

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2023-24 Financial and Performance Outcomes**

Melbourne – Wednesday 20 November 2024

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O'Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak



**WITNESSES**

Jenny Atta, Secretary,

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

Anthony Bates, Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services,

Bronwen FitzGerald, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

Stephen Fraser, Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support,

Andrea Del Monaco, Deputy Secretary, Schools Workforce,

Jacinta Blanch, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority, and

Jessica Trinder, Executive Director, Strategy and Planning, Victorian School Building Authority, Department of Education.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government achieved in 2023–24 compared to what the government planned to achieve.

All evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

As Chair I will remind committee members that I expect all members to be respectful towards our witnesses today, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

I welcome the Secretary of the Department of Education, Ms Jenny Atta, as well as other officers. Secretary, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

**Jenny ATTA:** Thanks, Chair. With your agreement I will ask Mr Fraser to step through our presentation. I am coming off a bout of laryngitis, and I will save myself for questions.

**The CHAIR:** Perfect.

**Stephen FRASER:** Thank you, Secretary. Thank you, Chair and committee members. On behalf of my colleagues and the Secretary I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of these unceded lands that we are gathered on today and pay my respects to elders past and present. Thank you for the opportunity to present to the committee.

**Visual presentation.**

**Stephen FRASER:** The Department of Education has as our vision the work to deliver a great education for every child and young person. In doing this we engage and support thousands of services and almost 1.2 million children and young people across our early childhood and school sectors. Across the 2023–24 financial year at the department continued its focus on excellence across our early childhood and school sectors, undertaking reforms and delivering modern infrastructure. To deliver this busy program of work our expenditure grew to \$16.4 billion across the key output groups. The Best Start, Best Life reforms continue the transformation of early childhood education, helping children get the best possible start in life. Free kinder continues to be a huge success, helping to save families up to \$2500 a year and supporting increased participation. As we expanded service delivery program quality remained a focus, with 95 per cent of

kindergarten services meeting or exceeding the national quality standard – the last figure on the right-hand side of the slide. Kindergarten infrastructure is expanding to support the rollout of the Best Start, Best Life reforms. We have supported new and expanded kindergartens across the state, including completing 15 new kinders on school sites and boosted capacity at dozens of others. New government-operated early learning and childcare centres are rolling out, and of the 50 building is underway for the first four services to open next year.

Supporting access and inclusion to kindergarten for children of all backgrounds remains a priority in 2023–24. The preschool field officer program was expanded in 30 local government areas, and the kindergarten inclusion support program continued giving crucial support. In 2023, 100 per cent of eligible four-year-old Aboriginal children were enrolled in kindergarten, with a similar result for three-year-old children.

The Best Start, Best Life workforce strategy was released in 2023 following broad consultation across the sector. Existing initiatives continued, including scholarships and mentoring to support workforce attraction, retention and quality. These reforms are delivering results. There was a 10.2 per cent increase in fully registered early childhood teachers in Victoria, to just over 6060 teachers, with another 3730 with dual registration. Our pipeline of newly qualified early childhood teachers is strong, with provisionally registered teachers up by almost 50 per cent in one year.

Moving to the school education portfolio, firstly I will provide some context. Victoria has more than 1 million students in around 2290 schools. Sixty-three per cent of students learn in our 1570 government schools. Victoria's school attendance is strong, with Australia's top overall school attendance rate, including ranking first for secondary school attendance. In addition, students and staff are reporting higher levels of satisfaction than in previous years. These are very pleasing outcomes that have led to strong academic results. Over the past year Victoria has continued to deliver some of the best NAPLAN results in Australia. This year Victorian students achieved first or second place in seven out of eight measures in reading and writing and achieved the top results in the country for writing in years 5, 7 and 9. More than two-thirds of Victorian students are achieving the 'strong' and 'exceeding' levels of reading, writing and numeracy in all year levels. This is testament to the hard work of our students and their teachers, alongside the reforms that we have put in place. However, we know that we need to do more to support those students who are struggling and extend those who need it.

Victoria's First Nations students are the highest performing in Australia. However, in Victoria mean NAPLAN scores for First Nations students remain below those of their non-First Nations peers. To help close this gap and ensure Koori students are achieving their learning aspirations, the *Marrung* Aboriginal education plan, developed in partnership with our principal partner in Koori education VAEAI, is working to strengthen self-determination and improve outcomes. Attendance rates and sense of connectedness to school for Aboriginal students in secondary school remain a challenge, but to accelerate these efforts we are working more closely with Aboriginal community controlled organisations in recognition of their unique roles and expertise in holistic and culturally responsive service provision. We will continue to support self-determination in education through direct consultation with Victorian Aboriginal communities to support First Nations students to feel strong and safe in their cultural identity and have a robust sense of belonging in school.

The Victorian curriculum F–10 version 2.0 was released in June 2024, this year. It sets out the knowledge and skills that Victorian students from prep to year 10 need to become confident, active and informed citizens. Implementation supports for schools have begun, and the rollout of changes will continue in 2025. In 2024 we also released an updated Victorian teaching and learning model, which will be implemented in government schools from next year. The updated model has explicit teaching at its core, which is the classroom strategy most underpinned by the best possible evidence to achieve the best possible outcomes for most students.

Throughout 2023 we introduced significant reforms to senior secondary school pathways. The Victorian Certificate of Education was expanded to include the VCE vocational major and the Victorian pathways certificate. These reforms provided students with improved access to quality vocational and applied learning opportunities as part of their school education. Victoria was the only Australian state to record a third consecutive year of growth in the number of school students enrolled in vocational education and training. Head Start, a school-based apprenticeship and traineeship program, expanded in 2023 to become available at every government secondary school. Startup and capital funding agreements were also executed for all six new tech schools, allowing commencement of the design of each of those tech schools and recruitment of directors.

We continued to provide the essentials needed for students to succeed at school. We delivered school breakfast clubs, affordable school uniforms, glasses for kids and free period products to improve opportunities for students who need that extra support. Improved learning outcomes for students are directly linked to supporting their wellbeing. Disability inclusion support increased as we continued to roll out the new tiered funding model and initiatives to respond to the needs of students with disability. All schools received new funding to support inclusive practices, including additional school and allied health staff and professional learning. As of term 1 of this year all Victorian government schools had access to the Schools Mental Health Fund. In 2024 the mental health in primary schools program expanded to another four departmental areas: the Mallee, southern Melbourne, western Melbourne and Ovens–Murray.

Over the past year the department has continued to focus on supporting our teacher workforce to grow and to prosper. We made major investments in scholarships, placement support, employment-based programs and incentives for teachers to work in hard-to-staff roles. These efforts have contributed to the Victorian government's school teacher workforce growing by almost 1700 teachers this year. There has been a 23 per cent increase in students enrolling in undergraduate secondary education courses via the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre in 2024, with Victoria also having the best student–teacher ratios of all states in the country. Mental health and wellbeing supports for staff are increasing and action is being taken to reduce administrative burden and ease workload pressures. Additionally, we are implementing strategies to attract and retain First Peoples staff. We have also invested \$2 billion in the modern school buildings that our hardworking school staff need. In 2023–24 these projects continued apace, with 14 new schools opened and 142 school upgrades and modernisation projects completed.

On behalf of the Secretary, I thank the Department of Education staff and all of our many partners across the sector for their work to improve learning outcomes for Victorian children and students right across the state. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Fraser. The first round of questions is going to go to Mr McGowan.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you to you all. Thank you, Secretary. Although, Secretary, if you wish to defer these to other people, please do so.

**Jenny ATTA:** Thank you, Mr McGowan.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Somewhat ironically, I suppose, John Bennett did a review some 12 months ago probably it is now, commissioned by the education minister, and you know where I am going with this. In the course of his review – because of course last year's exams had issues with biology and there were some issues with, I think from memory, Chinese studies and also maths, and you got a number of university mathematicians writing to you, although you may eclipse that number this year – one of the recommendations that was part of that review was that the VCAA needs to:

... develop procedures for managing issues that have been raised by the public or those that will take longer to resolve.

I suppose the obvious question is: what action is the VCAA taking on that recommendation by Dr Bennett?

**Jenny ATTA:** Thanks, Mr McGowan. I should note up-front that we do not have a representative from the VCAA with us today. As you will understand, the CEO has resigned. We have got a new CEO, who has only been in place for 48 hours. I am very happy to take what we can and take anything else on notice.

But I am happy to talk to the Bennett review, which was a very important review commissioned by the minister after the issues that were raised around errors. It was principally looking at the mathematics and chemistry exams, Mr McGowan, and some distribution issues with some Chinese language exams. The Bennett review produced six recommendations. It did confirm that overall there were good processes and systems in place for the VCAA, but it provided six recommendations. They did go very specifically and particularly to the preparation of mathematics and chemistry papers, the strengthening of the involvement of suitably qualified academics, the strengthening of the exam-setting process, the construction of the papers, the review and editing processes of the papers, training and guidance for the publishing and the in-house production of those papers, updated guidance for staff at exam centres, the recommendation to publish examination material in a timely manner and updating policies and processes relating to management of errors and alleged errors. The VCAA

has led a program of work, a very substantial program of work, to progress all of those recommendations over the past year.

I want to acknowledge it up-front: we have seen another set of issues emerge. I acknowledge the concern and anxiety that that has caused for students, schools, family and community, and the VCAA has apologised for that. I think there is an umbrella issue, if you like, that goes to embedded systems and processes we suspect are at play here. But it is important to note that, in terms of the work of the Bennett review, that work has been well received, including by the academics who were very vociferous in expressing their concerns last year. The authority worked diligently on improving those maths and science exams. While there is always a wrap-up at the end of a VCE examination series, no issues of errors in those exams have emerged. I just do not want to conflate the two issues too much – a very specific set of reviews around a particular issue. But I think what the minister has pointed to in calling for a comprehensive root-and-branch review is that the issues around systems, processes, accuracy and quality assurance clearly go deeper, and we do need to unpack all of that with a comprehensive review of the structure, operations, capability and culture of the organisation so that we do have a fit-for-purpose, high-performing agency to fulfil this really critical role.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Is this the worst ever you have seen in your time?

**Jenny ATTA:** I was going to reflect that it has been a long time, Mr McGowan, and I have seen a little bit, but look it is clearly very concerning.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I could take that as a yes if it makes it easier for you.

**Jenny ATTA:** I would simply say that it is very concerning, and it is notwithstanding what I know to be very diligent work from a large team of people with significant expertise and skills in this area, but there are a lot of fundamentals that go to building a high-performing agency, and clearly we conclude at this stage that there has been a deterioration over time. And it really is not a specific review; it is the root-and-branch review, as the minister has said. On top of that, he has asked for an independent monitor to be established, because the life cycle of a VCE examination series is really a 12-month life cycle. So we want an additional layer of assurance over the planning, preparation, management, production and implementation of the 2025 exams that can start straightaway in the new year.

**Nick McGOWAN:** You will forgive me, I have got a few machinery-like questions, but you know why I am asking them. In respect to Ms White's appointment, was the role advertised externally?

**Jenny ATTA:** Yes, it was.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. And was a proper merit-based process followed to the extent of your knowledge?

**Jenny ATTA:** That is correct. Yes, it was.

**Nick McGOWAN:** And do you know how many candidates were considered for that role?

**Jenny ATTA:** I could not tell you offhand the pool of candidates, but there were multiple applications for the role.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. And I have been asked to ask whether you were aware of Ms White's longstanding Labor Party membership.

**Jenny ATTA:** I am not aware of that.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. Did the Minister for Education actually sign off on Mrs White's appointment?

**Jenny ATTA:** No. The Secretary is the employer of the CEO.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. And was Mrs White's performance as VCAA CEO formally reviewed before her resignation?

**Jenny ATTA:** Ms White had acted in the role, I think from memory, from around November last year and has substantively been appointed in the role for four or five months now. I can check that detail for you. So we

had a performance conversation at the midyear point, when I usually have those conversations with executives, but it is only more recently that she has had a substantive contract that would be reviewed in that sense.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Did Ms White's resignation follow any internal recommendations or findings?

**Jenny ATTA:** There had been no time –

**Nick McGOWAN:** That were conveyed to her, let me put it that way.

**Jenny ATTA:** No, Mr McGowan. These events of course unfolded very quickly over the last week or so, and Ms White tendered her resignation. I do want to note that Ms White had worked diligently, taking on that role to turn around performance issues with the agency. I do not want to draw conclusions – and it is too early to, and the minister has announced a review – around exactly what are likely to be a range of factors that have contributed here.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Is it not preferable sometimes to wait for a review in order to determine whether that member of staff should actually receive certain benefits or payouts, to determine what their actions were and their culpability?

**Jenny ATTA:** Mr McGowan, Ms White has resigned, and that just triggers the usual contractual arrangements around the payout of accrued entitlements that are triggered on a resignation. There is nothing in that space, I think, that needs to wait.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. Without identifying anyone else, were there any other staff members disciplined or dismissed over the incident aside from Ms White?

**Jenny ATTA:** No, Mr McGowan. All of our focus and all of the VCAA's focus under Dr Devlin, the interim CEO, is on exams being completed this week and then working through the very important process around ensuring fair assessment of all exams next week. The minister has called for the review. I am in the midst of putting together advice for him about the scope and terms of reference for that review, and we will move to that just as soon as we can take our eyes off this immediate period.

