teachers into classrooms.

The Committee notes that the Department now has considerable experience trialling different models of internship-like teacher training, in paid placement schemes, ‘permission to teach’ registrations and postgraduate employment-based pathways. The Department is further expanding these initiatives with the undergraduate employment-based schemes being trialled for education support staff.

Moreover, some schools now report they are effectively running internship models in their school for newly recruited graduate teachers.

Unlike the ‘permission to teach’ model, the advantage of an internship or apprenticeship model is that trainee teachers would not be required to return to campus to complete their university studies. They would also be supported by dedicated ‘mentors’, formally recognising the support that graduate teachers require. This support is not acknowledged in the current ‘permission to teach’ initiative or for first year recruits.

If an internship program were to be adopted, the Committee notes several additional considerations would need to be made:

- Do internships apply to all degrees or a separate category of degree?
- Should internships be considered distinct from the ‘permission to teach’ initiative, or an expansion of it? (see Section 5.3.4)
- Interns should be paid an appropriate wage for their work.

⁹¹ Joanna Barbousas, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, pp. 52–53.

⁹² Institute of Special Educators, *Submission 215*, p. 4.

- Senior teachers would need to be appointed as mentors (see Section 5.5.2), and both appropriately remunerated and provided with sufficient time to carry out these duties.
- Mentors could function as an additional category to develop a more varied career pathway in the state education system (see Section 5.7.2).

RECOMMENDATION 33: That the Department of Education work with initial teacher education providers to investigate the feasibility of an internship model.

5.4 Recruitment

The Department of Education has devised a range of initiatives aimed at supporting schools experiencing challenges recruiting staff, especially in rural and regional areas. These initiatives include:

- **Targeted Financial Incentives**, which support moving teachers into hard-to-staff roles at Government schools. Since 2019, more than 600 financial incentives of up to \$50,000 (plus retention payments and assistance finding housing) have been provided.⁹³
- **The Graduate Teacher Recruitment Initiative**, which introduced in 2022, provides eligible graduates with financial incentives of up to \$5,650 to take up roles in Victorian government schools.⁹⁴
- **Teach Rural** and other funding supports, which are provided to support teaching students undertake placements in rural and regional schools.⁹⁵
- **The International Teacher Recruitment Program**, which attracts teachers from overseas to fill hard-to-staff roles in Victorian government schools.⁹⁶
- **The Teacher Recruitment Initiative**, which facilitates easier job searches in government schools by allowing teachers to upload a single application into the recruitment portal and make themselves available to offers from different schools.⁹⁷

The Committee received evidence regarding Targeted Financial Incentives and the International Teacher Recruitment Program. Additionally, it received evidence regarding two issues not discussed by the Department, being teacher housing in rural areas and the use of casual relief teachers in rural areas.

These four topics are discussed below.

⁹³ The Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 33.

⁹⁴ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 33.

⁹⁵ “We have a program that was funded last year which provides a daily rate of \$140, \$280 or \$420 a day, but it is only for placements in rural, regional or specialist schools.” Andrea Del Monaco, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024. p. 74.

⁹⁶ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 34.

⁹⁷ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 34.

5.4.1 Targeted Financial Incentives

The Department described its Targeted Financial Incentives program as a ‘a very important tool to redirect teachers to the areas where we need those hard-to-staff roles.’⁹⁸ Recipients are paid a commencement incentive of up to \$50,000 (before-tax). Annual retention payments may also be paid after the second, third and fourth year of employment. Relocation costs for regional and rural positions are also available. Teachers who accept these positions are required to commit to a minimum of two years of employment in the position.⁹⁹

The incentives are valued at \$27 million over 2024–25.¹⁰⁰

The Country Education Partnership reported that the Targeted Financial Incentives program has successfully attracted some teachers to rural areas. However, it also noted that there is no concrete data which demonstrates that the program lastingly addresses rural staffing shortages. On anecdotal evidence, the Country Education Partnership were concerned that many Targeted Financial Incentive recipients were simply moving from one rural school to another.¹⁰¹

There have been few evaluations on the effectiveness of financial incentives in attracting teachers to rural areas in the long term. The Centre for Independent Studies cited a 2021 Commonwealth Government review which found that there were limited formal evaluations or evaluations with low quality data to support the various programs and policies in place to improve the workforce in hard-to-staff schools.¹⁰²

Other rural stakeholders noted that the incentives, while well intentioned, had a deleterious impact on school cultures and morale among existing and long-serving staff.

Principals from rural and regional schools in north-eastern Victoria explained in a joint statement:

Some of our local schools feel the TFI’s [Targeted Financial Incentives] have often created more problems than solutions. They feel these programs attract teaching staff to the regions who do not commit to staying in the region which leads to a high turnover of staff and teachers do not get involved within the local community, which is very important to rural communities. The schools have also mentioned that this incentive negatively affects the school culture due to many existing staff feeling devalued due to the pay disparities.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Andrea Del Monaco, *Transcript of Hearings*, 9 May 2024, pp. 74–75.

⁹⁹ Department of Education, *Targeted initiative to attract more teachers*, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/Relocation-incentives-to-teach-in-Regional-Victoria>> accessed 18 July 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Department of Education, *Making Teaching Free to Back Our School Workforce*, 2023 <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/making-teaching-free-back-our-school-workforce>> accessed 18 July 2024.

¹⁰¹ Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, p. 3.

¹⁰² Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁰³ North Central LLEN, *Submission 176*, p. 3.

Tina King, President of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Principals Federation, advised the Committee:

What is being heard on the ground from our perspective membership bases is that the financial incentives in particular have been quite divisive in schools.¹⁰⁴

Cindy Grocott, a teacher with Virtual Schools Victoria, similarly told the Committee that because of morale issues caused by the incentives, not only were they potentially ineffective but also causing existing teachers to leave the system:

If I take Ouyen as an example, someone might get paid an extra \$50,000 to go and teach at Ouyen. What about the teachers who have been there for 20 years? Someone comes in and they are earning like \$150,000, when these people who have been there and stood the test of time and been loyal to the school do not get that. It is really difficult sometimes to retain the experienced teachers when they see things like that happening.¹⁰⁵

Committee comment

Given these unintended impacts of the Targeted Financial Incentives program, many stakeholders considered that the funding may be better directed to other incentives, such as housing (see Section 5.4.3) or towards rewarding long-serving teachers in rural areas (see Section 5.5.4).

FINDING 15: There is insufficient data to determine the effectiveness of the Targeted Financial Incentives program in achieving the objectives of recruiting new teachers to rural and regional areas.

RECOMMENDATION 34: That the Department of Education conduct a review into the effectiveness of the Targeted Financial Incentives program in achieving the objectives of recruiting new teachers to rural and regional areas.

RECOMMENDATION 35: That the Department of Education collect, analyse and regularly publish data at a regional level on the effectiveness of Targeted Financial Incentives, including the aggregated retention rates of teachers who receive a Targeted Financial Incentive payment.

¹⁰⁴ Tina King, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 41.

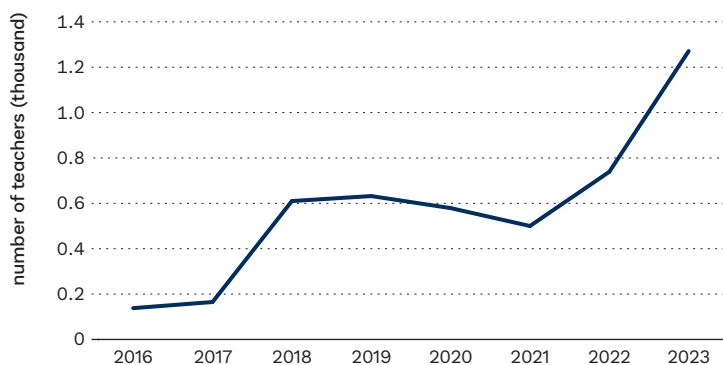
¹⁰⁵ Cindy Grocott, *Transcript of Hearing*, 16 April 2024, p. 8.

5.4.2 International teachers

In recent years, the Department has developed processes with the Commonwealth Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the VIT to recruit internationally trained and registered teachers to help fill gaps in hard to recruit areas. These arrangements are offered on two-year visas with options to extend to permanent residency.

As with the ‘permission to teach’ registrations, there has been a marked increase in the number of schools seeking to recruit teachers from overseas or with international qualifications in recent years.

Figure 5.6 Teachers with overseas qualifications registering with VIT, per year, 2016–2023



Source: Victorian Institute of Teachers, Annual Reports, 2017/18–2022/23.

Rural and regional stakeholders have found that the initiative is a positive development. However, there several issues schools have faced in engaging with this initiative, including:

- overseas teachers have encountered problems qualifying for a visa¹⁰⁶
- international teachers who are waiting for VIT approvals must have a qualified teacher with them in the classroom¹⁰⁷
- international teachers do not find conditions of the visa enticing enough to come or to stay teaching in Australia, such as the length, tax conditions, and resident requirements.¹⁰⁸

Stakeholders have recommended the following refinements to the scheme:

- a review of visa application processes and arrangements with DFAT¹⁰⁹
- develop media units and positive stories to promote the scheme¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁰⁷ Matt Kell, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 9.

¹⁰⁸ Wodonga Middle Years College, *Submission 204*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁹ Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, pp. 3–4.

¹¹⁰ Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, pp. 3–4.

- VIT registrations for international teachers need to be fast-tracked¹¹¹
- tax incentives are needed to attract sufficiently qualified teachers to stay long-term or permanently in regional and rural areas.¹¹²

5.4.3 Teacher housing

Victoria, as with most other jurisdictions in Australia, is facing an ongoing crisis of housing shortages and high housing and rental costs. These issues are especially acute in rural and regional areas, as well as in seaside tourist areas where increasing numbers of properties are being let for short-term accommodation.¹¹³

In its previous *Inquiry into the Rental and Housing Affordability Crisis in Victoria*, the Committee heard that rural and regional areas find it difficult to fill teaching roles due to the lack of housing availability in those areas.

Similar evidence was again presented to the Committee in this Inquiry, including that:

- teachers are declining positions in rural areas due to a lack of available housing¹¹⁴
- principals are securing teachers only to have them withdraw due to a lack of any housing in the area, especially in tourist locations such as Bright, Lorne and Apollo Bay¹¹⁵
- some schools in northern Victoria are chartering their own bus from a regional centre over an hour away to bring 12 teachers to the school as there is no housing locally¹¹⁶
- in towns such as Orbost, where a new Orbost Secondary College has been established, there are no rentals available and local workers must either buy, or travel from Lakes Entrance.¹¹⁷

Providing teacher housing

Stakeholders in regional areas were uncertain if the Targeted Financial Incentives program was helping overcome the housing barriers to teaching in rural areas. While ‘generous’, some stakeholders reported that the incentives were still not enough to attract metropolitan recruits to rural areas.¹¹⁸ Matt Jenkins, President of Orbost Secondary College, told the Committee that only one recruit had taken up the incentive to join the school. The last graduate position was unfulfilled despite being advertised

¹¹¹ Wodonga Middle Years College, *Submission 204*, p. 3.

¹¹² Wodonga Middle Years College, *Submission 204*, p. 3.

¹¹³ Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee (2024) *Rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria*.

¹¹⁴ North Central LLEN, *Submission 176*, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, p. 3.

¹¹⁶ North Central LLEN, *Submission 176*, p.3.

¹¹⁷ Matt Jenkins, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 32.

¹¹⁸ Katherine Neall, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, pp. 6–7.

with the maximum \$50,000 incentive with an additional \$10,000 for three years' service.¹¹⁹

Mr Jenkins told the Committee that the money is no longer an incentive for young people and that 'grace-and-favour' housing for three years may be a more attractive proposition to embed new recruits in the community.¹²⁰

The Committee was informed that the Department of Education still owns and operates properties for teachers across the State, however this stock has been greatly reduced over past decades.¹²¹

Committee comment

The Committee received a range of recommendations to provide better housing solutions to aid teacher recruitment into rural and regional areas:

- increase the number of locations and properties available
- increase the rural accommodation supplement
- allocate a percentage of the Department's capital budget for the purchasing of housing
- allocate a percentage of the Targeted Financial Incentive program for the purchasing of housing
- consider group housing
- develop a 'whole-of-government rural housing strategy for all government workers, including education, police, health etc'
- remove/reduce stamp duty for teachers who have ongoing employment and purchase houses in rural areas.¹²²

Evidence gathered in the Committee's *Inquiry into the Rental and Housing Affordability Crisis in Victoria* highlighted the likely inflationary impacts of first homebuyer grants on property prices. The Committee is similarly concerned that the Targeted Financial Incentives program may have similar inflationary impacts on renting costs in rural and regional areas, which adversely impacts incumbent local communities.

FINDING 16: Housing shortages in rural and regional areas make it difficult to recruit and retain teachers in those areas, even with financial assistance packages on offer.

¹¹⁹ Matt Jenkins, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 32.

¹²⁰ Matt Jenkins, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 32.

¹²¹ The Department of Education, Teaching Housing, 2020 <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/teacher-housing/print-all>> accessed 1 October 2024.

¹²² Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, p. 3; North Central LLEN, *Submission 176*, p. 3.

RECOMMENDATION 36: That the Department of Education review its policy on teacher housing, with a view to considering group housing in regional areas to address housing shortages in areas with high demand for teaching staff but few accommodation options.

5.4.4 Casual relief teachers

The Victorian state education system relies on casual relief teachers (sometimes referred to as substitute teachers) to provide cover for full-time teachers. School councils may employ casual relief teachers for periods of up to 30 consecutive working days for a range of reasons including:

- to replace a teacher absent on leave
- to replace a teacher undertaking other duties or professional development; or
- to undertake a specific task or activity that requires a registered teacher.¹²³

If a replacement teacher is required for a period exceeding 30 consecutive working days, the Department's policy stipulates that the vacancy is to be filled as 'a teaching service vacancy in accordance with the procedures set out in the Recruitment in Schools guide'.¹²⁴

The Department does not appear to make public the number of relief teachers employed in a school year. A 2012 Victorian Auditor-General's Office Inquiry estimated casual relief teachers constitute 12% of the teacher workforce at any given time.¹²⁵

75% of fully registered teachers without ongoing employment are actively engaged with the teaching profession in casual relief or fixed-term teaching positions.¹²⁶

There was a 39% increase in government employed casual relief teachers in 2022, however, the number still remained below pre-pandemic levels in 2018. 63% of primary and 69% of secondary relief teachers work in a major city. Schools have a higher use of relief teachers in outer regional/remote and inner regional locations, with a higher number of casual relief teachers per 100 non-relief teachers compared to major cities.¹²⁷

¹²³ Department of Education, *Human resources: Casual Relief Teachers (CRTs)*, 2020, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/casual-relief-teachers/overview>> accessed 18 July 2024.

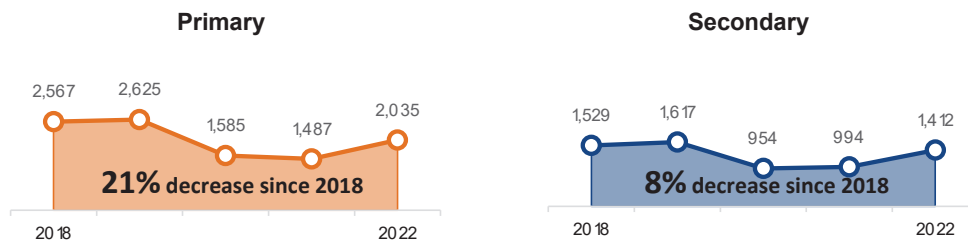
¹²⁴ Department of Education, *Human resources: Casual Relief Teachers (CRTs)*, 2020.

¹²⁵ The Victorian Auditor-Generals Office, *Casual Relief Teacher Arrangements*, 2012, <<https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/casual-relief-teacher-arrangements>> accessed 2 October 2024

¹²⁶ Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, 2023, p. 28.

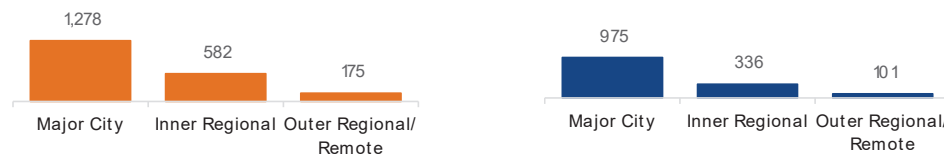
¹²⁷ Department of Education, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, 2023, p. 74.

Figure 5.7 Number of casual relief teachers



Source: Department of Education (2023) *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, p. 74.

Figure 5.8 Location of casual relief teachers



Source: Department of Education (2023) *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, p. 74.

Figure 5.9 Casual relief teachers per 100 non-casual relief teachers



Source: Department of Education (2023) *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report*, p. 74.

Stakeholders in rural and regional areas identified the current casual relief system to having possible counterproductive impacts on recruiting permanent teachers to their areas.

Casual relief teacher travel fund

Under the Student Resource Package targeted initiatives (see Section 7.3.2), in 2024 the Department provided a casual relief teacher travel fund to attract casual relief teachers to work in rural and regional areas. According to the Department:

Schools considering offering a special payment to attract CRTs will be able to pay a lump sum of a minimum of \$925 to a maximum of \$10,000 per annum.¹²⁸

Issues with casual relief teachers

Stakeholders in rural and regional areas informed the Committee of two major concerns with casual relief teachers.

¹²⁸ Department of Education (2024) School operations: Student Resource Package – Targeted Initiatives. Casual Relief Teacher Travel Fund, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/student-resource-package-srp-targeted-initiatives/guidance/casual-relief-teacher-travel-fund>> accessed 18 July 2024.

First, some areas of Victoria do not have access to a sufficient number of relief teachers to cover absences. In this instance, the Committee was not informed whether the school had access to the relief fund.¹²⁹

Wodonga Middle Years College recommended that principals be empowered to contract casual relief teachers for a minimum period of six months. In such circumstances, it considered it might be more effective to pay relief teachers retention bonuses rather than generous living expenses under the relief fund.¹³⁰

Second, casual relief teachers can create unintended strains on the larger workforce. These issues include:

- Incentivising casual relief teachers runs the risk of disincentivising teachers from full-time recruitment.
- Relief teachers are not required to assess students, leading to substandard education whereby students are not receiving authentic feedback. Students at some schools are not getting school reports.
- They can find it difficult to establish ongoing relationships with students which can contribute to classroom behavioural issues.
- A lack of reporting by casual relief teachers (on student progress) contributes to unsustainable workloads for existing staff.¹³¹

Teacher Katherine Neall informed the Committee that casual relief work around Shepparton was paying ‘around \$450 a day plus another \$300 for accommodation’, the equivalent of a leading teacher. She added this was ‘without the preparation, the responsibility, the assessment and the admin that we have to do’. Such conditions can be attractive to early-career teachers.¹³²

Kathleen Parry, a teacher at Rushworth P-12 College, near Shepparton, told the Committee that while it was fantastic the casual relief teacher fund was able to bring up teachers from Melbourne to teach at the school, nonetheless:

Teaching next to somebody who does not have to do planning, does not have to do assessments, does not have to do parent conversations, does not have to do any of those extra things – does not have to attend meetings – and who is getting paid twice as much as the person who does have to do all of those things makes it – ...really tricky.¹³³

¹²⁹ Lindsay Dann, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 47.

¹³⁰ Wodonga Middle Years College, *Submission 204*, p. 3.

¹³¹ Katherine Neall, *Submission 43*, p. 1; Katherine Neall, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 11.

¹³² Katherine Neall, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 5.

¹³³ Kathleen Parry, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 19.

5.5 Retention

We have not got an attraction issue; we have got a retention issue.

Matt Kell, teacher, Bairnsdale Secondary College, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 6.

While the Department of Education is placing considerable resources and emphasis on attracting new trainee teachers and recruiting teachers to hard-to-staff locations, the Committee heard that one of the most important challenges lay in retaining staff already in the system.

Accepting that the teaching workforce must be managed within a wider economy of competing priorities and opportunities, Jordana Hunter from the Grattan Institute succinctly concluded:

it is a lot cheaper to retain than it is to recruit another teacher, everything else being equal.¹³⁴

The Department have devised a number of strategies for improving conditions within the workforce for teachers and to support registered teachers not working to come back into the system. These initiatives include:

- **Reduced maximum face-to-face teaching time** for primary, secondary and specialist school teachers by one hour per week in 2023, with a further reduction of 30 minutes per week in 2024, under the Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2022.
- **Time-in-lieu arrangements** are to be implemented for school camps and other work outside of school hours.
- **Returning Teacher Support Service** program supports registered teachers currently not working in a school to return to teaching roles.
- **Safe and Well in Education Strategy** supports principal and teacher wellbeing.¹³⁵

Recognising that workloads are a key issue with staff retention (see Section 5.5.1), the Department has developed resources to help manage the administrative load of both individual teachers and principals. These include:

- The **School Administration Support Hub**, which is a centralised support service for small schools that assists with financial and payroll administration processes.
- The **Business Manager Professional Learning Suite** is a training package that supports business managers to develop the skills and capabilities they need to be effective in their role.

¹³⁴ Jordana Hunter, *Transcript of Hearings*, 12 June 2024, p. 57

¹³⁵ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 35.

- Teaching and technology resources, including:
 - All teachers are provided with laptops and a suite of collaboration platforms including Microsoft 365, Google Workspace for Education and WebEx.
 - Over 15,000 teaching resources are available on FUSE and Arc, with new lesson plans to be delivered to support the revised Victorian Curriculum in English, mathematics, science and the technologies.
 - Online assessments available through the Digital Assessment Library enable teachers to make accurate judgements about student learning.
 - The school performance online tool guides school leadership teams through the FISO 2.0 planning and reporting cycle.¹³⁶

5.5.1 Reasons teachers are leaving the state school sector

Teaching is a wonderful job, but it can wear you down. If you are dragged down by trying to work out how you are covering classes, or you are maybe not getting the support from your key learning area because that person is doing two or three jobs, it just wears you down little bit. So rather than being out of puff in November, you are out of puff in July.

Matt Kell, teacher, Bairnsdale Secondary College, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 6.

There are no up-to-date and available statistics on the attrition rates of experienced teachers from Victorian schools. The Committee was told that teachers leaving the system do not conduct exit interviews, even though an online infrastructure exists to facilitate such a process.¹³⁷

Evidence about the difficulties retaining teachers in the state education system was instead largely impressionistic and piecemeal. Nonetheless, a clear picture formed of challenges facing incumbent teachers.

Angela Tremain, Assistant Principal at Bendigo South East Secondary College, said:

Only 50 per cent of the time is being spent teaching. The rest of it is certainly self-regulation, behaviour regulation, wellbeing, making sure that the students feel comfortable in those spaces.¹³⁸

Throughout this Inquiry, the Committee heard a wide variety of reasons and factors that are continuing to push teachers out of the system. Some of these are discussed immediately below and later in the Chapter, others are addressed in Chapter 6 on student wellbeing. The issues include:

- remuneration, incentives and reward
- better pay in the non-government system

¹³⁶ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 35.

¹³⁷ Katherine Neal, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 7.

¹³⁸ Angela Tremain, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 April 2024, p. 58.

- non-government schools targeting and headhunting award-winning government school teachers
- glass ceilings and a lack of career progression or pathways, especially for teachers wanting to stay in the classroom
- increasing workload burdens; and
- worsening student behaviour and parent demands.

The Committee consistently heard the conventional wisdom that 50% of teachers leave the profession within five years of graduating.¹³⁹ The Centre for Independent Studies reported that the number was more likely one in five teachers leaving within the first five years, and 15% in their second or third year.¹⁴⁰

A 2022 Australian Education Union nationwide survey of teachers found:

- '45% of teachers surveyed by the Australian Education Union [AEU] intended to leave the government school sector within ten years.'¹⁴¹
- 'The proportion of early career teachers intending to leave the government sector within 10 years was similar at 44.7%.¹⁴²
- 'Teachers intending to leave within 10 years overwhelmingly nominated excessive workloads as one of their top three reasons for leaving (77%) followed by student behaviour (48%) and poor salary (40%).¹⁴³

According to an Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership study, 35% of the teacher workforce in 2022 reported that they do not intend to remain in teaching until retirement, which is in line with the broader workforce.¹⁴⁴

The concerns about teacher workload were reinforced by 4 Day Week Australia, an advocacy group for the working week to be reduced from five to four days per week. They cited 2022 surveys that found:

- 59% of Australian teachers considered leaving their role in the previous month due to stress or dissatisfaction
- early career teachers, primary teachers, and teachers working in rural and remote areas had the highest stress and burnout levels
- the same study identified that Australian teachers work an average of five hours per week more than teachers in other countries, with an average of 43 hours per week.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁹ Matt Kell, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 14.

¹⁴¹ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 13.

¹⁴² Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 13.

¹⁴³ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁴ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁵ 4 Day Week Australia, *Submission 210*, p. 3.

A report from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership also in 2022, found that 95% of teachers say they work unpaid overtime in a typical week, and 42% report working more than 60 hours a week.¹⁴⁶

Class sizes were not identified as a significant burden on teachers. Jenny Atta, Secretary for the Department, told the Committee that she did not think teacher workload stress and burnout 'is related to large class sizes, and we can see that from the student-teacher ratios, which are not excessive'.¹⁴⁷

Stakeholders also noted more structural issues in the education system causing specific cohorts of teachers' stress. For example, Travis Eddy, Principal at Kennington Primary, told the Committee of disparities between models used by the Department to assess school performance and the lived-experience of teachers as potentially contributing to burn-out:

The FISO model, when you look at a review for a school, has four categories: it starts at 'emerging' and ends in 'excelling,' and there are four stages you can be at. In our model, in the report was that we were doing a fantastic job, we were doing all of these things, but we were not excelling. Then the conversation came: 'But staff are saying they are working too hard.' How can you ever get to that point of excelling if your staff are saying they are working too hard? [...] it is not just around the reading. This is just working too hard in terms of the workload. It is one of the questions in here. It is the dealing with the children, it is dealing with the parents, it is the planning, it is the reporting, it is the assessment, it is the yard duties, it is the stuff after school, it is the meetings – it is all of those things coming together, and they are saying, 'We are working too hard.' I said, 'You guys are doing a fantastic job, Kennington does a great job, but you're not at excelling yet.'¹⁴⁸

FINDING 17: Teachers are leaving the state government school system due to a number of factors, including:

- a lack of appropriate remuneration, incentives and reward, and better remuneration in the non-government system
- a lack of career progression or pathways, especially for teachers wanting to stay in the classroom
- increasing workload burdens
- behaviour management issues and strategies.

¹⁴⁶ The Australian Financial Review, *The Real Problem With Teachers Pay* (in five graphs), Julie Hare, 4 July 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 77.

¹⁴⁸ Travis Eddy, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 April 2024, p. 21.

5.5.2 Remuneration

The rates teachers are paid is the most immediate and obvious area to consider in assessing teacher retention in the Victorian school system.

While graduate teachers are salaried at a typically higher rate than graduate roles in other professions including law and medicine, teacher salaries can plateau and cease to increase much quicker than other professions. Long serving teachers – typically after 10 years in the profession – are often at pay rates that do not reflect their experience or expertise. The only way to increase one’s pay in the teaching profession is to enter leadership or management roles. However, this tends to remove the best or more experienced teachers from the classroom.¹⁴⁹ These issues are longstanding. They are further addressed in relation to career progression in Section 5.5.5.

Teachers and representative bodies noted that while individuals are often not motivated primarily by pay when they decide to become teachers, income has an important impact on teachers’ motivation to stay in the profession.¹⁵⁰

Notably, Australian teachers on average are among the highest paid in the OECD. However, Australia is also a high-salary, high cost-of-living economy. These facts were readily relayed by teachers to the Committee:

Pay needs to increase... My rent has increased nearly 7%, groceries have increased, public transport has increased, utility bills have all increased. I rent and desperately want to buy but my teacher pay does not reflect or increase yearly to reflect my skills, qualifications, rising costs, value of my job or that I’m in a feminised industry which is typically underpaid, undervalued and underappreciated. Pay teachers that they are actually worth. I’d like to see pay increased by at least 10%.¹⁵¹

Other teachers and principals also provided evidence to the Committee similarly concerned with their rate of pay amid the current ‘cost of living crisis’.¹⁵²

Others noted that the conditions working in classrooms warranted greater rates of pay than currently offered. A teacher who asked to have their name withheld said:

If it is serious about calling itself the Education State, Victoria needs to increase salaries enough to make teaching a competitive and sustainable career option. Not only will this help to retain existing staff; it will surely help to attract additional prospective teachers to the profession and perhaps even draw qualified teachers back to the classroom. It ought also to address concerns about “teacher quality” by ensuring that our “best and brightest” are provided with a real incentive to enter (and remain in) the profession.

¹⁴⁹ Michael Scicluna, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 72.

¹⁵⁰ Australian Principals Federation, *Submission 266*, p. 7. The Brotherhood of St Laurance noted: how prospective teachers consider and talk about remuneration compared to other occupations is that it is not a cut and dry consideration of salaries alone. The workload, perceived value and contribution of the role, and the perceived difficulty of entry of the tertiary pathway for teaching are often cited as part of the factors contributing to decisions to enter or not enter teaching. See Kiera Clarke (Brotherhood), Question on Notice, received 30 May 2024.

¹⁵¹ Michelle Tyrrell, *Submission 250*, pp. 5–6.

¹⁵² Name withheld, *Submission 97*, p. 1; Keiran Kenneth, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 26.

The government is confronted with a choice: whether to accept the ongoing cost of a properly resourced school system staffed with competitively remunerated teachers and make good on its claim to being the Education State, or to continue with its de facto and utterly unsustainable approach of chronic underfunding and “churn and burn” staffing until we have no public school system left.¹⁵³

Another teacher, Cindy Growcott said:

The VGSA was a terrible joke - it was effectively a pay cut when compared to CPI, TIL is unmanageable, the workload and expectations are not realistic - recently, like never before, I have seen a large number of teachers 'quietly quitting' - the goodwill is no longer there, many are not willing to work for free anymore.¹⁵⁴

Current rates of pay

The salaries of Victorian state system teachers and principals are stipulated by the *Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2022*, which took effect from 25 July 2022. Under the agreement, teacher, principal and teacher support wages are set to increase by 1% every six months. Table 5.3 summarises increases in rates of pay for Victorian principals and teachers since this Inquiry began in mid-2023.

Table 5.3 Salary scales for Principals and teachers, Victorian

Classification	Rate at 1 July 2023	Rate at 1 July 2024	Rate at 1 July 2025
Principals (Range 1–6, 26 bands)	\$150,234–\$229,363	\$153,254–\$233,973	\$156,335–\$238,676
Assistant Principals (Range 1–4, 16 bands)	\$130,714–\$184,326	\$133,341–\$188,031	\$136,022–\$191,811
Leading Teacher	\$119,129–\$124,490	\$121,523–\$126,992	\$123,966–\$129,544
Learning Specialist	\$119,129–\$124,490	\$121,523–\$126,992	\$123,966–\$129,544
Classroom Teacher (Range 2)	\$90,731–\$113,456	\$92,554–\$115,737	\$94,415–\$118,063
Classroom Teacher (Range 1)	\$76,484–\$87,503	\$78,021–\$89,261	\$79,589–\$91,056

Source: Department of Education (2022) Teacher Class Salaries in Victorian Government Schools.

The pay ranges reflected in Table 5.3 include those for Leading Teacher and Learning Specialist roles. These new classifications were introduced by the Department to establish a career progression for longer serving teachers. These roles are discussed further in Section 5.5.

¹⁵³ Name withheld, *Submission 255*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁴ Cindy Growcott, *Submission 46*, p. 1.

The Victorian Branch of the Australian Education Union outlined concerns with the current agreement:

- The current industrial agreement was ‘extremely unpopular’, with ‘an unprecedented 39% of AEU members voting against it (and a similar proportion of department employees voting against it in the all-staff ballot).¹⁵⁵
- ‘Teacher pay continued to decline relative to the pay of other professions’ and the ‘pay of our most experienced teachers has gone backwards.’¹⁵⁶
- ‘Teachers who were at the top of the classroom pay scale at the end of 2020 are, today, \$15,000 a year worse off in real terms.’¹⁵⁷

Comparison with other jurisdictions

Victorian pay rates are middling compared with other jurisdictions.

In September 2023, NSW teachers entered a new agreement which made them the highest paid in Australia. The changes reflected the biggest increase in NSW teacher salaries since the 1990s. The base salary for graduate NSW teachers is now \$85,000 (the NSW Department of Education says graduates can earn a salary package of up to \$95,490) and the highest salary band is \$145,985.¹⁵⁸

The Committee was informed anecdotally that Victorian schools along the NSW-Victorian border were losing teachers to NSW following the pay rise there. This was ‘disheartening to all other public-school principals and teachers’.¹⁵⁹

In reporting the changes in September 2023, ABC News provided the following jurisdiction comparisons of graduate and most-senior teacher pay rates:

¹⁵⁵ Name Withheld, *Submission 225*, p. 4.

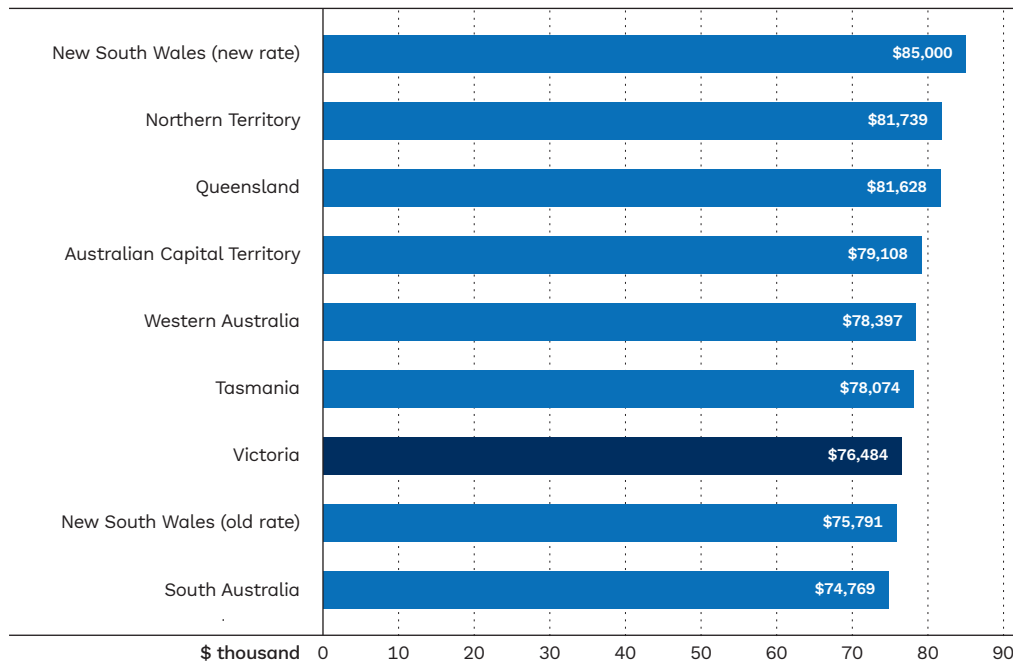
¹⁵⁶ Name Withheld, *Submission 225*, p. 4.

¹⁵⁷ Name Withheld, *Submission 225*, p. 4.

¹⁵⁸ New South Wales Department of Education, Salary of a teacher, <<https://education.nsw.gov.au/teach-nsw/explore-teaching/salary-of-a-teacher#Comparison0>> accessed 1 October 2024.

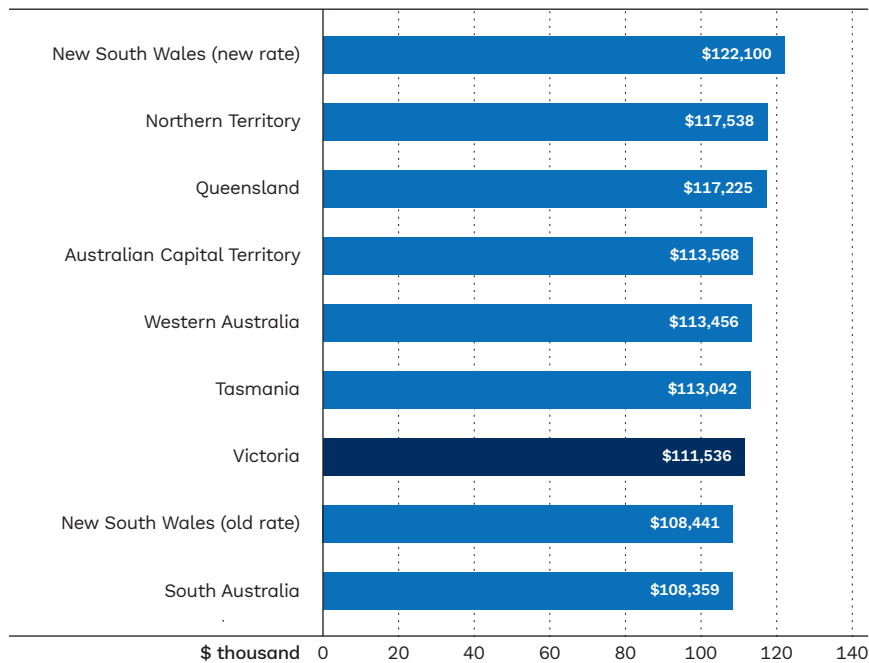
¹⁵⁹ Australian Principals Federation, *Submission 266*, p. 7.

Figure 5.10 Entry-level teacher salary in Australian states and territories, as at October 2023



Source: ABC News, NSW teachers offered highest wage increase since 1990s, union calls it a 'win' for students, Courtney Barrett Peters, 5 September 2023.

Figure 5.11 Top-level teacher salary in Australian states and territories, as at October 2023



Source: ABC News, NSW teachers offered highest wage increase since 1990s, union calls it a 'win' for students, Courtney Barrett Peters, 5 September 2023.

5.5.3 Time-in-lieu

The Department reports that one of its key measures to help with teacher retention in the state school system is the introduction of time-in-lieu arrangements. These arrangements were introduced as part of the *Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2022*. They provide for the accrual and acquittal of time in lieu where teachers and education support staff are required to attend and perform duties which results in attendance in any week exceeding 38 hours for a full-time teacher or education support employee.¹⁶⁰ Such duties may include school camps, plays or parent-teacher nights.

According to the Department's *Time in Lieu Guidelines*, accrued extra time may be acquitted, or paid out at the teachers' normal rate, or a combination of the above.¹⁶¹

Stakeholders said the time-in-lieu provisions should be made for school staff 'without question'.¹⁶²

However, they also noted several major deficiencies with the current system:

- Schools have not been adequately funded to acquit time-in-lieu, to either pay for extra hours or to hire resources to cover time taken-in-lieu.¹⁶³
- Acquitting time-in-lieu via other means than remuneration has impacted negatively on school culture and limited the number of extra-curricular activities such as school camps and performing arts programs, which schools offer.¹⁶⁴
- Schools do not have the resources – either funds to pay extra hours or access to replacement staff – for the time-in-lieu system to work without reduction in hours.¹⁶⁵
- Schools have also been forced to develop new processes to administer time-in-lieu, as well as conduct time consuming meetings to discuss and reach school specific agreements with staff in the planning of any school event.¹⁶⁶
- Principals' worries over how to adequately cover classes has been exacerbated in by the workload associated with managing the time-in-lieu arrangements.¹⁶⁷
- Principals are left to administer arrangements with few guidelines and face extra discussions with teachers on when they can take it.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁰ Department of Education, *Human resource: Time in Lieu – Teaching Service*, 2024 <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/time-in-lieu-teaching-service/overview>> accessed 2 October 2024; Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 35.

¹⁶¹ Department of Education (2023) *Time in lieu Guidelines, 2023*, <<https://content.sdp.education.vic.gov.au/media/time-in-lieu-guidelines-pdf-1663>> accessed 2 October 2024.

¹⁶² Department of Education (2023) *Time in lieu Guidelines, 2023*, <<https://content.sdp.education.vic.gov.au/media/time-in-lieu-guidelines-pdf-1663>> accessed 2 October 2024.

¹⁶³ Australian Principals Federation (Victorian Branch), *Submission 266*, p. 9; Name withheld, *Submission 249*, p. 2.

¹⁶⁴ Australian Principals Federation (Victorian Branch), *Submission 266*, p. 9; Name withheld, *Submission 166*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁶⁵ Charles Spicer, *Submission 151*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ Name Withheld, *Submission 166*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁶⁷ ARC Discovery Project Invisible Labour, *Submission 251*, p. 4.

¹⁶⁸ Travis Eddy, *Transcript of Hearing*, 16 April 2024, p. 18.

Teachers wrote to the Committee detailing significant limitations with the time-in-lieu policy, and the new agreement in general. One secondary teacher told the Committee:

This agreement has indeed damaged schools and does not support the issues it sought to resolve. Considering schools did not receive funding to support its changes. The time in lieu strategy and less face-to-face teaching time has not changed any visible or invisible teacher load. My colleagues and myself agree in saying that this has not fixed any work load issues. The teaching profession must become desirable to participate in, therefore salaries must increase beyond the agreement's modest increase that does not align with inflation. The department needs to focus on retaining teachers which will not be achieved with time in lieu offerings.¹⁶⁹

A health and safety representative and English and music teacher at a secondary school in Warrnambool, told the Committee:

The VGSA agreement has done nothing to support staff to manage a clear work life balance. In fact it has been an opportunity for different schools to take advantage of the blurred lines of policy and take up additional time from staff. The lack of funding to support TIL has almost broken our ability to run excursions and the music department as a whole. Warrnambool is 4 hours away from Melbourne, which means our students are severely disadvantaged and don't get half the opportunity that city students do ... We often use the phrase "if you can't see it, you can't be it" and our students are being deprived of opportunities and limited in their career options. This is partially causing the culture of low achievement, as academic ability is often very low on the list of priorities for these students.¹⁷⁰

This teacher compared their experience of organising excursions with that of colleagues they knew in outer suburban Melbourne schools:

What was a very cheap, quick and easy day for his kids, would have been months of planning and a significant amount of time-in-lieu for our staff.¹⁷¹

A primary school teacher with ten years' experience in the state school system, told the Committee:

The government and AEU negotiations that resulted in the current agreement has had a negative impact upon school operations and staff morale as it has placed new administrative and workplace burdens placed upon schools. This is exemplified by the negotiations with Time in Lieu. (TIL). Excursions and camps have been limited as schools are unable to fund TIL. Furthermore Schools have also been forced to develop cumbersome, new processes to administer TIL, as well as conduct time consuming meetings to discuss and reach school specific agreements with staff in the planning of any school event.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Name withheld, *Submission 249*, p. 2.

¹⁷⁰ Name Withheld, *Submission 235*, p. 1.

¹⁷¹ Name Withheld, *Submission 235*, p. 1.

¹⁷² Name Withheld, *Submission 166*, pp. 1-2.

Committee comment

Although the new time-in-lieu arrangements have been generally well received stakeholders reported needing extra funding to cover the arrangements.

FINDING 18: Schools report that the new time-in-lieu arrangements are difficult to fulfil without adequate funding. This is impacting the ability for schools to deliver education and extra-curricular activities such as school camps.

RECOMMENDATION 37: That the Victorian Government provide additional funding to cover the new time-in-lieu arrangements undertaken in schools to deliver education and extracurricular activities.

5.5.4 Other incentives

In addition to re-evaluating teacher remuneration, stakeholders provided evidence of a range of other incentives that could be provided by the Department to encourage teachers to stay in the system. Many noted that the Targeted Financial Incentives program could be redeployed to fund these alternative initiatives, including:

- Retention payments for existing school employees.¹⁷³ This might be in the form of:
 - Bonuses to provide pay equity with casual staff and CRTs¹⁷⁴
 - Bonuses rewarded to long-serving teachers, rather than incentivising new recruits.
- Early access to long service leave for rural teachers, reduced to four years rather than seven.¹⁷⁵
- Benefits such as subsidised gym membership or childcare.¹⁷⁶

Darren Zhang, a teacher who has worked in Victorian and European schools, compared the working conditions he had encountered at both:

- secondary school teachers in German speaking countries have only 18 contact hours per week
- in France, the highly qualified agrégé secondary school teachers teach 16 contact hours per week while every other teacher teaches 18 hours per week.

When Mr Zhang was in France, teachers came in only when they had classes to teach and left school when they had finished teaching. This professionalism and ability for

¹⁷³ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 1; Northcote High School Australian Education Union, *Submission*, p. 7.

¹⁷⁴ Wodonga Middle Years College, *Submission 204*, p. 3.

¹⁷⁵ Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, p. 4; Kathleen Parry, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 19.

¹⁷⁶ Kathleen Parry, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 19.

teachers in France to manage their own time is highly valued, and teachers are only required to be on campus when they are teaching.

In France, education support staff were responsible for yard duty, time out, after school detention, and covering extras (replacing teachers who are absent). In Victoria, education support staff are underutilised, and it does not make sense to pay highly qualified teachers to do supervision of grounds work that requires no specialised skills. The role of education support staff needs to be expanded.¹⁷⁷

5.5.5 Expanding teacher career paths

Closely connected with issues of teacher retention are issues of teacher career development within the Victorian state school system. The Committee received evidence that providing clearer career pathways and development opportunities would provide significant incentive for both attracting new teachers (see Section 5.2) and keeping existing teachers in the system.¹⁷⁸

The Committee acknowledges that the Department offers significant professional and career development supports. This includes the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, which provides more than 60 professional learning programs for all levels of school leaders, including classroom and middle leaders, aspiring principals, assistant principals, established principals and business managers.¹⁷⁹

Stakeholders told the Committee that training needed to be matched with concrete career progression opportunities. Limitations in career progression that teachers face include:

- Teachers feeling limited to move either 'horizontally' or 'diagonally' in their career. While there are limited classroom-related roles to progress after a certain number of years in the profession, teachers feel it is also 'risky' to transition to another part of the schooling system (from senior secondary to middle or junior school, for example), as salary structures, professional development are not built into those shifts.¹⁸⁰
- Career paths within the teaching profession become highly limited after a certain number of years for those that wish to continue to teach in the classroom but have their experience and expertise recognised.
- Competition from the private school system. Several stakeholders noted it was inevitable good public sector teachers would be attracted to leave for the private school sector due to the higher salaries on offer.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Darren Zhang, *Submission 153*, pp 1–5.

¹⁷⁸ Tony Shaw, *Submission 63*, p. 1; Name Withheld, *Submission 213*, p. 4.

¹⁷⁹ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 8.

¹⁸⁰ Kira Clarke, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 74.

¹⁸¹ Northcote High School Australian Education Union Sub-Branch Executive, *Submission 197*, p. 3; Michael Scicluna, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 74.

Teachers and former teachers told the Committee that experience and expertise are only recognised in the Victorian state school system by leaving classroom duties and taking principal or district and central office administrative roles.¹⁸² One stakeholder told the Committee;

Teaching is treated as the lowest rung in the hierarchy, and rewards, status, and power are attached to being promoted out of it into so-called administration. This can also leave the teachers who are skilled at teaching in the classroom in perpetuity, with no career path, while people who don't want to teach can become part of the administration. The separation between the teachers, on the bottom rung, and the administration, placed above, is the source of serious problems in my experience.¹⁸³

Department of Education initiatives in relation to teacher career paths

The Department has recognised career progression as an important factor for retaining teachers in the system.¹⁸⁴ In recent years, it has created two new positions to provide more depth in the Victorian teaching profession:

- **Leading teachers**, who usually have responsibility for the implementation of one or more priorities contained in school strategic plans and the coordination of several staff to achieve improvements in teaching and learning. As of June 2023, there were 2,630 leading teachers in Victorian government schools.¹⁸⁵
- **Learning specialists**, who are highly skilled classroom practitioners who continue to spend most of their time in the classroom providing high quality teaching and learning as well as have a range of responsibilities related to their expertise. This includes teaching demonstration lessons, observing and providing feedback to other teachers and facilitation of school-based professional learning. As of June 2023, there were 2,570 learning specialists in the Victorian government system.¹⁸⁶

Stakeholders to this Inquiry identified scope for further developing this framework in both the mainstream and specialist school system.

The Grattan Institute's proposal

The Grattan Institute submitted its proposal from a 2020 report, *Top Teachers: sharing expertise to improve teaching*. This report proposed the creation of three new permanent positions that would both enhance professional learning in schools and provide a more structured career path.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² Darren Zhang, *Submission 153*, p. 3.

¹⁸³ Name Withheld, *Submission 213*, p. 4.

¹⁸⁴ Jenny Atta, Andrea Del Monaco, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, pp. 74–75.

¹⁸⁵ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 32.

¹⁸⁶ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 32.

¹⁸⁷ The Grattan Institute, *Top Teachers: sharing expertise to improve teaching*, 2020.

These roles are system-wide and are not just located in schools. The three roles are:

- **Instructional Teachers:** who would set the standard for good teaching in their subject area (e.g. maths teaching), strengthening teachers' classroom skills – helping teachers understand not just 'what to do' but 'how to do it' – and spreading evidence-informed practices. They would be paid about \$40,000 more than the highest standard pay rate for teachers. The position would be limited to about 8 per cent of teachers.
- **Master teachers:** who would be responsible for improving subject-specific teaching (e.g. maths teaching) across multiple schools by coordinating professional learning, supporting Instructional Specialists, and connecting schools with research. They would be paid about \$80,000 more than the highest standard pay rate for teachers. This position should be limited to about 1 per cent of teachers.
- **Principal Master teacher:** who would be the subject-specific experts for the state, overseeing the work of Master Teachers, leading instruction in their subject across the state, experts in curriculum design and pedagogy in their subject areas, bridging the divide between research and classroom practice.¹⁸⁸

The Grattan Institute propose that this model could be implemented by amending the existing structure of Learning Specialist and Master Teacher roles. The Grattan Institute recommend a review of the existing roles, which would consider:

- The scope of the roles: both master teachers and learning specialists (or instructional teachers) should be subject specialists, not classroom generalists. Master Teachers should be allocated at regional level, working with 15 to 30 schools. Learning specialists should be given substantial time release (0.3 to 0.5 FTE) for research, instruction and administration roles.
- The roles work together: school-based learning specialists should be guided and overseen by a regional Master Teacher in the same subject areas. Master Teachers should in turn be guided and overseen by a Principal Master Teacher.¹⁸⁹

Adding an extra level: mentors

As noted in Section 5.3.4, graduate teachers may require a mentor figure to assist them to transition into the workplace and provide advice on classroom teaching.

The Centre for Independent Studies explained to the Committee that the VIT already stipulates a process for mentors to assist graduate teachers in professional learning:

While the VIT's guidelines state that the inquiry process requires one to "undertake professional learning", it is to "support [one]self in implementing [the] inquiry" – in other words, the professional learning can be self-directed and is not expected to adhere to any external or objective standard of effective practice. It is intended this inquiry is guided by a mentor teacher, but this again requires a mentor teacher

¹⁸⁸ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 4.

¹⁸⁹ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193* p. 5.

to themselves be aware of the right kind of professional learning needed to assist a graduate teacher with their inquiry. Because there is no explicit and clear requirement for graduate teachers to be guided through the process of using data to inform changes to teaching, it is difficult to argue any evidence they collect as part of the inquiry, or reflections they generate, demonstrate real proficiency.¹⁹⁰

The Committee received other evidence that identified the potential for designating senior teachers as mentors:

Establish long-term in-school mentor support programmes for new teachers. Experienced mentors should have little to no teaching load, so that new teachers are set up for success as career professionals, as opposed to spending an average of five years in the profession before resigning.¹⁹¹

The Committee notes that the Department is investing in a range of mentor programs, in which senior and experienced teachers' mentor (with time-in-lieu) early career teachers. The Committee feels this system could be expanded and formalised:

- providing an integral component of an internship/apprenticeship model of attracting new teachers (see Section 4.3.1)
- creating another alternative and recognised position within the education school system for experienced teachers who do not want to move into principal/management roles but maintain a classroom presence.

As noted earlier, some schools are already implementing informal 'apprenticeship' models in schools, in which new graduates are mentored or assisted by senior teachers or specialist teachers. These demands can put pressure on existing resources or make for unacknowledged efforts. As one principal told the Australian Principal Association:

I 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.¹⁹²

5.5.6 Administrative burdens

The terms of reference to this Inquiry required the consideration of the administration burdens on teachers and the availability of new technologies to alleviate these burdens. As noted in Section 5.6.1, administrative workloads have been a prime reason noted by teachers for leaving the government school workforce.

Dr. Jordana Hunter, Education Program Director, Grattan Institute, explained:

I think the administrative burden question is a really interesting one. You do hear examples of just basic things, where different parts of different government

¹⁹⁰ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 18.

¹⁹¹ Wodonga Middle Years College School Council, *Submission 204*, p. 4.

¹⁹² Australian Principals Federation, *Submission 266*, p. 7.

departments are effectively asking for the same information. That is just a straightforward double up. An audit of those administrative requirements I think is the way to tackle that issue ...

the other piece teachers really struggle with is the support – the mental health, wellbeing, and health needs of students and meeting those. We need to, again, get better at bringing together the multidisciplinary team, the allied health support workers, etc, that can take some of that burden off teachers, because teachers are not trained generally to do that work.¹⁹³

The Department informed the Committee of several initiatives intended to help alleviate these burdens on teachers, including:

- school administration support hubs, aimed at supporting schools with less than 200 schools; and
- a principal advisory service.¹⁹⁴

In Chapter 3, several initiatives and strategies the Department could develop were discussed, including:

- whole-school curriculum planning (Section 3.3.2)
- lesson plans (Section 3.4.5).

Resources for lesson plans were identified as saving teachers up to three hours in administration and planning each week.¹⁹⁵

Independent Review Into Schools' Admin Burden

In May 2024, midway through public hearings for this Inquiry, the Victorian Government announced an independent review of administrative and compliance activities in Victorian government schools and the impacts on teacher, support staff and principal workload.¹⁹⁶

Julie Phillips, Manager of the Disability Discrimination Legal Service, advised the Committee:

Teachers are expected to write behaviour plans themselves, be behaviour analysts and do things that they are not trained for and that they should not be doing. It just adds one more layer to their basic duties ...

¹⁹³ Jordana Hunter, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 60.

¹⁹⁴ Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 79.

¹⁹⁵ Jordana Hunter, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p.55; Greg Ashman, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 74.

¹⁹⁶ Premier of Victoria, Independent Review Into Schools' Admin Burden, 28 May 2024 <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/independent-review-schools-admin-burden>> accessed 2 October 2024; See also, Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 79.

These issues have been raised repeatedly over 20 years about workforce. It is actually about someone just addressing what has already been recommended so we can have a really healthy workforce.¹⁹⁷

As such, the Committee makes no significant findings on this topic. Rather, in addition to the measures listed above, it notes some concerns highlighted by stakeholders regarding administrative burdens:

- Australian teachers spend the third highest number of hours on management and administration in the OECD.¹⁹⁸
- 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’.¹⁹⁹
- Increased administrative staff at central offices is creating more administrative work for teachers. Save Our Schools told the Committee:
 - ‘Public schools are subject to widespread accountability measures covering financial management, student well-being, behaviour management and safety, teacher appraisal, compliance training, school review processes, curriculum standards, student progress based on standardised test results, workplace health and safety, and auditing. This requires increased monitoring and administration by managers and staff in central and regional offices. The system has resulted in a strengthening of central control over schools and a focus on management and administration rather than direct support for teaching and learning’.²⁰⁰
 - ‘Despite the huge increase in administrative staff, the workload of teachers has not diminished. Instead, the administrative load for principals and teachers has increased. School leaders and teachers are working longer hours on accountability measures. Filling out endless forms for central office is part and parcel of the life of principals and teachers’.²⁰¹
 - ‘Staff in central and regional offices have also increased by far more than teachers and students’.²⁰² Non-school staff increased by 83.4% since 2009, nearly three times the overall increase in teachers of 29.3% and over four times the increase in students of 20.2%.²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ Julie Phillips, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 13.

¹⁹⁸ Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 143*, p. 9.

¹⁹⁹ Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 143*, p. 9.

²⁰⁰ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 14.

²⁰¹ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 14.

²⁰² Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 13.

²⁰³ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 13.

- Administrative and clerical staff increased by 75% in primary schools, The increase in primary schools far exceeded the increase in teachers (44.6%) and was three times the enrolments in students in primary schools (25%).²⁰⁴
- Administrative and clerical staff increased by 56.5% in secondary schools, over four times the 13.3% increase in teachers, and over four times the increase in secondary student enrolments (13.1%).²⁰⁵

Committee comment

It is vital that the Victorian Government encourages experienced teachers to continue in their roles. They are best placed to educate and inspire the young minds of Victoria. However, encouraging them to stay requires a multi-faceted response.

The Committee heard that teachers are disheartened by a number of factors, including stagnant remuneration, a lack of career progression and increasingly overwhelming workloads.

Improving these conditions may improve teacher retention, thereby easing workforce shortages and improving learning outcomes. Responding to this issue requires a comprehensive strategy that considers the many, often interlinked, issues that cause poor teacher retention. The Committee believes the Department should develop a standalone teacher retention policy that addresses these issues.

RECOMMENDATION 38: That the Department of Education develop a standalone teacher retention policy in order to ease current workforce pressures.

5.6 Leadership in schools

We have a crisis in leadership. People are walking away from the job because of the challenges, the demands and the competing expectations.

Tina King, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024

The Terms of Reference to this Inquiry included reporting on ‘the impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture’.

School leadership is a broad category that involves many kinds of relationships, ranging from the Departmental leadership to the everyday informal leadership between senior and junior teaching staff.

The Committee has approached school leadership in the context of this Inquiry as relating specifically to the work and challenges faced by school principals.

²⁰⁴ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 13.

²⁰⁵ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 13.

The evidence provided addressing leadership issues overwhelmingly focused on principal wellbeing and workloads. These concerns follow on from Inquiries by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office.²⁰⁶

Absence of dedicated Department policy despite significant challenges

The Department's five-pronged approach to addressing teaching workforce challenges does not include a specific policy for principals. Several of the strategic areas include initiatives that are partly aimed at supporting principal wellbeing and career development assistance for aspiring principals.

The Department has also devised a principal health and wellbeing strategy. This strategy was devised in 2017 and dated for 2018–21. It does not appear to have been updated since 2022. However, according to the Department website, it appears to remain a current policy.²⁰⁷

There are several other policies and initiatives in place to assist with principal workloads. These include:

- The **Safe and Well in Education Strategy**, which supports principal and teacher wellbeing. This includes the employee wellbeing response team, which coordinates support to schools in relation to complex health, safety and wellbeing issues. There are also a set of initiatives providing increased expert and administrative support to principals managing OHS obligations and processes. This strategy was listed in the Department's submission as an initiative to help teacher retention.²⁰⁸
- The **Principal Advisory Service**, which is a dedicated hotline for Victorian government school principals to support them to find the information they need quickly.²⁰⁹

However, these supports do not amount to a cohesive, targeted policy.

The Committee received evidence relating to a wide spectrum of issues that are both currently impacting existing principals and also threatening the future supply of school principals in the near term.

The Victorian Branch of the Australian Principals Association reported that its member principals raised the following issues:

- increasing administrative tasks, such as budgeting, compliance and disciplinary issues that detract from time and capacity to provide school and instructional leadership

²⁰⁶ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Principal Health and Wellbeing: an independent assurance report to Parliament*, June 2023.

²⁰⁷ Department of Education, *Principal Health and Wellbeing, 2022*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/principal-health-and-wellbeing/advice>> accessed 1 August 2024.

²⁰⁸ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 35.

²⁰⁹ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 35.

- stress caused by covering teacher shortages and burnout
- increasing expectations on academic outcomes, which can be difficult to meet due to limited resources, diverse student needs, and evolving educational standards
- increasing demand for schools to address students' social and emotional well-being
- time and resource constraints caused by community expectations that schools should actively engage with parents and local organisations, fostering a sense of collaboration, and provide extra-curricular options, from sports to arts, to cater to diverse student interests
- increasing challenges relating to inappropriate parent behaviours and conduct.²¹⁰

Further evidence of these issues at a nationwide level is provided in the Australian Principals Occupational Health and Safety and Wellbeing 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).²¹¹

The Committee heard that these kinds of issues are deterring prospective future principals from taking up leadership roles. The Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals reported to the Committee that:

- teachers see the stress that school leaders currently operate under and feel increasingly disinclined to become school leaders
- existing school leaders are leaving the system as a result of burnout and stress.
- a significant number of principals are reaching retirement age and not being replaced by younger teachers seeking higher duties
- 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.

²¹⁰ Australia Principals Association (Victorian Branch), *Submission 266*, pp. 5–9.

²¹¹ Australian Catholic University, Violence escalates and mental health suffers but principals remain resilient, 2024, <<https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/news/2024/march/violence-escalates-and-mental-health-suffers-but-principals-remain-resilient>> accessed 1 October 2024.

- the remuneration package for school leaders does not reflect the size, complexity and stress of the roles relative to other positions in school workforces.²¹²

VAGO Inquiry in principal wellbeing

In June 2023, VAGO tabled to Parliament an *Inquiry into Principal Health and Wellbeing* that reviewed the effectiveness of the 2018–21 strategy. Overall, it found the strategy ineffective, concluding:

The Department is not effectively protecting the health and wellbeing of its school principals.²¹³

VAGO found that:

Principals experience worse health and wellbeing outcomes than the general population. They also experience more mental injuries than other school staff.²¹⁴

In addition, VAGO found that:

- Principals reported working an average of 55 hours per week during school term and 21 hours per week during school holidays in 2022.
- Averaged over a year, principals reported working 94 hours per fortnight – 18 hours more than their ‘ordinary hours of work’.
- There has been no material change in working hours since at least 2015.²¹⁵

Assessing the Department’s strategies for principal wellbeing, VAGO identified that 22 of the Department’s 29 strategies aim to reduce principal workload. Nearly all focus on increasing principals’ efficiency in undertaking required tasks rather than on reducing the volume of work. While principals welcome increased efficiencies – such as advice, templates, and streamlined systems and processes – VAGO concluded if the Department is to improve principals’ health and wellbeing the department needs to do more to reduce their volume of work.²¹⁶

VAGO concluded:

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.²¹⁷

²¹² Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 143*, pp. 11–12.

²¹³ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Principal Health and Wellbeing*, p. 1.

²¹⁴ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Principal Health and Wellbeing*, p. 7.

²¹⁵ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Principal Health and Wellbeing*, p. 7.

²¹⁶ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Principal Health and Wellbeing*, p. 7.

²¹⁷ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Principal Health and Wellbeing*, p. 1.

VAGO found that that principals health and wellbeing outcomes had not improved with the implementation of the strategy. The recent performance audit by the Victorian Auditor-General underlines the extent of this problem. Relative to the teaching staff in schools, principals:

- lodge more workers compensation claims, or which more of these claims are for mental health issues
- have higher rates of attrition.²¹⁸

Australian Research Council project, *Invisible Labour: Principals' emotional labour in volatile times*

The Committee received evidence from an Australian Research Council project led by Monash University on Australian school principal workloads. Their focus is not just upon workload hours, but the 'emotionally-draining nature of the work and the hard hours where principals are dealing with more and more demanding, emotionally-intense situations as they support troubled staff, students, and parents'.²¹⁹

The difficulty of this 'invisible labour' is precisely that; is it 'not easily quantified or measured'.²²⁰

In its first year, the research team has reviewed collected testimonies from over 170 principals working in state funded education settings across Australia, including 50 from Victoria. The project's submission to the Committee drew upon these voices to respond to and give feedback on the Terms of Reference. The responses reflect the stresses principals in state school systems face today:

- 'Where the workload associated with recruitment used to be concentrated at key points in the school year, it is now a daily stressor for state school principals.'²²¹
- 'The work of school leaders is being subsumed by the daily need to worry about how to adequately cover classes', exacerbated in Victoria by new time-in-lieu arrangements.'²²²
- 'Issues of wellbeing and mental health are endemic in school communities and are pervading the everyday work of school leaders (and teachers). Of the over 170 principal critical incident testimonies received so far, almost all refer to mental health issues for students, parents and/or staff.'²²³
- With limited resources to respond to mental issues, 'failure to respond appropriately exacerbates issues of wellbeing and mental health for all involved as the challenges multiply and the demands on time and resources increase'.²²⁴

²¹⁸ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Principal Health and Wellbeing*, June 2023, pp. 8, 19.

²¹⁹ ARC Discovery Project, *Invisible labour*, *Submission 251*, p. 3.

²²⁰ ARC Discovery Project, *Invisible labour*, *Submission 251*, p. 3.

²²¹ ARC Discovery Project, *Invisible labour*, *Submission 251*, p. 4.

²²² ARC Discovery Project, *Invisible labour*, *Submission 251*, p. 4.

²²³ ARC Discovery Project, *Invisible labour*, *Submission 251*, p. 4.

²²⁴ ARC Discovery Project, *Invisible labour*, *Submission 251*, pp. 3-4.

The ARC project reported that principals feel supported at the local levels, but less so by systems. It recommends further analysis of the ways that system resources in central and regional offices of the Department are deployed to support principals, particularly when they are managing emergencies and complex matters.²²⁵

The Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals gave examples of where it felt the workloads of principals and school leadership had been increased by the Department without consultation. It referred to the following programs 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'.²²⁶

These included:

- **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.²²⁷

The Associations recommended that in future, the Department of Education can support principals by taking the following lessons:

- 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

²²⁵ ARC Discovery Project, *Invisible labour, Submission 251*, p. 5.

²²⁶ Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 143*, p. 16.

²²⁷ Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 143*, p. 16.

- 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.²²⁸

The Committee includes the foregoing evidence with the hope of informing the Department's upcoming Independent Review into administrative and compliance activities in Victorian government schools.

²²⁸ Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 143*, p. 16.

Chapter 6

Student wellbeing

6.1 Overview

This Chapter explores the evolving expectation that schools should cater to both the academic and wellbeing needs of their students. Following the 2021 Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, education settings are increasingly being viewed as key places where mental health and wellbeing can be supported and promoted.

The Chapter also discusses student behaviour, attendance and engagement at school. This includes an analysis of existing policies and initiatives, such as school-wide positive behaviour support, flexible learning options and the Navigator Program.

The Committee heard from a broad range of stakeholders, including students, their families and teachers. This Chapter pays particular attention to managing student behaviour, improving flexible learning options and adopting whole-school approaches to trauma.

6.2 Defining the role and purpose of schools

6.2.1 Schools cannot ignore student wellbeing

An emotional dysregulated child who cannot focus, who is upset, who fears being bullied or harassed in their class or their playground, cannot learn. And when young people cannot learn, they cannot achieve and they cannot thrive and be the best they can be in their school environment

Felicity Marlowe, Rainbow Families Victoria, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 22

Wellbeing and learning outcomes are increasingly thought of as being interdependent. A student’s experience with learning at school can either promote or harm their wellbeing. As put by the Grattan Institute in their submission to the Committee:

When students develop a sense that they are succeeding academically, it boosts their self- esteem. This makes students’ mastery over learning an important protective factor for their wellbeing. The reverse is also true. Students who struggle significantly with learning gaps that are not addressed can face declining mental health outcomes, which in turn can undermine future learning.¹

¹ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 6.

Student wellbeing can also be influenced by a range of circumstances and factors well outside the school gate, which students carry with them as they enter the classroom. As stated by Kieran Kenneth, Principal of Yallourn North Primary School, if students do not show up to school ‘ready to learn, we actually cannot get to the education’.² He added:

Students are less prepared now than they have ever been before. In terms of students’ mental health, we see kids with significant anxiety at prep, which is a really new thing for us; we never, ever would experience those sorts of challenges that early.³

The Productivity Commission has recommended that student wellbeing be elevated as a national priority in the next National School Reform Agreement.

The Department of Education, in its submission to the Committee, acknowledges this interdependency by characterising student wellbeing as ‘both a desired outcome of schooling and a means of improving learning outcomes’.⁴

6.2.2 Is the responsibility we place on schools too broad?

It is not just the three Rs anymore. It is literally not the three Rs anymore.

Colin Axup, President of the Victorian Association of Secondary School Principals, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 42.

The Department of Education describes itself as an ‘early mover in this space, enabling schools to support student well-being and engagement’⁵ through a number of reforms and new initiatives. Recent reforms to the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes, known as FISO 2.0, are a good example of wellbeing being elevated to the centre of school improvement, alongside learning. Figure 6.1 below shows the updated framework.

² Kieran Kenneth, Principal, Yallourn North Primary School, public hearing, Traralgon, 27 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 26.

³ Kieran Kenneth, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 30.

⁴ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 16.

⁵ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 16.

Figure 6.1 Framework for Improving Student Outcomes



Source: Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 7.

The Committee heard positive feedback from those who consider FISO 2.0 a ‘distinct improvement from what it has been’⁶ with many applauding the ‘several initiatives from the Department of Education over the past few years to strengthen mental health and wellbeing supports in government schools’.⁷

However, the Committee also heard several concerns about the increasing focus being placed upon schools to address student wellbeing. Some concerns related to a school’s ability to carry out these responsibilities with the resources available to them. Travis Eddy, Principal of Kennington Primary School, said: ‘Anything and everything that becomes an issue in society comes back through the schools, yet how can we possibly do that when we are not funded enough to do it?’⁸

Others expressed concern at the perceived shifting or blurring of responsibility for mental health and wellbeing services. The Grattan Institute considers that:

schools should not – and cannot – be solely responsible for the mental health and wellbeing of students. If Australia places this expectation on schools, it risks stretching the role of teachers and school leaders beyond both their expertise and their capacity.⁹

Jessica McManus, a teacher at Lakes Entrance Primary School, echoed the Grattan Institute’s concerns. She told the Committee ‘If we are coming from a place of really

⁶ Professor Susan Sawyer, Director, Centre for Adolescent Health, public hearing, Melbourne, 8 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 59.