**Nick McGOWAN:** These questions are intended for Dr Devlin, but I am happy for you to either answer them as you can or come back to us if you wish. The question I have here is: on what date were the sample cover sheets uploaded to the VCAA website?

**Jenny ATTA:** Yes, I would have to come back to you to be sure I can give you an accurate date there.

**Nick McGOWAN:** And the other question I have is: on what date was it discovered that the sample cover sheets included hidden text, including hidden questions?

**Jenny ATTA:** My understanding is that was 12 October.

**Nick McGOWAN:** If that is not correct, you will let us know, obviously.

**Jenny ATTA:** That is right; I will.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay, thank you. And on what date were these sample cover sheets taken down from the VCAA website?

**Jenny ATTA:** I understand it was on the same day, and I will come back with confirmation of that.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you. On what date was the minister advised that the sample cover sheets had been uploaded with hidden text?

**Jenny ATTA:** I understand that was early in the following week – I think around the 14th – along with, by that time, the work that had been done on the proposed remedy to ensure that there was a full set of quality-assured exams with no relationship to those sample questions, if you like.

**Nick McGOWAN:** That flows on to my next question. What assurances was the minister given about the course of action and rewriting the exams?

**Jenny ATTA:** I would have to come back to you on the details of the VCAA briefing. But certainly the department was provided with a briefing as well, and the VCAA of course took that information and proposal to their board as well with a fully set out, detailed plan to ensure that that effective remedy could be delivered and delivered on time.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Do you have a clear picture yet as to why the VCAA failed to detect and address the issue of the hidden text in the sample cover sheets before they were uploaded?

**Jenny ATTA:** No, I do not have a complete understanding. That initial issue does appear to be a somewhat obscure desktop publishing error, malfunction or issue. But I think it is important that we let the review proceed and not speculate too much on that. The minister is determined, as am I, that we have complete clarity about what happened, how and why.

**Nick McGOWAN:** On that, do you know why the VCAA initially assured the minister that the exams had been rewritten, if that is in fact what they did?

**Jenny ATTA:** To your particular question about why they provided that assurance, we will come back to you, but it was a central part of the detailed remedy. But I can come back to you with any further detail from the VCAA on that.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Do you know how the decision was made to rewrite only some of the affected exams while leaving others unchanged?

**Jenny ATTA:** It was my understanding, Mr McGowan, that all impacted exams – all impacted items for the impacted exams – were adjusted. The question is clearly that some of them were not adjusted sufficiently. But again, I can come back to you to confirm the details on that.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you. I appreciate that. From your oversight, there were multiple VCAA exams which some have described, in the way they were written and phrased – and this is teachers and students commenting – as clumsy. Would that be your observation?

**The CHAIR:** Mr Hilakari, is there a point of order?

**Mathew HILAKARI:** There is. I appreciate Mr McGowan is a forward-looking individual, but we are actually looking back at the previous year's financial performance. So I am hoping we can move to that now that we are two-thirds of the way through your questions.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** On the point of order, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** On the point of order, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The questioning started specifically on the review undertaken last year on the exam debacle. This is the outcomes hearing, so we are seeking the outcomes of the Bennett review, which clearly have not been terribly well implemented. This is entirely within the scope, I would argue.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Happy to hear if there are questions about the Bennett review, of course.

**The CHAIR:** I beg your pardon?

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Happy to hear if there are further questions on the Bennett review, of course.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I can move on to something else, at any case, if it assists.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr McGowan.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you, Secretary, for your answer. Do you intend on disbanding the VCAA? What is the intention there going forward?

**Jenny ATTA:** My intention is to give the minister every support to establish the review that he has called for, the comprehensive review, which will provide recommendations to the minister on any future steps and actions going forward.



**Nick McGOWAN:** Just to take a little break from those issues just for one moment, my beloved Marlborough Primary School – now, we all want it to succeed. I think I said this last year, and I am going to say the same thing again this year – it would be remiss not to – but please, for the love of God, can you not give us a small bucket of money? Perhaps you can take it from transport, because we know they are not using it very well, and give it to Marlborough. If they are going to succeed as a primary school – I think they have enrolments in the order of seven, and you and I both know that that is not great – what they do need is a new facility in some way, shape or form.

**Jenny ATTA:** Mr McGowan, obviously there is a very long list of things that we would like to do, and –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Could we put this on the shortlist?

**Jenny ATTA:** That school as well – and I know the community that are supporting that school – have done a lot of work, so it is definitely on the department’s radar.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. Is there anything I can do to assist to make it bigger on that radar?

**Jenny ATTA:** I think you have assisted already, Mr McGowan, and obviously we need to provide advice across a wide range of competing demands.

**Nick McGOWAN:** No, I appreciate that. In terms of the VCAA and their not immediately disclosing the breach after it was discovered, was the decision not to do that, as far as you are aware, the VCAA’s decision or was that a decision by the minister’s office?

**Jenny ATTA:** I think all I can say on that, Mr McGowan, is that the VCAA developed the proposal on the actions and remedy and recommended a way forward to manage the incident once it had been discovered and was understood.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Do you know whether the minister’s office was involved in the rewriting process, or his advisers?

**Jenny ATTA:** I am –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Point of order again.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Secretary, there is a point of order. Mr Hilakari on a point of order.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I do appreciate that Mr McGowan did seek to have some other questions in there, which is fantastic, that looked back to the 2023–24 financial year. But I think we are straying back into a forward-looking approach, Mr McGowan, so it would be appreciated if you could either go to the Bennett inquiry or the Bennett report or other matters that are relevant to this inquiry – the reason that we are here.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. I will rule on the point of order, Mr O’Brien. Mr McGowan, I would draw you back to the terms of reference that this committee is having public hearings about today. If you would like to rephrase your question, perhaps, to move forward.

**Jenny ATTA:** Chair, with your permission, I might just note that the VCAA is an independent statutory authority. These are central elements of the statutory responsibilities, and neither the department nor any other agency or individual can interfere with or direct them in the carriage of those responsibilities.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Secretary. That seems crystal clear to me. Mr McGowan, please move forward.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I am feeling very chipper this afternoon, so I will move on to another question and that is in respect to the questionnaire on page 34, and in section B there of the PAEC questionnaire in relation to asset investment I note there are substantial variances between the intended cost and the actual cost of many school builds. We are talking about school build projects that have blown out by more than 100 per cent – in one case at least – with a total additional cost of nearly \$200 million across the projects, plural. Can you explain what that is attributable to? Notwithstanding obviously construction costs may have been more than anticipated, that seems to be quite a sizeable amount more.

**Jenny ATTA:** Thanks, Mr McGowan. I will hand to Ms Blanch to provide some detail here. One of the really important factors over the last two to three years has been the volatility in the construction market and the impact on pricing of infrastructure, not only within our school capital program but right across government and in the private sector. Ms Blanch will provide you with some more detail.

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Thank you, Secretary. Thank you for the question. As the Secretary mentioned, market volatility has impacted the construction sector – that is, the broader construction industry, not just the school infrastructure program level. Noting that, the majority of school building projects have been delivered on time and to budget, but in a market with high volatility there is uncertainty in pricing, which results in inconsistent costing practices across the industry. This can lead to project delays and slippage as well as cost increases. These increases are driven by a range of factors, including but not limited to increases in the costs of materials, energy prices, insurance and labour.

On most construction projects – again, across the industry, not just education infrastructure projects – labour accounts for about 50 per cent of the cost of those projects. Labor shortages do put significant cost pressures on project timelines, cost and scope. While we are seeing some of those pressures ease and stabilise over the past 12 months, we are still seeing some of those risk increases and that continued volatility. In response to those pressures, the Victorian School Building Authority –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, on behalf of the Deputy Chair. We are out of time. Thank you. We are going to move forward to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Like the Deputy Chair, I am also feeling very chipper, Secretary, because I am keen to talk about some of the new schools that have been built. Indeed they were funded under the 2023–24 budget. There is a raft of new schools – \$573 million, I believe, of schools – opening next year and the year after, including three in Clyde North in my electorate, which I am very excited about. Secretary, can you update us on these new schools and the progress of delivery for these schools?

**Jenny ATTA:** Yes. Thanks, Mr Galea. It is always exciting at this time of year as we start to confirm that the new schools due to open the following year are on track, as they are, for 2025, I am very happy to say. We have had that opportunity to have principals appointed some months out and already working with an evolving, developing local school community, who are already very passionate and excited about those schools. I will ask Ms Blanch to talk to the detail of that.

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Thank you, Secretary. That is right. The 2023–24 state budget provided \$573.2 million to build six new schools to open in 2025, three new schools to open in 2026 and planning and early works for three new schools to open in 2026 as well as additional stages at two existing new schools.

The six new schools, as our Secretary mentioned, are on track to open in 2025 and include Barayip Primary School in Tarneit, Kuyim Primary School in Pakenham, Mirniyan Primary School in Clyde North, Turrun Primary School in Clyde North, Wirrigirri Primary School in Wollert and Wulerrp Secondary College in Clyde North.

The three new schools to open in 2026 are also on track, and those are Fishermans Bend primary school in Port Melbourne, Lockerbie secondary school and Point Cook South P–9, and the early works and planning funding was also provided for three schools to be delivered in 2026. Those three schools are Casey Central primary school in Cranbourne North, Lockerbie specialist school and Point Cook South specialist school. All of those 2026 schools are also in progress and on time for day one delivery for 2026.

The two schools that received additional stages are Clyde Secondary College and Greenvale Secondary College. Clyde Secondary College opened in 2022, and the additional funds are for 425 additional permanent places. Those works also include a learning neighbourhood building, visual arts building, hardcourts and an oval, and this is on track for the 2025 school year. Similarly, we are adding additional, permanent capacity as part of stage 2 works at Greenvale Secondary College, creating space for an extra 425 local students. These works also include a learning neighbourhood building, a visual arts building, a community hub, hardcourts, a sports oval and outdoor spaces. That stage 2 upgrade is also on track for the 2025 school year.

**Michael GALEA:** Terrific. Thank you. And one of those schools you mentioned – all three of those are in my electorate, but one of those in particular, Mirniyan primary school in Clyde North, I got to visit with the

acting principal recently. It is just fantastic to see that school almost pretty much done now, indeed including a very beautiful serpentine eel sandpit representing the local indigenous fauna from the area. So it was a really special feature to be right at the heart of that new school. I know the staff are all very excited to take up the new school, and I know the parents will be too. There has been great demand for schools in that area, so to see all these new schools coming online is going to be really terrific. The existing schools as well – I understand there are 43-odd schools funded in the same budget for major upgrades, including Hallam Secondary and Cranbourne East Secondary amongst many others across the state. Whether it is the Secretary or Ms Blanch, can you talk me through the status of those projects and how they are tracking along?

**Jenny ATTA:** I will let Ms Blanch continue.

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Happy to, thank you. Thank you for that question. That is right; there were 43 school upgrades that were funded in the 2023–24 state budget. I am pleased to let the committee know that architects for all 43 upgrade projects were appointed in December 2023. At the end of June 2024, 41 of those 43 projects were in the design phase, one was in the construction phase and one has actually reached practical completion, which was the upgrade at Ormond Primary School. Depending on the individual project complexity, we expect 34 of the remaining 42 upgrades to reach practical completion between March and September 2026 and the remaining eight by December 2026. Thank you for the question.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Another of the many, many initiatives in this budget regarding school capital works was hydrotherapy pools for specialist schools. Can you talk to me a little bit about why these are so important and again an update on the delivery of those if they are on track?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Thank you for that question. As you stated, there were seven schools that shared in \$25 million from the Hydrotherapy Pools at Specialist Schools Fund. Those seven schools are Ballarat Specialist School, Bass Coast Specialist School, East Gippsland Specialist School, Echuca Twin Rivers Specialist School, Lake Colac School, Springvale Park Special Developmental School and Yarraville Special Developmental School. These are important projects because schools with hydrotherapy pools can provide students with valuable social and physical health benefits. They also reduce time taken out of class for appointments and the travel burden for students, parents and carers. All seven projects are being delivered through a standardised template design, and a principal design consultant was appointed in March 2024. The projects are currently at master planning stage and the VSBA is actively engaging with all seven schools to combine the template designs with unique features of the seven sites. These projects are forecast to have a builder appointed by the second quarter of 2025, with construction due to be completed ahead of the scheduled third-quarter 2026 date. Thank you.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Very good to see progress on that as well. It is important that we are looking after every student, giving them that same opportunity. Secretary, in terms of workforce, you touched on this in your presentation as well. Both in the budget papers but also the budget update for the 2023–24 financial year there is considerable funding for workforce initiatives to bring in and retain our teaching staff. Can you please go into a little bit more detail about what specific initiatives have been gone through in this year and what impact they are having?

**Jenny ATTA:** Yes, I am very happy to. I might ask my Deputy Secretary Andrea Del Monaco to supplement here, but it is and remains a really important priority for us. Schools not only in Victoria but right around the country are continuing to be in that challenging environment where we are trying to stimulate teacher supply to meet demand right across the country, right across all sectors here in Victoria as well. The department has really worked on a multifaceted plan to address this. It is really built around the five priority areas of attraction, recruitment – they are fairly obvious, but initiatives to support both of those objectives – but also a strategy to support our early-career teachers – we know that one of the really critical things is not losing those teachers two, three or five years into their career – a broader retention strategy, and then career development. Again we know that in the middle years of teaching, for instance, that is often where we will start to lose teachers who will take up other pathways if we do not have thriving career options, if you like, for them. So there are a wide range of initiatives that we have been progressing with, and with significant investment from the government. On the secondary teacher scholarships, I think you mentioned –

**Michael GALEA:** Yes, I am keen to know about that actually.

**Jenny ATTA:** I will ask Andrea to talk to those. They are particularly important, because our hardest area across the general schooling system is secondary schools. We have been able to grow, as you saw from the initial presentation, the number of registered teachers. But in Victoria, along with all other states and territories, secondary school is the most stubborn area for us to lift supply. Thanks, Andrea.