⁷ Berry Street, *Submission 194*, p. 9.

⁸ Travis Eddy, Principal, Kennington Primary School and Bendigo Deaf Facility, public hearing, Bendigo, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 17.

⁹ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 6.

having the best intentions but without the training, we are at huge risk of further traumatising these kids within an education setting'.¹⁰

Colin Axup, President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals told the Committee:

We brought mental health practitioners into schools, so we are now dealing with what is essentially an allied health process within schools... Once you start blurring the lines, if you like, between the front gate of the school and what is outside of that front gate, that is where the challenge comes.¹¹

Indeed, some told the Committee of their experiences which suggest these lines are already blurred. Teacher, Katherine Neall, stated:

I have sat in Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team meetings with police. I have been at midnight at a police station with a child that could not go home because she was unsafe and no-one else was there for her. I have had DFFH turn up and had to walk primary school students to the car. This is what we are asked to do.¹²

The Committee also heard concerns that schools are assuming responsibilities that should be left to a student's parents. Kieran O'Neill, a parent, emphasised the important role that parents play in the wellbeing of their children, asking 'who better to understand a child than their parents?'¹³

6.2.3 What should the purpose of our schools be?

During the Inquiry, the Committee heard many views as to what the purpose of our schools should be. Some consider the purpose of our schools should be confined to supporting students to achieve academic excellence and the teaching of core subjects such as English, Maths and Science.¹⁴

Others consider that the purpose of our schools is much broader. The Committee heard that schools have a responsibility to equip students with the skills they need for post-school success. Professor Larissa McLean Davies, Associate Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, put to the Committee that schools should enable students to:

Contribute positively to society, so you have a choice, so that education gives you options, so that you can be and contribute to the best world that you possibly can,

¹⁰ Jessica McManus, Lakes Entry Primary School, public hearing, Bairnsdale, 26 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 19.

¹¹ Colin Axup, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 June 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 50.

¹² Katherine Neall, public hearing, Shepparton, 17 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 10.

¹³ Kieran O'Neill, Parents of Adolescents with Gender Distress, public hearing, Melbourne, 9 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 67.

¹⁴ For example, see Australian Christian Lobby, *Submission 58*, pp. 3–8.

so that you individually are able to undertake the life that you have a right to in this society.¹⁵

Michael Scicluna, Principal of the David Scott School, considers that schools should support students to become self-sufficient individuals after they leave, noting the importance of setting clear boundaries on what schools can and cannot do.¹⁶

The Committee also heard that increasingly schools are being seen as a ‘wellbeing hub’ in their community. David Baker, from Orygen, told the Committee that:

There is a great opportunity in our education system to be identifying where those needs exist that may have been missed through the health system but also to be providing a broader structure of mental health support for students and enabling the schools and the teachers with the skills to be recognising where that need is.¹⁷

This can be particularly so in rural and regional areas, where schools often serve as an access point for students and families to connect in with broader community supports.

Committee comment

Whilst the Committee does not consider there is community consensus as to what the purpose of schools should be, it is apparent that many in the community expect schools to go beyond supporting academic excellence. Many now consider the role of schools to also support social and emotional development so students are ‘equipped to cope with the various stressors of life’¹⁸. This is particularly so after the COVID-19 pandemic and recent natural disasters ‘have brought concerns about student well-being into sharper focus’.¹⁹

The Department of Education implemented several initiatives and policies that demonstrate an increasing focus on improving the mental health and wellbeing of its students. This includes wellbeing programs, resources and workforces in schools. The Committee hopes the following discussion will both improve the public awareness of the existing work being undertaken in this space while also conveying first-hand stakeholder feedback to the Department of Education.

FINDING 19: Schools should support positive wellbeing outcomes for students. This includes providing an environment that is safe from harm.

¹⁵ Professor Larissa McLean Davies, Deputy Dean, The Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 18.

¹⁶ Michael Scicluna, Principal Research Fellow, brotherhood of St Laurence, public hearing, 8 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 76.

¹⁷ David Baker, Manager of Policy, Orygen, public hearing, Melbourne, 9 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 22.

¹⁸ Productivity Commission, *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Study Report*, 2022 p. 28.

¹⁹ Productivity Commission, *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Study Report*, 2022 p. 28.

FINDING 20: Some teachers reported that there is a growing expectation that schools assume a greater role and responsibility for parenting and life skills. Many teachers do not feel qualified or equipped to address these challenges adequately.

RECOMMENDATION 39: That the Department of Education ensure that schools are adequately resourced to respond to the needs of students, including their wellbeing.

6.3 Wellbeing programs and resources in schools

The 2021 Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System recognised that education settings are 'a key place where mental health and wellbeing can be supported and promoted'.²⁰ The Royal Commission recommended that the Victorian Government:

- fund evidence-informed initiatives, including anti-stigma and anti-bullying programs, to assist schools in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing
- develop a digital platform that contains a validated list of these initiatives, and
- develop a fund, modelled on School Readiness Finding²¹ for kindergartens, to support schools, with priority given to those in rural and regional areas, to select the most appropriate suite of initiatives for them.²²

In response to the Royal Commission's recommendation, the Victorian Department of Education established the Mental Health Fund and the Mental Health Menu which is a series of programs, staff and resources to assist schools in improving the mental health outcomes of their students.

6.3.1 The Mental Health Fund

The Mental Health Fund comprises '\$217.8 million over 4 years to support student mental health and wellbeing'.²³ The Fund is allocated directly to Victorian government schools through Student Resource Package allocations.²⁴ The Fund provides for a \$25,000 base allocation amount for all Victorian government schools with various loadings that may apply, including:

- additional enrolments-based funding for schools with over 200 students

²⁰ Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, *Final Report: Volume 2 Collaboration to support good mental health and wellbeing*, 2021, p. 80.

²¹ Department of Education, *School Readiness Funding*, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/school-readiness-funding>> accessed 19 August 2024.

²² Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, *Final Report*, p. 11.

²³ Department of Education, *Mental Health Fund and Menu*, 2024, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/mental-health-fund-menu/print-all>> accessed 31 July 2024.

²⁴ Department of Education, *Mental Health Fund and Menu*.

- a 10% additional loading for rural and regional schools, and
- a moderately higher per student rate for primary school settings (applied after enrolment threshold is reached).²⁵

The Fund is only able to be used to purchase programs, staff, or resources from the Mental Health Menu.²⁶

6.3.2 The Mental Health Menu

The Mental Health Menu is a publicly available list of evidence-based programs, staff, and resources that are endorsed by the Department of Education as meeting a range of criteria, including:

- evidence of program effectiveness in supporting student mental health and wellbeing outcomes
- alignment with department priorities
- ease of implementation by schools
- availability of providers, and
- cost-effectiveness.²⁷

The Menu is designed to assist schools to confidently utilise the Fund and choose the right mental health and wellbeing interventions for their school community.²⁸ The Menu includes programs, staff and resources across three tiers of support, comprising:

- Tier 1: positive mental health promotion
- Tier 2: early intervention and cohort specific support, and
- Tier 3: targeted support.²⁹

The Department of Education has developed the school mental health planning tool, which assists schools to plan their mental health and wellbeing interventions by simplifying the decision-making process³⁰.

Many welcome this investment

Stakeholders told the Committee that they are encouraged by the work the Government and the Department of Education is doing in this space to strengthen

²⁵ Department of Education, *Mental Health Fund and Menu*.

²⁶ Department of Education, *Mental Health Fund and Menu*.

²⁷ Department of Education, *Mental Health Fund and Menu*.

²⁸ Department of Education, *Mental Health Fund and Menu*.

²⁹ Department of Education, *Mental Health Fund and Menu*.

³⁰ Department of Education, *Mental Health Fund and Menu*.

mental health and wellbeing supports in schools. Kieran Kenneth, Principal at Yallourn North Primary School said:

There have certainly been moves in a positive direction there. The Schools Mental Health Fund has been a godsend- that has been a well-overdue reform that we are really, really pleased to be able to access.³¹

The Committee heard that the access to additional funding and resources is supporting schools to implement high-quality supports. Jessica McManus, Teacher at Lakes Entrance Primary School, stated:

We are doing Berry Street training at the moment, which is absolutely invaluable, and we are doing that as a whole staff. I cannot speak more highly about the need for trauma-informed practices in school.³²

Some are facing issues implimenting this new funding

Whilst many praised the creation of the Fund and the Menu as important steps in the right direction, some have expressed concern about how these reforms are being implemented in practice.

Some witnesses argued that these reforms do not quite go far enough in meeting the complex needs of school communities. Foundation House highlighted a shortfall in the offerings of the Menu, specifically that currently there are no anti-racism options available on the Menu to cater to diverse school communities.³³

The Principals Association of Specialist Schools, in its submission to the Committee, highlighted that there are 'very few items on the Menu that are useful or practical for specialist schools'.³⁴

The Committee heard that the demand for professional learning is high, however, teachers report that attending professional learning is often not achievable due to 'workload challenges and the inability to find relief teachers'.³⁵ Supporting teachers to successfully embed best practice in their classrooms will require more than increasing the existing stock of once-off wellbeing programs and professional development.³⁶

Schools in rural and regional areas are experiencing challenges accessing and implementing supports from the Menu. The Great Southern Coast Youth Strategy Advocacy Group told the Committee that there are a 'lack of options located in the country for rural schools in the Mental Health Menu'.³⁷ The Group considers their access challenges are compounded by a tendency to utilise centralised government contracts,

³¹ Kieran Kenneth, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 25.

³² Jessica McManus, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 17.

³³ Foundation House, *Submission 65*, p. 8.

³⁴ Principals Association of Specialist Schools, *Submission 254*, p. 7.

³⁵ Headspace National Youth Mental Health, *Submission 257*, p. 5.

³⁶ Berry Street, *Submission 194*, p. 17.

³⁷ The Great Southern Coast Youth Strategy, *Submission 264*, p. 7.

which favour larger providers, rather than place-based supports.³⁸ The Country Education Partnership echoed these access concerns.³⁹

In correspondence to the Committee, the Department of Education emphasised to the Committee that the ‘specific needs of rural and regional schools have been considered in the implementation of the Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu’.⁴⁰ Specifically, the Department highlighted the 10% additional loading intended to account for the additional costs associated with travel and alternative delivery methods, as well as providers located in regional areas.

Considering the scale of investment and the novelty of the reform, Jenny Atta, Secretary of the Department of Education, reminded the Committee that ‘it does take time to really embed those programs and see the better practice really spread across our system’.⁴¹ Despite this, Ms Atta stated she is ‘very encouraged by what we are seeing, and we are getting a lot of interest from other parts of the country’.⁴²

Committee comment

The Committee acknowledges that many stakeholders praised the work the Department of Education is doing to strengthen mental health and wellbeing supports in schools. It is important that these supports are accessible to all students across the state, including those students in rural and regional areas or in complex communities.

The Committee heard evidence that suggests the current loadings and selection of providers on the Menu are insufficient to overcome the barriers experienced in rural and regional areas in accessing supports on the Menu. It also heard that some equity cohorts currently have limited options on the Menu that are relevant to their needs.

RECOMMENDATION 40: That the Victorian Government provide additional resources related to the delivery of the Mental Health Menu, so that all schools, particularly those in rural and regional areas or with complex communities and students, can access programs that meet the needs of their students.

³⁸ The Great Southern Coast Youth Strategy, *Submission 264*, p. 7.

³⁹ The Country Education Partnership, *Submission 149*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Alex Kamenev, Department of Education, to Chair of the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, 29 April 2024, *Correspondence*, p. 2.

⁴¹ Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 83.

⁴² Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 83.

6.4 Wellbeing workforces in schools

6.4.1 Allied health and wellbeing practitioners in schools

Mental health practitioners in secondary and specialist schools

This Department of Education initiative provides government secondary schools with funding to employ a mental health practitioner. Mental Health Practitioners must be appropriately qualified:

- occupational therapists
- psychologists
- social workers
- nurses with a specialisation in mental health, or
- counsellors of a prescribed class.⁴³

Mental health practitioners are intended to work flexibly based on the needs of the school, but may be involved in:

- mental health prevention and promotion
- short-term support for students, including direct counselling, and
- coordinating supports with other services for students with complex needs.⁴⁴

Area-based mental health coordinators assist schools with mental health practitioner recruitment.⁴⁵

Student support services

The Department of Education employs more than 500 student support services staff, comprising professional psychologists, speech pathologists, social workers, and other allied health professionals.⁴⁶

The student support services workforce provides government schools with prevention, early intervention, response, and critical incident support.⁴⁷ Access to these supports are managed through a referral process, where schools can identify the type of service being requested (for example, individual student assessment/ intervention,

⁴³ Department of Education, *Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary and Specialist Schools*, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/mental-health-practitioners-secondary-and-specialist-schools>> accessed 1 August 2024.

⁴⁴ Department of Education, *Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary and Specialist Schools*.

⁴⁵ Department of Education, *Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary and Specialist Schools*.

⁴⁶ The Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 18.

⁴⁷ The Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 18.

consultation, professional learning, involvement in early intervention programs or group work, and allied health or visiting teacher support).⁴⁸

School nursing programs

The primary school nursing program

The Department of Education's primary school nursing program aims to assist in the early identification of 'children with potential health-related difficulties'⁴⁹ by offering health assessments and timely community referrals, if required.⁵⁰

The secondary school nursing program

The Department of Education's secondary school nursing program allocates nurses to secondary schools to promote better health outcomes, reduce risk-taking behaviours and coordinate referral to community-based services.⁵¹

Doctors in secondary schools program

The Department of Education's doctors in secondary schools program funds adolescent health trained general practitioners to attend up to 100 select Victorian government secondary schools up to one day per week.⁵² The program has delivered more than 71,000 consultations and made over 24,000 referrals to secondary services.⁵³

An evaluation of the wellbeing workforces

The Committee heard that wellbeing workforces are positively viewed, however, like other cohorts in the state education sector, they are overstretched and face staff shortages.

Josie Howie, principal of the Pavilion School praised the work of the wellbeing workforce at her school:

These work because they are real human resources, they are located in schools and serve the students and families directly. The students need real live human supports, not bureaucratic interventions.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ The Department of Education, *Student Support Services*, 2024, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/student-support-services/policy>> accessed 1 August 2024.

⁴⁹ The Department of Education, *Victorian School Nursing Program*, 2024, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/victorian-school-nursing-program/advice>> accessed 1 August 2024.

⁵⁰ The Department of Education, *Victorian School Nursing Program*.

⁵¹ The Department of Education, *Victorian School Nursing Program*.

⁵² The Department of Education, *Doctors in Secondary Schools*, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/doctors-in-secondary-schools>> accessed 1 August 2024.

⁵³ The Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 18.

⁵⁴ Josie Howie, Principal of The Pavilion School, 8 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 82.

Similarly, Matt Jenkins, President of the Orbost Community College, acknowledged the important contribution counselling and wellbeing services made to the mental health of his students:

To see how much [counselling and wellbeing services] is used out at Orbost was a bit of an eye-opener for me. I did not think it would be utilised that often, because again, country kids are sometimes a little bit tougher and just get on with it – they seem to have that attitude – but when it is offered and it is there and it is in their face all the time, they actually use it, so it is well and truly worth it.⁵⁵

The Committee heard that whilst most schools have a wellbeing team, they can be ‘very small and in big schools they are just not able to meet the needs of all the kids’.⁵⁶ Risith Jayasekara, a student at Melbourne High School, echoed these concerns. He told the Committee:

There are not enough staff trained to properly give advice and support to students facing mental health issues for them to properly navigate and understand what is happening to them and how they can combat this.⁵⁷

The size of a wellbeing team is not the only factor that limits their ability to engage with all students. Generalist wellbeing workforces in schools may not be able to meet the specialist needs of ‘students with complex needs, particularly around co-occurring mental health and AOD use issues’.⁵⁸ Odyssey House, in its submission to the Committee, emphasised that specialist interventions, including drug and alcohol counselling, ‘should be delivered by specialised AOD services rather than making them an additional responsibility placed on school teaching and wellbeing staff’.⁵⁹

The Committee also heard that wellbeing workforces are often funded to do both mental health promotion within their school as well as mental health care. If the scope of a wellbeing team’s responsibility is too broad, their effectiveness within a school can be limited. Professor Susan Sawyer, Director of the Centre for Adolescent Health at the Royal Children’s Hospital, questioned this broad expectation placed upon wellbeing workforces, asking ‘how can they possibly spend any time on health promotion when [they] have got so much demand from kids with current crises?’⁶⁰

Many applaud the work that the passionate but overstretched wellbeing workforces are doing in schools. However, some expressed concern that this is not a sustainable structure, and it is only a matter of time before these ‘people get burnt out or move on’.⁶¹

55 Matt Jenkins, Orbost Community College, public hearing, Bairnsdale, 26 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 38.

56 Josie Howie, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 84.

57 Risith Jayasekara, Victorian Student Representative Council, public hearing, Melbourne, 9 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 10.

58 Odyssey House, *Submission 126*, p. 4.

59 Odyssey House, *Submission 126*, p. 8.

60 Professor Susan Sawyer, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 60.

61 Professor Susan Sawyer, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 61.

The Committee consistently heard that whilst there has been significant investment to support schools to employ wellbeing workforces, many 'still struggle to find the professionals that are needed to support some of our kids'.⁶² Workforce shortages are limiting the effective implementation of Government investment, or in some cases, preventing schools from being able to access the intended mental health supports completely.

There is a national shortage of school psychologists and counsellors according to the Productivity Commission. The Australian Psychological Society estimates that there are approximately 700 school psychologists in Victorian Schools in 2023.⁶³ This equates to roughly one psychologist for every 1500 students in Victoria and is some way behind the psychological society's benchmark of one psychologist for every 500 students.⁶⁴ Mental Health workforce shortages are also apparent in the community sector, with wait times to access supports as long as 6–12 months.⁶⁵

These workforce shortages are particularly pronounced in rural and regional areas. Kate Kapolos, Senior Manager, Children, Youth and Families at Uniting (Vic Tas) told the Committee that schools in her region 'have funding for counsellors or wellbeing staff, but they cannot recruit'.⁶⁶ She emphasised that more broadly, the 'very low levels of staffing in allied health fields in our region has also seen the vulnerability of populations in this area grow in depth and complexity'.⁶⁷ This has resulted in an increased demand for in-school wellbeing workforces to support students. Similarly, Travis Eddy, Principal at Kennington Primary School said 'basically, the money is there. You just cannot get the people'.⁶⁸

Ms Kapolos said because of staff shortages, students faced a long wait to access services:

The waitlist for allied health intervention or mental health support is absolutely unfathomable. We can see wait lists of two to three years for any face-to-face consultation for our young people.⁶⁹

The Committee heard that workforce shortages were also visible in the Department of Education's student support service teams. Jessica McManus, teacher at Lakes Entrance Primary School stated:

Sometimes [student support service teams] may have speech pathologists available. We can dial in and we can get advice, but I feel that they are just as stretched as we

62 Meredith Peace, President, Australian Education Union, public hearing, Melbourne, 8 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 19.

63 Australian Psychological Society, *School Psych Battle*, 2023, <<https://psychology.org.au/about-us/news-and-media/aps-in-the-media/2023/school-psych-battle#:~:text=There%20are%20about%20700%20psychologists,psychologist%20for%20every%20500%20students.>> accessed 1 August 2024

64 Australian Psychological Society, *School Psych Battle*.

65 Australian Psychological Society, *School Psych Battle*.

66 Kate Kapolos, Senior Manager, Navigator Program: Uniting Limited, public hearing, Bairnsdale, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 55.

67 Kate Kapolos, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 52.

68 Travis Eddy, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 24.

69 Kate Kapolos, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 52.

are and their availability to come out to the school and help us on the ground is just not there at the moment.⁷⁰

Stephanie Feldt, a teacher at Albert Street Primary School, told the Committee:

But the services that families can then engage in to actually support them in that space – it is really, really difficult and it is really, really hard for those members of the community to actually know where to go and how to access them.⁷¹

The Committee heard the attractiveness of the private sector and the National Disability Insurance Scheme compounds the issues school are facing trying to attract wellbeing workforces.⁷²

FINDING 21: The success of the Department of Education’s mental health and wellbeing initiatives is challenged by a lack of qualified professionals, particularly in rural and regional areas.

Room to improve links with community services

Schools cannot respond to the health, wellbeing and learning needs of children, young people, and their families alone.

Victorian Council of Social Services, *Submission 237*, p. 15.

The community sector has an important role to play in supporting student wellbeing. Schools are ‘uniquely placed to identify and refer students who require further support’⁷³ to these community services.

Recognising the importance of the connection between schools and the community sector, the Department of Education and the Victorian Council of Social Service, on behalf of the Victorian community sector, signed a partnership agreement reflecting their shared commitment to increase collaboration and communication.⁷⁴

The Committee heard that despite this partnership agreement, some schools are ‘not fully aware of what the community services sector has to offer’⁷⁵ and therefore not effectively linking in with or referring students to available community services.

Poor links with community services means that important community programs and interventions are underutilised by students who would benefit from such support. It may also result in a duplication of supports and resources, with schools attempting to deliver supports in-house that already exist in their communities.

⁷⁰ Jessica McManus, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 15.

⁷¹ Stephanie Feldt, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 25.

⁷² Jessica McManus, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 15; Katherine Neall, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 4.

⁷³ The Grattan Institute, *Submission 193*, p. 6.

⁷⁴ Department of Education and Training, *Partnership Agreement: Between the Department of Education and Training and the Victorian Community Sector, 2018–2022*.

⁷⁵ Davina Forth, Executive Officer, Beyond the Bell, public hearing, Melbourne, 8 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 41.

Strong links with community services can also continue to serve students after they have left school. Beyond the Bell, in its submission to the Committee, emphasised that ‘strong connections between schools and the community sector can provide valuable role modelling and community links for students, guiding them in accessing support beyond their educational journey’.⁷⁶

FINDING 22: Despite the existence of a Partnership Agreement between the Department of Education and Victorian Council of Social Service, there may be a need for greater collaboration between schools and community-based supports. This indicates that the current partnership agreement may not be working effectively or is not being implemented at a school or community level as intended.

6.4.2 Koorie and cultural workforces in schools

Koorie Engagement Support Officers and Koorie Engagement Coordinators

The Department of Education’s Koorie Engagement Support Officers provide guidance to schools about culturally inclusive learning environments, can support Koorie student access to services, and facilitate relationship building between schools and Koorie students and families.⁷⁷

The Koorie Engagement Support Officers are members of their local Aboriginal community with an understanding of Aboriginal culture and the history of their community.⁷⁸ They are not qualified mental health practitioners or allied health professionals, but often work as part of a multidisciplinary team.⁷⁹ To access these services school communities must have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.⁸⁰

Calls for greater supports

The ‘presence and visibility of Aboriginal staff at school, both KESO [Koorie Engagement Support Officer] workers and teachers [are] seen to be important’⁸¹ as they help to cultivate culturally safe and representative environments for students.

The Committee heard that the Koorie Engagement Support Officer’s limited availability and presence in schools curtails their effectiveness. Elder Uncle Dozer Atkinson told the Committee that they ‘only come once in a blue moon to visit the school’.⁸² He noted it is

⁷⁶ Beyond the Bell, *Submission 270*, p. 11.

⁷⁷ Schools Victoria, *Koorie Engagement Support Officers*, 2024, <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/koorie-engagement-support-officers>> accessed 1 August 2024.

⁷⁸ The Department of Education, *Contact a Koorie Education Coordinator*, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/koorie-education-coordinator-contact-details>> accessed 1 August 2024.

⁷⁹ Schools Victoria, *Koorie Engagement Support Officers*.

⁸⁰ Schools Victoria, *Koorie Engagement Support Officers*.

⁸¹ The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 8.

⁸² Dozer Atkinson, Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation, public hearing, Bendigo, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 16.

a ‘sad fact, that we only have an Aboriginal support worker visit these schools in times of need or when they can fit into what is expected within their position’.⁸³ Meena Singh, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People in Vicotria, echoed these concerns, noting her understanding that the Koorie Engagement Support Officer role was ‘confined to certain things’⁸⁴ and did not always extend to ‘being able to advocate for children and young people’.⁸⁵ Elder Atkinson considers that ‘our black kids need somebody in that school for their whole journey’⁸⁶ and is a more consistent presence than the current Koorie engagement support staff.

In the absence of sufficient staff the Committee heard schools adopting innovative practices to support children. In Lakes Entrance, an out-of-care primary school student with a significant trauma history and ADHD diagnoses, now spends time with an Indigenous men’s shed.⁸⁷

In correspondence to the Committee, the Department of Education also highlighted the cultural awareness training that is available to all schools but acknowledged the feedback that many teachers still feel they require further support than what is offered.⁸⁸

Committee comment

The Committee finds that there is a higher demand for Koorie Engagement Support Officers in schools than can currently be facilitated by employed staff.

RECOMMENDATION 41: That the Department of Education increase the number of Koorie Engagement Support Officers to more consistently support Koorie students.

6.5 Student behaviour and wellbeing

6.5.1 A behaviour crisis in our schools?

It is odd really that we are not talking more about classroom behaviour in Australia.

Dr Greg Ashman, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 77.

As part of the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), students were asked several questions on classroom behaviour and disciplinary climate. Based on the results of this survey, Australia’s ranked 69 out of 76 participating OCED

⁸³ Dozer Atkinson, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 16.

⁸⁴ Meena Singh, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, public hearing, Shepparton, 17 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 42.

⁸⁵ Meena Singh, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 42.

⁸⁶ Elder Uncle Dozer Atkinson, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 16.

⁸⁷ Jess McManus, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 13.

⁸⁸ Alex Kamenev, Department of Education, to Chair of the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, 29 April 2024, *Correspondence*, p. 3.

jurisdictions.⁸⁹ This poor ranking was consistent with the previous 2015 PISA results, where Australia ranked 63 out of the 68 participating OECD jurisdictions.⁹⁰

Teachers have also been asked their perspective on school disruption as part of a study conducted by Monash University. Concerningly, the number of teachers feeling unsafe at work has risen from a fifth in 2019 to around a quarter in 2022.⁹¹ Most teachers attribute the source of their safety concerns to student behaviour.

It was put to the Committee that student behaviour has declined over time. Angela Tremain, Assistant Principal of Bendigo South East Secondary College, told the Committee ‘a lot of time we hear those words, ‘I don’t have the control that I use to have with my young people’’.⁹² This was a sentiment that was repeated throughout submissions made to the Committee. Katheen Parry, teacher at Rushworth P-12 College, described a worsening cycle of problems in schools to the Committee, stating:

The support is not coming from above so [student] choices keep happening, and so the behaviours are more and more extreme, so the teachers keep leaving, so the kids do not trust the teachers, so the teachers keep leaving.⁹³

6.5.2 School-wide positive behaviour support

The Department of Education puts forward school wide positive behaviour support program as an evidence-based framework to assist schools ‘create positive climates for learning and to support student behaviour’.⁹⁴ This explicitly teaches and reinforces positive behaviours through tiered instruction and interventions:

- Tier 1 (Universal Supports) – involves the establishment of foundational and school-wide supports. Tier 1 supports focus on creating a positive environment, strong relationships, and effective teacher practice. It is expected that Tier 1 supports should meet the needs of 80% of students
- Tier 2 (Targeted Supports) – provides intensive support to students who require more targeted assistance. Tier 2 supports should seek to match at-risk students with appropriate interventions
- Tier 3 (Intensive Supports) – provides further intensive individualised support to students with complex behavioural needs.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ OECD, *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What school life means for student's lives*, 2019, Table III B1.3.1.

⁹⁰ OECD, *PISA 2015 Results (Volume II): Policies and Practices for Successful Schools*, 2016.

⁹¹ Monash University, Dr F. Longmuir, Dr B. Gallo Cordoba, Associate Professor M. Phillips, Associate Professor K. Allen, Dr M. Moharami, *Australian teachers' perceptions of their work in 2022*; Monash University, A. Heffernan, F. Longmuir, D. Bright, M. Kim, *Perceptions of teachers and teaching in Australia*, 2019.

⁹² Angela Tremain, Assistant Principal, Bendigo South East Secondary College, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 15.

⁹³ Kathleen Parry, Teacher, Rushworth P-12 College, public hearing, Shepparton, 17 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 17.

⁹⁴ The Department of Education, *Behaviour – Students*, 2024, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/behaviour-students/policy>> accessed 1 August 2024.

⁹⁵ The Victorian Government, *School-wide Positive Behaviour Support*, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/SWPBS>> accessed 1 August 2024

The Department of Education makes clear that the implementation of the school wide positive behaviour support program is not ‘one-size-fits-all’ and will differ from school to school depending on the needs of its students and community.⁹⁶ Implementation is supported by the Department of Education region-based coaches.⁹⁷

Currently, the program supports over 400 schools across Victoria, with a further 350 schools expected to be added by the end of 2024.⁹⁸

The Committee heard that some behaviour interventions are working well. Dr David Howes, Deputy Secretary of Schools and Regional Services, said that the Department of Education is expanding the school wide positive behaviour support program ‘because it’s working’.⁹⁹ The feedback the Department is receiving is that those schools who are implementing the program are provided with ‘both the structure and resources’¹⁰⁰ to address challenging behaviours in students.

However, the Committee also heard from those who are experiencing more limited, if any, success managing student behaviour. Teachers spoke of their experiences in their classrooms, with some estimating that ‘only 50 per cent of the time is being spent teaching’¹⁰¹, whilst others feel they must spend ‘more time dealing with poor behaviour from students than they do teaching’.¹⁰² Stephanie Feldt, a teacher at Albert Street Primary School also noted that time spent on behaviour management impacted her ability to teach other students ‘What we have studied to do, teaching, has become less and less, and we are more dealing with our students.’¹⁰³

Other concerning accounts were provided of when student behaviour has placed teachers at risk in their place of work. Kathleen Parry, a teacher at Rushworth P-12 College, stated ‘it was a really good week for me when I did not get hit’.¹⁰⁴ Matt Kell, a teacher at Bairnsdale Secondary College stated ‘I got chased across the school by a kid threatening to kill me. I sat in the corner and cried while he yelled and screamed at me. The kid got three days suspension. How is this right?’¹⁰⁵

The Committee emphasises that it is never okay for a teacher to be put at risk in their place of work. It considers the Department of Education should be deeply concerned by the accounts of abuse put to the Committee by teachers.

⁹⁶ The Victorian Government, *School-wide Positive Behaviour Support*.

⁹⁷ The Victorian Government, *School-wide Positive Behaviour Support*.

⁹⁸ The Victorian Government, *School-wide Positive Behaviour Support*.

⁹⁹ Dr David Howes, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education, public hearing, Melbourne, 9 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 82.

¹⁰⁰ Dr David Howes, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 82.

¹⁰¹ Angela Tremain, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 58.

¹⁰² Name withheld, *Submission 103*, p. 2.

¹⁰³ Stephanie Feldt, Teacher, Albert Street Primary School, public hearing, Traralgon, 27 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Kathleen Parry, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁵ Matthew Kell, Bairnsdale Secondary College, public hearing, Bairnsdale, 26 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 7.

The Australian Education Union reports that student behaviour is the second most common factor as to why teachers intend to leave the profession within 10 years.¹⁰⁶ This sentiment was also expressed by some teachers who contacted the Committee.¹⁰⁷

Challenging student behaviours can also absorb the focus of a teacher out of necessity, making it near impossible for a teacher to simultaneously attend to the other students in the classroom. Travis Eddy, Principal of Kennington Primary School, asked the Committee to:

Imagine walking into an environment where you get hit, you get sworn at, you are kicked, your table is flipped, and then as a teacher you have to go this moral obligation to the other 24 kids in the classroom to make them safe. How do you do that?¹⁰⁸

Case Study 6.1 Isaac's story

Isaac is a 14 year old student who attends Victory Christian College, a school with a population of around 400 students. He used to attend Bendigo South Secondary College, which had a population of around 1100 students.

Isaac decided to change schools because of his 'general reaction to the behaviour of the other students ... [who] were very rowdy and misbehaving a lot'. He emphasised that the behaviour of other students along with concern for his own wellbeing motivated him to change schools. He felt that 'it was quite obvious that [he] needed to change, but [he] was a bit reluctant because [he is] not very good at attuning to change.'

Isaac's mother explained how the 'rowdy' school environment affected her son:

He is generally a student who has always been a very high achiever, and the challenge that he was explaining to us was just that he could not focus and that the teachers had to spend so much time just trying to moderate other kids that they would not hardly get any class time.

Since moving to a smaller school Isaac is '[a] lot happier than last year.' He explained that the change has been 'fairly easy compared to last year' in relation to the 'overall environment and behaviour of the students.'

Isaac explained that a good environment makes school 'so much easier and more enjoyable to do things in'. He emphasised that good student behaviour 'can really elevate his experience.' Isaac explained the importance of a calm classroom, stating:

The most comfortable environment... is an environment where I can talk to people but not have people go crazy about it. I want it to just stay appropriate so I can focus really.

Source: Isaac and Gretel Farr, public hearing, Bendigo, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 39–58.

¹⁰⁶ The Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁷ For example, see Michelle Tyrrell, *Submission 250*, pp. 3–4; Elizabeth Howes, *Submission 180*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁰⁸ Travis Eddy, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 20.

The Committee heard concerns that ‘we do not really have a lot of detail about the level of disruption and mislearning time that teachers in Victoria face’.¹⁰⁹ Not collecting adequate data means there is not a full understanding of the scope of the issue or how much time teachers actually spend on managing student behaviour. It also means that it is difficult to properly assess the effectiveness of behaviour interventions and policy in practice. The Senate Education and Employment References Committee’s 2023 Inquiry into the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms considered this issue and recommended:

The Committee recommends that Education Ministers commission an annual national survey of students and staff on behaviour in schools, including school learning climate, behavioural culture and policies, and the frequency and impact of classroom disruption and schools’ responses’.¹¹⁰

The Committee received submissions that echoed the recommendation made by the Senate Committee and advocated for the introduction of a behaviour survey in schools.¹¹¹

Committee comment

The Committee is concerned that there is limited data capturing the levels of disruption and mislearning time in Victorian classrooms. Without this information the Department of Education cannot understand the scope of the issue or the effectiveness of interventions that seek to minimise classroom disruption.

RECOMMENDATION 42: That the Department of Education introduce a behaviour survey in schools to better understand the extent of classroom disruption, as well as what interventions minimise classroom disruption. The survey should inform:

- a. an update to the Department’s behaviour policy in line with contemporary behaviour expectations
- b. new materials to support teachers to manage classroom behaviour and communicate with student’s families about student behaviour.

Many call for a greater emphasis on explicit teaching of positive behaviour

Classrooms are artificial environments. They are not things that kids have evolved to participate in, so you have to teach them how to be in a classroom, and you need to do that explicitly.

Dr Greg Ashman, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 77.

¹⁰⁹ Trisha Jha, Research Fellow, Centre for Independent Studies, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 58.

¹¹⁰ The Senate, *Education and Employment References Committee, The national trend of school refusal and related matters, Final Report*, August 2023.

¹¹¹ Dr Greg Ashman, *Submission 170*, p. 5.; The Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 46.

The Committee heard that a greater focus on the explicit teaching of positive behaviour could better address poor student behaviour in classrooms. Trisha Jha from the Centre for Independent Studies told the Committee: ‘We cannot expect students to behave in a certain way if we have not taught them. I think there is this expectation that kids will know, and the truth is that they do not.’¹¹²

Because students who display disruptive behaviours are also likely to be behind their peers in literacy and numeracy, schools ‘have a duty to teach children the habits of conduct that will maximise their safety, opportunity to learn and their dignity’.¹¹³ According to the Centre for Independent Studies, failing to do so will disadvantage demographics of students who do not already possess ‘advantaged social capital, habituated into habits of institutional success – sharing, waiting, helping, perseverance etc.’¹¹⁴

Dr Jordana Hunter from the Grattan Institute, considers that ‘engaged behaviour is something that can be taught quite effectively’,¹¹⁵ but emphasised that for such teaching to be successful, a whole school approach is required with ‘all teachers on the same page’.¹¹⁶

The implementation of a ‘Behaviour Curriculum’ was recommended by the Federal Senate Education and Employment References Committee in its interim report on the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms.¹¹⁷ The Senate Committee considered that:

Introducing a ‘Behaviour Curriculum’ will enable a whole-school approach to addressing behaviour in classrooms, which affects the overall learning climate of the school. The Committee recognises that the intent behind a ‘Behaviour Curriculum’ is not to dictate a list of unwanted behaviours but to represent the essential habits and routines that are conducive to learning in a school environment.¹¹⁸

The Committee received submissions that echoed the recommendation made by the Senate Committee and advocated for more explicit teaching of behaviour in schools.¹¹⁹

6.5.3 Restraint and seclusion practices in schools

The Department of Education’s restraint and seclusion policy authorises Victorian government school staff to use of physical restraint or seclusion of students in limited circumstances, where:

¹¹² Trisha Jha, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 59.

¹¹³ The Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 45.

¹¹⁴ The Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 45.

¹¹⁵ Dr Jordana Hunter, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 56.

¹¹⁶ Dr Jordana Hunter, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 56.

¹¹⁷ The Senate, Education and Employment References Committee, *Interim Report on the Issue of Increasing Disruption in Australian School Classrooms*, December 2023, p. 55.

¹¹⁸ Education and Employment References Committee, *Interim Report on the Issue of Increasing Disruption in Australian School Classrooms*, p. 55.

¹¹⁹ Dr Greg Ashman, *Submission 170*, p. 5.; The Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 46.

- there is an imminent threat of physical harm or danger to a student or others
- the physical restraint and seclusion are reasonable in all the circumstances, and
- there are no less restrictive measures available in the circumstances.¹²⁰

The emphasis of the policy is harm prevention and it is clear that it does not authorise the use of physical restraint or seclusion as behaviour management technique, for convenience, as retaliation, or to discipline or punish a student.¹²¹

Importantly, the policy requires all instances of restraint or seclusion practices being used to be reported on the Department's online incident reporting system or the Department's incident support and operations centre, depending on the severity of the incident.¹²²

Committee comment

The Committee heard concerning accounts that the required mandatory reporting of incidents of restraint or seclusion are not consistently occurring. This is particularly concerning because the use of restraint and seclusion may be traumatising to students and can result in injury or even death.¹²³ Leanne Vella from Voices for Special Needs told the Committee 'for us, and for our cases, it is just not happening'.¹²⁴ and 'we are still seeing children being failed through mandatory reporting requirements'.¹²⁵ She emphasised that there is a need for actual 'accountability measures for breaches of policy or procedure'.¹²⁶ Ms Vella advocated for the Commission for Children and Young People to be given the 'authority to almost force change, really, within the department'.¹²⁷ She also stressed that there 'needs to be stronger restrictive practice guidelines and stronger mandatory reporting requirements, including engagement plans and strategies with those affected, including the parents and carers'.¹²⁸

RECOMMENDATION 43: The Victorian Government implement standards consistent with the National Framework for Reducing the Use of Restrictive Practices, including accountability measures for breaching standards.

¹²⁰ The Department of Education, *Restraint and Seclusion Policy*, 2024, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/restraint-seclusion/policy>> accessed 13 August 2024.

¹²¹ The Department of Education, *Restraint and Seclusion Policy*.

¹²² The Department of Education, *Restraint and Seclusion Policy*.

¹²³ Julie Philips, Chief Executive Officer, Disability Discrimination Legal Service, public hearing, Melbourne, 12 June 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 10.

¹²⁴ Leanne Vella, Voices for Special needs, public hearing, Traralgon, 27 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 16.

¹²⁵ Leanne Vella, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 15.

¹²⁶ Leanne Vella, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 16.

¹²⁷ Leanne Vella, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 16.

¹²⁸ Leanne Vella, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 14.

Ms Vella told the Committee that members from Voices for Special Needs have felt ignored and lost trust in the department on these issues:

VFSN has sought many avenues to have the voices of these most vulnerable children heard and taken seriously. Members have attempted to liaise and seek assistance from the Department of Education and Training (DET); however, support has not been given, and individuals have been dismissed. It is fair to say that trust towards DET is non-existent, and there are concerns regarding the bureaucratic leadership within this department, from a local level all the way to the central office.¹²⁹

Ms Vella also drew to the attention of the Committee to the WebEx 20/10/2020 ‘cage fight’ incident that gained state-wide publicity, saying: ‘Despite the publicity, the staff in question still remain teaching at LSDS today—a matter that perplexes families deeply.’¹³⁰ She said:

Voices for Special Needs is still deeply concerned and has been advocating for over three years now. At one point, they met with representatives from the Department of Education, calling for the highest level of independent inquiries, including a judicial inquiry into Latrobe Special Developmental School, and continue to seek avenues to raise concerns, especially about the welfare of current students at LSDS, as many of the staff outlined in the document remain within LSDS.¹³¹

Ms Vella added:

There should be no zoning of school bus eligibility for Special Needs students and companions. Families that have had to leave LSDS are now faced with exorbitant transport costs, forced to travel to either Sale or Warragul for alternative school-based education. Educational options for those with a severe disability are limited.

There needs to be resourcing of these qualifications within schools, with an emphasis on intervention models—mental health is the outcome of not supporting or addressing issues/behaviours of concern.

CCYP needs to have stronger powers. Rather than just making recommendations, they should have the power to enforce changes to policy and procedure. CCYP needs greater powers to enact accountability, transparency, and benchmark/best practice standards across the department and its staff.¹³²

Julie Philips from the Disability Discrimination Legal Service expressed concern that ‘the violence against students with disabilities in schools’¹³³ has gotten worse. She told the Committee this continues to be the case even in the face of multiple ‘reforms and changes to policies and procedures – which teachers are not required to read’.¹³⁴ She was critical of allocating schools’ insufficient resources or directives to appropriately

¹²⁹ Voices for Special Needs, *Submission 144*, p. 2.

¹³⁰ Voices for Special Needs, *Submission 144*, p. 2.

¹³¹ Voices for Special Needs, *Submission 144*, p. 3.

¹³² Voices for Special Needs, *Submission 144*, p. 3.

¹³³ Julie Philips, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 8.

¹³⁴ Julie Philips, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 8.

deal with the behaviour of their students, considering that without this support, ‘the easier thing to do is just use violence with them. It is cheap. Anyone can do it’.¹³⁵

The Committee also heard how important it is to appropriately build the capacity of staff to use restraint and seclusion practices correctly. Katherine Neall, teacher, expressed concern that presently, teachers:

Get told what not to do – that you should not use this type of restraint, but you can use it in certain circumstances if a child is going to be of harm to themselves or others, but we are not going to tell you how to do it safely. Like that is a big issue.¹³⁶

In correspondence to the Committee, the Department of Education said that it currently offers a restraint and seclusion in Victorian government schools eLearning module as well as other complementary professional learning opportunities throughout the year.¹³⁷

Committee comment

The Committee heard evidence that the existing resources provided to stakeholders to support the implementation of the restraint and seclusion policy may be insufficient. The evidence suggests these concerns are particularly problematic to the disability sector.

RECOMMENDATION 44: That the Department of Education review the resources and direction it provides to schools on restraint and seclusion practices to ensure they are always undertaken according to child-centric best practice.

6.5.4 Respectful Relationships and Safe Schools

The 2016 Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence found that ‘there are sustained benefits in targeting prevention strategies to children and young people’¹³⁸ and that these ‘primary prevention strategies work best when they are delivered in the places where people live, work, play and learn’.¹³⁹

The Victorian Royal Commission recommended that Respectful Relationships Education be mandated in all government schools in Victoria from prep (or foundation) to Year 12 and be delivered through the effective resourcing of a whole-of-school approach.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Julie Philips, *Transcript of Evidence*, pp. 10–11.

¹³⁶ Katherine Neall, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 14.

¹³⁷ Alex Kamenev, Department of Education, to Chair of the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, 29 April 2024, *correspondence*, p. 3.

¹³⁸ Royal Commission into Family Violence, *Report and Recommendations*, Victoria, March 2016, p. 1580.

¹³⁹ Royal Commission into Family Violence, *Report and Recommendations*, p. 1558.

¹⁴⁰ Royal Commission into Family Violence, *Report and Recommendations*, p. 96.

In response to the Victorian Royal Commissions recommendation, the Victorian Government mandated the introduction of Respectful Relationships Education from Prep to Year 12. As envisaged by the Victorian Royal Commission, Respectful Relationships Education is a primary prevention initiative seeking to reduce family violence by teaching students how to build healthy relationships. It accords with the evidence that educating children and young people about the basis for healthy and respectful relationships is crucial to preventing family violence in the future'.¹⁴¹

Early evaluations show positive outcomes

Stakeholders praised the Victorian Government's continued commitment to Respectful Relationships Education. 'Our Watch', an independent not-for-profit organisation, plays a key role in supporting the Department of Education's implementation of the program. Cara Gleeson, Director at Our Watch, told the Committee 'this is the first time we have seen a continuation of resourcing and support at the scale that is happening in Victoria – it is internationally world-leading'.¹⁴² Our Watch added that consistent investment has allowed Victoria to build upon the 'substantial system and structural reform already undertaken and continue to lead the way nationally on embedding evidence-based [Respectful Relationships Education] across the education system'.¹⁴³

An early evaluation of the pilot program found that Respectful Relationships Education 'had been effective in modifying gendered stereotypes amongst students and had contributed to student wellbeing'.¹⁴⁴

Given that Respectful Relationships Education is relatively new, a longitudinal evaluation of respectful relationships education has not yet been undertaken. Genevieve Sheppard, Senior Policy Advisor at Our Watch, told the Committee:

When we talk about primary prevention, which is what Respectful Relationships is – a primary prevention initiative to prevent gender-based violence – to prevent gender-based violence is a long-term game'.¹⁴⁵

Some consider the program oversteps in its scope

The Committee heard that some consider the Respectful Relationships program to be 'a proxy for parenting'¹⁴⁶ that oversteps the traditional scope and responsibility of education, being the teaching of subjects such as maths and English.

Kieran O'Neill, a parent, told the Committee he considered the program 'is teaching other people's values and throwing the values of the parents and the beliefs of the

¹⁴¹ The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, Report and Recommendations, p. 1558.

¹⁴² Cara Gleeson, Director, Our Watch, public hearing, Melbourne, 8 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 23.

¹⁴³ Our Watch, *Submission 222*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁴ The Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 29.

¹⁴⁵ Genevieve Sheppard, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 28.

¹⁴⁶ Kieran O'Neill, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 72.

parents away'.¹⁴⁷ He considers that 'values should be coming from the parents and the family unit, they should not be disrupted in that way by the education system'.¹⁴⁸

Cara Gleeson from Our Watch emphasised that the Respectful Relationships program when delivered well includes 'engagement and discourse between the parents, the teachers, the children and the broader community as well',¹⁴⁹ noting that such engagement is 'really, really important'.¹⁵⁰

Committee comment

The Committee finds that there is scope for greater engagement with all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, children, and the broader community, when delivering the Respectful Relationships education in schools.

RECOMMENDATION 45: That the Department of Education conduct ongoing longitudinal evaluations of Respectful Relationships education, including whether:

- a. it is achieving its aims
- b. there is appropriate engagement with all stakeholders, including students and parents or guardians.

6.6 Attendance and engagement at school

The *Education and Training Reform Act 2006 (Vic)* establishes a parental duty to ensure that individuals aged 6–17 years of age are registered for and attend school (unless an exemption has been granted or the individual is enrolled in home schooling).¹⁵¹ Government schools must record and monitor student attendances and absences.¹⁵²

Nationally, school attendance declined from 90.9% in 2021 to 86.5% in 2022.¹⁵³ There is some uncertainty as to whether this 4.4% decline is an emerging trend or whether it can be attributed to several events that were occurring at the time of data collection, including the COVID-19 Omicron variant, an influenza outbreak and natural disasters.¹⁵⁴

What is clear to the Committee is that student attendance and engagement is currently a front of mind issue for many in the community. The Committee heard that

¹⁴⁷ Kieran O'Neill, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 72.

¹⁴⁸ Kieran O'Neill, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 72.

¹⁴⁹ Cara Gleeson, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 27.

¹⁵⁰ Cara Gleeson, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 27.

¹⁵¹ Victorian Legislation, *The Education and Training Reform Act 2006*, 2024, pp. 33–35.

¹⁵² Victorian legislation, *The Education and Training Reform Act 2006*.

¹⁵³ ACARA, National Report on Schooling in Australia, p. 78.

¹⁵⁴ ACARA, National Report on Schooling in Australia, p. 78.

'school disengagement is affecting all communities in Victoria'¹⁵⁵ because 'schools serve communities, and our communities are struggling'.¹⁵⁶ Kieran Kenneth, Principal of Yallourn North Primary School, told the Committee 'We try really, really hard around attendance, and we are not really shifting that curve.'¹⁵⁷

It is critical that students attend schooling as high levels of absenteeism can have negative and long-lasting impacts upon their health, sense of connection and employment prospects.

6.6.1 Why are students not attending school?

There are a lot of pressures on students that mean that education takes a back seat sometimes.

Cindy Growcott, Teacher at Virtual School Victoria, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 April 2024, p. 3.

The Committee heard varying accounts as to why students are experiencing challenges attending school.

Students may not attend school because they are not feeling socially included in their school community. Associate Professor Lisa McKay Brown, University of Melbourne, spoke about the importance of students feeling a sense of social inclusion. She noted that it is important to consider 'what social inclusion is for all students, because that is a really big part of schooling and is certainly something some students are missing out on'.¹⁵⁸

Other students may not attend school because they are feeling discouraged by poor learning outcomes. Cindy Growcott from Virtual School Victoria spoke of her experience with students who 'might attend for one day and then think 'I'm too far behind. What is the point?''¹⁵⁹

Some consider that the emphasis placed on achieving good VCE outcomes may contribute to poor school attendance. Risith Jayasekara, a student, told the Committee of his experience where teachers 'would say, 'None of this matters' or 'The only thing that matters is VCE''.¹⁶⁰ He considered that such rhetoric 'removes any foresight and makes [students] blind to the idea that years 7,8 and 9 are also vital parts of their education'.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Josie Howie, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 81.

¹⁵⁶ Josie Howie, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 81.

¹⁵⁷ Kieran Kenneth, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 30.

¹⁵⁸ Associate Professor Lisa McKay-Brown, The Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 18.

¹⁵⁹ Cindy Growcott, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 4.

¹⁶⁰ Risith Jayasekara, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 5.

¹⁶¹ Risith Jayasekara, *Transcript of Evidence*, pp. 5-6.

Others considered that student attendance challenges may be worsened by teacher shortages. Radha Katyare, a student, told the Committee that ‘not having support at school kind of just makes some students feel like there is no point in going’¹⁶² The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency also considered that the ‘under-resourcing of teaching staff within schools’¹⁶³ contributes to attendance challenges. They submitted that ‘teachers are expected to support a classroom of an average of 23 students, and often do not have sufficient time or supports for students who have behavioural issues or different needs’,¹⁶⁴ which can lead to ‘students with behavioural difficulties disengaging from schools’.¹⁶⁵

Students may also face a range of challenges outside the classroom which impact their ability to attend school. Cindy Growcott from Virtual School Victoria told the Committee that students may:

have a really difficult upbringing and home life. They might be couch surfing because they are homeless for various reasons. So to expect them to sit in a classroom and take in what you are trying to teach them when their head is elsewhere causes a lot of disengagement as well.¹⁶⁶

The terminology of ‘school can’t’, when compared to ‘school refusal’, is preferred by many as it dispels the assumption that absenteeism is a choice made by students. Lucy Demant, Policy and Advocacy Manager at Youth Affairs Council Victoria, explained that:

When we talk about the language of school refusal, we are positioning the problem with the young person, so the child becomes the issue. Actually, when we use the language of ‘school can’t’ we understand that it is not a deliberate choice not to attend school, we start thinking about those underlying factors.¹⁶⁷

The COVID-19 pandemic and student attendance

The Committee heard concerns that society has not fully grasped the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns upon student attendance.

Angela Tremain, Assistant Principal at Bendigo South-East Secondary College, emphasised that the return to schooling environments after the pandemic ‘was very overwhelming’¹⁶⁸ for students.

The Committee heard concerns that because of the pandemic, students may have ‘lost that connection with school as a community’.¹⁶⁹ Davina Forth, from Beyond the

¹⁶² Radha Katyare, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 5.

¹⁶³ The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁴ The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁵ The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁶ Cindy Growcott, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 4.

¹⁶⁷ Lucy Demant, Policy and Advocacy Manager, Youth Affairs Council Victoria, 9 May 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 21.

¹⁶⁸ Angela Tremain, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 50.

¹⁶⁹ Davina Forth, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 41.

Bell, spoke of her experience with students who are experiencing a continuing struggle to regain a sense of connection with school.¹⁷⁰ Feeling disconnected from the school community may contribute to a student disengaging or not attending school. Kate Kapolos from Uniting Vic Tas, echoed these concerns noting that due to ‘rising mental health and socio-economic outcomes because of the COVID pandemic, young people cannot find their voice and are disengaging from school at rapid rates’.¹⁷¹

The pandemic saw the introduction of flexible educational models out of necessity. The Committee heard that some students sought a continuation of that flexibility. Angela Tremain, Assistant Principal at Bendigo South East Secondary College, told the Committee that students got very used to flexible online learning and increased levels of independence.¹⁷² She noted it has been difficult for students to come back to less flexible settings where they are subject to ‘instructions given to them during the school day’.¹⁷³ Ella, a student, told the Committee that ‘COVID really showed that you can do school from home’.¹⁷⁴

The Committee also heard that students had very different experiences in lockdown that impacted the level of education they received during this period. Angela Tremain, Assistant Principal at Bendigo South East Secondary College, noted that ‘a lot of our young people throughout COVID spent two years in some pretty horrible situations’.¹⁷⁵

She spoke of some students being without routines or support during this time who could say to their teachers ‘If I don’t want to open my computer, I’m not going to’, ‘If I want to get onto a streaming service and watch Netflix for 5 hours, that’s what I’m going to do’.¹⁷⁶ She told the Committee that prior to the pandemic, you would walk into a class ‘with 25 students of mixed abilities and staring points for those young people. Coming back from COVID that is even greater, depending on how much learning those young people were doing in primary school – how much reading and writing they were doing, how much maths they were keeping up to date with’.¹⁷⁷

Lost learning opportunities during the pandemic are likely to continue to negatively impact students as they move through their schooling journey.

The pandemic also ‘exacerbated existing problems’¹⁷⁸ in the community. David Baker, Manager of Policy at Orygen, emphasised that we need to ‘look more broadly from the young person to social determinants’¹⁷⁹ to fully grasp the continued impact of COVID-19 upon student attendance and engagement.

¹⁷⁰ Davina Forth, *Transcript of Evidence*, pp. 39–47.

¹⁷¹ Kate Kapolos, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 51.

¹⁷² Angela Tremain, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 51.

¹⁷³ Angela Tremain, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 51.

¹⁷⁴ Ella, Student, public hearing, Bairnsdale, 26 March 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 53.

¹⁷⁵ Angela Tremain, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 51.

¹⁷⁶ Angela Tremain, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 51.

¹⁷⁷ Angela Tremain, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 52.

¹⁷⁸ David Baker, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 23.

¹⁷⁹ David Baker, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 23.

It is apparent that there are many factors that contribute to student absenteeism. It is also apparent that we do not fully grasp the continuing impacts of the pandemic that are still emerging. It was put to the Committee that increased flexibility within our schools may go some way to addressing these challenges and allowing students to remain connected and engaged with their education.

6.6.2 Flexible learning options

The Department of Education offers flexible learning options to select students in circumstances where intensive intervention is required to respond to behavioural, therapeutic, or learning needs.¹⁸⁰

The Department of Education characterises these options as short to medium term arrangements intended to support individuals back into mainstream schooling settings.¹⁸¹ They can take various forms, including:

- flexible learning government schools, being specialist or specific purpose schools who primarily enrol students at risk of or already disengaged from education
- flexible learning campuses, that sit alongside some Victorian government schools as an alternative campus targeted at students who are at risk of disengagement
- flexible in-school programs, that are offered by some schools and operate on main school campus sites for students who are at risk of disengagement.¹⁸²

The Australian Association for Flexible and Inclusive Education indicate that there are 201 locations offering flexible learning options in Victoria.¹⁸³

Engagement with a flexible learning option is largely managed by a referral system.¹⁸⁴ The Department of Education considers that students should only be referred to flexible learning options when their needs are not being met in mainstream schooling settings and where other strategies have been ineffective or unsuitable.¹⁸⁵ Generally, for a referral to be successful, schools must be able to demonstrate that a broad range of early intervention and engagement strategies have been undertaken to date.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁰ The Department of Education, *Flexible Learning Options (FLOs) - policy*, 2023, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/flexible-learning-options/policy>> accessed 9 August 2024.

¹⁸¹ The Department of Education, *Flexible Learning Options (FLOs) - policy*.

¹⁸² The Department of Education, *Flexible Learning Options (FLOs) - policy*.

¹⁸³ The Australian Association for Flexible and Inclusive Learning, National Flexible Learning Options Program Database, <<https://aafie.org.au/national-flexible-learning-options-program-database>> accessed 12 August 2024.

¹⁸⁴ The Department of Education, *Flexible Learning Options (FLOs) - policy*.

¹⁸⁵ The Department of Education, *Flexible Learning Options (FLOs) - policy*.

¹⁸⁶ The Department of Education, *Flexible Learning Options (FLOs) - policy*.

Flexible learning options have delivered positive outcomes to some students

The Committee was pleased to hear that some students have had positive experiences engaging with flexible learning. Case Studies 6.2 to 6.4 provide examples of the positive outcomes of students re-engaging with school through flexible learning.

Case Study 6.2 Jasmine's story

Jasmine is a Year 11 student who decided to complete her studies through an online school program called Virtual School Victoria.

Jasmine used to attend an in-person school. She explained how 'it was not working well' as the environment caused her 'a lot of anxiety'. Her mother described how Jasmine was 'drained at the end of every day' which affected her ability to socialise outside of school as 'she had nothing left'. Jasmine's mother explained that Jasmine was 'struggling in every area because she could not focus in class'.

With the support of her school and parents, Jasmine decided to transition to Virtual School Victoria. She attends classes online and also undertakes self-directed learning.

Jasmine now feels more confident and she is doing better at school following her decision to change to virtual learning. She is 'a lot more social now than she was' when attending an in-person schooling. Her mum affirmed that '[by] having that support, she just thrived. She started getting great results.'

Jasmine emphasised that Virtual School Victoria 'works really well and that the current school system does not exactly advocate for everyone'. She stressed that the program is 'really well set up, but [she] would like to see other kids like [her] being able to have the same opportunities.'

Source: Jasmine Bieleny, *Transcript of evidence*, 16 April 2024, pp. 39–58; Michelle Bieleny, *Transcript of evidence*, 16 April 2024, pp. 39–58.

Case Study 6.3 Ella's story

Ella is a secondary school student who is currently participating in the BlendED program, an online and virtual model of schooling where students can learn at home.

Ella struggled with school from the start. She described how in primary school, she was marked as 'a child that refused to go to school'. She enjoyed the learning but she 'could not handle being around so many people'. As a primary school student she was offered very minimal support, cementing her isolation and disengagement from school.

Ella attended Bairnsdale Secondary College where she was badly bullied by a group of students. Ella told the Committee how the group 'threatened to do so many bad things to [her],' which she described as 'terrifying'.

Ella informed the school about the bullying but nothing changed. She continued to feel unsafe and unsupported in the school environment. She explained to the Committee how the bullying led to 'fighting with Mum every morning because [she] was terrified to go to school'. The school offered Ella a flexible learning centre which she enjoyed but she was pressured to return to school despite the continued presence of her bullies. Ella changed schools but it was no different.

She was referred to the Navigator Program who then introduced her to BlendED. BlendED is a program run by St Josephs that combines online individualised learning with in-person wellbeing support. Ella described her experience with BlendED as 'the best thing that ever happened'. Ella is much more confident and she feels 'so much happier' as a result of BlendED. She has re-engaged with school and she is 'doing really well in [her] education'.

Ella told the Committee how there needs to be more support for students who feel more comfortable at home or where the school environment may be unsafe and unsupportive. She went on to say that principals and teachers need to:

help other students that are going through the same thing I went through, because no-one deserves that. They need to really crack down on help being available for students like me. And not being so pushy toward school – School is very important, but school is not for everyone ... BlendED is a perfect example of that.

Source: Ella, 26 March 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 50–60.

Case Study 6.4 Hands on Learning

The Hands on Learning program (The Program) is a ‘practical school program that builds wellbeing, engagement and attendance by creating opportunities for students to discover their talents and experience success through significant and authentic hands on projects.’ Since The Programs pilot in Frankston in 1999, this ‘born and bred Victorian innovation’ has grown and is being run in schools across Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania.

The Program provides ‘students who might not necessarily always get the chance to shine in the classroom’ an opportunity ‘to show their talents and what they can do.’ The projects undertaken one day a week during The Program are driven by the students. For example, the team in Geelong found that when they attended the football on the weekend, the bench seats around the oval were disintegrated. The students ‘partnered with the local Geelong council for the funding, for the materials, and the kids built those seats, so on the weekend mum and dad and everybody else knows the impact that they are having.’

Michael Stubbe, Coordinator of the program at Kurnai College, told the Committee ‘the kids always say...that they struggle in the classroom, so when they come into Hands on Learning they feel part of a program and they want to learn; they want to come to school.’ He stated, ‘its great to keep them engaged in that way, and then we can build from that to hopefully engage them back into full-time studies.’

Source: Lisa Vagg, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, pp. 34–35; Michael Stubbe, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 36.

There is greater demand for flexible learning options than the current offerings

The Committee heard that the demand for flexible learning is outpacing the current offerings. Josie Howie, Principal of the Pavilion School, stated:

Parents and students are leaving the system. Then they are looking around, and because there are not enough of our kinds of settings around, they just line up at the next closest one and wait for there to be a vacancy for them to come in.¹⁸⁷

Berry Street, in its submission acknowledged that the ‘prevalence and capacity of these schools has been growing’¹⁸⁸ but at present, the available flexible options are unable to fully absorb the demand, which is placing further strain on the state education system.

¹⁸⁷ Josie Howie, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 85.

¹⁸⁸ Berry Street, *Submission 194*, p. 20.

The Committee heard that unmet demand for these options are more pronounced in certain areas across the state. Josie Howie, Principal of the Pavilion Schol, stated:

If you happen to live near us in Preston, you can get access to the Pavilion School, but if you live in Sunbury, there is nothing really close by up there for you to go to in terms of flexible learning.¹⁸⁹

This inconsistent access to flexible learning options are likely to further disadvantage and disengage students who would benefit from access to them but cannot access suitable options in their area.

Flexible learning offerings are not regulated or resourced well

The Committee heard that many flexible learning options are traversing the ‘infant stage’¹⁹⁰ of their development without the benefit of any ‘predeveloped or prescribed formula for how a FLO should operate’.¹⁹¹ Britt Holmberg, Assistant Principal of Bendigo Flexible Learning Options, told the Committee that many flexible option ‘schools are really running blind’.¹⁹² She considers ‘There is nothing really to work off for people. Doing the best they can with the tools they have got. They are just doing what feels best, I guess.’¹⁹³

Michael Scicluna, Principal of the David Scott School, echoed these comments, telling the Committee that because flexible learning options are not regulated ‘there is a whole range of different things that are happening’¹⁹⁴ in this space. He emphasised that despite this, stakeholders generally are working with the best intentions to support their young people.¹⁹⁵

The Committee also heard that flexible learning options ‘are not resourced well’¹⁹⁶ to cater for the complex needs of their students. Britt Holmberg, Assistant Principal Bendigo Flexible Learning Options emphasised to the Committee:

At our little school we do not have an outdoor space. We open up onto a car park. Our most vulnerable students in our community do not have the basic privileges of what going to school is – having a grass area to play on, having a basketball court to go to, having breakout spaces or actual classrooms. We are talking about our most vulnerable people in our community, and we are not giving them access to a level of education that their mainstream peers and other peers in their community have. We are working at the bare minimum with the bare minimum facilities, and so I would love to see them have designated spaces that they deserve and that other schools get. For us sometimes it is really hard. We sit there and we say, ‘Oh, this school’s been given another bucket of

¹⁸⁹ Josie Howie, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 85.

¹⁹⁰ Britt Holmberg, Assistant Principal, Weeroona College, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 37.

¹⁹¹ Britt Holmberg, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 33.

¹⁹² Britt Holmberg, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 33.

¹⁹³ Britt Holmberg, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 33.

¹⁹⁴ Michael Scicluna, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 78.

¹⁹⁵ Michael Scicluna, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 78.

¹⁹⁶ Britt Holmberg, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 29.

millions of dollars, and we don't even have toilets for our kids' or 'We don't even have a grass area for them to play on.' So it sends a really negative message to our young people of 'This is what you deserve. You don't deserve what other young people have. You get this.' And for lots of our students that has been their whole lives.¹⁹⁷

A flow on effect from poor resourcing is that prospective students may not be aware that flexible learning exists that could better meet their educational needs. Gretel Farr, a parent, told the Committee that she wasn't aware of flexible learning options, specifically the Virtual School Victoria, and therefore 'did not even think it was an option when we first realised there was a challenge'.¹⁹⁸ A lack of community awareness around flexible offerings may further compound the challenges experienced by students who are disengaging or disengaged from mainstream educational settings.

Committee comment

The Committee heard evidence that flexible learning options support students to remain engaged in education by meeting their needs in ways that mainstream education could not. The Committee considers the Department of Education should engage with the flexible learning sector to ensure it is operating well and reaching all those students who would benefit from alternative educational settings.

RECOMMENDATION 46: That the Department of Education meet with all principals from flexible learning options schools to determine:

- a. the appropriate funding levels
- b. whether regulations are needed to support the sector
- c. how to increase community awareness of flexible learning options.

There is appetite for greater flexibility in schooling beyond the flexible learning model

The Department of Education's flexible learning options are not available to all students and are intended to be transitional supports that support students back into mainstream schooling settings. The Committee heard that many consider flexibility should not be confined to students who qualify for these limited offerings. Ms Holmberg asked the Committee:

If you cannot access that mainstream education, if you do not fit that model of being able to go to a state high school or if you do not fit that model of qualifying to go to a special school, where do you go? Where do you access education?¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Britt Holmberg, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 34.

¹⁹⁸ Gretel Farr, Bendigo East Secondary College, public hearing, Bendigo, 16 April 2024, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 49.

¹⁹⁹ Britt Holmberg, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 29.

The appetite for greater flexibility has increased following the COVID-19 pandemic. Ms Farr told the Committee:

Through COVID there was some ability to do some work from home and things, and I know for some children that works really well, but once that had finished and everyone had to get back, there were a lot of issues I think with kids' ability to cope and there were not any options. Everything was off the table. You had to be back in school.²⁰⁰

Gail McHardy, CEO of Parents Victoria, emphasised that just as many employees have made their flexible working expectations clear to their employers, 'young people are expressing they want flexible learning arrangements too'.²⁰¹ She considers student experience during the pandemic created an expectation that schooling be delivered more flexibility, because it demonstrated that it could be. The Committee heard that moving schooling 'straight back into the old setting'²⁰² following COVID-19 was a jarring experience for many students and went directly against this new student expectation of greater flexibility.

6.6.3 Re-engagement with education – the Navigator Program

The Committee heard that some students require specialised services to support them to re-engage with their education. The Department of Education's Navigator Program is targeted at severely disengaged young people. The program aims to address issues that underlie disengagement through intensive case management and outreach support, delivered by contracted community service organisations.²⁰³

Participation in the Navigator Program is managed by an open referral system and eligibility criteria, which require a student to be:

- aged 12 to 17 years (inclusive)
- be enrolled in, or intend to enrol in a Victorian education setting (including non-government schools), and
- have attended 30% or less of the previous school term, or equivalent, or not be attending an education setting at all.²⁰⁴

There is an expectation that a broad range of supports will have been provided by schools to address disengagement prior to referral to the Navigator Program, which is considered a program of last resort.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ Gretel Farr, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 49.

²⁰¹ Gail McHardy, Chief Executive Officer, Parents Victoria, public hearing, Melbourne, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 66.

²⁰² Angela Tremain, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 55.

²⁰³ Department of Education, *Navigator Program – Policy*, 2024, <[Navigator Program: Policy | education.vic.gov.au](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Navigator-Program-Policy)> accessed 9 August 2024.

²⁰⁴ Department of Education, *Navigator Program – Policy*.

²⁰⁵ Department of Education, *Navigator Program – Policy*.