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Thank you for that. Significant funding was provided in the 2022–23 budget, the 2023–24 budget and the 2023–24 budget update, and in this period of 2023–24 we have been implementing a number of those initiatives. The Secretary spoke to the secondary teacher scholarships initiative. The other significant initiative has been Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow. It is an employment-based program. Previously, people studied and then became teachers. This is postgraduate people studying while they teach, so they might do part-time study and teach at the same time or study intensely and then work in schools. I think this is the way of the future. We have got 1200 of those rolling over the 2023, 24, 25 years.

Preservice teacher grants – we know that when students go on placement it is a challenging time financially, so we have got a grant program for people who take their placements in rural, in regional and in specialist settings. Importantly in terms of the retention piece, we have got a really significant career start initiative, which provides comprehensive support to government graduate teachers, time release and, importantly, release of time for the mentors. We have got an aspiring Koori teacher program to help our ES staff train to be teachers; flexible work for school leaders, again trying to build on the retention piece for our school leaders; returning teacher supports to get a number of those people on the Victorian Institute of Teaching register back into our schools; and targeted financial incentives, which I think Mr O’Brien has asked about in the past, which provide an important role for those very difficult-to-fill roles. We are pleased with how these are being delivered – the Secretary talked about that – but we know that there is still more to be done.

We have got 1700 additional teachers this year in the government system than last year. The numbers in the Victorian register are really quite strong – stronger than trend, more than 4000 in the last two years, each year, so this bodes well. The other important thing is we have now got the best ratios of all the states in terms of our teacher-student ratios, and half the growth in teacher numbers has been in Victoria. But I think we would acknowledge that principals and teachers in their communities, in some of those hard-to-staff locations, have had to do more. When they advertise there are less applications, and sometimes it is taking longer to recruit, so we appreciate the work that they have done as part of that, and work needs to continue.

**Jenny ATTA:** And Mr Galea, if I might, it is worth noting that we have, through some of those initiatives and the scholarships in particular, for the first time in many years seen an increase in the intake for initial teacher education, including for secondary schools. That is a very important green shoot for us.

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Yes, that is a 23 per cent increase in VTAC enrolments, which is really quite significant. We had a downward trend of enrolments in people choosing to study teaching, and this has started to turn the tide on that. It is a really significant change, and other states are watching this with interest. And it has really created some interest and excitement and shows the value that has been placed on the profession.

**Michael GALEA:** Excellent. Just to clarify, I think you said half of all new teaching roles are in Victoria, across the nation, is that correct?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Yes, that is correct.

**Michael GALEA:** Did you also say 700 more teaching staff?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** 1700.

**Michael GALEA:** 1700 more than last year, excellent. That is very good to see, very encouraging.

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Victoria is also growing, so we also have a lot more people.

**Michael GALEA:** Of course. What we see in Clyde North is probably taking up a large share of some of those new teachers.

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** And some of the challenges and the pain that you see in those areas is very much due not just to the normal movement of staff but the movement of staff plus enrolment growth, which is driving that.

**Michael GALEA:** You said that the teacher–student ratios are the best in the nation. Do you have any data that shows –

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Not best in the nation – of all states. Northern Territory has –

**Michael GALEA:** Best of all the states.

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** That is right. Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** We will catch up to them. Do you have any data that shows Victoria in comparison with the other states?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Yes. I can find that data. Across all levels in Victoria we have student ratios of 12.6, so one teacher to every 12.6 students. By comparison New South Wales is at 14.1, Queensland at 13.2, South Australia at 13.3, Western Australia at 14.2. This is really significant and is a key part of that workforce retention piece. When teachers are supported with other teachers in the classroom this makes a significant difference.

**Michael GALEA:** Quite some measure ahead as well, by the look of it, from those figures. That is very good to know. You did touch on the secondary teaching scholarships as well. I am wondering if you could talk about that a little bit more. Is that part of the reason why we are seeing those green shoots emerge, or are there any other impacts out of that program in particular?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** The important thing about the scholarship program is it provides, if you are doing an undergraduate degree, \$18,000, so that is payments while you study and then a couple of payments after if you do your time in a government school, and \$9000 if you do a postgraduate degree. This is significantly driving the change in that trend. We know that this will mean more teachers entering the workforce from 2026, because postgraduates are a two-year degree, so we will see that come through shortly. We have awarded 1910 scholarships. These are scholarships for people regardless of where they choose to go, whether it is into the government or the non-government system.

**Michael GALEA:** Irrespective of which sector they go into, it still has a net positive impact.

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** That is right. We are growing the supply of the workforce.

**Michael GALEA:** Excellent.

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** We expect with these scholarships not only will it increase the number of enrolments coming in but also the completion rates, so we know, while Victoria has better completion rates than some other states across the universities, the economics of studying and working is a challenge, and we are expecting to see and watching closely and looking to evaluate the impact on completion rates from this initiative.

**Michael GALEA:** Terrific. Thanks very much, Ms Del Monaco. Secretary, just going back to disability supports – and we did speak just briefly before about hydrotherapy pools at specialist schools – I understand that there is a raft of initiatives totalling \$209.8 million in the 2023–24 budget papers for supporting students with disability. Could you go through what some of those initiatives are in a little bit more detail and what outcomes have been delivered through these programs?

**Jenny ATTA:** We would be happy to, Mr Galea. Mr Fraser, I will throw to you in a moment to talk a bit more to that. The continued investment to support students with disabilities is incredibly important for our government school system, and that goes to both inclusion initiatives for our mainstream schools as well as additional support for our 83 or 84 specialist schools across the state. Mr Fraser will be able to talk about those initiatives that we are currently rolling out through an additional \$210 million that was invested in the 2023–24 budget. Thanks, Stephen.

**Stephen FRASER:** Thank you, Secretary. Thanks for the question. As we touched on in the presentation, there has been significant investment in disability inclusion over the last four years, and we are now well into almost the end of the fourth year of a five-year reform program to implement disability inclusion across the entire system. The \$210 million that you mentioned is part of the fighting for students with disability and their

families package of interventions. The hydrotherapy pools that Ms Blanch talked through earlier are part of that initiative. One of the significant initiatives as part of that as well is the NDIS navigators program. That is about getting a highly expert, well-trained individual into our specialist schools – 88 specialist schools across the state – to help families and the school navigate the service delivery within the NDIS. We are rolling that out at the moment. It is being delivered in three tranches. The first tranche opened up to schools as part of an expression-of-interest process. We know that not all specialist schools will be ready for those staff to come in immediately, and so a phased implementation approach is working really well to support that. The first tranche was opened up in September of last year. That succeeded in recruiting navigators to 32 schools, and all 32 schools now have a navigator employed, with no vacancies. Tranche 2 opened up in July of this year. We are recruiting to 35 schools as part of that tranche; we have got 26 of those positions filled. The remaining nine schools are expected to be recruited to by the end of this year, and then we will open up tranche 3 to have all schools recruited to by the end of 2025.

Those navigators are doing some outstanding work really, supporting students, families and schools to navigate the sometimes complex environment of the NDIS, whether that is service delivery in terms of getting students to therapy sessions, navigating service delivery partners, navigating access to information or sometimes the transition beyond school into further employment and work. There have been, as I said before, some outstanding individuals attracted to those roles. One of the things that we were a little anxious about at the start is that that would create a pressure on the teaching workforce, which Ms Del Monaco has just talked us through, but the people attracted to those roles are typically those with expertise in the NDIA. They have come out of the National Disability Insurance Agency, they are mental health practitioners, they are integration aides, they are educational support staff or they are welfare coordinators – those with real expertise in working with families and students. They know how schools work, they know the complexities of what disability can be like for families and they really are expert at helping those families navigate the services. The initiative attracted quite a bit of attention from the NDIS review at the national level, and there is interest in exploring those NDIS navigator roles nationally within the context of the future of the NDIS.

**Michael GALEA:** As in other states adapting that same model in their jurisdictions – or indeed by the Commonwealth?

**Stephen FRASER:** Definitely at the Commonwealth level in terms of the NDIS review, but we have had interest in the disability inclusion rollout, the reforms and the NDIS navigators from other states and territories. It is an initiative that is seeing success in those specialist schools and attracting interest, as you say, from other states and territories and being picked up in the NDIS review at a national level. So we are really looking forward to continuing the rollout and recruitment under that second tranche, which we will complete by the end of this year, and then opening up to the final tranche of schools so that we have got one in place in every specialist school across the state by the end of next year.

**Michael GALEA:** Fantastic. Thank you very much. Thank you, officials. Thank you, Secretary.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Galea. We are going to Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, team. Secretary, did the minister ask you to ask for Ms White's resignation?

**Jenny ATTA:** No, Mrs McArthur, he did not. And I should clarify, I did not ask for it either.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Thank you. Can we just go back to some questions Mr McGowan asked, where you said you discovered the sample sheets on 12 October –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** On a point of order, Chair, I think we have been through this before. We are looking at the 2023–24 financial year and the performance, not looking forward. It is appreciated that you might want to ask questions in question time or in other forums or media conferences et cetera, but this place is actually to discover how the state has performed in 2023–24. I would appreciate it if we confined it to the actual point of the inquiry.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** On the point of order, Chair, this might be uncomfortable for the government and Mr Hilakari, but there is no possible way you can argue that this is not in scope. There have been two previous years of stuff-ups with VCE exams. As a result, the government spent money on a review – the Bennett review.

This is an outcome from that. Did we fix it? Clearly, we did not fix it, and it is the job of this committee to ensure that we pursue that and find out what went wrong and what is being done about it. That might be uncomfortable for the government members, but you need to sit there and listen through it.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** It is not actually the job of this committee. The job of this committee at this time is an Inquiry into the 2023–24 Financial and Performance Outcomes. It is right behind you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I just outlined that, Mr Hilakari. Could you please just let us ask the question?

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, I will remind all committee members about the terms of reference for this inquiry. Mrs McArthur, if you wanted to continue with your question keeping in mind the evidence that Ms Atta has just provided us previously during Mr McGowan's line of questioning in relation to – Secretary, remind me again, the body?

**Bev McARTHUR:** It is a statutory authority. It is a quango.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That does not mean we cannot ask questions about it.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes. So who is responsible for the quango, Secretary?

**Jenny ATTA:** Sorry, for the what?

**Bev McARTHUR:** The quango – the quasi-autonomous non-government organisation, the school building authority. Who is responsible for it if not you?

**Jenny ATTA:** Well, I am responsible for the school building authority –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you very much.

**Jenny ATTA:** but I think you mean the curriculum and assessment authority. If it would assist the committee, I can talk to the structure of the VCAA. It is independent –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, can I ask you a question, please?

**Jenny ATTA:** I thought that was a question.

**Bev McARTHUR:** On 5 October the chemistry exam front cover was downloaded for people. You did not discover this till 12 October, you have said.

**Jenny ATTA:** No, I did not discover anything, Ms McArthur. We were talking earlier in response to Mr McGowan's question about my understanding of when the VCAA discovered –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Secretary, can you tell us how many days compromised papers were up online before anything was done about it?

**Jenny ATTA:** No. I do not have that information with me, but I can follow that up for you.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you. I will ask you to take that on notice.

**Nick McGOWAN:** It seems to me we had 5 October. Do you have any evidence of –

**Jenny ATTA:** I just do not have that knowledge, Mr McGowan. I am not aware of that date.

**Bev McARTHUR:** All right. Thank you very much, Secretary. If you could take those details on notice. On 14 November Ms White said:

The VCE examinations haven't been compromised and all students can be very confident about completing their exams. Only days later another VCAA spokesman admitted:

It is clear some students have been let down as a result of these errors and that is completely unacceptable ...

The VCAA are working to address the issues caused by the early publication of some examination questions.

while the minister confessed that a ‘handful’ of exams have been substantially compromised. How many exams are there in the VCE?

**Jenny ATTA:** My understanding is there are 117 written exams – 116, sorry.

**Bev McARTHUR:** 116, thank you very much. So how many were compromised?

**Jenny ATTA:** My advice is that there was some impact for 56 of those exams.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Fifty-six. How many would you say were substantially compromised?

**Jenny ATTA:** I am not able to give you that assessment, Ms McArthur, and again I am conscious as well that the minister has asked obviously for this to be reviewed. I can look at what information the VCAA can come back to you on to give a proper assessment. I am just not in a position to give you that assessment.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. How is it fair that assessors may dock a student’s marks if they believe they may have had an advantage by seeing the hidden text in the sample cover sheets?

**Jenny ATTA:** I think a very important next step that has been announced is the process for ensuring that all students’ work is fairly assessed. I might ask Dr Howes to talk to that. I do not think that is quite an accurate characterisation of the process, but I would be happy if we could just talk to that for the committee.