The Department of Education reports that this program is delivering good results. In 2022, 76% of Navigator participants re-engaged in schooling and a total of 3,700 students have re-engaged with education through the program to date.²⁰⁶

Lucy Demant from Youth Affairs Council Victoria also told the Committee that ‘services report really good things about the Navigator Program’.²⁰⁷

However, the Committee heard that in some cases, interventions are being made too late. This is because by the time a student has reduced their attendance to 30%, which is a requisite of entry to the program, it is difficult to get them to re-engage with school. This was argued by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, who said: ‘This is a very high threshold for non-attendance, and it is extremely difficult to build back attendance once it has reached this point’.²⁰⁸

The Centre for Multicultural Youth, in its submission, agreed that the current eligibility criteria ‘is too high a threshold to be able to meaningfully re-engage students’.²⁰⁹ The centre noted that the evidence demonstrates interventions should be introduced at 10% absenteeism, rather than the current policy of 70% absenteeism.²¹⁰ Ms Demant also emphasised the importance of engaging with students sooner rather than later, stating ‘once those school-cant behaviours start emerging we have missed that window for early intervention and prevention’.²¹¹

The Victorian Auditor-General’s Office conducted an audit of the Navigator Program in 2022. The Auditor-General found that three-quarters of students referred to the Navigator Program had not received any individualised supports from the Department of Education prior to referral.²¹² The Audit concluded that the Navigator Program is likely less effective when students do not receive early intervention supports prior to referral.²¹³

The Centre for Multicultural Youth told the Committee that even if students had received supports prior to referral, ‘notes of this support were not provided to Navigator teams’.²¹⁴ Limited communication between providers of support can undermine the overall effectiveness of intervention. It can also be confusing for students and their families, as there is no consistent point of contact or approach.

The Committee also heard that students who qualify for the Navigator Program often face lengthy wait times to access supports. The Auditor-General’s report found that the referral process can take up to six weeks to finalise and students in areas of ‘high

²⁰⁶ The Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 20.

²⁰⁷ Lucy Demant, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 29.

²⁰⁸ The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, *Submission 172*, p. 14.

²⁰⁹ The Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Submission 196*, p. 25.

²¹⁰ The Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Submission 196*, p. 25.

²¹¹ Lucy Demant, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 23.

²¹² VAGO, *Report on the Effectiveness of the Navigator Program*, March 2022, p. 2.

²¹³ VAGO, *Report on the Effectiveness of the Navigator Program*, p. 2.

²¹⁴ The Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Submission 196*, p. 25.

demand can face an ‘active hold’ for four to six months’,²¹⁵ meaning students are on a wait list and receive limited support. Delayed access to the Navigator Program means that eligible students must wait even longer before they receive critical interventions and supports. This limits their prospects of successfully reengaging with education.

At present, the Navigator Program is limited to students between the ages of 12 to 17 (inclusive). The Committee heard that the current age requirements mean that students who display severely disengaged behaviours in primary school must wait until secondary school to qualify for Navigator Program supports. Britt Holmberg, Assistant Principal of Bendigo Flexible Learning Options, considers that the current age requirements can result in delaying interventions until students ‘have fallen off the rails’²¹⁶ or until ‘things go terribly wrong’.²¹⁷ She emphasised that ‘prevention is better than a cure’.²¹⁸

The Department of Education is currently piloting the Navigator Program for a younger cohort (aged 10 to 11 years) in the Bayside Peninsula, Hume Merri-bek, Loddon Campaspe and Western Melbourne areas.²¹⁹ The Committee is hopeful that extending program access to students aged 10 to 11 years will facilitate earlier intervention for students who struggle with severe disengagement below the age of 12.

FINDING 23: Students are more likely to successfully re-engage with education if appropriate interventions are delivered before students become severely disengaged. For example, students do not become eligible for the Department’s Navigator Program, which provides specialised support to re-engage with education, until their attendance rate drops to only 30% of school attended. In many cases, this is too late.

6.6.4 Supports for Students in out-of-home care

The Committee heard that students in out of home care experience ‘substantially higher rates of disengagement from school compared to their peers’.²²⁰

The Commission for Children and Young People’s 2023 *Let us Learn* Inquiry highlighted how the educational experiences of students in out of home care is impacted by a range of systemic issues and barriers. The Inquiry revealed that ‘on every measure, students in care are not engaged in education in the same way as their peers and many are not reaching their potential’.²²¹

215 VAGO, *Report on the Effectiveness of the Navigator Program*, p. 3.

216 Britt Holmberg, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 34.

217 Britt Holmberg, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 34.

218 Britt Holmberg, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 34.

219 Department of Education, *Navigator Program – Policy*.

220 Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us Learn: Systematic Inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care, report*, November 2023, p. 22.

221 Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us Learn*, p. 22.

The Department of Education established LOOKOUT Education Support Centres in 2016 to assist schools to better support students in out-of-home care and lift educational outcomes, by:

- increasing the capacity of school workforces to meet the needs of their students in out-of-home care through the provision of professional development and expert advice
- improving the monitoring and visibility of students in out-of-home care via the Lookout Centre Student Roll (where the Department of Families, Fairness of Housing data is matched with school enrolment data held by the Department of Education) and the collection of data reporting from schools at least twice yearly
- strengthening collaboration between service systems by taking a multidisciplinary approach and advocating to embed education as a priority when decisions are made about a student's care.²²²

The Committee heard positive feedback about the training provided by the LOOKOUT centres to designated teachers. Liana Buchanan, Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People, emphasised the importance that such training be expanded to all school leadership.²²³

Case Study 6.5 provides an example of the difficulties faced by children in out of home care in engaging with education.

²²² Victorian Government, *Lookout Education Support Centres*, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/lookout-education-support-centres>> accessed 9 August 2024.

²²³ Liana Buchanan, Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People, public hearing, Shepparton, *Transcript of Evidence*, 17 April 2024, p. 38.

Case Study 6.5 Missi Joyce's story

As a member of the youth council for the Commission for Aboriginal Children and Young People, Missi advocates for young people living in state care. Missi's advocacy is informed by her own experience with the residential care system and how it impacted her at school.

When Missi was in the care system she was 'moved around all the time'. The placement instability meant she could not 'settle down' or 'find stability' in her environment. She described how the instability meant she could 'not find a way to learn how to be [herself] and ... to learn at the same time.'

Missi's mental health and her engagement at school were both impacted due to the placement instability. The teachers often labelled Missi as the 'troubled kid' or the 'she's too much' kid'. She would 'distract [herself] with everything that [she] possibly [could]' and 'engage in disruptive and destructive behaviour patterns' at school.

Missi explained that 'it wasn't until [she] got to Year 11 and started to learn about [the] impacts of trauma on the brain, that [she] finally understood that part of [herself]'. Missi 'would not call [herself] a bad kid', rather she feels that there is a 'lack of understanding around trauma in education settings for children and young people in state care'.

Missi emphasised that she has a high level of respect for the people in the education system who had taken 'the time to converse or understand' how she was feeling. Missi explained the main change she would like to see in the education and home care system:

[T]he biggest thing – and it is so small – but, like, compassion, because there is just a lack of. There is no understanding. ... you do not get that compassion, you do not get that understanding and you do not really get that opportunity to move forward.

Source: Missi Joyce, Youth Council Member, Commission for Aboriginal Children and Young People, public hearing, Shepparton, 17 April 2024, *Transcript of evidence*, pp. 30–44.

A 2020 evaluation of LOOKOUT centres found that despite some indicators of success, there is room for improvement, as there is 'not yet a consistent level of capability across Victoria which can result in inconsistent practices within schools'.²²⁴ The *Let us Learn* Inquiry heard from many stakeholders with experience of the LOOKOUT program. Common themes and feedback included, in summary:

- the current resourcing of LOOKOUT centres does not match the scale of their responsibilities

²²⁴ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us Learn*, p. 249.

- there is some confusion regarding the responsibilities of LOOKOUT staff and whether the focus of the role is on individual capacity building or on encouraging compliance with the Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment: A Partnering Agreement.²²⁵

The *Let us Learn* Inquiry made 40 findings and 47 recommendations²²⁶ including the following that relate to LOOKOUT Centres:

- Recommendation 39: Assess additional resource requirements for LOOKOUT Centres as a result of the review. That, as part of the review of the Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care and the Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment, DE identify resource requirements for the LOOKOUT Centres to enable an effective combination of school capacity building and accountability.²²⁷
- Recommendation 40: Allocate necessary resources to LOOKOUT Centres based on the review. That the Victorian Government provide additional funding to the LOOKOUT Centres based on the review of resource requirements referred to in Recommendation 39.²²⁸

The Victorian Government provided its response to the Commissions' *Let us Learn* report in May 2024, which was made public in August 2024.

The Committee notes that the Victorian Government has accepted recommendation 39 and has accepted in principle recommendation 40, with any further action subject to future funding decisions.²²⁹

The Committee agrees that the Victorian Government should first assess LOOKOUT Centres to identify any additional resource requirements. However, the Committee considers that the Victorian Government should commit to funding any additional resources its assessment deems necessary to equip LOOKOUT Centres to effectively build capacity and accountability.

The *Let us Learn* Inquiry also recommended that a 'whole-school' approach to trauma be adopted by all government schools, including the embedding of trauma informed practices as part of the implementation of FISO 2.0 in schools.²³⁰

According to the *Let us Learn* report, core components of trauma informed practices 'typically include safe, supportive relationships, structure and stability, shared agency, self-awareness and self-regulation, and social-emotional learning and skill building'.²³¹ The Committee heard that there is a 'significant gap between

²²⁵ The Department of Education, *Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment: A Partnering Agreement*, July 2018.

²²⁶ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us Learn*, p. 48.

²²⁷ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us Learn*, p. 48.

²²⁸ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us Learn*, p. 48.

²²⁹ Victorian Government, *Victorian Government Response to the Commission for Children and Young Peoples Report: 'Let us Learn: Systematic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out of home care'*, May 2024, p. 21.

²³⁰ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us Learn*, p. 44.

²³¹ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us Learn*, p. 175.

understanding trauma-informed practice – that is needed – and actually the provision of trauma-informed practice on the ground'.²³²

Meena Singh, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, emphasised that trauma-informed practices support all children who experience some form of trauma. She noted:

I think part of the problem is that we think trauma is an isolated thing. We think that it is only a small number in the community that experience trauma, when the reality is that it is not. It is much more prevalent; it is much more widespread than we think.²³³

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study from 2023 found that child maltreatment is endemic in Australia, with a total of 62.2% of the Australian population experiencing at least one type of child maltreatment.²³⁴ The study identified that across the child population, there is a high prevalence of physical abuse (32.0%), sexual abuse (28.5%), emotional abuse (30.9%) and exposure to domestic violence (39.6%).²³⁵ These findings emphasise that the implementation of trauma informed practices is likely to be relevant to a number of students who are experiencing various forms of trauma.

Recommendation 14 from the *Let us Learn* report stated:

- That the Department of Education work to ensure that:
 - Government schools adopt a 'whole school' approach to trauma and embed trauma-informed practices throughout their school environments as part of the implementation of FISO 2.0 in schools, and
 - Trauma-informed training is offered as an option under School Readiness Funding for early years educators and other staff, and that early childhood education settings are encouraged to embed these practices into their operations.²³⁶

The Committee notes that the Victorian Government has accepted Recommendation 14 in principle, noting that it supports the intent of this recommendation but considers further work is required to determine a feasible implementation approach in relation to government schools.²³⁷ It notes that the school readiness funding component is accepted in full.

The Committee emphasises the importance of implementing trauma-informed practices in schools. It considers the Victorian Government should commit to supporting schools to embed trauma-informed practices.

²³² Meena Singh, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 34.

²³³ Meena Singh, *Transcript of Evidence*, p. 34.

²³⁴ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us Learn*, p. 175.

²³⁵ Australian Child Maltreatment Study, *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: 2023 Brief Report*, 2023, p. 3.

²³⁶ Commission for Children and Young People, *Let us Learn*, November 2023, p. 44.

²³⁷ Victorian Government, *Victorian Government Response to the Commission for Children and Young Peoples Report*.

Chapter 7

Funding state schools

7.1 Overview

Anything and everything that becomes an issue in society comes back through the schools, yet how can we possibly do that when we are not funded enough to do it?

Travis Eddy, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 April 2024, p. 17.

The Committee received overwhelming evidence that Victoria's state schools are chronically underfunded on the terms outlined by the Gonski model. They will remain so unless agreements between the Commonwealth and Victorian governments change. These concerns occupy the first part of this Chapter.

The debates are complex. Gonski funding agreements determine the overall aggregate funding the Victorian Government commits to the state education system. The Department of Education then uses its own formulas to calculate how that aggregate is allocated to individual schools. Issues with the transparency and data used to make these allocative calculations occupy the second part of this Chapter.

Questions of overall funding levels in the Victorian state system might be considered a matter of perspective. The Department informed the Committee that it 'had very significant investment over three budgets'¹ which now allows it to feel that it has 'a comprehensive, multipronged strategy'.²

Between 2011–12 and 2020–21, recurrent expenditure (non-capital/infrastructure funding) for Victorian government schools grew by \$3,810 per Full Time Equivalent (FTE).³ An increase of 23.4% on 2011–12 levels and above the Australian average of 10.8%.⁴

Similarly, the Centre for Independent Studies noted that Victoria had enjoyed high growth in state education spending over the past decade. It presented data showing that real all-government recurrent/output spending (including the user cost of capital) for Victorian government schools grew by approximately 41%, from \$8.4 billion in 2010–11 to \$11.9 billion in 2019–20.⁵ Over the same period, spending for all of Australia increased from \$40 billion to \$53 billion, a growth rate of 31%.⁶ This is illustrated in Figures 7.1 and 7.2 below.

¹ Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 75.

² Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 75.

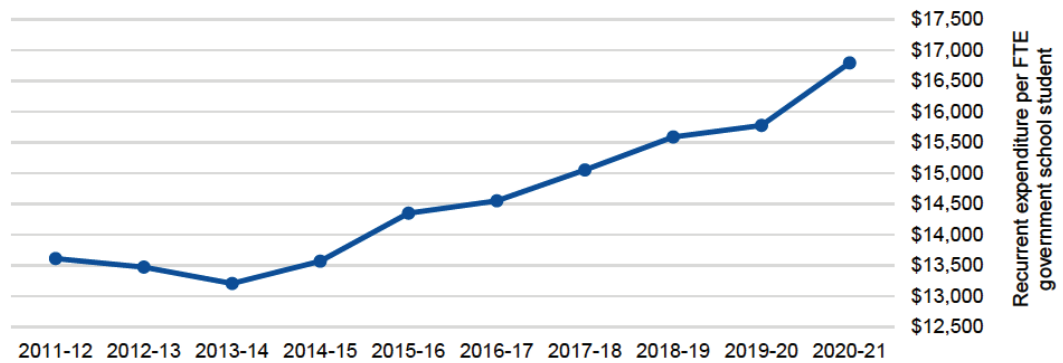
³ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 12.

⁴ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 12.

⁵ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 5.

⁶ Centre for Independent Studies, *Submission 225*, p. 5.

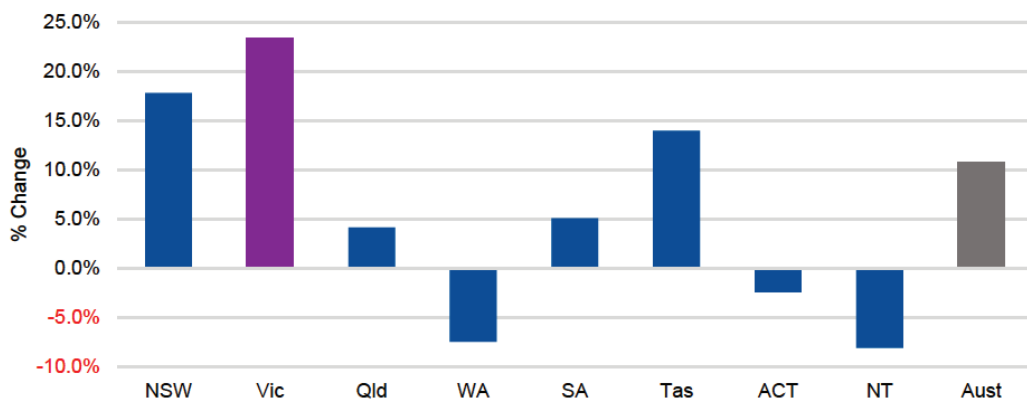
Figure 7.1 Victorian Government recurrent expenditure per FTE government school student



Note: Data adjusted to 2021-22 dollars.

Source: Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 12.

Figure 7.2 Change in State and Territory government school recurrent expenditure per FTE student, 2011-12 to 2020-21



Note: Data adjusted to 2021-22 dollars.

Source: Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 13.

By contrast, Save Our Schools, an education advocacy group, focused on the spending of dollars-per-student to highlight more concerning trends. It stated:

Victoria's public school system is the worst resourced in Australia. Total income per student was \$15,970 in 2021 compared with the average for Australia of \$16,739 and \$16,887 in NSW. Victoria also has the largest resource gap between public and Independent schools in Australia at \$10,461 per student. The resource gap between public and Catholic schools of \$2,792 per student is the third largest in Australia.⁷

The Committee takes the view that the Gonski model has established a nation-wide method to calculate the baseline funding requirements of education in each state. Accordingly, the focus of this Chapter is not on the shifts in aggregate spending.

⁷ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 9.

Rather, the focus is on the consequences for Victoria if its state school system is not funded at this baseline level.

7.1.1 The structure of government funding

Funding the Victorian state education system comprises two major streams:

- **Output or recurrent funding**, which provides for the day-to-day operations of schools and the delivery of education.
- **Capital funding** or investment, which provides for school infrastructure, including the delivery of new schools and school upgrades.

The Commonwealth and Victorian governments direct all output school funding to the Victorian Department of Education, which then allocates funding to individual state schools or passes on funding to relevant authorised bodies that allocate funding for the Catholic and Independent school systems.

Capital funding, by contrast, is provided directly to government and non-government schools through the Commonwealth grants process or by the Victorian government to the state school systems.

This Chapter assesses each of these processes. Section 7.2 considers the Gonski methods and the National School Reform Agreement which are used to determine overall output funding. Section 7.3 considers the methods used by the Department to allocate this funding to individual schools and Section 7.4 discusses capital funding.

7.1.2 Victorian Government funding for non-government schools

Government support for non-government schools is an ongoing political issue. The Committee received numerous submissions from individuals, organisations and academics expressing concerns with current funding provisions made by the Victorian Government to non-government schools.⁸

The Committee recognises that under the National School Reform Agreement (see Section 7.2), the Commonwealth Government pays for 80% of the Schooling Resource Standard for non-government schools, which sets a base standard of public funding for each student (see Section 7.2). This may be reduced by a Commonwealth Government assessment of the capacity of the school's parents to contribute. This portion ranges from 10% of the Schooling Resource Standard, to 80% for those assessed as having the largest capacity to contribute.⁹

⁸ John Friend-Pereira, *Submission 20*, pp. 1-3; Darren Zhang, *Submission 153*, pp. 4-5; Parents Victoria, *Submission 200*, p. 6; Emma Rowe, *Submission 203*, pp. 1-2; Daniel Jordan, *Submission 205*, pp. 1-3; Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 30; Name Withheld, *Submission 238*, pp. 1-2.

⁹ Commonwealth Department of Education, *Schooling Resource Standard*, 2024, <<https://www.education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/schooling-resource-standard>> accessed 5 September 2024.

Committee comment

Nonetheless, the Committee received evidence of substantive concerns with the funding that the Victorian Government does allocate to non-government schools. Rather than detailing these concerns separately, these issues are raised as they relate to each aspect of the school funding process:

- government schools are underfunded and non-government schools overfunded on Gonski Schooling Resource Standard contributions (Section 7.2)
- the discretionary spending clauses in the National School Reform Agreement penalises the funding that flows to government schools but not private schools. (Section 7.2)
- Victoria maintains clauses in the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* which guarantees non-government schools a set proportion of government school funding regardless of relative levels of need (Section 7.2)
- Victorian Government schools are required to make applications for grants from the Department for necessary works, in competition with applications from non-government schools (Section 7.4)
- non-governments schools have recently received large shares of Commonwealth capital funding and government schools have received almost none (Section 7.4).

RECOMMENDATION 47: That the Victorian Government significantly increase its investment in school capital infrastructure funding in government schools.

RECOMMENDATION 48: That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government for significantly increased capital investment in government school infrastructure.

7.2 Determining output funding

7.2.1 Elements of output funding

Output funding includes government contributions towards the Schooling Resource Standard (see Section 7.2.2) as well as other government expenditure that sits outside of the Schooling Resource Standard. Output funding that sits outside of the Schooling Resource Standard includes, but is not limited to:

- Payroll tax paid by the Department, which employs most government school staff, including all teaching staff.
- Financial assistance paid by the Commonwealth Government to non-government representative bodies. These bodies support the non-government school sector in implementing national policy initiatives under the National School Reform Agreement.

Schools, particularly non-government schools, may also generate revenue through fees, donations, hire of school facilities, and other operations.¹⁰

Schooling Resource Standard contributions account for by far the greatest proportion of output funding governments provide to the school system, as reflected in Table 7.1 (2021 figures):

Table 7.1 Commonwealth and Victorian Government output funding of schools in 2021

Funding	Government schools (\$ million)	Non-government schools (\$ million)	All schools (\$ million)
Victorian Government funding			
SRS funding	8,083.7	911.5	8,995.2
Other output funding	588.5	-	588.5
Total	8,672.2	911.5	9,583.7
Australian Government funding			
SRS funding	2,197.7	3,836.3	6,034.0
Other output funding	-	35.6	35.6
Total	2,197.7	3,871.9	6,069.6
Total government funding			
SRS funding	10,281.4	4,747.8	15,029.2
Other output funding	588.5	35.6	624.1
Total output	10,869.9	4,783.4	15,653.3

Source: Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 17.

7.2.2 The Schooling Resource Standard

Background

Commencing with the 2011 release of the Gonski review, there has been considerable reform in education funding arrangements over the past decade. The 2011 review recommended a needs-based funding model for recurrent school funding called the Schooling Resource Standard.¹¹ The Australian Government committed to the Schooling Resource Standard model in 2017. In early 2018, to improve the efficiency of funding arrangements, a second Gonski review recommended tying funding to agreed teaching strategies that would improve student outcomes and national performances.¹²

¹⁰ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 17.

¹¹ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 1.

¹² Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 8.

This 2018 review helped inform the development of the National School Reform Agreement 2019–23, committed to by the Council of Australian Governments in November 2018. This National School Reform Agreement required each state and territory government to negotiate a bilateral agreement with the Commonwealth Government that outlined the respective funding responsibilities of the Commonwealth and state or territory governments to achieve the National School Reform Agreement's outcomes.¹³

The bilateral agreements express school funding commitments of the Commonwealth and state or territory governments as a share of the Schooling Resource Standard. Each bilateral agreement also binds state or territory governments to a set of national reform initiatives that align with the National School Reform Agreement. These reform initiatives broadly relate to:¹⁴

- educational reform on student learning and achievement
- teacher support and school improvement
- improvements in data and the national evidence base.

Victoria was the last jurisdiction to enter into a bilateral agreement, signed on 17 June 2019. This agreement was set to expire on 31 December 2023.¹⁵ In December 2022, the Education Ministers agreed to extend Victoria's existing National School Reform Agreement and bilateral agreements for a further 12 months to 31 December 2024, to allow for a review to inform the next agreement.¹⁶

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034

On 31 July 2024, the Commonwealth Government released the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034*, which will replace the existing National School Reform Agreement.¹⁷ The new agreement will tie funding to new targets and reforms, including:¹⁸

- Year 1 phonics check and early years of schooling numeracy check, to identify students who need additional help
- evidence-based teaching and targeted and intensive supports, such as small-group or catch-up tutoring to help students who fall behind
- greater wellbeing support for learning and engagement, including through full-service schools, counsellors, wellbeing coordinators and mental health workers

¹³ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 8.

¹⁶ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 1.

¹⁷ Australian Department of Education, *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034*, 2024, p. 5, p. 15.

¹⁸ Jason Clare, Commonwealth Minister for Education, *NAPLAN shows why the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement is needed*, 2024, <<https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/naplan-shows-why-better-and-fairer-schools-agreement-needed>> accessed 14 August 2024.

- increasing the proportion of students leaving school with a Year 12 certificate to 83.8 % (by 2030), from 76.3% in 2022
- reducing the proportion of students in the ‘Needs Additional Support’ category for reading and numeracy by 10 per cent and increasing the proportion of students in the ‘Strong’ and ‘Exceeding’ proficiency levels for reading and numeracy by 2030.

The new agreement proposes new funding contributions by the Commonwealth and state or territory governments, with a view to achieving 100% funding of the Gonski Schooling Resourcing Standard models (see next section).

As with the previous National School Reform Agreement, state and territory governments will use the Better and Fairer agreement as the basis to negotiate bilateral agreements for funding arrangements and reform outcomes. Agreements were to be signed by September 2024.

At the time of writing, only the Northern Territory and Western Australian governments had reached deals with the Commonwealth and signed onto its Better and Fairer Schools Agreement.¹⁹

The new agreement is informed by the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System, conducted by an Expert Panel appointed in March 2023. The Expert Panel published its final report, *Improving Outcomes for All*, in December 2023.

How the Schooling Resource Standard is calculated

The Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) is a targeted needs-based funding model that estimates the total government funding required for schools to meet their students’ educational needs. The Gonski Review designed the SRS model to replace all previous government recurrent school funding arrangements.²⁰

The SRS comprises a base funding amount for each student plus loadings for students with additional needs, based on formulas prescribed in the *Australian Education Act 2013*.²¹ In 2023, the base funding amount is \$13,048 for every student in primary school, and \$16,397 for every student in secondary school.²²

In addition to the base loading, the SRS formula comprises an additional six loadings to provide extra support for student priority cohorts and small and regional schools.

¹⁹ Conor Duffy and Evan Young ‘NAPLAN results reveal one in three students not meeting basic literacy and numeracy expectations’, *ABC News Online*, 31 January 2024, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-31/public-school-funding-deal-wa/103408180>> accessed 14 August 2024.

²⁰ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 8.

²¹ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 8; Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 9.

²² Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 9.

Priority student cohort loadings include:

- students with disability
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- socio-educational disadvantage
- low English language proficiency.

The school-based loadings include:

- school size
- school location.

For non-government schools, the base amount is discounted according to the assessed capacity of the school parents or guardians to financially contribute to the school's operating costs. The maximum discount for non-government schools is up to 80% of the base amount.²³

Commonwealth and state contributions under the bilateral agreements

The funding obligations of the Commonwealth and state or territory governments under the bilateral agreements are expressed as a percentage of the SRS (in addition to some capital funding contributions).

The *Australian Education Act 2013* outlines the Australian Government's recurrent funding responsibilities. By 2023, the Australian Government had committed to contribute at least:

- 20% of the SRS for government schools
- 80% of the SRS for non-government schools.²⁴

The remainder of SRS needs-based funding is expected to be met by state or territory governments.

Victoria's 2019 bilateral agreement provided for a funding transition, in which both Victoria and the Commonwealth governments increased their contributions over the period of agreement (see Table 7.2).²⁵

Under the current National School Reform Agreement, the Victorian government school system received 90.4% of the SRS funding in 2023. The Victorian Government

²³ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 11.

²⁴ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 13.

²⁵ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 13.

contributed 70.4% of the SRS funding and the Commonwealth contributed 20% of the SRS funding.

In 2023, some non-government schools were funded above their share of SRS funding (see Table 7.2). Numerous stakeholders expressed disappointment at a situation where government schools are underfunded and non-government schools are overfunded on Schooling Resource Standard minimum requirements.²⁶

As discussed below, the Committee notes that under the proposed *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2024–2035*, the Australian Government proposes to lift federal contributions to meeting SRS requirements from 20% to 22.5% by no later than 2029.²⁷

Table 7.2 Victoria and Australian Government required contributions to Victorian school funding as a percentage of the Schooling Resource Standard

Funding		2019 (%)	2020 (%)	2021 (%)	2022 (%)	2023 (%)
Victorian Government contributions	Government schools	68.0	68.4	68.9	69.6	70.4
	Non-government schools	19.7	19.0	19.1	19.9	20.0
Australian Government contributions	Government schools	17.8	18.4	19.0	19.5	20.0
	Non-government schools	77.7	76.3	77.8	81.3	82.5
Combined government contributions	Government schools	85.8	86.8	87.9	89.2	90.4
	Non-government schools	97.5	95.4	97.0	101.2	102.5

Source: Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, pp. 13–14.

Required and reported Schooling Resource Standard contributions

State and Territory governments are required to meet their SRs funding commitments under Section 22A of the *Australian Education Act 2013*. Compliance with this requirement is assessed in an annual review by the National School Resourcing Board.²⁸

²⁶ John Friend-Pereira, *Submission 20*, pp. 1–3; Darren Zhang, *Submission 153*, pp. 4–5; Parents Victoria, *Submission 200*, p. 6; Emma Rowe, *Submission 203*, pp. 1–2; Daniel Jordan, *Submission 205*, pp. 1–3; Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 30; Name withheld, *Submission 238*, pp. 1–2.

²⁷ Australian Department of Education, *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034*, 2024, p. 18.

²⁸ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 14.

The most recent review for which details are available are from 2022 (see Table 7.3):

Table 7.3 Victoria, compliance with meeting Schooling Resource Standard funding requirements, 2022

Funding	Government sector (\$ million)	Government sector (%)	Non-government sector (\$ million)	Non-government sector (%)
Total SRS	12,160.9	-	4,878.2	-
Required Contribution	8,473.7	69.6	972.7	19.9
Reported Contribution	8,411.2	69.1	1,107.0	22.6
Allowed immaterial shortfall	-72.9	-0.6	N/A	-0.6
Utilised immaterial shortfall	-62.5	-0.5	N/A	N/A

Source: National School Resourcing Board, *Annual review of state and territory compliance with section 22A of the Australian Education Act 2013, 2023*, p. 35.

Under Victoria's bilateral agreement, a shortfall in the State's contribution compared to its required contribution can be assessed as material or immaterial. An immaterial shortfall is defined as less than or equal to 0.6% of the total SRS commitment. If a funding shortfall is within this threshold, the Board will not consider it as non-compliant. Victoria had a shortfall within this threshold in 2022. It had no shortfall in 2021.²⁹

The Schooling Resource Standard funding gap

While the Victorian Government is meeting its SRS commitments in actual terms, the current funding agreement clearly produces a 'gap' between what the model indicates is the base rate required to adequately fund the Victorian state schooling system and the funding that governments have agreed to contribute towards education.

As noted above, government schools in Victoria are underfunded on the SRS models and non-governments schools overfunded.

The Department informed the Committee that the Victorian Government indicates that it is committed to increasing its funding share for government schools to 75% of the SRS by 2028.³⁰ Under Victoria's current National School Reform Agreement bilateral agreement, the Australian Government is only required to provide 20% of the SRS, this indicates that a 5% gap in needs-based funding will persist by 2028.

Similar scenarios exist in other states. The Parliamentary Budget Office reports:

The 5% gap in funding for the government school sector is common across the bilateral agreements of other jurisdictions and was a sticking point in negotiations between the

²⁹ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 14; National School Resourcing Board, *Annual review of state and territory compliance with section 22A of the Australian Education Act 2013*, p. 35.

³⁰ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 9.

Australian and state and territory governments. Victorian government schools will be funded below their total need-based funding unless this gap is closed, whether through increased Australian or state government funding.³¹

In its 2023 report, the Expert Panel on a Better and Fairer Education System found that 98% of government schools across Australia were still being funded below the SRS on average.³² Only the Australian Capital Territory schooling system was at 100 per cent at the time of the Expert Panel's report.

These disparities are common to most Australian jurisdictions (see Table 7.4) Commenting on these issues, the Better and Fairer Expert Panel said:

In the current funding model, governments provide a minimum public contribution to the best-resourced schools, even when the private tuition fees alone would exceed the Schooling Resource Standard. Providing public funding to high-fee non-government schools likely provides minimal measurable educational benefit. In a context where most government systems are not at 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard, and students experiencing disadvantage are less likely to achieve minimum standards, this situation raises the question of whether resources should be targeted to schools most in need.³³

Table 7.4 Federal and State and Territory government commitments as proportion of the Schooling Resource Standard, 2023, public and private schools

	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%

Source: Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 146*, p. 19.

³¹ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 14.

³² Expert Panel, *Improving Outcomes for All*, 2023, p. 35.

³³ Expert Panel *Improving Outcomes for All*, 2023, p. 84.

7.2.3 Consequences of the Schooling Resource Standard funding gap

Many stakeholders contributing to this Inquiry recommended funding Victorian schools to 100% of the SRS as a priority reform.³⁴ Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals estimated that the underfunding amounted to \$1.8 billion ever year, equivalent to \$2,800 per student.³⁵

At the same time, according to the Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, non-government schools in Victoria are over-funded by around \$400 million every year.³⁶ Although this gap will reduce over the life of the National School Reform Agreement.

The Better and Fairer Expert Panel stressed the importance of fully funding schools to 100% of the SRS calculations in its final report:³⁷

Underfunding of schools, and government schools in particular, is undermining other reform efforts, with real implications for student educational and wellbeing outcomes, teacher attraction and retention, and ultimately confidence in the public education system. Governments should work together to address this issue as a priority and fund government schools to 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard. Governments should also work together to get the small number of non-government schools who are not fully funded to their full Schooling Resource Standard.³⁸

Stakeholders said fully funding schools should be the highest priority of governments, given that about 80% of low-income students and 84% of Indigenous students in Victoria attend public schools. As discussed in previous Chapters, further funding is required to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds.³⁹

The Principal of the Pavilion School, Josie Howie, told the Committee:

We lack the funding, resources and facilities we need to best support our students ... Schools in the most part in our state system are not adequately set up to support this level of need ... We have got 70 young people on our waitlist right now. These students are not engaged in school. Most flexible settings like ours in the state system are at capacity, and we have long waitlists.⁴⁰

³⁴ Meredith Pearce, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 11; Gail McHardy, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 61; John Friend-Pereira, *Submission 20*, pp. 1-3; Darren Zhang, *Submission 153*, pp. 4-5; Parents Victoria, *Submission 200*, p. 6; Emma Rowe, *Submission 203*, pp. 1-2; Daniel Jordan, *Submission 205*, pp. 1-3; Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 30; Name Withheld, *Submission 238*, pp. 1-2.

³⁵ Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 143*, p. 18.

³⁶ Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, *Submission 143*, p. 18.

³⁷ Expert Panel (2023) *Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, pp. 29, 74.

³⁸ Expert Panel (2023) *Improving Outcomes for All*, p. 35.

³⁹ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Josie Howie, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 81.

In a survey of 587 members, the Australian Education Union asked teachers which students at their school would benefit most from the additional funds that would be provided if they were funded at 100% of the SRS. Three-quarters said extra funding would support students who have fallen behind in literacy or numeracy, students with disability and students who are disengaged or at risk of dropping out of school.⁴¹

Box 7.1 provides further evidence of the consequences and missed opportunities from underfunding the state school system. In presenting this evidence, the Committee acknowledges that changes to SRS funding agreements may not translate to equivalent increases in funding for individual schools, whose budgets are determined by the state-level model, the Student Resource Package (see Section 7.3).

Box 7.1 Consequences of the Schooling Resource Standard gap

Teacher, principals and experts told the Committee what could be achieved if the school system was funded to 100% of the Schooling Resource Standard:

The funding of public schools in Victoria is below what was recommended by one of the many reviews that has been done into education. If you do not think \$2000 per kid makes a difference to what can be done at all levels of school, but especially at lower primary school, to bring up illiterate and innumerate kids, then you are kidding yourself.

Matt Kell, teacher, Bairnsdale Secondary College, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 3.

Even just paying for social workers to come into the school and our school counselling system, they are additional costs that we have got to make those applications for, which should be in the schools.

Matt Jenkins, School Council President, Orbost Community College, *Transcript of Evidence*, 26 March 2024, p. 38.

Additional funding would indeed allow us to have the supports that we need in different classrooms. I am speaking of six classrooms, and I know that two of our classrooms need even more additional support to allow the teacher to teach, to do their job.

Stephanie Feldt, teacher, Albert Street Primary School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 7.

(Continued)

⁴¹ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 31.

Box 7.1 Continued

Our principal colleagues ... say that the amount of money that they need additional for each student would then remove the pressure on them from their budgets to be calling on families and transferring those costs to other people – i.e. the families – to contribute, just having to prioritise certain programs and so forth and having to do that juggle struggle with the budget.

Gail McHardy, Parents Victoria, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 63.

If there was new money that came into the system to get to 100 per cent of Schooling Resource Standard, that could sufficiently cover the increased expenditure on instructional specialists and master teachers paid. We recommend a \$40,000 uplift for instructional specialists off the top teacher salary and an \$80,000 uplift for master teachers. That would be affordable with additional Gonski funding to get to that Schooling Resource Standard 100 per cent.

Jordana Hunter, Grattan Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 57.

In terms of my school, that extra 10 per cent would actually give me another staff member, a full-time person, which does not sound like much, but that would double the capacity in my school of what we can actually offer in terms of the non-face-to-face.

Keiran Kenneth, Principal, Yallourn North Primary School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 27 March 2024, p. 25.

We currently miss out on \$1.6 million a year. Our budget is about \$8.5 million. We miss out on \$1.6 million a year, so for the last 10 years we have missed out on \$16 million. You know, anything is possible when you have got that amount of money ... In terms of the support that we could put in place – you know, funded positions, whether it be speech therapy or whether it be counselling services or all of those things. You would have access to be able to set yourself up with those sorts of things.

Travis Eddy, Principal, Kennington Primary School, *Transcript of Evidence*, 16 April 2024, p. 25

The AEU estimates that our school – Northcote High School – is underfunded by \$4.8 million each and every year. With an additional \$4.8 million per year we would be able to hire many more teachers and education support staff to share the load, for the benefit of students... With more money for more staff, we could have the time to plan better lessons, provide more specific feedback, launch more interventions, provide more support to students etc and teachers wouldn't have to work so much overtime to try to achieve these things (which leads to burn out).

Northcote High School Australian Education Union Sub-Branch Executive, *Submission 179*, p. 2.

7.2.4 Strategies for closing the gap

The gap in SRS funding will be closed if governments agree to do so. The Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office provided modelling of the likely total cost to increasing funding to 100% of the SRS, whether it is shouldered both or either of the Commonwealth and Victorian governments (see Box 7.2). Several pathways have been identified for achieving a new agreement.

Agreeing to the new term in the *Better and Fairer Agreement 2024–2035*

As noted above, in its proposed *Better and Fairer Agreement 2024–2035*, the Commonwealth Government has proposed a new funding arrangement to ‘increase its share of the SRS from 20% to up to 22.5% for all government schools by no later than 2029’.⁴²

Accordingly, to reach 100% of SRS funding, the state or territory governments will be expected to increase their share of funding from 75% to 77.5%, however they will not need to provide the 80% of funding that was expected under the original designs of the National School Reform Agreement.

Under the new agreement, the Commonwealth places the following conditions on this new funding arrangement:

- The implementation of National Reform Directions as set out in the Better and Fairer Agreement.
- States and territories directing the increase in Commonwealth funding provided as part of this Agreement to schools with the highest levels of need according to their needs-based funding arrangements. For the avoidance of doubt, this may include but is not limited to, allocation of funding or resources, or central or regional services or supports or resources provided to schools by a state or territory as part of its local needs-based funding arrangements consistent with the Act.⁴³

The Western Australian example

As noted above, the Western Australian and Northern Territory governments have agreed to the new terms set out by the Better and Fairer Agreement.

The Western Australian Government struck a new funding agreement with the Commonwealth Government along these lines in January 2024, before the Better and

⁴² Australian Department of Education, *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034*, 2024, p. 18.

⁴³ Australian Department of Education, *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034*, 2024, p. 18.

Fairer Agreement was released. Under the new agreement, Western Australian state school funding increased from 95% to 100% of SRS by 2026. The agreement involves:

- the Commonwealth increasing its share of Schooling Resource Standard funding from 20% in 2024, to 21.5% in 2025 and 22.5% in 2026
- the Western Australian Government will increase its contribution to 77.5% of Schooling Resource Standard funding
- the agreement will result in \$777 million extra Commonwealth funds for Western Australian schools over the next five years.⁴⁴

In responding to this agreement, other state governments have rejected the Western Australian example. According to reports in Nine-Fairfax media, education ministers from Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT have written to Commonwealth Education Minister Jason Clare MP, rejecting a proposed 2.5-percentage point increase. They have called on the Commonwealth government to lift its share to 25%, leaving state contributions at 75%.⁴⁵

The Australian Education Union supports this view.⁴⁶ Representatives from the Union told the Committee:

It is the [Commonwealth] Government that has the much bigger revenue-raising capacity compared to states and territories, it has an obligation to contribute a further 5 per cent at least so that through these negotiations we can realise 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard for public schools.⁴⁷

Amending the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006 (Vic)*

Outside negotiations between the Commonwealth and state or territory governments, stakeholders identified existing areas within the Victorian Government's education spending that could be amended to increase funding to government schools.

Currently, it is a legislated requirement under the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006 (Vic)*, that non-government schools receive from the Victorian Government 25% of the funding provided to government schools.⁴⁸ The Parliamentary Budget Office explained to the Committee how the 25% is applied:

The Victorian Government determines the per-student funding provided to government schools based a 'basket of goods' that captures specific recurrent funding lines, on

44 Minister for Education, Premier of Western Australia and the Western Australian Minister for Education, *Australian and WA Governments agree to fully and fairly fund all Western Australian public schools*, 31 January 2024 <<https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/australian-and-wa-governments-agree-fully-and-fairly-fund-all-western-australian-public>> accessed 2 October 2024.

45 Sherryn Groch and Robyn Grace, 'How one state deal reignited Australia's school funding wars', *The Age*, 31 January 2024, <<https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/australian-and-wa-governments-agree-fully-and-fairly-fund-all-western-australian-public>> accessed 2 October 2024.

46 Groch and Grace, 'How one state deal reignited Australia's school funding wars'

47 Justin Mullaly, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 18.

48 *Education and Training Reform Act 2006 (Vic)*, Section 2.7.4.

which the 25% is applied. These recurrent funding lines relate to teaching, learning and welfare of students in order to capture education costs that are also applicable to non-government schools.⁴⁹

These costs exclude:

- payroll tax and capital expenditure
- Australian Government funding to government schools
- funding for programs or initiatives provided to both government and non-government schools.⁵⁰

Some stakeholders considered that this provision legislated inequality within the Victorian state school funding regime and called for the clause to be repealed. As one stakeholder wrote to the Committee:

This legislated provision entrenches inequality of funding and is anathema to educational equality, all education funding should be directed based on need and a needs-based formula should replace the current legislative requirement. By narrowing the funding gap and providing equitable support to all schools, regardless of their sector, we can foster a more equitable education system that prioritizes the needs and potential of every student.⁵¹

The Australian Education Union noted that ‘as the Victorian Government must spend proportionally more to meet its Schooling Resource Standard requirements for government schools’,⁵² the provision represents ‘an unwarranted bonus for non-government schools and, as such, is inherently inequitable’.⁵³

Box 7.2 provides analysis from the Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office on different scenarios of the cost of closing the SRS gap.

⁴⁹ Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 9.

⁵¹ John Friend-Pereira, *Submission 20*, p. 3.

⁵² Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 30.

⁵³ Australian Education Union, *Submission 220*, p. 30.

Box 7.2 Cost of closing the 5% Schooling Resource Standard gap

The Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office provided modelling to the Committee of the likely cost of closing the SRS gap.

The cost to increase funding by the 5% gap to 100% of Schooling Resource Standard funding differs depending on when that additional funding would be provided.

To illustrate this, the Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office considered 2 scenarios:

- **Scenario 1** – It estimated the cost to phase in the additional 5% of the SRS funding by 2028 — the year government schools are currently scheduled to reach 95% of the SRS.
- **Scenario 2** – It estimated the impact of an additional 5% of the SRS funding in the next school year (2025) and each year after 2025.

Under both scenarios, Victorian government schools would receive 100% of the SRS funding in 2028 and beyond. In preparing these estimates the Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office made no judgement about which government would provide the additional funding.

The Victorian Government's current transition schedule for government schools beyond 2024 is unavailable due to the ongoing negotiations between the Australian and Victorian governments. The Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office assumed that the Victorian Government funding as a share of the SRS would linearly increase to their final share for government schools by 2028 and would remain at this share beyond 2028. This affects:

- **Scenario 1** - matched the phase in of the additional 5% of SRS funding to the transition path to the current target of 95%.
- **Scenario 2** - as it affects the share of the SRS funding achieved in each year from an additional 5% from 2025 onward.

Scenario 1

Under this scenario, the Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office estimated the cost of transitioning to the additional 5% of the SRS funding by 2028. It estimated that government school funding as a share of the SRS would increase from 92.8% to 100.0% between 2025 to 2028 under this scenario.

(Continued)

Box 7.2 Continued

	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033	2034
Current SRS Funding level (%)	91.6	92.7	93.9	95	95	95	95	95	95	95
Scenario 1 SRS Funding level (%)	93	95	98	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Year on year (\$ million)	180	375	589	823	861	901	942	985	1,030	1,078
Cumulative (\$ million)	180	555	1,145	1,967	2,828	3,729	4,671	5,656	6,686	7,764

It estimated this scenario would cost:

- \$1,967 million (\$1.97 billion) from 2025 to 2028
- \$7,764 million (\$7.76 billion) over 10 years from 2025 to 2034.

Scenario 2

Under this scenario, the Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office estimated the cost of an additional 5% of SRS funding in 2025, with this additional funding share maintained beyond 2025. It estimated that government school funding as a share of the SRS funding would increase by 5% in 2025 to 96.6% and would then reach 100.0% in 2028 under this scenario.

	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033	2034
Current SRS Funding level (%)	91.6	92.7	93.9	95	95	95	95	95	95	95
Scenario 2 SRS Funding level (%)	96.6	97.7	99	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Year on year (\$ million)	719	751	786	823	861	901	942	985	1,030	1,078
Cumulative (\$ million)	719	1,470	2,256	3,078	3,939	4,840	5,782	6,767	7,797	8,875

We estimate that this would cost:

- \$3,078 million (\$3.08 billion) from 2025 to 2028
- \$8,875 million (\$8.88 billion) over 10 years from 2025 to 2034.

Source: Parliamentary Budget Office, Question on Notice.

7.2.5 Discretionary allowance in Schooling Resource Standard funding

Stakeholders highlighted provisions within Victoria's current National School Reform Agreement that means schools do not receive the full amount that Victoria pledges to contribute towards SRS funding.

In its bilateral National School Reform Agreement, the Victorian Government may, at its discretion, claim the following expenses out of its agreed proportion of SRS funding:

- Up to 4% of its contributions towards SRS funding for the government school sector to cover the costs of:
 - depreciation of capital assets; and
 - the School Bus Program for rural and regional Victoria.
- All recurrent funding for the government sector for the purpose of:
 - Curriculum and regulation activity, including the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority and Victorian Registration and Qualifications.
 - Authority funding for curriculum and regulation activity including the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority and Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority.
 - Budgeted funding allocated to schools rather than that expended by schools.⁵⁴

In 2022, Victoria claimed \$486.4 million of its total SRS contributions of \$8,411.2 million for expenditure on these non-output items.⁵⁵

Save Our Schools, an advocacy body, calculated that after removing the discretionary allowances, in 2023 the Victorian Government effectively contributed only 65.9% of the SRS funding requirements, not the reported 70.4%.⁵⁶

Stakeholders noted that this clause further underfunded the Victorian state school system, referring to the clause as 'defrauding'⁵⁷, an 'accounting trick'⁵⁸ or a 'loophole'⁵⁹ that needed to be abolished or closed.⁶⁰

Save Our Schools and the Australian Education Union also highlighted that the clause introduced an added inequity between government and non-government schools.⁶¹ While the Department may use the discretionary spending clause to draw from its

⁵⁴ Department of Education (2023) *National Schools Reform Agreement*, Appendix 8: Bilateral Agreement Between Victoria and the Commonwealth on Quality Schools Reforms, p. 10.

⁵⁵ National School Resourcing Board (2023) *Annual review of state and territory compliance with section 22A of the Australian Education Act 2013*, p. 35.

⁵⁶ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Gail McHardy (Parents Victoria), *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 63.

⁵⁹ Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, *Submission 259*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Justin Mullaly (AEU), *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 May 2024, p. 18.

⁶¹ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, pp. 14-15.

Schooling Resource Standard funding commitments to cover specific expenses, there is no equivalent provision for private schools, who receive the full amount of committed Schooling Resource Standard funding.⁶² Save Our Schools concluded:

Private schools get an actual increase in recurrent funding whereas public schools are defrauded by the inclusion of non-school expenditure items in their Schooling Resource Standard.⁶³

Committee comment

There is a concern among stakeholders regarding the clauses in the current National Schools Reform Agreement which give the Department discretion to spend funding intended for student learning outcomes on non-student items.

RECOMMENDATION 49: That the Victorian Government work with the Commonwealth Government to ensure additional funding is allocated to state schools to address non-student items (such as capital depreciation costs) so that the entirety of funding allocated under the National Schools Reform Agreement is spent on student learning outcomes.

7

7.3 Allocating output funding

While the SRS determines how much funding Australian schools require to achieve learning outcomes, each state is free to use its own formulas to determine how those funds are allocated to the individual schools within its jurisdiction.⁶⁴ Accordingly, while the SRS provides uniformity in calculating aggregate amounts, the allocation of actual funds differs in each State and Territory, and across government and non-government school system.

In Victoria, the Department uses a tool known as the Student Resource Package to determine how funds from the Australian and state governments are allocated to individual schools. After detailing methods of fund allocation, this section presents concerns stakeholders raised with the equity, data and transparency of the Student Resource Package. These concerns are discussed in the context of a recent Victorian Auditor-General Office review of the Student Resource Package, which also highlighted data and transparency deficiencies.

⁶² Australian Education Union, *Submission 225*, p. 6. See also: Parents Victoria, *Submission 200*, p. 5.

⁶³ Save Our Schools, *Submission 159*, pp. 14–15; Australian Education Union, *Submission 225*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Department of Education, *Fact sheet: How is Australian Government funding for schools distributed according to need?*, 2024, <<https://www.education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/fact-sheets/how-australian-government-funding-schools-distributed-according-need>> accessed 16 July 2024.

7.3.1 How funds are allocated

As the Better and Fairer Expert Panel noted, the Schooling Resource Standard was designed on ‘principles of subsidiarity and flexibility’,⁶⁵ which assumes that the approved state-level and school-system authorities are best placed to determine the most effective allocation of resources due to their ‘operational responsibilities and proximity to schools’.⁶⁶

The Commonwealth and State or Territory governments transfer aggregate funds to the relevant education departments. These departments then determine how to allocate funding to schools and pass on Commonwealth and State or Territory funds to the relevant approved authorities who determine what funds are to be allocated to the schools within their remit.⁶⁷

In Victoria, for example, Commonwealth and Victorian output funding are forwarded to the Victorian Department of Education, which distributes funds to approved authorities who then allocate the funds to government and non-government schools (see Figure 7.3).⁶⁸

For government schools, the Department is the approved authority, which uses the Student Resource Package to calculate what funds are allocated to individual schools (See Section 7.3.2). For non-government schools, approved authorities are a legal body approved by the Australian Education Minister to receive Australian Government recurrent funding for one or more schools. These authorities include:

- **Approved system authorities**, which are responsible for more than one school that are formally affiliated with a group or system of schools that share common aims, affiliations or educational philosophies. These authorities use their own needs-based method to determine how government funding is allocated to their schools.
- **Independent non-systematic schools**, which are schools that do not belong to a system. The approved legal body, which is generally a limited company trading as a school, must distribute Australian Government funding in according with the school funding formula outlined in the *Australian Education Act 2013* (Cth).⁶⁹

Figure 7.3 shows how the output funding is allocated from the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments to schools.

⁶⁵ Expert Panel, *Improving Outcomes for All*, December 2023, pp. 167–68.

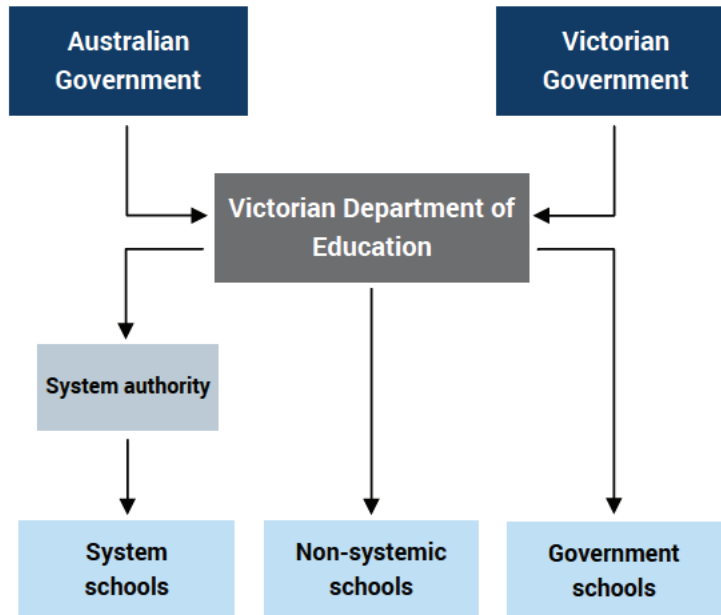
⁶⁶ Expert Panel, *Improving Outcomes for All*, December 2023, pp. 167–68.

⁶⁷ Department of Education, *Fact sheet: How is Australian Government funding for schools distributed according to need?*

⁶⁸ Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 22.

Figure 7.3 Output funding flow for schools



Source: Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 22.

How the Department of Education allocates funds to non-government schools

The Department uses a Financial Assistance Model to determine how funds are allocated to non-government approved system authorities and independent non-systematic schools. Unlike the Student Resource Package, the Department does not use this model to reallocate Australian Government funding to non-government schools. Rather it transfers federal funds for non-government schools directly to independent non-systemic schools and approved authorities.⁷⁰

The Financial Assistance Model consists of two components - core funding and equity funding. Core funding consists of the base funding allocated for each enrolled student, and wealth-adjusted funding that reflects a school's own capacity to contribute to its operating costs through income raised privately. Equity funding is similar to the needs-based loadings applied under the SRS or the Student Resource Package. The funding provided under this model is untied recurrent funding. This means these entities can autonomously determine how they will spend the funding to deliver student education.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 20

⁷¹ Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, pp. 20–21.

7.3.2 The Student Resource Package

The Student Resource Package was introduced in 2005 and reflected the first form of a needs-based school funding model in Australia.⁷²

The amount of funding each school receives is based on how many students are enrolled, the demographics of the students (such as family education and jobs) and the location of the school. This means that funding for each school changes from year to year as enrolments change. In addition, there are a range of other loadings and targeted supports provided.⁷³

How the Student Resource Package is calculated

The Student Resource Package is calculated using a complex formula by which schools are assessed for their eligibility for different funding items. The Department calls these items 'references'. Each reference is used to allocate funds for a particular purpose. Schools must be eligible to receive funding for a reference depending on factors such as their size, location and classification.

The Student Resource Package references are grouped in three broad categories:

- student-based funding, including 'core' and 'equity' funding
- school-based funding
- targeted initiatives.

The *Student Resource Package Guide* listed more than 80 different references for which a school might be eligible to receive funding. Table 7.5 provides a detailed overview of the references.

'Student-based funding represents the main funding source for all schools and comprises approximately 90% of the total Student Resource Package funding provided to schools. This funding is designed to cover core teaching and learning, leadership, teaching support, professional development, relief teaching, payroll tax and superannuation costs for the school'.⁷⁴

⁷² Department of Education and Training, *Greater Returns on Investment in Education: Government Schools Funding Review (Bracks Review)*, 2015, p. 26.

⁷³ Victorian Government, *Find your school's funding*, 2024, <<https://www.vic.gov.au/find-your-schools-funding>> accessed 3 October 2024.

⁷⁴ Department of Education, *School operations: Student Resource Package – Core Student Learning Allocation Funding (Student-Based Funding)* 2024, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/srp-core-student-learning-allocation/policy>> accessed 16 July 2024.

Table 7.5 Funding items used to calculate the Student Resource Package for each school

Funding stream	Type	Funding items/calculations
Student-based funding (core student learning needs and equity requirements)	Core	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student per capita funding Years Prep-12 Students • Enrolment Linked Base • Small School Base • Rural School Size Adjustment Factor • Core Index Stages 1-3 • Size Adjustment Supplementation • Approved Early Education Program • Principal Salary Adjustment • Language and Learning Disabilities Support Program • Mental Health Practitioners • Camps Payment • Autism schools – stages of schooling • Autism schools – dual enrolment linked base • Deaf facility funding
	Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equity (Social Disadvantage) • Equity (Catch Up) • Mobility funding • Programs for students with Disabilities • EAL funding • Disability Inclusion (Tier 2 and Tier 3)
School-based funding	School Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P-12 Complexity Allowance • Location Index funding • MARC/MACC Teachers • Instrumental Music Programs • Language Assistants Program • Bus Coordination • Country Area Program Grant • MARC/MACC Grant • Alternative Settings Teachers • Ancillary Settings Teachers • Alternative programs – regional grants • Joint Community Program • Designated Bilingual Programs • Science and Technology
	School Specific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contract Cleaning • Cross Infection Prevention Allowance • Grounds Allowance • Building Area Allowance • Split-site/Multi-site Allowance • Utilities • Maintenance and Minor Works • Annual Contracts • Workers' Compensation

Funding stream	Type	Funding items/calculations
Specific Programs (programs with specific criteria or defined life spans.)	Targeted Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary Welfare • Late Enrolment and Senior Secondary Re-engagement • Doctors in Secondary Schools – School program lead funding • Respectful Relationships • Career Education Funding • Swimming in School • Head Start • National Student Wellbeing Program • Middle Years Literacy and Numeracy Support Initiative • Student Excellence Program Funding • VCE Revision Lectures • Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Link Schools • Primary Mathematics and Science Specialists Initiative • Transition Funding (Rural) • Jobs, Skills and Pathways Coordination • Tutor Learning Initiative • Mental Health in Primary Schools • Mental Health in Specialist Schools • Career Start – Transforming the First Years of the Teaching Career • Secondary Sciences, Technologies and Mathematics (SSTM) Initiative • Outside School Hours Care Establishment Grant Initiative • Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow Programs • Inclusion Outreach Coaching (IOC) Initiative • School Mental Health Fund • Casual Relief Teacher Travel Fund • Active Schools • Vocational Education and Training Delivered to School Students • NDIS Navigators • Specialist School Activity Boost • Flexible work for school leaders initiative • Hindi and Punjabi beacon schools

Source: Department of Education, *2024 Confirmed Student Resource Package Guide, 2024*, pp. 2–4.

It is important to note while the SRS and Victorian Student Resource Package both use calculations based on 'base' or 'core' funding with added 'equity' loadings, each method is attempting to achieving different outcomes. Therefore, the respective base and loading amounts are different.

For example, in 2024 the SRS base amount for every primary school student in Australia is \$13,570 and for secondary students is \$17,053.⁷⁵ By contrast, the Student Resource Package provides notably lower 'core' rates staggered across year levels (see Table 7.6). These core rates are then supplemented by the references that schools might be entitled to.

Table 7.6 Formula and rates for student per capita funding, Student Resource Package, 2024

Student per capita funding = Student enrolments (P-12) × Student price

Example: A campus with 62 Year 2 students would calculate their funding as 62 (Year 2 students) × Year 2 Student Price.

Student per Capita Years Prep to 12 Students	Credit (\$)	Cash (\$)	Total Student Price (\$)
Prep-Year 1	8,874	546	9,420
Year 2	8,266	510	8,776
Years 3-6 (and Primary Ungraded)	7,609	469	8,078
Years 7-12 Students (and Secondary Ungraded)	10,054	525	10,579

Source: Department of Education, *2024 Confirmed Student Resource Package Guide*, 2024, p. 6.

7.3.3 The Victorian Auditor-General's Office review of the Student Resource Package

In 2020, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office conducted a review of the Student Resource Package, *Management of the Student Resource Package*. The Inquiry asked whether the Department allocated funding through the Student Resource Package 'fairly, consistently and transparently'.⁷⁶

In May 2024, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office issued a *Follow-up* report on the Department's implementation of its recommendations.⁷⁷

Background

The Victorian Auditor-General's 2020 Inquiry followed a 2015 Victorian Government-commissioned review of the Student Resource Package, headed by former Victorian Premier Steve Bracks. The Bracks Review concluded the Student Resource Package was a 'solid mechanism for allocating finite funding based on a needs basis to schools'⁷⁸ but that it lacked a 'clear strategy and coherence and was complex and difficult to understand'.⁷⁹ The Bracks Review also found weaknesses with the Student Resource Package, including the use of outdated information to determine

⁷⁵ Australian Department of Education, *Schooling Resource Standard 2024*, <<https://www.education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/schooling-resource-standard>> accessed 2 October 2024.

⁷⁶ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Management of the Student Resource Package*, 2020, p. 1

⁷⁷ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, May 2024.

⁷⁸ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 20.

⁷⁹ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 20.

funding eligibility.⁸⁰ The Bracks Review recommended improvements to the Student Resource Package to better link it to educational outcomes, including:

- increasing transparency on how school funds are calculated
- consolidating duplicative references or no longer requiring a separate reference
- updating rural boundaries used to calculate rural school equity funding
- correcting the methodology for certain references, such as grounds allowance and utilities.⁸¹

The Victorian Government did not directly respond to Bracks Review but committed to rethinking its approach to school funding as negotiated in the 2019 National School Reform Agreement.⁸² The Victorian Auditor-General's Office deemed it important to follow up the issues identified by the Bracks Review following the National School Reform Agreement signing.

Key themes and findings of the Auditor-General's report

The 2020 review made the following key findings regarding the Student Resource Package:

- out-of-date information is used in some areas, which did not reflect the characteristics of individual students or their schools when the funding was allocated⁸³
- there is a lack of essential documentation that transparently communicates the purpose and rationale for Student Resource Package allocations, how it distributes funds, how it calculates the allocations, and how it should manage the allocation process
- schools did not have visibility over how the Department calculates all Student Resource Package allocations, limiting schools' ability to scrutinise all the Department's calculations or understand the implications of data they submit to the Department.⁸⁴

The Auditor-General made seven recommendations to:

- improve the internal governance and control system of the Student Resource Package
- regularly review against objectives
- regularly review the basis of core student funding

⁸⁰ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 1.

⁸¹ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 19.

⁸² The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 20.

⁸³ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 3.

⁸⁴ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 7.

- regularly review and update all formulae, criteria and other components that inform the Student Resource Package, including out-of-date data
- develop and maintain Student Resource Package operating manual documents
- regularly monitor the controls over the system used to calculate the Student Resource Package
- improve transparency of the Student Resource Package for schools and the community.

The Victorian Government agreed to implement all recommendations.

In 2024, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office reported on the Department's implementation of these recommendations. It found that the Department had satisfactorily implemented five out of seven recommendations. Two recommendations have only been partially completed, with an outstanding action each for recommendation six and seven (see Figure 7.4).

Figure 7.4 The Victorian Auditor-General's Office assessment of Department of Education of compliance with recommendations

The 2 recommendations related to ...	The department has made progress in this area, but has further work to ...
strengthening the data and systems it uses to calculate SRP funding allocations (Recommendation 6).	improve its approach to assuring the quality of data it uses to calculate funding allocations.
making SRP funding allocations more transparent (Recommendation 7).	update its guidance for schools to fully and accurately explain funding allocations.

Source: The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, May 2024, p. 17

Ongoing issues with data and transparency of the Student Resource Package identified by the Victorian Auditor-General in its 2024 follow-up report were also key areas of concern noted by stakeholders making submission to this Inquiry. These concerns are detailed in Sections 7.3.4 and 7.3.5.

7.3.4 Data accuracy in calculating the Student Resource Package

Data accuracy issues with the Student Resource Package have been identified by both the Victorian Auditor-General's Office and stakeholders providing evidence to this Inquiry. These issues concerned:

- strengthening data systems
- data sets used to calculate rural and regional school equity funding
- data sets used to calculate equity funding.

The Victorian Auditor-General's Office assessment of data issues with Student Resource Package

In its 2024 *Follow-up* report, the Auditor-General identified that the Department had not implemented all aspects of Recommendation 6, relating to strengthening and regularly monitoring controls over the systems it uses to calculate the Student Resource Package references. Specifically, the report stated it had 'not seen evidence that its processes for assuring data quality fully comply with the data quality standard'.⁸⁵

The consequences of these risks are that schools may not get the funds they are eligible for or receive funds they are eligible for.⁸⁶

These deficiencies are summarised in Figure 7.5.

Figure 7.5 Victorian Auditor-General's Office assessment of Student Resource Package compliance with data quality standard

The data quality standard requires agencies to ...	But the department cannot show that it ...	This means there is a risk that...
take a structured, risk-based approach to assuring data quality by developing data quality statements for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • critical data assets • data assets to be shared with other departments or external partners • data assets released to the public. 	has followed the data quality standard by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing data quality statements • assessing whether it has critical data assets requiring a data quality management plan. 	the department has not assessed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the risk profile of SRP data assets, and the potential impact on the organisation or the Victorian community if any data assets were severely compromised, degraded, unavailable for an extended period, or destroyed • the sensitivity of SRP data assets and any necessary controls to ensure compliance with relevant legislation and standards. potential users of data assets cannot: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make informed choices about data assets and how they are used (including privacy considerations) • understand the limitations of the data.
assess data assets against specified measures (quality dimensions).	has processes and business rules to help program areas consistently assess data assets against the standard's quality dimensions, aside from the high-level information in the SRP operating manual.	program areas may not consistently: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assess data quality • document their decisions about data quality.

Source: The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, May 2024, p. 17.

⁸⁵ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 15.

⁸⁶ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 5.

Defining rural schools

The Department provides additional loadings to schools to meet the educational needs of those in rural locations through three separate references:

- reference 4: rural school size adjustment factor
- reference 39: location index funding
- reference 45: country areas program grant.

Advocates for rural schools said the classification used to provide mobility and equity funding for regional and rural schools needs revising.⁸⁷

Principals from the North Central cluster of schools (nine schools in norther Victoria) told the Committee:

The current regional classifications need to be reviewed to ensure equitable distribution of resources. Bendigo, Geelong, and Ballarat schools are still categorised as rural despite improved access and significantly better resources. Transport and teacher resourcing for professional development and student excursions have significantly higher financial cost to rural schools in comparison to these ‘regional cities’ that have libraries, museums, science & technology centres, TAFEs & universities within close proximity. There is a need for a clearer distinction in these classifications to ensure an equitable distribution of funding.⁸⁸

The Committee notes that these issues were dealt with in detail by the Auditor-General in the 2020 and 2024 review of the Student Resource Package.

In its 2020 report, the Auditor-General’s Office found that six of the Student Resource Package’s references used data to calculate school location more than 20 years old. It was noted in 2024 *Follow-up* report that in 2021 the Department had updated its database used to calculate rural and regional school indexing with 2016 census data. The Auditor-General outlined in the 2024 *Follow-up report* that this meant the Department is still using ‘data that is up to eight years old to calculate school eligibility for rural and regional references in the 2024 year.’⁸⁹

The Committee does note that the Department is working to rectify these deficiencies. In the 2024 edition of the *Student Resource Package Guidelines*, the Department states that in calculating the rural school size adjustment factor (reference 52):

It is intended that location measures will be updated with the release of new ABS data every 5 years. The last ABS data survey was completed in August 2021. The result of this will be applied in the future releases post-2024. Funding for school year 2024 is based on ARIA 2016.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ The Great South Coast Youth Strategic Advocacy Group, *Submission 264*, p. 8; North Central LLEN, *Submission 176*, p. 6.

⁸⁸ North Central LLEN, *Submission 176*, p. 7.

⁸⁹ The Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 12.

⁹⁰ Department of Education, *2024 Revised Student Resource Package Guide*, 2024, p. 13.

FINDING 24: The Department of Education has begun the process of updating the data used to calculate equity funding for rural and regional schools.

English as an Additional Language index funding

Equity funding for English as an Additional Language (EAL) students is provided under Reference 26 of the Student Resource Package.

EAL index funding is made available to schools to staff EAL programs with EAL teachers and Multicultural Education Aides. Funding is based on data collected from mainstream schools in the preceding August school census.⁹¹

Presently, students must meet the follow criteria to be considered eligible for EAL index funding:

- come from a language background other than English
- speak a language other than English at home as their main language
- have been enrolled in an Australian school for less than 5 years.

EAL funding is based on a weighted index for primary and secondary students as follows:

1. Level 1, Foundation
2. Level 2, 2 to 5 years in an Australian school, Years 1–6
3. Level 3, less than 2 years in an Australian school, Years 1–6
4. Level 4, 2 to 5 years in an Australian school, Years 7–12
5. Level 5, less than 2 years in an Australian school, Years 7–12.

A school or campus is required to reach a threshold of EAL funding before EAL Index funding will apply. A school's EAL allocation includes a weighting based on the school's densities of student family occupations. According to the 2024 *Student Resource Package Guide*, the family occupations weighting 'reflects the high correlation between student outcomes and family occupation to target funding to schools with EAL learners who have the greatest need'.⁹²

Schools that experience a significant increase in their EAL student profile during the school year which takes them beyond that threshold are also eligible for EAL contingency funding.

⁹¹ Department of Education, *School operations: Student Resource Package – Equity Funding (Student-Based Funding 2024*, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/student-resource-package-srp-equity-funding-student-based-funding/guidance/9-eal-program>> accessed 16 July 2024.

⁹² Department of Education, *Student Resource Package Guide*, p. 61.