**David HOWES:** Thanks, Secretary and Ms McArthur. The Secretary together with the VCAA have appointed an expert panel to oversee that work. That comprises of Professor John Firth, Dr Nathan Zoanetti – Dr Zoanetti is with the Australian Council for Educational Research, which is one of the internationally leading educational measurement bodies – and Barry McGaw. Barry McGaw is by any measure a world leader in psychometrics. They are going to work together to oversight the process that will use what is called an anomalous grade process, which is established within the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority’s current processes, to determine: is it apparent in any first of all exam and then within that examination is it apparent that any question was impacted by the leak, that students’ performance was impacted? That is yet to be determined. And then there are a set of processes that are able to be pursued to say: if an item was impacted, did that lead to any student being advantaged and as a consequence any other student being disadvantaged? So there is a very clear process to work through; that has not been completed yet.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Will there be proof required before a mark is docked?

**David HOWES:** It will not be a question of proof, it will be a question of what the data says. This will be an analysis done based on the data that is apparent when all the answers from every question and the pattern of those answers are analysed on all the students’ performance on each study. That will involve as well an analysis of the performance of the students on other studies.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Will the students be provided with detailed guidance as to how their exams were marked so they can have confidence they have been fairly assessed?

**David HOWES:** Every year there is a marking guide that is published after the exams.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Will there be an appeal process?

**David HOWES:** There is an appeal process, yes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Will additional resources be provided to the VCAA given there are likely to be significantly higher volumes of appeals?

**Jenny ATTA:** We will be working closely, Mrs McArthur, with Dr Devlin. I will be very keen to ensure she has every resource that she needs to make sure this is conducted successfully.

**David HOWES:** Mrs McArthur, I should correct that. It would be more accurate to say it is an examination report that is published rather than a marking guide.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Will the timeline for results be pushed out? In other words, what will it mean for university and other offers?



**Jenny ATTA:** At this stage the advice from the VCAA is that they are working to the established timeline for release of results. We will be working very closely with them in terms of getting updates. I know Dr Devlin, if anything emerges that might impact that timeline, will want to be clear about that as soon as possible. But at this stage the advice is that they are working towards and confident about that date, on all the information in front of them at the moment.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Given that the VCAA has overseen three consecutive years of error-plagued or compromised exams are you confident this new due diligence process that you are undertaking will be substantial? And before you appointed Dr Devlin were you confident of the process?

**Jenny ATTA:** I am very confident that we will have a comprehensive and expert root-and-branch review of the VCAA. The minister has asked for that, quite correctly I think, and we are working at the moment to bring him advice on the appropriate scope and terms of reference and expertise and timelines et cetera that we need to be able to deliver on that. But importantly, and in partnership with that piece, I think the individual monitor that the minister has asked for should ensure that, from the very start of those preparations for the next examination series in 2025, we have an extra layer of assurance that can provide periodic reporting through to the minister at different stages of the exam development and preparation life cycle. Are the right processes and procedures in place? Are they being adhered to? From the work that happens across January and February right through to this time of year next year we need to make sure that we have got that monitor there. There will be considerable lessons to learn, I anticipate, coming out of the comprehensive review. The timeline is yet to be determined, but it will take some time for that review. We cannot afford to wait on the 2025 examination series, so we want that monitor in place very quickly.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Do you have any concerns about this year's exam in Chinese as a second language?

**Jenny ATTA:** There have been no concerns raised with me, Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Are you aware of a social media post from the social media platform Reddit that a tutoring company who had assisted the Department of Education sent out prompts identical to the leaked VCE Chinese paper?

**Jenny ATTA:** I am not personally aware of that post.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Would you be able to find out?

**Jenny ATTA:** I can ask a question about that and follow it up for you.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you very much. We will just go to – I think it is – Ms Blanch, Victorian School Building Authority. Thank you, Ms Blanch. Now, the VSBA capital works manage project delivery. The 2024/25 Capital Works Bundle West 2 combines four school construction projects: Cobden Technical School, Fitzroy Primary School, Swan Hill North Primary School and Whittlesea Secondary College. Why?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Thank you for your question. Can I just confirm that was in the reporting period that we are talking about?

**Bev McARTHUR:** Sorry? Yes, the 2024–25 capital works bundle.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That would be over the prior year. I do not think we would have funded them in this year's budget and then gone to tender within a couple of months. That is not how it works. So they were previously funded; we are now asking about the tendering process.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** And I am sure we can find a reference within the budgets – the previous budget papers or the department's reports.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Do you have any knowledge of this?

**Jenny ATTA:** So perhaps, Mrs McArthur, we can check that and come back to you during the session.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, that would be great, because it goes to another point. This bundling process, and I am not sure whether it is new or you have done it before – I think you have probably done it before – makes it

impossible for smaller businesses to pursue contracts in their own community, and that is about using local employees and local product et cetera. Fitzroy is a long way from Cobden, so that seems illogical. As you know, businesses wishing to tender must be pre-qualified on the DTF's construction supplier register. When you bundle contracts like this you automatically exclude smaller companies. So in my electorate, for example, BDH Constructions has operated for more than 30 years and recently successfully delivered the Colac Specialist School which I think was referred to in your report. Their CSR limit is \$15 million, enough for almost any standalone project, but bundled like this they cannot bid. Why take away this company's bread and butter and local projects?

**Jenny ATTA:** I think without having the specifics of that bundling approach in front of me, the thing I would say is that there have been different approaches to the procurement for the school capital program trying to balance a whole range of considerations, and it is important, and we have had approaches that have considered where we can ensure access for local companies for local projects, but we also have competing demands around how do we get price, how do we get things delivered on time, how can we bring like projects together where companies might have particular expertise. So I will just check if there is anything we can say about that bundle right now or otherwise I will follow it up for you.

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Thank you, Secretary. In terms of that specific bundle, no, but generally all of our procurement follows the government's social procurement requirements, and there are procurement thresholds that do require an element of local input, and those larger capital programs would meet those thresholds requirements to do that and follow up with specific advice around that.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, if you follow that up. The 5 per cent management fee VSBA takes on capital projects like this: would it be chargeable on all the projects if they are separately tendered, or will it be chargeable on the bundled projects?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Thank you for the question. There is not a set 5 per cent line as you mentioned. There are fees that need to be paid for consultants for project management, and those are incorporated into the overall cost of these projects.

**Bev McARTHUR:** The VSBA have a separate line entry of their own percentage they take off the top every project, don't they?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Not for every individual project, no.

**Jenny ATTA:** And it may be that where there is a school-funded project that the VSBA is managing – that might be what you are referring to there where there will be a project management cost as there would be for whoever was delivering that project.

**Bev McARTHUR:** If you are bundling all these projects, are you bundling them for your own convenience? Why would you be bundling them?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** I am happy to take that question. Thank you. Part of the reason why we bundle school projects is to make sure that we have got an attractive bundle for the market to respond to and get the best possible responses from the market. That is the main reason why we bundle them. It does usually happen in geographical cohorts and –

**Bev McARTHUR:** This is clearly not geographical, is it? Fitzroy to Cobden to Swan Hill is hardly geographical.

**Jacinta BLANCH:** It is usually done in geographical cohorts but also can be around the type of the school that is being constructed.

**Bev McARTHUR:** It is clearly designed to eliminate small- to medium-sized operators, isn't it?

**Jenny ATTA:** I do not think that is the case, Ms McArthur. On the specific example you have raised, we will follow up and come back to you with a rationale.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Construction costs have been escalating at a pace for the past few years. How has the department not been able to appropriately budget for the true cost of these school upgrades?

**Jenny ATTA:** Again, Ms Blanch might supplement. We have seen in a much more stable environment, pre-pandemic for a number of years, a very strong track record of estimating budgets and delivering schools on budget and on time. There have been two or three years that have been much more volatile, and for school projects along with other infrastructure right across the state it has been much more challenging to project where the market will be once the projects go out. Is there anything you can add to that, Ms Blanch?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** It would just be good to add that we do regularly reflect market rates. We conduct annual reviews to do that, and we also undertake quarterly reviews of the volatility of the market.

**Bev McARTHUR:** I have some questions relating to section B, question 10 of the PAEC questionnaire, relating to high-value, high-risk projects. I note you have listed two high-value, high-risk projects: enrolment growth for new schools and Best Start, Best Life infrastructure. What is your reason for refusing the business cases for these high-value, high-risk projects to be publicly available?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Thank you for your question. We have never made our business cases public, but we do submit to the high-value, high-risk process each year.

**Bev McARTHUR:** We have seen that there is a \$200 million blowout in school upgrades over this period. Do you think releasing the business case for new schools would give the public some confidence that your budgeting for new school builds is more accurate?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Thank you for your question. In terms of those additional funds that have been required for a small number of projects, these have proportionately been a very small component of the broader capital budget for those programs. Some of that funding was related to contractor insolvencies, which impacted the residential building sector far more than the school infrastructure, but nonetheless it did cause some delays and cost increases due to retendering and associated works to complete some of those projects.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. I would like to talk a bit about an initiative from the 2023–24 budget. Table 1.7 of BP3 has one of the initiatives there: providing Victorian students with the essentials to support their engagement in learning. We have not touched on it so much so far, but I guess the broader context that we are talking about is in a cost-of-living crunch situation. With this initiative funding here, how is that supporting families during this time? I think this is where the breakfast club sits; is that right?

**Jenny ATTA:** Yes, that is right. There are a range of initiatives that probably fall into this category, but certainly funding in the 2023–24 budget continued and enhanced significant programs, such as the school breakfast clubs and Glasses for Kids program. I will ask Mr Fraser to say a little more about that.

It is a really important part of our whole-school operating model, which is about teaching and learning and about health and wellbeing. We know that on the wellbeing side it is very important, along with teaching and learning programs, to be able to design programs to support engagement, to support wellbeing, to support children and young people, so that they are ready to learn and they are supported to learn. And we have found – as I am sure Mr Fraser will talk to – the uptake of the school breakfast clubs and all the other support that goes around that before-school program is a really great example of why that makes a difference when children get to the classroom. Thanks, Mr Fraser.

**Stephen FRASER:** Thank you, Secretary. Thank you, Ms Kathage. Look, these are such essential programs and supports for children and families. As you say, the suite of programs is about providing the essentials to support students' engagement in their learning, and it really sits across a range of four programs – the school breakfast club program, the affordable school uniforms program, the free period products and the Glasses for Kids program, as you mentioned. Each of these really builds on some great partnerships that we have right across the system.

If I start with the school breakfast clubs program, it is delivered by Foodbank; they have been our delivery partner since the program was established in 2016. And just two weeks ago Foodbank, with the government, celebrated the delivery of the 50 millionth meal across the state, which is outstanding. As of the end of the financial year – June 2024 – the program had delivered 44.5 million, and as I said, we have just hit that 50 million mark. It is not only about breakfast, it is about delivering nutritious breakfasts, lunches, snacks, take-

home meal packs and cooking classes in the 1000 participating schools that we have got to date – and just in the last budget the opportunity to expand that program to all schools who wish to participate in the program was offered. But sticking with the scope of these hearings, we have invested through government \$141.2 million since 2016, and in the 2023–24 budget there was that \$69.5 million invested.

As I said, Foodbank have been a fantastic partner. They have really expanded and made flexible the delivery of the program so it can be tailored to meet the needs of individual schools and families and to ensure that food is not just limited to breakfast but is provided throughout the day for those children who might need it, and as I said, with those take-home meal packs supporting families. That kind of support was provided through the pandemic when students were learning remotely and flexibly and families were struggling with the cost of living and getting out to the supermarkets, in some cases, to get those meals.

The program has been, as I said, expanded to offer it to all schools who want it, and that will be rolled out from this year, with an expression of interest going out by the end of this year. It is not being offered as a universal program, because although Foodbank do an outstanding job, we know that some schools have existing partnerships with local providers and similar organisations to Foodbank, and we do not want to disrupt those really important relationships that exist at the local level with local businesses.

Just a little bit on the kind of meals and snacks and foods that are provided: there is a menu, and schools get to –

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Cheese toasties.

**Stephen FRASER:** Cheese toasties are very popular. Tuna and rice bowls, soup – that is in addition to cereals, fruit and the toasties in the morning. And the program also offers a range of small appliances – you know, toasted sandwich makers – to support not only the making of the meals but storage as well. So that is a really important part of the program. We renew that equipment in schools and school kitchens. And it has expanded to allow the provision of cooking classes as well. Again, Foodbank have been a fantastic partner in opening up the cooking classes. And we are delivering an additional 15 cooking classes through the funding provided in the last budget so that we will get up to a total of 103 schools supported with those classes since that aspect of the program started.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** It is interesting what the Secretary said about wellbeing and health, because when I visited the Whittlesea Secondary College breakfast club program, it is actually the staff wellbeing team that prepare and distribute the meals to the students. They sort of recognise, I guess, that crossover between who might need a bit of help physically and who might need a bit of help mentally as well. I think that is really fantastic. And then each school is different, because down the road then at Whittlesea Primary School when I visited it was Casey, a mum and Jenny, one of the grandmas there delivering for the kids along with the children themselves volunteering with the serving up of the meals, so there is this range across schools. I have been tracking which of my schools are taking up the EOI process, because I think it is a fabulous program; I would like to see it in all the schools in my electorate. Not all of them have yet, and maybe not all of them will. So for those schools that maybe do not think it is for them, are you sort of taking learnings from their particular situation and how the program might be adapted to suit more schools?

**Stephen FRASER:** Absolutely. It will not be suitable for all schools because they do have these existing partnerships with local businesses and local charities and other organisations providing food. As I said, we do not want to disrupt those partnerships that have been in place in some communities for many years, but where there are any barriers, whether it is the storage of the food or those appliances, it is overcoming those and tapping into the volunteers and others. As you said, sometimes it is classroom teachers, sometimes it is wellbeing support staff, sometimes it is families and parents coming in to support the provision and, as you say, sometimes it is students themselves. One of the really important aspects of the program is that it is not targeted only to students with particular eligibility. We do not want any stigma created by some students being eligible for free breakfasts and meals throughout the day. It is open to all students who might need it. And schools do a really good job of navigating the sensitivities around that and just ensuring it is access for all but making sure those students who might need it more than others are prioritised. That openness, that universality of the provision within each school, does a lot to forge and strengthen the social connections between students, students and families and families and the school just by bringing everyone in. The kind of social engagement that we see in the morning, and that you would have seen, does so much to strengthen the relationships between students, but then pays off, as the Secretary said, in terms of learning in the classroom.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Yes. Whittlesea Primary have board games out and tables set with tablecloths and everything. It is really, really sweet. You mentioned also the Glasses for Kids program. I have probably got more of a mum's view of this program than an MP's view. This term my daughter went off to school for the first time with glasses in her bag. She got picked up through the Glasses for Kids program as having a sight problem, that we had no idea about and her teacher had no idea about, so this program means a lot to me because we have seen how my daughter's learning has improved as a result of that program. So can you speak to that a bit more broadly than my daughter across the state and how that is helping children?

**Stephen FRASER:** Yes, absolutely. And as the kid who got in trouble sitting at the back because I could not see the board and was copying from my friends until I got glasses, I completely, completely identify. This is a really valuable program. It started in 2015. 6550 prep to year 3 students across the state have been provided with glasses to date, and there is screening in place for over 40,000 students. That screening process – we know whether it is speech and language or hearing or vision if we put that screening in place really early, we can identify those students who might need the intervention, provide the glasses or provide the speech pathology or provide the auditory intervention and make sure that those students can participate in their lessons on the same basis as their peers. So it is a really wonderful program. I will come onto portable school uniforms in a moment, but State Schools' Relief are a really wonderful organisation that was started by government schoolteachers in the great depression, and they are still going strong today. They are our delivery partner with the Glasses for Kids program. They work with schools to arrange the appointments, arrange for optometrists to come to those schools to undertake the screening, and then when students are identified as needing prescriptions, they work with the optometrist to deliver the glasses. Again, it is a really wonderful program, and we are proud to see it continue and expand across the state.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Fantastic. You mentioned uniforms. I did not realise that that started in the Great Depression.

**Stephen FRASER:** Yes, it was started by teachers around Elsternwick. It was started by teachers who identified that access to uniforms was a barrier to some students participating in school. So government schoolteachers started up State Schools' Relief, and it has been going strong since the 30s.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Because it is a big part of pride and belonging. Being the same as every other student is such a big thing for primary schoolkids. In 2023–24, that funding, what did that result in in terms of the uniforms?

**Stephen FRASER:** In 2023–24, \$32.9 million was invested to continue the program, so that secures funding right through to June 2027, and as of the end of the last financial year, June 2024, State Schools' Relief had approved applications from 568,000 students and supplied 2,033,000 items of clothing and educational resources to students in need since 2015. That is a huge number of students supported, a huge number of items delivered. It is not only uniforms; the program provides branded uniform items. They also run their own production line of affordable items for schools to tap into. It is a really innovative organisation – whether it is pants, shirts, jackets, underwear, socks, shoes or vocational equipment for training, steel-capped boots, for instance. They provide a range of resources – calculators and devices for internet access – just to ensure that students do not face those barriers to their learning and can engage with their peers. It is a pretty sophisticated distribution line that they have got going out from a warehouse in Dandenong, and they support hundreds of thousands of students and families across the state. Again, there is the cost-of-living aspect and also the participation in education that it addresses.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I think that you could probably build a lot more efficiencies into that program if kids would stop losing their jumpers at school. That would be very helpful.

I think the last one that you mentioned was the free period products. That has not been going as long, that program, and it is something in fact that we would not previously have even spoken about in public, so it is really great that attitudes have changed. How has this program been received by teachers and by students? How many people are we helping through this?

**Stephen FRASER:** Look, it has been incredibly positive. We saw the first free vending machines roll out in the state in just the last few weeks. This really builds on what has been put in place in schools. It began in 2019, with over nine million products delivered to government school students since that establishment in 2019. It

really is about providing students with the confidence that there will always be free period products available in their school. It is about relieving the stigma, anxiety and discomfort associated with menstrual hygiene management so that students can focus on their studies. There is, again, a cost-living aspect of this as well for families and individual students. There is \$15.4 million provided in the 2023–24 budget to continue the delivery of that program, and not only the free period products but the delivery of pelvic pain programs in schools as well. That is a fairly new program, which has been really, really well received by students and teachers. In the first half of this year we also started a trial of free individual tampons in schools, which had not been available. They were only previously available in three-packs, so those individual packs are in place in 20 government schools as part of a trial to improve access to products. There is an additional trial of free period underwear as well, which has been in response to calls from students themselves. The individual packs of tampons and the period undies were directly from organisations like the VicSRC, who tapped into student views, and those trials are really responsive to that demand.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** It is great that it is responsive in that way. I just want to move on then to page 17 of the same budget paper. It has got information there about multicultural and multifaith community support and different funding. Quite a few of us here represent very multicultural communities, and our schools have a wonderful diversity. I will just take a moment to give a shout-out to the principal at Donnybrook Primary School Dave Williams. I met one of his students, a student leader, on the weekend at celebrations for Guru Nanak's birthday. She told me that basically she would not have survived school without him and that he had made school a fantastic experience for her. She ended up as a school leader, so a big thankyou to principal Dave Williams. The funding that is there – what is it actually providing for multicultural and multifaith communities?

**Jenny ATTA:** Yes, it is another really, really important element of provision in our government school system. I think Dr Howes has got the detail – if you could go to it.

**David HOWES:** Sure. I can talk to one of the very important programs, which is the community language program, because obviously home language is incredibly important to a student's identity and to communities feeling that the heritage that their language represents is very important. It does give you some sense of the depth and the breadth of the diversity that you just spoke to when you go through some of the languages that were accredited for this year. I might just touch on some of them, because I am not sure people are aware of how many languages are supported through the community language program – Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian, Cantonese Mandarin, Chinese Mandarin, Croatian, Dari, Farsi, Filipino, and then some of the more traditional ones like German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Punjabi, Hungarian and Italian. We could go on the list through to Ukrainian, Urdu and Vietnamese. These are really important programs, and we are very pleased that the community language program enables those to be offered to students so that they can continue learning in their home language even if the school is not able to offer that as part of a program, because the community language schools of course work out of hours, either after school or on the weekend.

The extent of the program is there are now 182 of these community language schools operating, and this year 41,000 children were supported to attend those language centres, so that is 41,000 students who are being supported to maintain their language and their families are being supported to do that. Their sense of their own heritage and identity is strengthened through that, and of course we are very familiar with the other benefits that learning a language brings in terms of those social and cognitive benefits. There is plenty of evidence that talks to the broader benefit to academic learning that learning a language delivers. I am sure we are all acutely aware of the importance of students having a sense of the globe and their membership as global citizens, and language learning plays a critical role in that. So those community language centres are playing a really important part in strengthening the multicultural fabric not only of our schools but of our community.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Yes, I can imagine in growth areas or new suburbs that becomes a pretty central part of the community with people gathering out of school hours. That would be really fantastic. I must admit I did like that you included Punjabi as a traditional language for our state because it is becoming more and more common, and that is great to see. Speaking of Punjabi, we have got the beacon school initiative for Hindi and Punjabi. How is that going? Did that roll out to the original – did we select the original starting schools?

**David HOWES:** We have, and there was strong interest. As you point out, they are rapidly growing languages and it has been important to respond to that. The three schools are spread across the south-east, western and northern areas. Alkira Secondary College will be delivering Hindi. Wyndham Central College will

also be delivering Hindi, and Mount Ridley P-12 College will be delivering Punjabi. That is well underway. Students will be able to start their study at the start of term 1 next year, which is pretty exciting. So a lot of work in development in getting ready for that. They will start at either year 7 or a combination of years 7 and 9; the schools are making that decision in consultation with their communities.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** What was the process then for selecting schools?

**David HOWES:** Schools were able to express interest in that. We did have a very significant number of schools who wanted to offer them, so in addition to those three schools that will be participating in the beacon program there were three schools who had very strong expressions of interest through that process, so they are going to be provided with some seed funding to support them as well. That is Tarneit P-9 College with Tarneit Senior and they will be offering Hindi and possibly Punjabi, Mill Park Secondary College will be offering Hindi and Springside West Secondary College will also be offering Hindi. We are very pleased to have partnered with Monash University, who are developing a language methodology course in 2025 to support the teaching of those programs.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Kathage. Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Secretary, I understand after last year's exam conflagration that the then VCAA CEO asked Minister Carroll for approval to employ external experts in the exam unit. Is that correct, do you know?

**Jenny ATTA:** I am not aware of that as I sit here. I am just trying to think, Mr O'Brien. I am happy to follow it up for you. The VCAA will often work with different academics, different experts in the field who will assist or be contracted to do a particular task, but I am not aware of the specifics that you are going to there.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Could you perhaps investigate, because I understand Minister Carroll rejected the proposal for external experts in favour of using the GSC, which I think is an internal redeployment scheme of some sort?

**Jenny ATTA:** I am not aware of that at all, but I am happy to follow up your question.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** If you would not mind, that would be great. With respect to the panel that has been appointed to review the VCAA, who determined who was on the expert panel?

**Jenny ATTA:** We do not have a panel appointed at this point for any review. We do have the expert panel that is assisting and indeed overseeing the assessment process over the next period –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** They are the people that Dr Howes referred to.

**Jenny ATTA:** that Dr Howes referred to.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. I will rephrase the question: who will appoint the panel? Will the minister be choosing the members of the panel for the major review?

**Jenny ATTA:** Dr Howes might talk to that.

**David HOWES:** For the major review next year.

**Jenny ATTA:** Sorry, for the major review. Sorry. For the major review, yes, we are in the process, as I mentioned earlier, of bringing all of that advice together to go to the minister. He will ultimately approve the composition and structure of that review and indeed any lead reviewers, expert reviewers, other advice that we need. So all the advice will go to the minister on that, and final decisions will be taken then.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** By him?

**Jenny ATTA:** Yes. The minister will approve the review.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** What is the timeline for that?

**Jenny ATTA:** The minister has asked for advice, asap at this point. He has said that he wants that review to be underway in January.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I am sure PAEC is very unhelpful at this particular point in time.

**Jenny ATTA:** We will get to it tomorrow, Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Which goes to my next question. You yourself, Secretary, have appointed Dr Devlin as the interim CEO of the VCAA.

**Jenny ATTA:** That is correct.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Firstly, on what basis did you make that appointment?

**Jenny ATTA:** Mr O'Brien, obviously at a very difficult and challenging time for the VCAA with the resignation of the CEO, with this incident unfolding and the need for the appropriate processes to address it, we considered who would have a relevant skills background, expertise, that could readily step into that role if they were willing. Dr Devlin's substantive role is as CEO of the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership. We approached Dr Devlin after putting that proposal to the minister and Dr Devlin was willing in effect to second across into an acting capacity with the VCAA.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Has she got direct experience of the VCAA or its predecessors?

**Jenny ATTA:** Dr Devlin has previously been a board member with the VCAA. She has chaired a key committee related to aspects of the senior secondary reforms. An important part of her background and experience with the academy is that she works with all three school sectors in Victoria as the VCAA is required to. She is a very experienced academic and senior administrator at the university level as well. We feel that we were very fortunate to have someone of Dr Devlin's calibre available who is understanding of the immediate challenge in front of us and very willing to step in.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Is there a reason she was not able to step in for Ms White today for these hearings?

**Jenny ATTA:** Well, she had been in the role about 48 hours, so in terms of being able to get across and speak to issues across the 2023–24 year or any other matters it just seemed unreasonable.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Fair enough.

**Jenny ATTA:** She is also attending a board meeting this afternoon, and I just felt that her priority was much better focused on the work that we need to do now to support students coming out of their exams.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sure. In terms of her secondment, in terms of remuneration, is she now just remunerated as the interim VCAA CEO? Is she getting additional money for still doing her other job or not?

**Jenny ATTA:** She is being remunerated at the level of this role.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** And that alone?

**Jenny ATTA:** And that alone.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes, okay. Can I go back to – in fact Ms Blanch I think was answering a question earlier about building insolvencies. Can I ask, has the department incurred additional costs because of any insolvencies of builders that were undertaking school builds?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Yes, there were a small number of additional costs for those projects. The department itself did not incur additional costs, but those building projects did incur additional costs.

**Jenny ATTA:** But the projects incurred additional costs.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So the VSBA then incurred them. Is that what you are saying?