Foundation House and the Centre for Multicultural Youth, advocacy groups for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, highlighted issues with the indexing of EAL funding under the Student Resource Package. Their concerns included:

- Schools are funded to support students with EAL assistance for their first 5 years in Australia. However, research indicates that students from refugee backgrounds who have experienced disrupted schooling take 7–12 years to acquire academic language proficiency.⁹³
- Some schools may have small numbers of EAL students, particularly in rural/regional areas, and not meet the threshold of EAL learners to be entitled to funding. It is challenging for such schools to provide necessary language support for their students with limited resources.⁹⁴
- The use of EAL Index funding is at the discretion of principals in Victorian schools, with advice from the Department. This allows for the possible diversion of EAL funding without any responsibility to demonstrate how it is benefitting EAL learners.⁹⁵

Committee comment

The Centre for Multicultural Youth recommended that some of these issues would be addressed if ABS national standards were reflected in the Student Resource Package data used to classify EAL learners. According to the Centre for Multicultural Youth, using ABS data would ‘better capture EAL learners who may not be receiving appropriate loading because of how refugee-like background and disadvantage indicators are currently captured’.⁹⁶

FINDING 25: English as an Additional Language reference funding may not be reaching every student requiring support due to the methods used to allocate the funding.

RECOMMENDATION 50: That the Victorian Government review English as an Additional Language reference funding with a view to ensuring that every student requiring support is reached.

7.3.5 Transparency

Both the Auditor-General’s review and stakeholders providing evidence to this Inquiry reported issues with the transparency of the Student Resource Package.

⁹³ Foundation House, *Submission 65*, p. 10.

⁹⁴ Foundation House, *Submission 65*, p. 10.

⁹⁵ Foundation House, *Submission 65*, p. 10.

⁹⁶ Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Submission 196*, p. 3.

Recommendation 7 from the 2020 Auditor-General review required the Department to improve the transparency of the Student Resource Package by:

- clarifying the funding sources allocated through the Student Resource Package and funding that is excluded,
- updating the Student Resource Package guide to ensure it fully and accurately explains each reference, and how it is calculated,
- providing schools with visibility over the references they are eligible and ineligible for and making available data about their school that drives the Student Resource Package.⁹⁷

In its 2024 *Follow-up* report, the Auditor-General found the Department had responded and made it easier for schools to confirm they get the funding they are eligible for and understand how the department uses the data they submit. It has done this by:⁹⁸

- transferring its guidance about Student Resource Package references to its Policy and Advisory Library in 2020, which makes it easier for schools to access the information
- adding new references for funding provided through the Student Resource Package
- sharing the data it uses to calculate Student Resource Package allocations with schools. It improved the data it shares with schools in October 2021.⁹⁹

However, the 2024 *Follow-up* report also found continuing gaps in the transparency of information regarding how the Student Resource Package is calculated.¹⁰⁰ These deficiencies are reflected in Figure 7.6.

Figure 7.6 The Victorian Auditor-General's Office assessment of Department's compliance with Recommendation 7

In 2020 we found ...	Did not ...	The department has since updated ...
7 references	clearly explain the funding's purpose	5 of these references.
20 references	have a numeric formula or sufficiently explain the calculation method	15 of these references.
14 references	have transparent eligibility criteria	4 of these references.

Source: The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, May 2024, p. 18.

The Auditor-General reported in the 2024 *Follow Up* report:

The Department told us it will review the remaining references in 2024, 2025 or 2026. But this means schools will not get the information they need to confirm they are eligible or have received the right amount of funding for some references until 2026.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 8.

⁹⁸ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 18.

⁹⁹ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Follow-up of Management of the Student Resource Package*, p. 18.

Stakeholders providing evidence to this Inquiry expressed concern with the transparency and availability of information that reflected the findings of the inquiries into the Student Resource Package.¹⁰²

As one principal informed the Committee:

The Student Resource Package is overly complicated and does not provide a clear picture of how the funding is broken down.¹⁰³

The Australian Principals Federation (Victorian Branch) informed the Committee it had been advised:

The Department has undertaken work relating to a review of the Student Resource Package, however to date, we are yet to see or be informed of the results of this work.¹⁰⁴

The Better and Fairer Expert Panel, reviewing the education system nationwide, found similar frustrations were experienced by school communities across Australia, not just in Victoria:

A wide range of stakeholders... identified that it can be hard to determine how closely approved system authorities' funding models align with the principles of needs-based funding. Currently, public reporting via the MySchool website shows the total funding provided to each school, with no breakdown of the allocation according to the different loadings. Some jurisdictions require additional reporting of this information, but it is inconsistent and not centrally reported. As the Panel heard during school visits, many administrators of individual schools – across multiple sectors – are also unclear about the extent to which Commonwealth funds have been reallocated. This opacity may lead to reduced community confidence in the funding system.¹⁰⁵

As the Faculty of Melbourne told the Expert Panel:

The nature of school funding in the Australian federation means that while the Schooling Resource Standard provides a consistent measure for determining Commonwealth funding for schools, the diversity of models subsequently used by Approved Authorities to calculate and determine funding to schools results in no clear line of sight to understand how Commonwealth money flows to most schools ... we endorse the need for new initiatives, which at a minimum should include the need to make easily accessible to the public the models used to distribute funds to schools. We see potential in establishing an accessible public website where such information can be housed and where existing models can be compared.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Charles Spicer, *Submission 151*, p. 2; Australian Principals Federation (Victorian Branch), *Submission 266*, p. 4; Parents Victoria, *Submission 200*, p. 5.

¹⁰³ Charles Spicer, *Submission 151*, p. 2

¹⁰⁴ Australian Principals Federation (Victorian Branch), *Submission 266*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Expert Panel, *Improving Outcomes for All*, 2023, p. 168.

¹⁰⁶ Expert Panel, *Improving Outcomes for All*, 2023, p. 168.

The Expert Panel made numerous recommendations how transparency could be improved at a national level:

- an expanded role for the National School Resourcing Board (NSRB) in reviewing the methodologies underpinning needs-based funding models and advising education departments and approved system authorities on the extent to which they align with the principles of needs-based funding
- publish the funding models on each of the approved system authorities' websites. Alternatively, they could be published on the Australian Government Department of Education website or the MySchool website, to promote the ideal of national consistency
- making all school budgets publicly and easily available, regular financial reporting, audits, and establishing the means to follow money as it flows through the various levels of government and approved system authorities to schools.

7.3.6 Other criticisms of the Student Resource Package calculation method

Stakeholders presenting evidence to this Inquiry noted several inequities with how the Student Resource Package is calculated.

Providing funding for indexed schools, not students

Due to differences between the methods used to determine funding under the Schooling Resource Standard, and those to allocate funding under the Student Resource Package, stakeholders noted considerable disparities in projections of how much schools should receive to support student learning outcomes, and the actual funding allocated to Victorian state schools. (The Committee appreciates that as all jurisdictions use funding allocation models that differ to the Schooling Resource Standard, this situation is the same in all states, not just Victoria.)

Several stakeholders raised concerns with perceived inequities with how the Student Resource Package is calculated. A major concern is that the socio-economic status of a student's parents and the location of a school are used to weight the funding provided to schools. Accordingly, as one stakeholder put it, the Department funds a 'school index' rather than individual student needs. From this perspective, such arrangements might be seen as a perversion of the Gonski model for student need-based funding.¹⁰⁷

In presenting a detailed analysis of such disparities in the Geelong-Colac-Bellarine region, Michael Rhook, an accountant and consultant, and member of the Barwon Heads Primary School Council, concluded:

The result of the index method is that a poor student in a deemed wealthy area will get no extra funding, whereas a wealthy student in a poor area will get a lot more funding.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Rhook, *Submission 61*, p. 1.

This is an unintended consequence of an expedient system used to allocate funds rather than identifying what should be funded.¹⁰⁸

Mr Rhook contrasted the funding outcomes of primary schools in Colac and Barwon Heads, both which have similar numbers of students in the lower two quarterlies but indexed by the Student Resource Package as having different socio-economic status:

We know that Colac only has 34 extra students in need of Gonski adjustments compared to BHPS [Barwon Heads Primary School]ff and yet it gets an extra \$5,000 for every student in the school. To put it another way. BHPS has only 34 students less than Colac Primary who deserve extra Gonski funding and yet it gets \$5,000 less for every student in the school. Colac may well deserve the extra funding. But BHPS surely does not deserve the penalty.¹⁰⁹

In Mr Rhook's summation, the Department 'is using a method that removes funding from schools, rather than providing a base level of funding plus extra funding for the students that Gonski and NAPLAN correctly identifies'.¹¹⁰

Other stakeholders made similar observations. A parent suggested that the equity adjustments focused on parent qualification and incomes rather than student learning needs. They contended this downplays the benefits of a school community with families from diverse backgrounds or with some parents who chose government schools for reasons other than financial motivation, such as social beliefs and ideals.¹¹¹

While appreciating the logic of these critiques, the Committee acknowledges that both the Schooling Resource Standard and Student Resource Package are funding calculations based on averages. It also acknowledges the goals of the Student Resource Package to address the clear link between lower socioeconomic status and learning outcomes, outlined in Section 3.2.2 of this Report.

Disparities between Schooling Resource Standard and Student Resource Package funding is also noticed by parents of children with disabilities. Ameilia Matlock, Vice-Chair, Code Read Dyslexia Network, told the Committee:

Something that we as parents hear a lot – 'Your child's not funded. We can't provide support' – and I think there is a disconnect between what is happening at a federal level and what is happening at a state level. The kids are included in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data, which generates a funding bucket, an activity, from the federal government to come down. Now, what happens in the Catholic or the private system is generally the funding will follow the child. So the child is identified as a tag and gets the funding, and that funding will go to wherever the child is. In the state system what happens is the funding goes into a bucket, and it is a big bucket and it gets

¹⁰⁸ Michael Rhook, *Submission 61*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Rhook, *Submission 61*, p. 14.

¹¹⁰ Michael Rhook, *Submission 61*, p. 12.

¹¹¹ Name Withheld, *Submission 166*, p. 2.

washed around and then it gets disbursed. But it is not being disbursed to the schools at the level at which they are putting in.¹¹²

The Committee's notes these issues may be addressed with greater transparency over the Student Resource Package system, discussed above in Sections 7.3.4 and 7.3.5.

School census date

Some stakeholders were also concerned with the inflexible census dates used to calculate Student Resource Package funding.

Schools must submit a Student Enrolment Census twice each year:

- on the last school day in February, and
- on the first Friday in August.

According to the Department's website:

Student enrolment data reported in the February student enrolment census are used to calculate the SRP for each school for that year. Student Family Occupation (SFO) and Student Family Education (SFE) data reported in the August student enrolment census is used to calculate the Equity Funding (Social Disadvantage) for the following year.¹¹³

Stakeholders said this single date does not account for student movement throughout the school year. The effect upon smaller schools can be especially detrimental. For example, in 2023 Wangaratta Primary School acquired an additional 16 students after the census date, equivalent to nearly an entire class. The school was required to find additional money for these students as well as stationary and other costs.¹¹⁴

Launch Housing similarly noted that the single date census day penalised schools that enrolled vulnerable students, such as homeless children, after the census date. Launch Housing recommended the availability of year-round funding to 'ensure schools do not miss out on critical funds to support vulnerable young students.'¹¹⁵

Committee comment

Regarding allocating output funding, the Committee received evidence noting several major concerns with the tools that the Department uses to calculate what funding each state school receives in Victoria. These are:

- accuracy of data in calculating the Student Resource Package allocations
- transparency of how the Department makes Student Resource Package calculations

¹¹² Amelia Matlock, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 June 2024, p. 20

¹¹³ Department of Education, *Student Enrolment Census*, 2024, <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/student-enrolment-census/policy>> accessed 2 October 2024.

¹¹⁴ Name Withheld, *Submission 166*, p. 1.

¹¹⁵ Launch Housing, *Submission 173*, p. 10.

- equity of the Student Resource Package as a tool to determine what funding schools receive
- the efficacy of the census date for the Student Resource Package.

Regarding equity and census date concerns, the Committee makes no conclusive findings.

Regarding the accuracy of data and transparency of the Student Resource Package, the Committee finds that the Department should implement in full the recommendations made in the Auditor-General's 2020 report *Management the Student Resource Package*.¹¹⁶

Regarding transparency, the Committee also finds the Department could make other improvements to public understanding of how Student Resource Package allocations operate. The Committee finds that at a minimum, the Department should provide an explicit accounting of how annual funding for individual schools has been calculated. This should include a detailed breakdown of what references a school has received funding for and detailing the calculations of how that reference has been applied.

If a school has been found not eligible for a reference, this should also be stated.

Based on anecdotal evidence provided to this Committee, on the finding of the Better and Fairer national review and on policy material publicly available on the Department's website, the Committee finds that no such advice is currently provided to principals.

The Committee notes the important work the Department has undertaken in updating the Student Resource Package Guide to provide more transparent information on how the Student Resource Package is calculated. This now include detailed example calculations.

However, the Committee finds that school principals should not have to use the Student Resource Package Guide to recalculate themselves how funding has been calculated and allocated. Such tasks create added and time-consuming burdens on principals that detract from their school and learning leadership responsibilities. Given the workplace pressures on principals discussed in Chapter 5, the Committee finds that that the Department can provide urgent assistance to principals by giving great clarity on precisely how their school has been funded.

Improved transparency practices will also help address the criticisms of the Student Resource Package made in Section 7.3.3, especially whether equity funding reaches or 'follows' students in needs.

¹¹⁶ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Management of the Student Resource Package*, pp. 7–8.

The Committee finds that transparency will in turn enable principals to provide more transparent accounts to school communities of how funding allocations are meeting the needs of students.

RECOMMENDATION 51: That the Department of Education implement in full Recommendation 6 of the Victorian Auditor-General's Office's 2020 report, *Management of the Student Resource Package*.

RECOMMENDATION 52: That the Department of Education implement Recommendation 7 of the Victorian Auditor-General's Office's 2020 report, *Management of the Student Resource Package*.

RECOMMENDATION 53: That the Department of Education publish a detailed accounting breakdown of how the Student Resource Package is used to calculate each government school's annual budget, including the eligibility, application and calculation of each Student Resource Package reference.

RECOMMENDATION 54: That the Victorian Government continue to advocate to the Commonwealth Government that the Commonwealth fund the remaining 5% gap in Schooling Resource Standard funding to bridge the gap with non-government schools that have been fully funded.

7.4 Capital funding

Governments provide capital funding and related grants to schools to construct new buildings and upgrade existing facilities. Capital funding is not counted towards Schooling Resource Standard contributions or Student Resource Package allocations but provide a separate stream of funding.

Almost all capital investment funding in Victorian state schools has been provided by the Victorian Government since 2017, when National School Agreements began coming into place. The Commonwealth has provided little funding to Victorian state schools in that time.

According to the Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, in 2021 the Victorian Government spent \$2.1 billion on state schools and the Commonwealth nothing. By contrast, the Victorian Government spent \$89.9 million and the Commonwealth \$46.7 million on Victorian non-government schools.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 5.

Victorian Government capital investments

The Department informed the Committee that over the past decade, \$16.9 billion has been invested in school infrastructure, either building new schools or delivering school upgrades and maintenance.¹¹⁸

These investments have included:

- Building and opening schools since 2018, for a net increase of 32 new schools. The building of new schools reflects increasing enrolments and changing demographics in Victoria. The Department says this increase accounts for almost 50 per cent of all new schools opening nationally.¹¹⁹
- Over 1,100 schools funded for school upgrade projects over the past nine years. This includes more than 700 schools that have received upgrades through the **Capital Works Program**, which provides upgrades to address school condition or capacity requirements.¹²⁰
- School upgrades delivered through the following specialised programs:
 - **Inclusive Schools Fund**, providing grants to 385 schools to promote inclusion and student social needs through projects such as outdoor sensory gardens and learning areas, or specialist play and recreation equipment
 - **Accessible Buildings Program**, making grants to more than 800 schools to make adjustments for students and staff with disability
 - **Minor Capital Works Fund**, making grants to more than 480 schools to support small-scale priority building upgrades such as toilet replacements and fixing roofs.

Additionally, school maintenance is also provided by the Department through the Victorian School Building Authority, which makes onsite condition assessments for every school every five years. School maintenance comprises both capital and output funding.¹²¹

The Committee has included this information to explain some of the key feature of capital funding in Victorian government schools. The Committee is aware that some schools find these processes problematic and do not always result in beneficial outcomes. Some of these issues are reflected in Box 7.3. However, the Committee did not receive sufficient evidence to conclusively comment or make findings on the capital funding process for state schools in Victoria.

¹¹⁸ Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 76.

¹¹⁹ Department of Education, *Submission 223*, p. 14; Jenny Atta, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 May 2024, p. 80.

¹²⁰ For more on how the Victorian Schooling Building Authority determines funding, see, Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 25

¹²¹ For more on how the Victorian government allocates capital funding to state schools, see Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 25

Box 7.3 The need for greater capital funding

Schools, parents and school councils provided the Committee with examples of difficulties accessing capital funding to address urgent works at their schools:

A significant amount of our play equipment was inspected and deemed unsafe and removed. Parents club and school community are in the process of trying to raise \$30,000 to build a replacement-type playground for our children. Why should we have to fund a playground at a publicly funded Victorian state school, after the department condemned the facilities that were already there that they would have had to approve? A modest school of five classrooms, four use for classes and the fifth as a library/storage. Once again, the onus is being put onto the school, teachers and families to fix issues that they shouldn't have to. Our education department should have contingency plans in place for these specific circumstances if health and safety requirements for playgrounds have adapted or changed.'

Danielle Newburry, *Submission 27*, p. 1.

Funding for essential maintenance continues to be a process of "putting out fires", where repairs are typically only funded once they have become quite extreme. In my terms as Council President I have seen two schools repeatedly refused funding for leaking roofs until the subsequent damage has become extensive. If a roof that does not keep out the weather does not deserve maintenance it's hard to understand what does! The result of these funding inadequacies is that school cash budgets must be directed toward noneducational expenses. This directly impacts student learning outcomes and wellbeing. In our school we have had those discussions in our finance meetings - shall we employ more wellbeing staff and contribute to going into budget deficit or shall we direct that money to maintenance etc?

Bright P-12 College, *Submission 265*, p. 2.

Brighton Primary School has not received capital funding since 2016, and as an ageing school, is in desperate need of a capital investment - not just VSBA patch up funding through the Rolling Facilities Evaluation program. The school has made a large investment and commitment to improving teacher competency and capabilities with professional development in literacy and numeracy, yet the staff has to teach in poor conditions that are not conducive to best practice and stimulating learning. Teachers at Brighton Primary School, as in all government schools, deserve to work in an environment that supports their professional efforts. Inadequate facilities create additional challenges for educators, impacting their ability to deliver the curriculum effectively and provide students with the best possible education. The dedication of teachers should not be overshadowed by the shortcomings of their workplace.

Brighton Primary School Council, *Submission 119*, p. 1.

(Continued)

Box 7.3 Continued

Brighton Primary School Council also noted the possible political skewing of capital funding:

Unfairly, many schools surrounding Brighton have received capital funding, yet Brighton Primary, sitting in a Liberal electorate, is repeatedly overlooked... We know that Labor refuses to meaningfully invest in schools outside of Labor electorates. We know that the recent state budget directed 93 per cent of school funding into Labor electorates, despite Labor holding just over 60 per cent of electorates in the chamber. Despite the coalition holding a third of the seats, those electorates – our electorates – only received 6 per cent of school capital funding. Nineteen out of 20 school investments were in Labor seats. Sadly, the trend on funding being misappropriated has been long standing. In the last budget, 85 per cent of new metro school constructions occurred in Labor seats, 82 per cent of school upgrades were in Labor electorates and 82 per cent of metro school upgrades were in Labor electorates.

Brighton Primary School Council, *Submission 119*, p. 2.

Commonwealth Government capital investments

Prior to 2017, the Australian Government provided funding to government schools for capital projects as part of its grants to state and territory governments. Between 2017 and 2023, the Australian Government stopped providing capital funding to government schools, instead directing all its funding for government schools as recurrent funding under the Schooling Resource Standard.

In the 2023–24 federal budget, the Australian Government announced it would now provide funding to government schools to enable capital investments in new classrooms, buildings, or other refurbishments and upgrades via the Schools Upgrade Fund.¹²²

In the Australian Budget 2023–24, the Australian Government allocated \$59.9 million over two years to Victorian schools under the Schools Upgrade Fund, comprising:¹²³

- \$11.7 million in Round 1 – which is open to both government and non-government schools and provides funding for small-scale improvements such as upgrading ventilation systems, building outdoor learning spaces, and upgrading computer equipment.
- \$48.2 million in Round 2 – which is limited to government schools only and provides funding for new classrooms, buildings, or other major refurbishments and upgrades.

¹²² Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office, *Submission 192*, p. 24.

¹²³ Question on Notice, Xavier Rimmer, received 22 May 2024, pp. 1–2.

**Adopted by the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament of Victoria, East Melbourne
24 September 2024**

7

Appendix A

About the Inquiry

A.1 Submissions

1	Mr Paul Murray	31	Terence Mills
2	Mr Brad Topp-Lowe	32	Mr John Kermond
3	Ms Scarlett Nguyen	33	Mrs Sara Dower
4	Ms Katherine Stiffe	34	Name withheld
5	Miss Ngoc	35	Name withheld
6	Mr Ahmed	36	Confidential
7	Miss Lola	37	Name withheld
8	Miss Ariella	38	Name withheld
9	Miss Kyah	39	Name withheld
10	Ella	40	Ms Julie Urban
11	Hope	41	Mr Joshua Shrive
12	Mr Aly	42	Name withheld
13	Confidential	43	Mrs Katherine Neall
14	Confidential	44	Ms Christine Lenghaus
15	Miss Matilda	45	Mr Kieran Kenneth
16	Mr Charley	46	Mrs Cindy Growcott
17	Miss Sheranpreet	47	Mrs Brigitte Riscica
18	Mrs Colleen Clifford	48	Name withheld
19	Name withheld	49	Name withheld
20	Mr John Friend-Pereira	50	Mr Theo Tsourdalakis
21	Dr Morena Vallese	51	Mrs Dorothy Long
22	Name withheld	52	Name withheld
23	Asheriya	53	Name withheld
24	Mrs Sarah Moffat	54	Name withheld
25	Mr Iain Wallace	55	Name withheld
26	Name withheld	56	Mr Ryan Murphy
27	Mrs Danielle Newberry	57	Mrs Katja Murray
28	Confidential	58	Australian Christian Lobby
29	Name withheld	59	Mrs Margaret Chambers
30	Name withheld	60	Ms Tori Powell

61	Mr Michael Rhook	98	Name withheld
62	Name withheld	99	Name withheld
63	Mr Tony Shaw	100	Name withheld
64	Keith & Noella Ridley	101	Name withheld
65	Foundation House (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture)	102	Name withheld
66	Dr Katrina Haller	103	Name withheld
67	Jenny Houlihan	104	Mrs Tracy Turner
68	Gwen Simmons	105	Name withheld
69	Name withheld	106	Ahmed El
70	Ms Kylie Murphy	107	Mr Ezekiel Chalmers
71	Mr William Porter	108	Name withheld
72	Ms Jacqui Kiss	109	Miss Tamika Beggs
73	Name withheld	110	Name withheld
74	Confidential	111	Name withheld
75	Mr Greg Barnes	112	Name withheld
76	Confidential	113	Name withheld
77	Dyslexia Victoria Support	114	Jo Rogers
78	Name withheld	115	Name withheld
79	Mr Richard Speedy	116	Name withheld
80	Mrs Kerri Anselmi	117	Name withheld
81	Name withheld	118	Miss Jennifer Vickery
82	Name withheld	119	Brighton Primary School Council
83	Name withheld	120	Ms Catherine Civelle
84	Name withheld	121	Name withheld
85	Mr Leo Darveniza	122	Mrs Mia Fenton
86	Mr David Newman	123	Dr Esme Capp
87	Ms Natalie Coleman	124	Name withheld
88	Parents of Adolescents with Gender Distress	125	Name withheld
89	Ms Melanie Whyte	126	Odyssey House Victoria
90	Miss Rachel Gramm	127	Kylie Johnson
91	Name withheld	128	Meaghan Capell
92	Mrs Ainsley Stanley	129	Mr Joseph Sirianni
93	Name withheld	130	Name withheld
94	Name withheld	131	Mr John Fisher
95	Name withheld	132	Julie Phillips
96	Name withheld	133	John Quay
97	Name withheld	134	Ms Jo Lomasney
		135	Name withheld

136	La Trobe University	172	The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)
137	Name withheld	173	Launch Housing
138	Name withheld	174	Learning Difficulties Australia
139	Mr Antony O'Brien	175	Dr Sophie Rudolph and Tim Delany
140	High Schools Activate	176	North Central LLEN
141	Confidential	177	Mr Leigh Barrett
142	Speech Pathology Australia	178	Disability Advocacy Victoria
143	Victorian Principals Association and Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals	179	Northcote High School Australian Education Union
144	Voices for Special Needs	180	Ms Elizabeth Howes
145	Amaze	181	Social Education Victoria
146	Youth Affairs Council Victoria	182	Jarrold and Narelle Risson
147	Dr James Thyer	183	Mrs Natalie Mitchell
148	Mr Timothy Mahar	184	Sunsmart - Cancer Council Victoria
149	Country Education Partnership	185	Disability Discrimination Legal Service
150	Heather Hogan	186	Orygen
151	Mr Charles Spicer	187	Mr Rodney O'Connell
152	Confidential	188	Name withheld
153	Mr Darren Zhang	189	Association for Children with Disability
154	Name withheld	190	Colman Education Foundation
155	Name withheld	191	Name withheld
156	Australian Jewish Association	192	Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office
157	Code REaD Dyslexia Network	193	Grattan Institute
158	Stop Gender Education	194	Berry Street
159	Save Our Schools Australia	195	Mrs Nicola Rowling
160	Name withheld	196	Centre for Multicultural Youth
161	LGB Alliance Australia	197	Teach For Australia
162	Name withheld	198	Victorian Student Representative Council
163	Name withheld	199	Anglicare Victoria
164	Ms Elizabeth Reed	200	Parents Victoria
165	Mr Dal Oldaker	201	Mrs Marnie Kerridge
166	Name withheld	202	Brotherhood of St Laurence
167	Mr Craig Thomson	203	Dr Emma Rowe
168	Marian Kowarzik	204	Wodonga Middle Years College
169	Communication Rights Australia	205	Mr Daniel Jordan
170	Dr Greg Ashman	206	Mary Featherson Design
171	Women's Rights Network Australia		

207	The Centre for the Excellence in Child & Family Welfare	244	Confidential
208	Victorian College for the Deaf	245	Name withheld
209	Square Peg Round Whole Victoria	246	Ms Apsara Sabaratnam
210	4 Day Week Australia	247	Name withheld
211	Centre for Adolescent Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute	248	Ms Lisa Petrie
212	Mrs Hannah Lewis	249	Name withheld
213	Name withheld	250	Ms Michelle Tyrrell
214	Ms Amanda Kent	251	ARC Discovery Project 'Invisible Labour'
215	Institute of Special Educators	252	Ms Stephanie Ashley
216	Name withheld	253	The Alannah and Madeline Foundation
217	Confidential	254	Principals' Association of Specialist Schools, Victoria
218	Tomorrow Today	255	Name withheld
219	VietSpeak	256	Confidential
220	Australian Education Union	257	Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation
221	Name withheld	258	Miss Celeste Benoit
222	Our Watch	259	The Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne
223	Department of Education	260	Name withheld
224	Name withheld	261	Ms Emily Wrigglesworth
225	The Centre for Independent Studies	262	Name withheld
226	Name withheld	263	Mr Michael Uren
227	Mr Brian White	264	The Great South Coast Youth Strategic Advocacy Group
228	Name withheld	265	Bright P12 College
229	Name withheld	266	Australian Principals Federation (Victorian Branch)
230	Name withheld	267	Mr Rohan Davis
231	Name withheld	268	Active Watchful Waiting Incorporated
232	Ms Hannah Bowen-McCosker	269	Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), Murdoch Children's Research Institute
233	Confidential	270	Beyond the Bell
234	Confidential	271	Mr Matthew Kell
235	Name withheld	272	Commission for Children and Young People
236	Name withheld	273	Commission for Children and Young People's Youth Council
237	Victorian Council of Social Service	274	Rainbow Families (Switchboard Victoria)
238	Name withheld		
239	Mr Adam Nicoll		
240	Maroondah City Council		
241	Mrs Taylah Ling		
242	Professor David Gurr		
243	Mr Jeremy Simms		

A.2 Public hearings

12 June 2024

55 St Andrews Place, East Melbourne, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Karen Dimmock	Chief Executive Officer, Association for Children with Disability
Julie Phillips	Chief Executive Officer, Disability Discrimination Legal Service
Amelia Matlock	Vice Chairperson, Code REaD Dyslexia Network
Heidi Gregory	Founder, Dyslexia Victoria Support
Nicole Antonopoulos	Policy Consultant, Amaze
Jo Briskey	National Political Coordinator, United Workers Union
Julie Hooper	School Cleaner, United Workers Union
Mick Lynch	School Cleaner, United Workers Union
Tina King	Victorian Branch President, Australian Principals Federation (Victorian Branch)
Colin Axup	President, Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals
Jordana Hunter	Program Director, Education, Grattan Institute
Gail McHardy	Chief Executive Officer, Parents Victoria
Andrew Campbell	Council Member, Brighton Primary School Council
Greg Ashman	-
Jasmine Yuen	State Director, Victoria, Australian Christian Lobby

9 May 2024

55 St Andrews Place, East Melbourne, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
William Naughton-Gravette	Policy & Advocacy Manager, Victorian Student Representative Council
Professor Larissa McLean Davies	Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Education, The Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne
Associate Professor Lisa McKay-Brown	Associate Dean Diversity and Inclusion, Faculty of Education, The Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne
David Baker	Manager of Policy, Orygen
Desiree Smith	Clinical Educator, Orygen
Lucy Demant	Policy and Advocacy Manager, Youth Affairs Council Victoria
Leo Fieldgrass	Teach For Australia
Soo-Lin Quek	Executive Manager of Policy, Sector & Business Development, Centre for Multicultural Youth
Richard Filer	Team Leader of Education, Centre for Multicultural Youth

Witness	Position and Organisation
Darren Zhang	-
Trisha Jha	The Centre for Independent Studies
Moira Chalk	Parents of Adolescents with Gender Distress
Jenny Atta PSM	Secretary, Department of Education
David Howes PSM	Deputy Secretary, Schools and Regional Services, Department of Education
Sharon Barry	Acting Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support, Department of Education
Andrea Del Monaco	Deputy Secretary, Schools Workforce, Department of Education
Tony Bates PSM	Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services, Department of Education
Keiran O'Neill	-
Ivy Sheng	Victorian Student Representative Council
Risith Jayasekara	Victorian Student Representative Council
Radha Katyare	Victorian Student Representative Council

8 May 2024

55 St Andrews Place, East Melbourne, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Dr James Thyer	-
Justin Mullaly	Deputy President, Australian Education Union
Meredith Peace	President, Australian Education Union
Xavier Rimmer	Parliamentary Budget Officer, Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office
Genevieve Sheppard	Senior Policy Advisor of Respectful Relationships Education, Our Watch
Ms Catherine Civelle	-
Davina Forth	Executive Officer, Beyond the Bell
Professor Joanna Barbousas	Dean of the School of Education, La Trobe University
Dr Stefan Gruenert	Chief Executive Officer, Odyssey House Victoria
Professor Susan Sawyer	Director, Centre for Adolescent Health
Dr Jennifer Dam	Senior Project Coordinator of Education Initiatives, Centre for Adolescent Health
Kira Clarke	Principal Research Fellow of the Social Policy and Research Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence
Michael Scicluna	Principal, David Scott School, Brotherhood of St Laurence
Josie Howie	Principal, Pavilion School
Felicity Marlowe	Director, Rainbow Families (Switchboard Victoria)

Witness	Position and Organisation
Alisha Bennett	-
Cara Gleeson	Director, Prevention in Action, Our Watch
Petra Staiger	Odyssey House Victoria

17 April 2024

Quality Hotel Parklake, Shepparton, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Mrs Katherine Neall	-
Kathleen Parry	Teacher, Rushworth P-12 College
Liana Buchanan	Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People, Commission for Children and Young People
Meena Singh	Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, Commission for Children and Young People
Missi Joyce	Commission Youth Council, Commission for Children and Young People
Jasmine Mallett	Commission Youth Council, Commission for Children and Young People
Jenny Houlihan	-
Jodie Fleming	Executive Officer, Tomorrow Today
Louise Pearce	Board Chair, Tomorrow Today
Sally Matheson	Education Benalla Program Manager, Tomorrow Today
Lindsay Dann	-

16 April 2024

All Seasons Hotel, Bendigo, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Cindy Growcott	Teacher, Virtual School Victoria
Dozer Atkinson	Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation
Travis Eddy	Principal, Kennington Primary School and Bendigo Deaf Facility
Britt Holmberg	Assistant Principal, Weeroona College, Bendigo Flexible Learning Options
Angela Tremain	Assistant Principal, Bendigo South East Secondary College
Isaac Farr	-
Jasmine Bieleny	-

27 March 2024

Century Inn Traralgon, Traralgon, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Leanne Vella	Voices for Special Needs
Leesa Lawrence	Voices for Special Needs
Anthony Rodaughan	College Principal, Kurnai College
Michael Stubbe	Hands on Learning Program Coordinator, Kurnai College
Lisa Vagg	National Partnerships Manager, Hands on Learning
Stephanie Feldt	Teacher, Albert Street Primary School, Moe
Mr Kieran Kenneth	Principal, Yallourn North Primary School

26 March 2024

Bairnsdale RSL, Bairnsdale, VIC

Witness	Position and Organisation
Mr Matthew Kell	Teacher, Bairnsdale Secondary College
Mr Rodney O'Connell	-
Natalie Mitchell	-
Jessica McManus	Teacher, Lakes Entrance Primary School
Matt Jenkins	School President, Orbest Community College, P-12
Kate Kapolos	Senior Manager, Children, Youth and Families, Navigator Program, Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania) Limited
Sam Henry	Case Manager, Navigator Program, Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania) Limited
Ella	Navigator Program, Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania) Limited

Appendix B

Department of Education response to the 2019 Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students

Recommendation	Department response
Planning & Strategy	
1.1 Develop a comprehensive five-year strategic plan for rural and regional education that recognises and addresses the specific opportunities and challenges of rural and regional education and establish a Rural Education Consultative Group and a Regional Education Consultative Group to support the effective implementation of the strategic plan.	Since the delivery of the report of the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students, the department has engaged with a range of stakeholders to develop priorities and directions to improve regional and rural education in Victoria. A number of investments have been made which deliver on the priorities and recommendations in the report, and demonstrate an ongoing commitment to equity and excellence for rural and regional schools and students. These are set out in responses to the other recommendations.
Wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices	
2.1 Consider a range of options to support the development of wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices by rural and regional students, their families, schools and communities, including additional support to ensure rural and regional students have access to VCE study resources; the development of a resource hub of case studies of successful programs linking local employer/industry with schools; and the recruitment of international students to rural and regional schools in order to expand the diversity of rural and regional communities and global awareness of rural and regional students	<p>There are a number of initiatives which seek to progress the recommendation of wide aspirations and high expectations for rural and regional students and their communities. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invested \$13.2 million over 5 years from 2019-20 and ongoing funding to support rural and regional students access to VCE Revision Lectures. • Established Bellum Bellum Blended Learning Hub in Gippsland, to expand access to VCE subjects and specialist teachers via virtual and face-to-face learning for students from surrounding schools via a central hub in Morwell. • Invested \$116 million in 2023-24 to fund new Tech Schools including in Wangaratta and Warrnambool. • Invested additional \$14 million in 2024-25 for Tech Schools, including outreach for country students via regional STEM camps and support for rural and regional students to access Tech Schools' Virtual and Remote programs. • Established the Raising Rural and Regional Student Aspirations Initiative in 2019-20 to enhance learning, transitions, and aspirational mindsets, extended in 2023-24 for an additional 2 years. • Supporting high-ability students in rural and regional areas with \$132 million invested in the Student Excellence Program since its commencement in 2020. • Committed nearly \$750 million since 2018 for young people across Victoria to engage in vocational and applied learning pathways that match their goals and set them up for success in life as part of the Senior Secondary Pathways Reform.