**Jacinta BLANCH:** Yes. Not for costs for VSBA staff, but for the project itself, just to clarify. That is partly because some of those were mid-construction, and it meant that we had to wait to see what happened with the company that entered into administration – sometimes they can restructure and be bought by another organisation and the works can continue and the deed can be novated under that new company. But sometimes the project may not have started. There were examples of projects that had not started yet so they had to go back out to tender and therefore were subject to the current market rates.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** How many were there?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** In this reporting period there was only one school project that was subject to an organisation that went insolvent, but there are projects completed in this reporting period that were subject to insolvencies in the previous calendar year. I think there was – I am happy to correct these numbers, but they were quite low – about 11 projects across four organisations.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** What was the one in this reporting period?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Allmore Constructions was the name of the organisation, and it was Wallan Primary School.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry, which primary?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Wallan Primary School. That was one of the projects where construction had completed and was in its defects liability period, so really there was no impact to that project.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry, I do not really quite understand when you say the department did not incur any costs but there were costs to the project.

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Apologies. I was trying to make it clear that it was just for the building works that additional costs were incurred – for re-tendering. So yes, to the department.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** There will be costs?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Yes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Have you been able to quantify that for those 11?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** We have quantified that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** How much is it?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** I do not have that with me, but I am happy to provide that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** If you can provide that and perhaps break them down by whatever years they were incurred in it, that would be good. We were asking also about the release of business cases for high-value high-risk projects, and Best Start, Best Life was one of them. An implementation schedule for that has already been delayed, and the sector is being asked to plan for a rapid scale-up in hours and places between now and the end of the decade. Secretary, is there not a public interest in having that business case released?

**Jenny ATTA:** I think the business case you are referring to there is the capital works program for Best Start, Best Life.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Yes, the high-value high-risk projects listed on page 99 of the questionnaire. So yes, it is the infrastructure, sorry.

**Jenny ATTA:** I think the general policy there is not to release those business cases as we are about to engage with the market on them et cetera. I do not think there would be any change to that given a change in rollout.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The point I am getting to here is that there is a very rapid take-up and there is considerable cost and burden, including on local councils, as we have heard from the local government inquiry. I can give an example from my own electorate where the government has decided to put a new early learning

centre in Meeniyan, in South Gippsland shire. But the South Gippsland shire plan does not identify Meeniyan at all as a priority. The local community has said likewise – the Meeniyan community but also the Foster and Leongatha communities have said, ‘Hey, we’re where the demand is, not in Meeniyan.’ The point being: how do we know that we are getting these right – putting new facilities in the right places – if you will not release the business case?

**Jenny ATTA:** I might ask Ms FitzGerald to speak some more to this, but there is very significant engagement with local areas around the planning.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** With respect, Secretary, that is not the experience in Meeniyan, and indeed when local community and council have actually written to the government and said, ‘This is not the place to put it,’ basically the minister has written back and said, ‘Well, no, this is what we’re doing.’

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** Thank you for the question. The selection of specific sites and the selection of the location that the site is chosen within are based on data that we have available about families’ access to child care. Specifically the department looks at how much child care is available in that location, which can include a township but usually includes multiple townships in a regional area; how many people need that child care in that location; and how much of that need is being met by current levels of supply. And it is worth saying here that specifically we are looking not just at kindergarten demand, like we normally do for most of our kindergarten program, but we are looking at childcare demand for the age groups between usually six months and five years – across all of those age groups – in an area that is usually a statistical area 2 size, which varies in size but can encompass a township or multiple townships in a regional area. And once we have had a look at that supply-and-demand picture for child care we then look at the level of advantage or disadvantage in that location as well, and we use the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas or SEIFA as a measure –

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Sorry to interrupt you, but can I bring it back to my question, which is about the business case. Is all that information contained in these business cases?

**Jenny ATTA:** Others might be able to help on what is contained in the business cases. The point I did neglect to make is that they are developed for cabinet consideration, and so they are cabinet-in-confidence documents.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Can I butt in?

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Yes. Go for it.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Can I just ask: what came up in the local government inquiry was this significant problem of the government imposing free three-year-old kindergarten on communities but the ratepayers having to pick up the bill for the facilities.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** It is not free at all.

**Bev McARTHUR:** It is not free at all. And often it was not included in their budget going forward, but it was imposed on them. Some councils quoted \$10 million and \$20 million needed to provide whole new facilities, because you have embarked on a whole new sector requiring education.

**Jenny ATTA:** I think there are some important points to make around the planning provision for three-year-old kinder and other elements of the program. Bron, can you say a bit more about that?

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** Absolutely. There are two really significant processes that we do with every local government in the state, all 79 of them, which help us plan for and then fund and support the provision of new facilities in the locations that have unmet demand for kindergarten. The first of those processes is what we call kindergarten infrastructure and service plans, or KISPs, which are planning documents which take the department’s assessment of unmet demand, the unmet demand picture for kindergartens but also the existing supply picture for kindergartens, and use that data to project a kind of unmet demand projection for a location.

**Bev McARTHUR:** That is all fine, but why don’t you fund the entire project?

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** In that case it is worth moving on to part 2. There is the planning process, which determines how much supply is needed, and then there is a process that we go through with councils across the

state – and this is a rolling program; for each council it is a living document – where we enter into what we call a Building Blocks partnership, which is where the state puts significant funding on the table to partner with council to either expand and develop existing council assets or to create new assets in the area. For a number of those projects the council contributes the land, and the facility that is funded by the state is funded in full. Our modular program is a good example of that. If you would like more context on that particular element of the program, we might ask my colleague –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I have been very generous to Mrs McArthur in letting you answer that question, so I might move on, if I could.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Exactly. I am sorry.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** But thank you for the answer. Secretary, can I take you to question 26 of the PAEC questionnaire, page 122. It relates to reviews, studies and evaluations that the department has undertaken. Listed there are 59 reports and evaluations. Of those, 15 are cabinet in confidence, and as for the rest of them, you are only proposing to make two publicly available. Can you explain why you are keeping 95 per cent of these reports hidden?

**Jenny ATTA:** Thanks, Mr O'Brien. It is a very big list of projects. Many of them are evaluations of programs and projects for what is a very big portfolio. The introduction, as part of the model report of this listing, for the first time this year asks if they are public or not, yes or no. Many of them are to inform further internal work or advice to government on projects, but it has really triggered for us, at my request, some work on, 'Where is it sensible that we just make these reports available? Let's do it where we can.' They are not intended to be hidden, although some of them are very much designed as continuous improvement, internal work to inform projects.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I get that. One of those is the readiness review of the 50 new government-owned early learning centres, to continue the theme, listed as being an internal document. Well, I would have thought that is one that surely would not have any state secrets and would be useful for the committee to understand, particularly given the questions we have just been asking.

**Jenny ATTA:** We will work through a process, because I accept that there is a long list there, and I would expect that a number of them can readily be made available going forward.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Okay. Moving on, page 155 of the questionnaire refers to the department currently undertaking a comprehensive, four-year strategic evaluation of Victorian school workforce attraction and retention initiatives. When do you expect this comprehensive four-year strategic evaluation to be complete?

**Jenny ATTA:** Mr O'Brien, I will just ask Ms Del Monaco to talk to that, who will more likely have that timing than I will.

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Thanks, Mr O'Brien. We are clustering that evaluation into a number of parts, so we talked –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Here is that clustering again, Mrs McArthur.

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Clustering, yes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Clustering.

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** All the initial teacher education initiatives that we talked about earlier are being clustered in one, Career Start in another, and then the other workforce initiatives in the other. There are interdependencies between those. We are starting to get early signs of what those evaluations are showing us, and we are refining the programs as we go, based on those. I think, with the Secretary –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Can I clarify, going back to the question: it is not a four-year review, is it? It is not going to take four years?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** No. Each of them has got different parts to it. A number of the initiatives have a two-year life span, so they are funded in 2024 and 2025, so we need to wait until the end of the 2025 cycle for that initiative. Flexible work is a two-year initiative. This is just a phased approach to evaluation.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So we are not going to see anything until the end of next year?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** I mean, this is one where we are continuing to try new initiatives, and we are being quite open in the approach where we are refining certain things. For example, for the teacher financial incentives we refined the key selection criteria or how people are eligible, based on the feedback we have heard from you and others about eligibility. So that is an example where we are using that information now and not waiting for the final piece. There are opportunities for learning. And there are things like scholarships and paid placements, where that information is available.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Getting to the question: in terms of timing, it will not be released until the end of next year at the earliest?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Yes. Most of the initiatives are funded to the end of 2025, which means the evaluation will be completed after that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** In 2026. Is it internal or is it then being done by a contractor?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** It is being done by a contractor, with significant input from us, because –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Did that go to tender?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Yes.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Who got it, and what is the value of the tender?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** They are all clustered with different – I will have to take that on notice, but that work is being undertaken.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That is fine on notice. And will that final review be released publicly?

**Jenny ATTA:** We will make that part of the considerations that are put in train now around our evaluation reports.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you. Secretary, with respect to the questionnaire, on page 13 there was a Treasurer's advance for the program called 'Taking the burden off government schools and teachers with detailed lesson planning support', which goes to Victorian English and maths lessons, including phonics plus. I am sure that you are aware that the AEU has directed members not to comply with this new Victorian teaching and learning model. What is the department's plan to ensure the policy is upheld?

**Jenny ATTA:** Well, I might ask Dr Howes to supplement. I am not sure it is that cut and dried from the AEU, although I do not want to put words into their mouth.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Be very careful. I am actually going to run out of time. Are you happy to take that on notice?

**The CHAIR:** Apologies. No, Mr O'Brien, your time is up.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry, Chair –

**The CHAIR:** We are going to break for –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Chair, point of order.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien on a point of order.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You cannot just cut me off and say I cannot ask for a witness to take something on notice because I have run out of time. You cannot do that. It is not within your power as Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, you have your own clock in front of you. You are asking questions with 10 seconds to go, full well knowing –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Which is why in the last 5 seconds I asked for it to be taken on notice.

**The CHAIR:** No, Mr O'Brien, the question is not taken on notice.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Point of order.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** This is just outrageous, Chair. You are not the boss of this whole bloody process.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have something to say on the point of order, Mr McGowan?

**Nick McGOWAN:** The member had asked a question in time, and the Secretary was attempting to respond to that. In fact I would even go a step further and say the Secretary motioned in the positive, although I do not want to verbal the Secretary. But nonetheless it is quite reasonable that the Secretary be allowed to answer yes or no in relation to the information the member sought.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** On the point of order.

**The CHAIR:** On the point of order, Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Members have an allocated time. If people choose to ask certain questions towards the end of the timing, that is up to them. If you want a question taken on notice, choose to ask it at the start of your 21 minutes. I think it is entirely reasonable that you can do so.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Mr O'Brien –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** What is your point?

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Ask your questions in the order that you want them answered.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** To clarify, you just said, 'You've got your own clock.' I do, and with 5 seconds to go I started to ask the Secretary, 'I'm going to run out of time. Could you take it on notice?' And you cut me off before my time had even come up.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** The Secretary can answer –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Mr Hilakari, I do not need assistance from you, please.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Go and get a text message from the Premier's office and worry about what they are telling you to do.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, control your temper, please.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, Chair, this is completely unreasonable.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, if you wished to ask a question of the Secretary, you had 21 minutes to do that. You asked the Secretary after my timer went off if she would take it on notice. Thank you. We are going to break for the next 10 minutes before coming back and resuming our consideration of the Department of Education. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Thank you. The committee will now resume its consideration of the Department of Education. Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair, Secretary and officials. The budget 2023–24, page 23, on tech schools outlines the investment to expand access to tech schools. Can you please update the committee on this initiative?

**Jenny ATTA:** Yes, thanks, Mr Tak. I will ask Mr Fraser to take us through that.

**Stephen FRASER:** Mr Tak, thank you for the question. As you say, the budget did include an additional \$116 million to establish six new tech schools, and that included \$10 million to establish a Clean Energy Equipment Fund. So I will talk about the status of delivery of the six new tech schools. I think really importantly these build on the existing 10 tech schools that are delivering across the state, and together with those 10 existing tech schools we will have 16 in total, delivering in a way that gives access to a tech school program for just about half of all students in the state, which is significant, across both government and non-government school systems. It is free access to hands-on, immersive, curriculum-linked STEM programs outside of the classroom and really supporting the STEM practice inside the classroom.

If I go through the six tech schools, they are all currently in the design and delivery phases, and we are on track. Frankston tech school is the first off the rank due for opening in term 3 of next year, and that has recently commenced construction, which is a fantastic milestone. It is a tight timeline, but we are on track to open in term 3 next year. The Brimbank, Dandenong, Hume, Wangaratta and Warrnambool tech schools are then expected to open in term 3 of 2026, so a longer timeframe for each of those. We have appointed the six new tech school directors. They have started in their roles, and they have established really significant partnerships and relationships both with local schools – they need to work really closely with local government and non-government schools to ensure that the programs that are developed by the tech schools are integrated within the teaching and learning program and the scope and sequence of the curriculum in those partner schools for those students to connect to – and then the industry partnerships with local industry and business ensure that the skills that have been developed through the tech school programs are really linked to local industry need. That is reflective of the existing 10 tech schools, and the six will follow in that model. It really is about providing that in-depth exposure to STEM skills that are required for the jobs of the future – the clean energy, agri-food supply chain, tech-integrated industries, the advanced manufacturing and construction as well as eSports and gaming. The Dandenong and Warrnambool tech school sites were still being confirmed in the last budget bid. These sites have now been confirmed, and we will be able to put advice to government about the operational funding for those schools in the future. I am happy to go into the partnerships –

**Meng Heang TAK:** Yes, please.

**Stephen FRASER:** but that is where we are with each of those. Each of them has been developed in partnership with a TAFE or a university. The department provides funds then to the TAFE or university to operate and manage the tech school, and then the tech schools receive both operational and strategic advice from a governance committee made up of representatives of partner schools, community, industry and the department as the host for each of those tech schools.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. You also talked about the \$10 million in funding to establish the Clean Energy Equipment Fund. Can you please provide further information on this fund?

**Stephen FRASER:** Yes. It is a reprioritisation of the Equipment Renewal Fund. This is a really important part of the tech schools program. As we know, those tech schools offer a range of industry-standard experiences for students. They are immersive programs and students use high-quality equipment to learn about those industries that they will be experiencing programs in, so laser printers, advanced manufacturing equipment, cutting-edge software, hardware, energy storage systems for clean energy batteries, virtual reality kits, laser scanners as well as 3D printers, solar power units. All of these materials, being industry standard, need to be renewed on an ongoing basis. So we receive applications from those tech schools with input from the local schools and the industry partners that they work with about what their new equipment needs are, and the Clean Energy Equipment Fund is really building on that model to ensure that the equipment rollover in those tech schools is up to industry standard and relevant to the clean energy needs of the sectors and industry partners those tech schools are working with. It is funding available for each of the next four years, and tech schools are required to apply for the funding against pretty stringent criteria, and then the department works closely with the tech schools to ensure that that equipment is delivered and up to standard.

In round 1, which we have conducted this year, a range of equipment was funded, including equipment to support the delivery of programs which introduced students to solar and wind energy generation and renewable energy optimisation for vehicles and homes. As I said before, the type of equipment included wind and solar power units, wireless 3D laser scanners, virtual reality kits, energy storage systems and software and hardware. We will then open up applications for round 2, and look forward to announcing successful grants and recipients for that equipment in the first half of 2025.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Mr Fraser. Books in prep bags were always my favourite. Perhaps I need to declare a bit of a conflict of interest given my wife is an early childhood educator and one daughter is now in prep and two are in primary school. Secretary, in page 16 of budget paper 3, funding was provided to supply free books to prep bags. Can you please update the committee on this initiative?

**Jenny ATTA:** Thanks, Mr Tak. From our really sophisticated tech schools at one end of the school system to a small but very important program right at the beginning. I will ask Dr Howes to talk about prep bags.

**David HOWES:** Thank you, Secretary. Thank you for the question. Bags for preps is a very, very important initiative that supports all of our efforts now to make sure every child is able to read in the early years of primary school. I am very glad that your child received their bag. I am not sure exactly what number they were, but since the program commenced in 2019 there have been 1.9 million bags distributed, and those bags include four or five, depending on the year, really high-quality children's storybooks, and that is because we are very familiar with the evidence and the research that shows a very clear link between the frequency of reading to children and their future outcomes, and this holds regardless of children's background or environment. This initiative is extraordinarily important in ensuring that every child then has books that can be used to support their reading at home. We are clearly very focused now on this question of: how do we ensure that every child is provided with the capacity to read by the time they finish their first three years of school? The minister has been very clear on this, and we have, obviously, made announcements about the way in which reading will be taught consistently across all Victorian schools, commencing next year in those first three years, in a way that reflects the best evidence.

To go to your question about the funding, that funding meant that 325,000 books were distributed to Victorian families in 2024. I might note that we obviously have students who have a range of disabilities, including those students who are blind, and the Statewide Vision Resource Centre produced books for those students in braille with tactile illustrations to make sure these resources are available to everyone. I also want to note that in terms of selecting the books, all of the books this year were written by Australian authors, and in this year it was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander author Kirli Saunders, whose book *Our Dreaming* was included in the bag. So there is a lot of thought that goes into the selection in the bags. They are so popular now that we have expanded some of the things that are included in those bags, so as well as the books they have now got resources that include tips on numeracy; there is a jigsaw featuring a world map, so we are really using those to expand the opportunities for parents and carers to engage in the full range of their children's learning. It is a very important initiative that will continue to form part of the strengthened efforts that we are making to strengthen reading outcomes in the early years of Victorian government primary schools.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. There is a lot of joy every time when I attend each school to deliver those bags to our peopies.

**David HOWES:** Great.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Moving on to the same budget paper but page 21, Secretary, funding was provided to continue implementation support for the Schools Mental Health Fund.

**Jenny ATTA:** Thank you. This is a really significant initiative for us that came directly in response to a recommendation from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, along with other recommendations. A key part of that was the implementation of the Schools Mental Health Fund, designed to ensure schools had funding but also a quality-assured, evidence-based menu of options that they could select from and tailor to the needs of their school. We know that we have got one school system, but each school has a local context, and there can be a wide variety of different needs, so the fund is an initiative developed to work in that way. I might ask Mr Fraser to talk to the detail of that investment in the budget, as you have mentioned.

**Stephen FRASER:** Thanks, Secretary. Thank you, Mr Tak, for the question. It is such an important program. As the Secretary said, it is a specific recommendation out of Victoria's royal commission into our mental health system. Recommendation 17 deals specifically with mental health in schools, and the development of an evidence-based menu of interventions supported by appropriate funding for schools is specifically to address that. The initial investment was \$200 million over four years, and then \$86.9 million ongoing is the funding that is being delivered to schools. The funding announced in the last budget really supports us to continue the refresh of that fund and continue that rollout to schools.

One of the biggest developments over the last year has been the refresh of that menu. We launched the program in 2022 with an initial menu, after a really thorough process supported by the University of Melbourne to select programs for the provision of that on that menu and to ensure that there was robust evidence behind those programs, and now we have had the opportunity, through an invitation to supply to the market, to re-tender for that menu and ensure that the programs are fit for purpose. Really pleasingly, we had many returning programs – 44 of the current 59 are returning programs – and we have got 15 new programs and providers coming on board and a really good spread of programs across a range of intervention categories. Most of our schools choose to focus on early intervention and prevention strategies, which is where we know, particularly for school students, the biggest gains can be made in the prevention of mental ill health.

Really importantly, again, picking up on the findings and recommendations of the royal commission, we are focusing the delivery, where we can, on provision in rural and regional areas where often the provision is quite thin and patchy. The mental health menu has been a really important opportunity for us to incentivise providers to deliver to schools in rural and regional areas. In recognition of that thinness we have assessed the programs for their ability to provide on a range of geographies, really privileging those programs that can deliver to all schools statewide, regardless of where they are, and privileging face-to-face delivery as well. We are really glad to say we have got 10 programs being offered in areas of specific geographic need, including rural and remote areas in Central Highlands, in Wimmera South West, in Inner Gippsland and in Outer Gippsland. The fund includes a 10 per cent loading for schools in rural and regional areas to cover travel expenses and any additional costs that might be borne by those schools in addition to the kinds of challenges and costs that are faced by schools in metropolitan areas. We have also worked hard with our First Nations partners and LGBTQIA+ and CALD communities to ensure that all of the programs are responsive to the range of needs that students might present with in particular communities, and that has been a really strong feature of the redevelopment of the menu.

I think the other aspect that this funding has allowed us to do is really support the tailoring to school need. We know that staffing is a big component of what schools choose to do with the fund, particularly on that early intervention and prevention side, so 60 per cent of the funding that schools receive can be spent on staffing and then 40 per cent on program delivery. It is a good mix of getting more adults and more trained professionals into the school and then bringing programs in to support with student needs alongside those staff working in schools.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Do you have something more to add, Secretary?

**David HOWES:** I would just like to correct – I think I might have misspoke about the 1.9 million. I think I said '1.9 million bags' but it should of course have been '1.9 million books'. I did misspeak. I will just correct that; the focus is on the books.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you.

**Jenny ATTA:** Mr Tak, the only other thing I think it is important to add on the mental health fund – and Mr Fraser might have the details there – is that there has been an important staggered rollout of that. It has been a staged rollout across the state, and I think we are at all schools now.

**Stephen FRASER:** We are now at all schools. We started in 2022 with rural and regional schools, and again that was in line with the mental health royal commission recommendation that the need was greatest in those communities, that students in those communities were facing some of the biggest challenges. That was the case before the pandemic, and in some of those communities that was amplified through the pandemic. So that is where we started in 2022 and then through 2023. Now 2024 has been the year that all schools have access to that fund, and they are making the decisions about the programs on the menu that they want to bring in. We are



gathering the data about which programs and which tiers of funding support schools are using most and how they are choosing that mix of staffing and program delivery, and we are learning a lot from that as we move into full-scale implementation across the state.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Fantastic. In the remaining time I would like to touch a little bit on three-year-old kinder, which is also of very big interest in my community, certainly. I refer to budget paper 3, page 11, table 1.7, and the initiative titled 'Three-year-old kinder'. Secretary, are you able to please update the committee on the progress of the rollout of three-year-old kinder.

**Jenny ATTA:** Thanks, Mr Tak. I will ask Ms FitzGerald to assist.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** No problem. Thank you for the question, Mr Tak. Three-year-old kindergarten is being successfully rolled out across the state and at present allows eligible children to access between 5 and 15 hours of funded kindergarten each week. Not dissimilar to what Mr Fraser was just referring to, it is being rolled out in a staged way, starting with geographic locations in regional Victoria in 2020 and 2021 and moving to a statewide rollout, with the metropolitan areas being able to offer 5 hours in 2022. In 2023 we reached the point where across the state services were able to offer between 5 and 15 hours of three-year-old kinder, which is a teacher-led, teacher-planned program. When I say 'teacher' here I mean a bachelor qualified early childhood teacher supported by vocationally trained educators in a range of different services, both sessional kindergartens and long day care centres across the state. It is operating now in nearly 3000 services, and we are very pleased with the implementation progress thus far, both in terms of the number of enrolments of three-year-olds and in terms of the number of hours each of those three-year-olds are doing in the program.

To give you a sense, in 2023, during the reference period, there were 67,413 children enrolled in a funded three-year-old kindergarten program, in the two years before they start school, which was 11.5 per cent higher than the 60,455 children enrolled the previous year in 2022. So we are seeing the change over time that we want to see in terms of the participation of children in the three-year-old program. Those numbers include about 4500 children who are enrolled in Early Start Kindergarten and access to early learning programs, and that is an increase of 328 children, or 7.8 per cent, compared to just over 4200 children enrolled the year before. Those two programs are significant because they are designed to support the children who most need the largest number of hours in that three-year-old age group. Those programs are available for children who are known to child protection or who have a refugee background, and those programs are available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Victoria as well. Overall, the three-year-old kindergarten participation rate for 2023 was 88.7 per cent, and the average number of enrolled hours per week for three-year-old kindergarten in 2023 was 13.1 hours.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms FitzGerald. I am going to cut you off there. We are going to go straight to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. We know that if we are going to target support where it is needed, we need really good data. So in terms of the Victorian percentage of high school students who identify as LGBTQIA+, my office has heard from stakeholders that the department has a figure for the 14- to 16-year-old age bracket of 31 per cent. Could I ask where that figure has come from?

**Jenny ATTA:** I am not aware of that figure, but I am happy to follow it up. I do not think I have ever heard of that figure.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. That would be really much appreciated. It is a very specific figure I have raised, so that is understandable. Could I ask maybe a bit further where this sort of data would be sourced from typically by the department.

**Jenny ATTA:** I am not sure if it is Mr Howes or Mr Fraser in terms of the student information that we collect.

**Stephen FRASER:** I am happy to jump in and take anything further on notice. There are a range of ways that we collect the gender identity of students – the enrolment form, but obviously that is often at those entry points into the school system, at prep and year 7, and we are going to get quite different figures at each age

range. The other key mechanism is we survey all students from years 4 to 12 every year through the attitudes to school survey, and there are questions about gender identity in that survey, which are completely voluntary for students to complete. That is another source – it is not a definitive source – but it is a way that we can analyse that data by the experiences of different cohorts.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I suppose the elements of the question that you do not immediately have to hand, if those could be on notice, that would be fantastic. Thank you.

I will just move on to the education plan for Merri-bek North. The community said that they felt like they were a bit placated back in the election year of 2022. They did not hear much more, did not see much action, and then the plan was unveiled again via a media release in late October of this year. There is no formal copy of the plan on the government's website. I suppose my query is: what does the plan tangibly do? I mean, it uses phrases like 'leverage their shared vision', which kind of sounds like spin. Will this education plan provide a fairer and better education opportunity to all students in the area?

**David HOWES:** I am happy to take that. I know the schools have worked very closely together, and I think there has been consultation with the community about community expectations about the types of programs that will be available. I think there are some specific initiatives around links with external providers to broaden the offerings, to broaden the range of opportunities that are available. I can take on notice about the publication of that plan.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** And if you like as well on notice, potentially a breakdown of the consultations that took place with the community would be really handy. Thank you. A closer look of what at least is in the press release for this plan, looking through the past budgets, shows that the funding is seemingly all previously allocated before the plan's supposed rollout. So does the department acknowledge that without new funding associated with the plan it kind of just looks like a string of press releases?

**David HOWES:** Again, happy to take that on notice. I think there is some additional resourcing that has gone into support the implementation of that plan and some additional resourcing into some of the schools that are part of that plan, but I can take that on notice.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. That is much appreciated. I might move on with some questions regarding instructions and directions of school staff that have taken place in schools. I have heard some instances raised with my office of teachers at multiple public schools being directed to removal keffiyeh by principals, principals directing union representatives to not allow discussion of Palestine in union meetings, students and staff directed to remove symbols because of a perceived threat to the wellbeing of other students, principals investigating teachers for potential misconduct because of references to Palestine and principals directing staff members not to communicate about Palestine with each other in staffrooms. Can I ask: what is the department doing to protect staff and students against vexatious and political complaints that seek to characterise any representation of Palestinian existence as antisemitic?