Recommendation	Department response
School Resourcing	
<p>3.1 Review the effectiveness and efficiency of the SRP design in relation to rural and regional schools, including the definition of 'rural' and 'regional' schools and other measures such as the introduction of a 'deemed' annual SRP over, for example, a three year cycle to reduce the impact of volatility of enrolments on staffing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is continuing investment in school resourcing including responding to the specific needs of rural and regional Victoria. • The department has identified opportunities within the Student Resource Package to better support rural and regional schools. This includes adjusting the Rural Size Adjustment Factor, and updating location-based funding lines to ensure that rural and regional schools are classified according to the latest available information. • A small-scale adjustment loading has been developed to support small schools which are often located in regional and rural areas to deliver Vocational Education and Training Delivered to School Students.
<p>3.2 Examine the current funding arrangements for rural and regional schools, including maintenance funding and the effectiveness of the current VSBA service delivery model for rural and regional schools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The delivery model for capital works and grants projects is the same for schools both in metropolitan areas and in rural and regional areas. All schools across the state receive consistent and high-quality support for all projects. • Schools are allocated SRP Maintenance and Minor Works funding to undertake routine and day-to-day condition-based maintenance.
<p>3.3 Consider whether the current Camps, Sports and Excursions (CSE) fund should be extended to include all students in rural and regional schools with indexation to reflect greater distance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To reflect the additional costs involved with sourcing trades outside of metropolitan areas, campuses in rural and regional locations receive an additional loading to the Maintenance and Minor Works of 20–25% on top of the base rate. • Facilities-related Student Resource Package funding will increase to more than \$275 million in 2025. • Furthermore, \$19.3 million was allocated in the 2022–23 Victorian Budget for the Freeing Up School Staff to Lead and Teach Initiative. This initiative is rolling out to small rural and regional schools from 2022 to 2026 to help manage routine and condition-based maintenance, essential safety measures, OHS compliance and Return to Work obligations. • The department is committed to ensuring that Victorians both in metropolitan areas and in rural and regional areas have access to safe and modern learning environments. This includes improving the building condition and functionality for all government schools across the state. • The 2023–24 State Budget committed \$168.7 million to extend the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund (CSEF) for a further 4 years including an increase of the CSEF per-student rates by \$25 to reflect the increased cost of participating in camps and other activities. • The 2024–25 State Budget included \$280.1 million to fund a \$400 School Saving Bonus for all government school students in 2025 and disadvantaged students in non-government schools. The bonus will be used by families to cover the cost of uniforms, camps, excursions and other extracurricular activities throughout the year.
Student Support	
<p>4.1 Develop a strong culture and practice of 'soft boundaries' in the delivery of rural and regional services and education provision, both across sectors (for example, health and justice) and across locations, to ensure the interests of every student is placed at the centre of service delivery.</p>	<p>Significant work has been done to ensure every student has access to the supports they need across the state, regardless of where they attend school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every government school has been allocated a Health Wellbeing Key Contact to regularly meet with them to support the identification of student, cohort and whole-school health wellbeing and inclusion needs. This involves providing access to internal departmental health, wellbeing, and inclusion support, as well as connecting schools with external services to better meet student needs.

Recommendation	Department response
Student Support (Continued)	
<p>4.2 Consider improved models of support for rural and regional schools to address student mental health as part of the response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, including consideration of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4.2.1 Expansion of mental health support services to primary schools; • 4.2.2 Provision of trauma-informed training to all teachers in rural schools and regional schools where support services are difficult to access. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Support Services teams work as part of a multidisciplinary area team to support schools in the provision of integrated health and wellbeing, providing group-based and individual support, workforce capacity building and the provision of specialised services. • The Education Justice Initiative supports young people involved with youth justice to connect and reconnect with educational pathways that suit their needs and interests. • The Victorian Government invested \$200 million over 4 years and \$86 million ongoing for the Schools Mental Health Fund (the Fund). Rural and regional schools were allocated the Fund first in response to the Royal Commission findings, and they also receive an additional loading of 10%. • The Victorian Government committed \$200 million over 4 years and \$93.7 million ongoing to expand the Mental Health in Primary Schools program to every government and low-fee non-government primary school in Victoria.
<p>4.3 Review and develop local plans for the provision of alternative settings in regional centres</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A \$121 million investment is delivering the Respectful Relationships initiative to every government school and participating Catholic and independent school in rural and regional Victoria. This investment includes \$6.7 million for Respectful Relationships professional learning delivered to early childhood educators in Victorian funded kindergarten programs.
<p>4.4 Examine steps to increase access to support staff, in particular paediatricians/ speech therapists, including the provision of facilities to enable the delivery of virtual support services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 2024-25 State Budget committed \$13.9 million over 4 years to continue Enhancing Mental Health Support in Schools with Headspace, including support for the Regional Phone Counselling Service and face-to-face counselling through headspace centres. • The department is building further consistency and clarity into the specialist school eligibility and enrolment process. This is reflected in updated content in the department's Policy and Advisory Library.
Inclusive Communities	
<p>5.1 Consider further steps that can be taken by rural and regional schools and communities to strengthen development of inclusive cultures for all students and staff.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A range of programs and resources have been delivered to help schools build intercultural capability and strengthen inclusion. This includes Student Leaders for Multicultural Inclusion, Refugee Education Support Initiatives, Schools Standing up to Racism and the Intercultural capability curriculum. • The 2022-23 State Budget committed \$2.7 million over 4 years for Cluster Approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' Curriculum. The Koorie Curriculum Clusters project focuses on strengthening partnerships between Registered Aboriginal Parties and cluster schools to improve teacher capability and confidence in teaching the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority throughout the curriculum.
<p>5.2 Develop common teaching and learning programs across clusters/ networks of schools focused on Aboriginal knowledge, histories and cultures.</p>	
Curriculum Provision	
<p>6.1 Examine how the provision of VCAL in rural and regional areas can be strengthened.</p>	<p>The recommendations on curriculum provision in rural and regional Victoria have been addressed by investments which seek to strengthen provision across Victorian schools.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Senior Secondary Pathways Reform is implementing generational change to vocational and applied learning pathways for secondary school students, with nearly \$750 million invested since 2018. • All local senior secondary government schools now offer the VCE Vocational Major and Victorian Pathways Certificate which provide high quality curriculum alongside work-related skills and personal development skills, in place of the former Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

Recommendation	Department response
Curriculum Provision (Continued)	
6.2 Support and consider incentives for networks/cluster of secondary schools (all sectors) to develop timetables that enable delivery of VCE subjects across multiple schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since 2021, the department has supported every government school with Jobs, Skills and Pathways Coordination funding to assist with the administration required to deliver the VCE Vocational Major and VET Delivered to School Student • The Curriculum and Collaboration Access Fund supports schools with small senior secondary cohorts to overcome barriers to providing access to the VCE Vocational Major and Victorian Pathways Certificate with additional preparation time for teachers to support the delivery of high-quality programs.
6.3 Review the design and delivery of virtual learning.	
6.4 Examine how access to existing digital platforms can be supported.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A pilot program is underway to test virtual work experience for students in rural and regional areas who are unable to access on-site workplace learning opportunities and enable students to learn more about work and different industries without leaving their local school. • The 2024-25 State Budget committed \$6 million to extend the Improving Curriculum Choice for Rural and Regional Students initiative, to expand the subjects on offer for rural and regional students, including by supporting collaboration and planning in clusters of schools. • The 2022-23 State Budget committed \$5.2 million over 4 years for the Bellum Bellum Blended Learning Hub to deliver a mix of virtual and face-to-face learning to expand access to VCE subjects and specialist teachers for students in Gippsland via a central hub in Morwell. • Dedicated Jobs, Skills and Pathways staff in the department's region and area offices support government schools with the significant improvement to vocational and applied learning curriculum and activities. • Cost and travel barriers to VET participation have been removed via increased transport supports and course fees provided for every government school student. The establishment of VET clusters for senior secondary schools to collaborate in local networks to increase VET offerings for their students. • From 2019-20, the Victorian Government has invested \$3.7 million over 5 years and provided ongoing funding to abolish fees for Virtual Schools Victoria. • There has been continued investment for the Greater Subject Choice for Rural and Regional Students initiative to make almost every VCE subject available virtually, so students can study the subjects of their choice regardless of location. • The department has delivered bandwidth uplift initiatives to increase minimum speeds from 32kbps per student in 2019 to 1mbps per student.
Attraction & retention of principals teachers and support staff	
7.1 Consider a range of incentives to attract high quality principals, teachers and support staff in order to provide the most appropriate locally-determined measures	<p>Significant work has been done to address these recommendations and attract and retain principals, teachers and support staff in rural and regional schools, in the context of national workforce shortages. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invested \$45.2 million in 2019 to address teacher supply outside of Melbourne by attracting teachers and leaders to rural and regional Victorian schools and supporting them to stay including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – \$12.5 million for Targeted Financial Incentives of up to \$50,000 for teachers re-locating to country areas. An additional \$27 million was announced in 2023 to expand this initiative. – \$12.8 million to increase the number of high-quality teachers specialising in VET and VCAL so that more students from country areas can access and complete apprenticeships, traineeships and further education.

Recommendation	Department response
Attraction & retention of principals teachers and support staff (Continued)	
7.2 Examine the steps that might be taken to increase the pool of available CRTs for rural and regional schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided \$32.2 million in the 2023-24 Victorian Budget to support pre-service teachers to undertake their placements in rural, regional, remote and specialist Victorian government schools.
7.3 Support the development by schools, in collaboration with local communities, of strong induction and welcome programs for potential or actual new appointments, including programs for partners/family members.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$5.7 million in 2022-23 to increase supply of CRTs in rural and regional areas, including the establishment of the CRT Travel Fund, enabling special payments of up to \$10,000 to attract CRTs. • Partnered with Country Education Partnership to deliver the Teach Rural pilot program to support groups of pre-service teachers to • attract and retain principals, teachers and support staff in rural and regional schools, in the context of national workforce shortages. These include:
7.4 Consider steps that can be taken to strengthen the support provided to new principals and teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invested \$45.2 million in 2019 to address teacher supply outside of Melbourne by attracting teachers and leaders to rural and regional Victorian schools and supporting them to stay including: • \$12.5 million for Targeted Financial Incentives of up to \$50,000 for teachers re-locating to country areas. An additional \$27 million was announced in 2023 to expand this initiative.
7.5 Examine the feasibility of increasing the number of administration hubs for clusters/networks of rural and regional schools to reduce principal workload.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$12.8 million to increase the number of high-quality teachers specialising in VET and VCAL so that more students from country areas can access and complete apprenticeships, traineeships and further education. • Provided \$32.2 million in the 2023-24 Victorian Budget to support pre-service teachers to undertake their placements in rural, regional, remote and specialist Victorian government schools. • \$5.7 million in 2022-23 to increase supply of CRTs in rural and regional areas, including the establishment of the CRT Travel Fund, enabling special payments of up to \$10,000 to attract CRTs. • Partnered with Country Education Partnership to deliver the Teach Rural pilot program to support groups of pre-service teachers to undertake placements across rural and regional schools. • Established the Principal Advisory Service in 2021 (now ongoing) to reduce workload and support school leaders with policy and compliance. • Committed \$19.3 million in the 2022-23 Victorian Budget for the Freeing Up School Staff to Lead and Teach, funding 16 coordinators to support small and regional schools to manage routine and condition-based maintenance, essential safety measures, OHS compliance and Return to Work obligations. • Invested \$148.2 million in the 2021-22 Victorian Budget to establish the 7 Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership Regional Centres in Bairnsdale, Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura, Moe and Shepparton, offering evidence-informed professional learning programs for Victorian teachers and school leaders. • The Victorian Aspiring Principal Assessment, which supports the pipeline of new principals by identifying and preparing suitable future candidates. The assessment comprises leadership competencies, professional practice and behavioural and interpersonal skills to ensure new principals are prepared for the demands of the role.



Recommendation	Department response
Professional Development	
<p>8.1 Examine measures to strengthen the delivery of and access to professional learning for rural and regional staff, including access to VCAA virtual VCE Assessor Training and the delivery of Bastow-based programs.</p>	<p>There has been further investment in professional development for school staff in rural and regional Victoria, including through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invested \$148.2 million in the 2021-22 Victorian Budget to establish the 7 Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership Regional Centres in Bairnsdale, Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura, Moe and Shepparton, offering evidence-informed professional learning programs for Victorian teachers and school leaders.
<p>8.2 Review the role of SEILS/EILS/network chairs to ensure adequate support is available for collaborative professional development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committed \$7.8 million in 2019-20 to expand professional development for teachers and leaders in rural and regional areas and, in 2020, the expansion of Virtual VCAA Assessor Training. • Invested \$10.1 million in the 2022-23 Victorian Budget for the Secondary Science, Mathematics and Technologies initiative, with half of the places assigned to rural and regional schools. • Committed \$17.1 million in the 2022-23 Victorian Budget for the Primary Mathematics and Science Specialist Initiative across 2023 and 2024, training an extra 100 government primary teachers as maths specialists, including 25 rural and regional teachers. An additional \$20.8 million was committed to continue the Primary Mathematics and Science Specialist Initiative in the 2024-25 Victorian Budget

Source: Questions on Notice, Department of Education, received 30 May 2024.

Extracts of proceedings

Legislative Council Standing Order 23.20(5) requires the Committee to include in its report all divisions on a question relating to the adoption of the draft report. All Members have a deliberative vote. In the event of an equality of votes, the Chair also has a casting vote.

The Committee divided on the following questions during consideration of this report. Questions agreed to without division are not recorded in these extracts.

Committee Meeting – 24 September 2024

Mr Puglielli moved, that in Chapter 2 the following text is added:

‘First Peoples were the first educators and their skill as teachers has kept culture and Country safe and vibrant for tens of thousands of years.’ Ben Carroll, Minister for Education, Transcript, Public Hearing 14 June 2024 Yoorrook Justice Commission

The Committee acknowledges the ongoing and thriving cultures and traditions of First Peoples in what is now known as the state of Victoria. It acknowledges the First Peoples leaders continuing the sharing of culture and knowledge and pays respect to Elders past and present.

In acknowledging the ongoing work for truth and justice in education, the Committee notes the work that is yet to be undertaken in removing barriers within the school system facing the children of First Nations people. The Committee acknowledges that to achieve equity in education in Victoria, these gaps must be addressed and removed.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Ryan Batchelor	Trung Luu
Michael Galea	Renee Heath
Rachel Payne	Joe McCracken
Aiv Puglielli	
Lee Tarlamis	

Question agreed.

Ms Bath moved, that in Chapter 3 the following text is added:

‘The top five countries or economies based on the 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results for each subject area were as follows:

- **Mathematics:** The leading performers were B-S-J-Z (Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang in China), Singapore, Macao (China), Hong Kong (China), and Taiwan.
- **Reading:** The top performers were B-S-J-Z (China), Singapore, Macao (China), Hong Kong (China), and Estonia.
- **Science:** The highest-ranking were B-S-J-Z (China), Singapore, Macao (China), Estonia, and Japan.

In these assessments:

- **Below proficient** refers to students at Levels 1 and 2.
- **High performers** refers to students at Levels 5 and 6.

These rankings and definitions are based on data from the OECD PISA (2018) and the Australian Council for Educational Research report on Australia’s results in PISA 2018.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 3	Noes 5
Trung Luu	Ryan Batchelor
Renee Heath	Michael Galea
Joe McCracken	Rachel Payne
	Aiv Puglielli
	Lee Tarlamis

Question negated.

Mr McCracken moved, that in Chapter 3 a new finding is added: ‘The Victorian Curriculum is overcrowded.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 4	Noes 4
Trung Luu	Ryan Batchelor
Renee Heath	Michael Galea
Joe McCracken	Aiv Puglielli
Rachel Payne	Lee Tarlamis

Question agreed with Chair’s casting vote.

Ms Bath moved, that in Chapter 3 the following text is amended:

‘The Committee welcomes the mandated changes to teaching literacy in Victorian state schools announced by the Minister for Education. It finds these announced changes are consistent with current best-practice evidence on teaching reading and writing.’

To replace ‘welcomes’ with ‘supports’ and add ‘finds that the Minister for Education’s announcement of’.

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 3	Noes 5
Trung Luu	Ryan Batchelor
Renee Heath	Michael Galea
Joe McCracken	Rachel Payne
	Aiv Puglielli
	Lee Tarlamis

Question negated.

Ms Bath moved, that in Chapter 5 the following text is added:

‘Kieran Kenneth, Principal at Yallourn North Primary School, advised the Committee: What we see from that tertiary space and the educational training space is that they actually do not have any of those skills. They have not been taught how to manage a classroom.’

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 3	Noes 5
Trung Luu	Ryan Batchelor
Renee Heath	Michael Galea
Joe McCracken	Rachel Payne
	Aiv Puglielli
	Lee Tarlamis

Question negated.

Mr Puglielli moved, that in Chapter 6 the following text is deleted:

‘The Committee also heard concerns regarding specific aspects of the program’s curriculum. Moira Chalk, parent, told the Committee she believes ‘the component of the Respectful Relationships program that addresses gender identity is simplistic’ and ‘does not touch on the complexity of what brings about gender distress’.

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 5	Noes 3
Ryan Batchelor	Trung Luu
Michael Galea	Renee Heath
Rachel Payne	Joe McCracken
Aiv Puglielli	
Lee Tarlamis	

Question agreed.

Mr Galea moved, that in Chapter 7 the following recommendation is amended:

‘That the Victorian Government significantly increase school capital infrastructure funding.’

To replace ‘significantly increase’ with ‘continue to invest in’.

The question was put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes 3	Noes 5
Ryan Batchelor	Trung Luu
Michael Galea	Renee Heath
Lee Tarlamis	Joe McCracken
	Rachel Payne
	Aiv Puglielli

Question negated.

Minority report

VICTORIAN GREENS' MINORITY REPORT

Legislative Council Legal & Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria

Authored by Aiv Puglielli MLC

Acknowledgement

In preparing this minority report, it is important to acknowledge that the First Peoples of this continent are the first educators, and they have cared for Country and shared culture for tens of thousands of years. We acknowledge the ongoing, thriving cultures and traditions of First Peoples, and the impact that the dispossession and colonisation of this land has had on First Nations communities which is still being felt today.

There can be no equity of education outcomes for First Nations children and young people without Truth-telling, Treaty and Justice.

We acknowledge the ongoing work of community leaders and Elders in sharing language and culture, and the positive impact this continues to have for young people in our state.

Sovereignty was never ceded.

Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: "What do you think would be possible if we saw a program like that expanded to a statewide context – that sharing of First Nations language and culture with all students?"

Dozer ATKINSON: The number one advantage I see is that we will end up with more children completing year 12, completing high school, but it has got to start at primary school or it has got to be incorporated into high school so our children feel culturally safe to stay and learn, to get the education. I always refer back to a great one-liner that my brother Archie Roach would always say: 'It's easy for a black kid to act white and feel black.' Do you know what I mean? But the true context of that is that children want to act black and feel black. I just want to sort of make that clear before I finish. That one-liner he would always say to me had a big impact on me because that is how our children feel. Our children have to go into these settings, into settings that are not culturally safe, and are expected to meet the curriculum requirements. That has to change. The retention rates say that. The retention rates are screaming that. We are not keeping enough children culturally safe within their education journey so they are able to stay in the system."

- Dozer Atkinson, Senior Cultural Advisor - Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation.
Public Hearing, 16 April 2024

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government consult with First Nations communities and Elders regarding an expansive state-wide program for the sharing of First Nations culture and language with school students

Introduction

Every family should have access to a high quality, genuinely free, local public school.

At this point in time, this is not the experience of many Victorians.

This inquiry was an important review of the Victorian public school system which is experiencing significant pressures and consequently the scope of the inquiry itself was vast.

Many public hearings were held, both in metropolitan Melbourne and in regional Victoria.

From teacher working conditions, the attraction and retention of new teachers and school staff, school funding, through to student wellbeing and learning outcomes, many core issues featured prominently throughout the hearings and in written submissions.

The inquiry process was thorough and detailed. The evidence offered was broad and often informed by significant expertise and lived experience.

Whether the end of this process actually results in improved outcomes following this report rests with the politicians and their political will to implement the changes required as requested by the community and expert submissions.

"I was one of the people that went and listened to David Gonski 10 years ago and I thought, 'Fantastic,' and this is what he is about: he is about bringing up those kids and allowing every child to reach their potential. I am just really sad that we have not got anywhere near what he says in terms of following up those kids that do need a lot more help."

- Dr James Thyer, School Councillor at Northcote High School (individual contribution), Public Hearing, 8 May 2024

The structure of issues raised in this minority report are listed under the categories of **Funding**, followed by **Supports for Students** and **Supports for Teachers & School Staff**, respectively.

Funding

Victorians deserve access to an accessible, world-class, and genuinely free public education, regardless of where they live or their socioeconomic status.

But following successive governments underfunding our public schools, Victoria is amongst the lowest funded states in the country and this means our public schools don't get the required funding to meet everyone's needs.

Many of the concerns raised during this inquiry can be linked directly to a lack of funding from both successive state and commonwealth governments.

This lack of funding is also having an impact on teachers ability to teach and on the health and well being of students in public schools.

"Public schools in Victoria face a funding crisis. They are massively underfunded while private schools are over-funded. Funding increases over the past decade have heavily favoured private schools. Public schools are defrauded by the current Commonwealth-Victoria bilateral funding agreement."

- Save Our Schools Australia submission #159

"it is vital that Victoria takes the opportunity to ensure that public schools in this state reach at least 100% of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS)."

- Australian Education Union submission #220

Victorian schools remain the third most under-resourced public schools¹ in the country, which is an embarrassment at best and a travesty in reality, for the students in this system, particularly those with disabilities and disadvantages.

And while our public schools remain underfunded, Victorian private schools are currently receiving more than they require and are funded to 102.9% of their school resources standard. This equates to almost \$150 million per year of public funds going to over subsidise private schools. This arrangement which overfunds these schools will currently continue the rest of this decade with a cumulative over spend of \$734 million from this year until 2029.²

It's been a decade since our governments agreed to the Gonski school resource standard, and the fact that our community alongside teachers, unions, families and education advocates are having to continue to push for the state and federal governments to finally meet this minimum level of funding for the needs of students is ridiculous.

¹ Save Our Schools Australia submission #159

² Save Our Schools submission #159

Public schools educate the majority of young people in our state and the vast majority of disadvantaged and/or disabled students in Victoria. We should be providing every student with the funding they need to prosper in their school education.

In the Australian Education Union's 2024 State of our Schools survey, they spoke to over 15,000 principals, teachers and support staff. Almost 90% of principals reported that they had to move funds around in their already overstretched budgets to support students with a disability as the funding they received was inadequate³. This should not happen in a prosperous state like Victoria.

It's time for the state and federal governments to stop blaming each other for the chronic underfunding of our schools and time for them to work together to provide every public school with the funds they need to educate their students and support their teachers and staff.

"We must see Victorian public schools funded to the federal government's funding standard that they set more than a decade ago. We must get to 100 per cent, at a minimum, of that standard if we are to address the issues that we have and to provide the resources to our schools to respond to the educational and support needs of students and to ensure that the workforce is appropriately invested in to do the work that it is asked to do."

- Meredith Peace, President - Australian Education Union, Public Hearing 8 May 2024

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government fully funds public schools to a minimum of the Gonski school resource standard, and ensures that all school funding of both public and private schools is strictly needs based.

³ AEU's 2024 State of our Schools - <https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/new-research-shows-funding-students-disability-totally-inadequate>

Supports for Students

Students are reporting more and more that they are overworked and are feeling overwhelmed by the pressure to perform, fear of failure and uncertainty about the future⁴.

"I feel like there is massive pressure. What I have been hearing, from year 7, is that we are doing these tests and we are learning all of this for the year 12 exams. So we are going through all of our high school experience just for those exams"

- Radha Katyare, Victorian Student Representative Council, Public Hearing, 9 May 2024

Pressures on students

Increasingly political commentary and media focus is on raw academic outcomes and test results rather than seeking to quantify positive student experiences, their connections with their peers and educators and their relationship with learning about the world around them.

Students have reported struggles finding a sense of personal achievement when the very notion of success is overwhelmingly attributed to academic excellence. Students want to learn in environments which respect their diverse learning styles, their personal ambitions and identities. They want to be supported with positive feedback about their individual progress through the schooling system, in a way which focuses on more than just their test scores.⁵

"I believe that schools should be implementing diverse ways to gauge a student's progress, not just in formal tests but in projects, in classwork and in a lot of other different ways so that students could feel less stressed out and less locked in and have more freedom of expression in the way they show their progress in learning the subject matter."

- Risith Jayasekara, Victorian Student Representative Council, Public Hearing, 9 May 2024

There are also mixed reports received through the public inquiry hearings from students about feeling pressured to cram for year 12 exams, and this potentially having flow-on effects into school attendance and engagement.⁶

"Reducing students to a number, which is what we currently do, actually does not value the learning of students, and it should not be there as a proxy for quality. Quality is actually measured by how well a student does in their actual studies, not how they are ranked."

- Justin Mullaly, Deputy President - Australian Education Union, Public Hearing 8 May 2024

⁴ Victorian Student Representative Council submission #198

⁵ Centre for Multicultural Youth submission #196

⁶ Public hearing transcript thursday 9 may

NEW RECOMMENDATION: The Department of Education should conduct a review of the VCE and the ATAR system to recommend ways in which the negative impacts of the senior years certificate and tertiary entrance rankings on the wellbeing and mental health of students can be alleviated.⁷

Student mental health

Mental ill health of students not only affects their learning outcomes, but also their life and successes beyond the school gates. Students have reported exacerbated mental health issues, and schools are unable to provide sufficient and timely support in school. This issue should be addressed within schools and in our broader communities to ensure that all young people can access mental health support at the time they need them most.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government commits to 'A Mental Health Service Access Guarantee' for Victorian students as proposed by the Australian Education Union, Victorian branch⁸ which ensures availability, timely provision, and ongoing provision of mental health services in schools and the broader community.

Racism in our schools

Since the beginning of 2020, 85% of multicultural young people have reported at least one instance of direct racism, while indirect or vicarious racism involving third-party exposure was experienced by 93% of young people.⁹

Students are saying that they aren't confident their school can effectively address racism, and school staff are expressing that they do not feel they have received the training and support to prevent and respond to racism in their school environment.¹⁰

"Often we do hear where students really struggle, and they say, 'Look, I don't think I can. I don't want to go back to school anymore, just because I don't feel safe. I don't feel like I belong and I don't feel connected.' It is not just racism in the playground, it is also the kind of unconscious bias that teachers or curriculums may have that do not speak to the student's experience. I think even though it is not a curriculum issue – I think it is a teacher skill issue – it is an issue where we need a whole-of-school response from the principal, the leadership, the school board and the school committee right down to the person at the front desk to create a safe environment for students to learn well. For us, on racism the kind of social cohesion that we can and should be building in schools is critical."

- Soo-Lin Quek, Executive Manager of Policy, Sector & Business Development, Centre for Multicultural Youth, Public Hearing, 9 May 2024

⁷ Australian Education Union, Victorian branch, Submission #220

⁸ Australian Education Union, Victorian branch, Submission #220

⁹ : Doery, K., Guerra, G., Kenny, E., Harriott, L. & Priest, N. (2020). Hidden Cost: Young multicultural Victorians and COVID-19. Melbourne, Victoria: Centre for Multicultural Youth.

¹⁰ Centre for Multicultural Youth submission #196

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Department of Education conduct a comprehensive review of the experiences of racism within school communities, and resource schools to deliver anti-racism programs to ensure that students are able to receive an education free from racism.

Student experience of queerphobia

Students who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community continue to experience bullying, discrimination and harassment, be it overt or covert, direct or indirect. Some of this has been fed by an ongoing and politically fuelled moral panic about gender affirming care for trans and non-binary young people. As well as experiences of homophobia, biphobia and queerphobia which have persisted from previous events such as the marriage equality postal survey.¹¹

“Continuing to promote, fund and develop LGBTQIA+ support structures within schools is imperative to improving and supporting mental health and wellbeing for young LGBTQIA+ students.”
- Rainbow Families/Switchboard submission #274

We must continue to work to ensure that our public schools provide an inclusive and safe experience for LGBTQIA+ students. This can be done in many ways including by continuing to support and expand sexuality and gender education that increases students’ understanding of all types of relationships and identities.

We should build more queer and trans experiences into the curriculum and include materials that feature diverse characters and communities to ensure that students recognise themselves in resources they use for their studies.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Department of Education work with LGBTQIA+ support organisations to identify ongoing partnerships and opportunities to support LGBTQIA+ students in the schooling system.

¹¹ Rainbow Families Switchboard Victoria submission #274

Supports for Teachers & School Staff

Overworked teachers

Teachers are experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety and other pressures due to unsustainable workloads.¹² This pressure creates both a driver for teachers to leave the profession, as well as a barrier for new teachers being attracted to the workforce and creating lasting relationships as leaders in their local communities.

“Undoubtedly though, the biggest cause of teacher anxiety and depression is over-work. Even before COVID, surveys conducted by the AEU, the OECD, and others, consistently showed Victorian public school teachers worked 50+ hour weeks. Principals even more. Furthermore, most teachers frequently do work during the school holidays and are rarely able to genuinely ‘switch off’. To the extent that we are able to ‘switch off’, this period of reduced work in the holidays is essential to recover from very stressful working conditions. This has been the case for years, going back well before COVID, and for most of us it has gotten worse since COVID.”

- Northcote High School Australian Education Union - Submission #179

Underpaid Teachers

The lack of remuneration for teachers has caused them to leave the state education system for higher paid private school positions or in some instances to never enter in the first place.¹³

“Salaries need to be more competitive with other professions over the course of a teacher’s career, whilst education support staff need the value of their work better recognised by improved pay.”

- Australian Education Union submission #220

Teachers need more administration support

Some evidence provided to the committee noted that increasing attrition rates of teachers could primarily be attributed to ever expanding administrative burdens, while also noting that this is causing fewer school staff seeking leadership positions in their school community.¹⁴

“Give teachers more time to plan for success so they can plan for all students in their class.”
Association for Children with a Disability submission #189

¹² Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, submission #220

¹³ Northcote High School AEU sub branch, submission #179

¹⁴ Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, submission #220

Smaller class sizes - Better outcomes

The resounding feedback from the inquiry evidence was that smaller class sizes are optimal for learning and wellbeing outcomes. Lack of resourcing disguised as 'flexibility' for students and teachers has placed a bandaid over the broader issue fuelled by teacher attrition and inadequate school funding.

Teachers career progression

Teachers reported that they wish to be offered pathways for professional development and career progression which are meaningful and provide them opportunities for growth and reward for their ongoing service to the school community and to student learning outcomes.

Time in lieu funding

It is welcome that the main report recommends additional funding to cover time in lieu arrangements. The Greens and other advocates have raised this issue for a number of years, given the impact it presents on activities such as school camps, and hope that the Government will accept this recommendation and provide the additional funding.

"There are also difficulties with the time in lieu for things like excursions and camps. It is a great difficulty for the school to have the money to have teachers away on camps – to make up. I think that is an issue with proper conditions for teachers in terms of actually getting paid proper overtime et cetera for going on camps, so that severely dented our budget for a while until we were able to reach an agreement on that."

- Dr James Thyer, School Councillor at Northcote High School (individual contribution), Public Hearing, 8 May 2024

In noting all of the above points, we recommend the following, in line with the contributions made to the inquiry by the Australian Education Union:

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Victorian Government adopt all measures recommended by the Australian Education Union Victorian branch 'A ten-year plan for staffing in public education' report¹⁵

¹⁵ Australian Education Union, Victorian Branch, 10 year plan - <https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/10YearPlan>

School Cleaners Deserve A Fair Go

The Committee received heartfelt evidence from school cleaners during this inquiry.

Julie HOOPER, School Cleaner *"The way I look at it is like this: I have been there nearly four years. I have watched the kids grow. They come up to me. They call me Julia – my name is Julie, but for some unknown reason, I am Julia – and I answer to that, and they will hug me. It is like my grandkids are there, and it breaks my heart to watch it, knowing we cannot do anything."*

Julie HOOPER, School Cleaner *"Fix it. Just fix it."*

- Julie Hooper - public hearing 12 June 2024

They spoke of the outsourcing of school cleaners as a result of the undervaluing of their roles within the school community in providing a safe environment for students to learn.

"Contract companies are run for profit, not for service. Cleaners are required to do more with less, and this places immense and unacceptable pressure on our cleaners and results in sub-quality services."

- Jo Briskey, National Political Coordinator - United Workers Union, public hearing 12 June 2024

Sadly, this evidence was not reflected in any recommendations in the main report.

"Aiv PUGLIELLI: Just so we can have it explicitly clear, to check off: cleaning jobs should not be outsourced?

Jo BRISKEY: Correct.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Correct. Good. You should be hired as school staff, ongoing?

Jo BRISKEY: They should be directly employed by the education department, so managed through Victorian education, yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Perfect. Okay, great. Thank you. You should receive proper pay and conditions for what is essential work for the school community?

Jo BRISKEY: Correct.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Mick LYNCH: And the correct hours.

Jo BRISKEY: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I am going to say: anything less than that being in the report, would that be a failure in your eyes?

Jo BRISKEY: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Perfect. I think that is quite clear."

- School Cleaners & United Workers Union, public hearing 12 June 2024

As elsewhere in this minority report, it is essential that every effort is made to recommend change based on lived experience where the system has failed Victorian workers, not just in the instances which are most politically expedient.

NEW RECOMMENDATION: That the Department of Education end their outsourcing of school cleaners and employ a permanent workforce of well paid school cleaners to service public schools across the state.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aiv Puglielli', is centered below the 'Signed:' text. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mr Aiv Puglielli MLC

Date: 2 October 2024