**Jenny ATTA:** Dr Howes?

**David HOWES:** Thank you for the question. The events in the Middle East are obviously causing extreme distress for many in the community, especially those who have got connections to the countries there and the areas there. We have given advice a number of times to schools – public advice – about the importance of maintaining sensitivity to everyone who is impacted by that, and that applies both to staff and to students. We have also indicated, and this would particularly apply in secondary schools, that it is important for students to have the opportunity to discuss those issues. We have asked staff to be very sensitive both to each other and to students around the impact that any kind of behaviour might have at a time of such distress for many members of the community from many different groups. I do think, in the middle of very challenging circumstances, our schools have overwhelmingly behaved in a professional, sensitive way, where they have done as much as they can to support the members of their community, and that is staff and students and obviously families as well, to maintain a cohesive and collaborative environment for both study and work.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. The instances that I have raised – do those align with the department's interpretation of sensitivity?

**David HOWES:** I do not have the details of the examples you have raised, so I would need to look at some specific examples. But the things that have come to my attention I think have been instances where people are trying very hard to acknowledge the sensitivities that are being experienced by, as I said, many staff and students and trying to respect those.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Are you able to look into these matters on notice and perhaps come back to the committee in relation to these issues?

**David HOWES:** I might need some more specific details to look at.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** I am happy to see what I can pass on as well if that is useful. Thank you. You have spoken about the impact it is having on people with connections to the region in question. What targeted support programs or considerations have been offered by the department to students with personal ties to Palestine and Lebanon?

**David HOWES:** Schools do have strong and well-resourced supports for supporting student mental health and wellbeing. Those staff and those resources have been asked to be particularly attentive and to be aware of the students that do have those connections, because there is nothing that necessarily indicates that other than an awareness of connection with family. We have asked schools to be attentive to that, and we have asked schools to ensure that those supports, where they are necessary, are made available.

**Jenny ATTA:** I should add, Mr Puglielli, that one of the issues being raised by schools particularly with large enrolments of Islamic or Jewish students is they have raised concerns around security and ensuring that students can safely access their education and perceive that they are safe. The government's safer faith-based schools program opened in November 2023. It provides \$2 million to assist 27 Islamic and Jewish Victorian schools to improve security and ensure that sense and that reality of safety. That is just one element of some of the concerns and issues that have arisen in that context but a good example I think of a targeted program seeking to address those concerns.

**David HOWES:** There are resources, like Schools Standing up to Racism resources, that schools are able to access as well to deal with these challenging circumstances.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I might move on to another matter. I understand that multiple schools are due to be impacted by the Labor government's proposed public housing tower demolition. There is a public primary school, for instance, that is less than 200 metres away from 12 Holland Court, Flemington. There is another school within 150 metres of 33 Alfred Street, North Melbourne. In Richmond, a government primary school sits just 25 metres away from the now earmarked 139 Highett Street, Richmond. I have heard there are families there who are concerned about sending their children to some of these schools with the impending demolitions. They are worried about health impacts in the surrounding environment, including air and dust and fine particle pollution from the significant demolition works planned and the many years of construction to follow, as well as the potential disruption to the schools' operation when some of these works are occurring. Has the department made any preparations to ensure the safety and wellbeing of these school communities during the demolition of the nearby towers and the construction works?

**Jenny ATTA:** The department as the plan and the strategy are progressed will be working with partners across government to ensure that any implications for the provision of schooling from the demolition of towers, and for any relocation, we are at the planning table, if you like, for impacts and implications for community and can ensure that we are planning appropriately for them.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Words like 'we will be in planning' – this is into the future, but that is occurring, and to date the preparations have not been made?

**Jenny ATTA:** To date there are no concrete preparations that we have made, but where there are going to be impacts for schools we will obviously be looking to engage on that and ensure that we can be working with those school communities on provisioning options.

**David HOWES:** I understand there are local reference groups that are being established, so we will work with Homes Victoria as part of that process.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Is it the expectation of the department that some of these schools will require temporary shutdown during the demolition or construction works?

**Jenny ATTA:** Look, I am not aware of that at this stage.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. On another matter, just maybe going to a specific school, Docklands Primary School temporary campus, I understand there are outstanding defects that need to be addressed at that temporary campus. For example, the school tells us that the security system does not work as intended. We have also been told, though, in a letter that the VSBA thinks there is no problem but the school tells us it is still an issue. Is the department aware of this issue and will it be fixed?

**Jenny ATTA:** I think Ms Blanch might be able to help us with that.

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Thank you for the question about the Docklands campus. We have been working with that school to have that campus in place. I am not aware of any unresolved defects but obviously the school and the VSBA can continue to work through that if there are. I am happy to take that back, but I am not aware of any at the moment.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. If that could be on notice, that would be fantastic. Thank you. I also understand that the VSBA never had blinds placed on the windows as part of the funded scope for the new campus. They frosted the windows, but there are still reports of significant glare coming in and teachers have had to put black paper on the windows to deal with it. Will the department fix this?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** I am not aware of that issue, but again happy to follow that one up.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, much appreciated. As the department would be aware, a number of schools in Victoria are in buildings well over 100 years old. Does the department acknowledge that these buildings need special care to maintain them and it costs a lot more money to keep them in good condition than, say, newer buildings?

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Thanks for the question. I am happy to talk about the supports that are available to all schools to maintain their school facilities.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That was not quite the question, if I could just interrupt. Sorry about this. It is just an acknowledgement that those buildings, being much older, need more funding to be maintained properly.

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Part of the annual funding that is provided to schools through the student resource package is a small amount of additional funds that are provided if older or heritage buildings are onsite.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Is the department aware that there are parents donating their own time and money to try and do the necessary maintenance work at these schools?

**Jenny ATTA:** I only have the general answer to that, and I think an important one to note, which is that government has increased maintenance funding for schools considerably over the last eight to 10 years. That real recognition of the benefit of investing in the maintenance of the asset base in a way that historically had not necessarily been the case has been a very important change.

I know that school communities across the state in different ways run working bees and do jobs locally, but we are working to ensure that we are continuing to grow the level of funding available to schools to address maintenance issues. It is a huge system of course, with more than 1560 schools and more campuses again on top of that – a really important asset base for the state. We have been on an upward trajectory in terms of the investment in that area. Does that mean that there are not parent groups mending fences at particular schools at times or adding an equipment shed? I know those sorts of things still go on at a range of schools, and that is not necessarily a bad thing in terms of additional enhancements that the school community are invested in providing. But we certainly recognise the importance of effective maintenance funding, both that provided through the school budget and the additional funding that we can strategically apply from the centre where need is greatest, so we will continue to focus on that work.

**David HOWES:** Can I come back to an earlier question about Merri-bek? I was a little surprised when you said it was not available, but I took your word. But it is – the Merri-bek plan is available online.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Could you provide that link to the committee? That would be helpful.

**David HOWES:** Vic.gov.au/education-plans.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay, thank you so much. Just following on from that previous line of questioning, acknowledging that the longer that maintenance needs are left unaddressed on some of these schools, the more expensive these needs become, has the department provided advice to government on the need for the establishment of a special maintenance fund for schools in very old buildings?

**Jenny ATTA:** I am not aware in any recent times that we have particularly advised on that. There has been a lot of advice over the years on how we can grow and target maintenance funding and supporting schools with maintenance funding, but I am not aware of a specific piece of advice on heritage schools.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** What departmental advice has been given to schools dealing with unresolved maintenance issues where the existing maintenance funding has not been sufficient?

**Jenny ATTA:** I will ask Ms Blanch if she can talk to that.

**Jacinta BLANCH:** Yes, thank you for your question. As I mentioned before, schools do get their annual maintenance funding through the student resource package, and that does have an additional allowance for the age of schools, so that is incorporated in their annual funding. The 2023–24 state budget did allocate \$331 million over four years and \$65 million ongoing to essential maintenance and compliance programs. As I said, the student resource package is a key one that schools have at their disposal to assist them with that proactive and planned ongoing maintenance.

Schools can also apply for additional grants for other needs for their schools. The minor capital works fund has funded 502 projects since it was introduced in 2020, and an allocation of \$10 million was made in the 2023–24 state budget for round 3 of the minor capital works fund. That initiated a new tranche of 22 projects. There is also the accessible buildings program, and that is a program that funds small projects to meet needs of students with disabilities to provide equitable access to school. Again, \$10 million was allocated to that program in the 2023–24 state budget. In the 2023–24 reporting period, 191 accessible buildings program applications were approved by the VSBA. Sixty-seven of those were for modifying infrastructure for accessibility, and 124 applications were for hearing augmentation.

However, if those streams of funding are not sufficient and there is some unforeseen or immediate and serious risk to students at the school and those maintenance issues are not in scope of those other programs, the VSBA has two additional programs that can support schools. The first of those is the make-safe program and the second is the emergency maintenance program. The make-safe program provides assistance to schools that have sustained damage through an incident or an event such as vandalism, fire, flood or storm. The emergency maintenance program assists schools to address unforeseen maintenance issues that pose an immediate and serious risk to the health and safety of staff, students or the community. Make-safe is available 24/7, and the program requires attendance at a school – in the metro area, for example – within 4 hours of the incident being raised; 98 per cent of the time that performance indicator was met by that program. As I said, they can be contacted year-round, day or night, and \$50.7 million was expended through that program in the 2023–24 reporting period. The emergency maintenance program is also there to assist schools who have limited financial resources following an asset failure or unplanned and unforeseen maintenance issues that might arise. We support schools to work with their regional office contact, who can support them in preparing an application if required. \$16.1 million was expended in the 2023–24 reporting period to the emergency maintenance program across 71 projects. So that is the range of supports that are available to all schools in Victoria.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Just looking at the Arden precinct, is the department aware that local public schools in the area are either at or over capacity at this stage?

**Jenny ATTA:** We are certainly aware of the pressures on a range of schools in and around that area and in inner city areas in particular.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms Atta, I am going to cut you off there. We are going straight to Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Secretary and officials, for your attendance this afternoon. I am lucky last on the question list, so we will breeze straight through this. I admit I have got a conflict of interest in some of the questions I am about to ask, because I have got a three-year-old about to enter four-year-old kinder, and I am going to start at four-year-old kinder.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You are welcome to recuse yourself right now and go out the door.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I know we are all keen to get out of the door.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** You cannot just declare them and then still keep asking the questions.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I can declare and keep going.

**Bev McArthur** interjected.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Not yet. They are available I think next term – I am hoping – but I will not ask about the free books. We did get a three-year-old kinder bag, which was sensational. There was some playdough in there, for some of those opposite, so that is excellent.

I was hoping to understand – we are hitting about 96 per cent, from your presentation, of eligible four-year-olds. I am just wondering what kids we are missing and if we have got intentions to get into that further or if there are some natural reasons why we are missing them – people coming into Australia midway through the term or towards the end of term et cetera.

**Jenny ATTA:** Sure. There are issues like that, but I might ask Ms FitzGerald to speak to that.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** Thank you for the question. You are referring, I think, just to clarify, to the four-year-old age group and the participation rate of 96 per cent. The first thing to observe I think is that it is not a compulsory program. There are families that make a choice to pursue other ways of engaging in early literacy and other early learning activities. Now, that might be through family day care, it might be through parents themselves taking on some of that function. We do appreciate that it is not compulsory and not all families are required to be there by law. What we would say is that over the past year we have seen quite a significant increase in the participation rate –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** You have predicted my next question.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** which is really positive and represents quite a large number of children.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Where has it been at over time? We are up to 96 per cent now – what has it been?

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** With slight variation year to year, which is usually due to population data, it has remained steady for quite a long time at about 92–93 per cent. We have seen a step up – quite a dramatic step up – which we attribute to the introduction of the free kinder program. At the point where that was introduced statewide, we saw that shift in the participation rate. We are quite pleased with that outcome, and it represents quite a large number of additional children who are accessing that 15-hour program in the year before school. The other thing to acknowledge is just the suite of participation support programs that we have in place. I will call out a couple of them. The most significant one in recent years, which was funded during the reference period, was what we call the CALD outreach program, or the culturally and linguistically diverse program, which we do with a series of councils across the state where the council themselves employs an officer whose role it is to do outreach work with diverse communities in that local area and support parents to understand what the kindergarten offering is, understand what it might mean for their children in terms of their long-term outcomes, understand the way that the programs are structured and what funding and supports are available to the family, and then to do the practical support for families to assist them to do the paperwork to enrol and to do the orientation and familiarisation work with the services. So a combination of that program and some other programs including our Koorie Kids Shine program, which we do in partnership with –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I was –

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** Oh, have I stolen your thunder?

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I was about to get right there, which is the great success of the department in this area, which is the 100 per cent participation rate by Aboriginal children enrolled in four-year-old kinder. I am really keen to understand what are some of those programs and what is driving that success. And congratulations to the department and everyone involved in achieving that absolutely perfect outcome.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** Well, the first thing to say is that the department should be second I think in the list of congratulations. The first credit must go to the Aboriginal community themselves, who have embraced the kindergarten program, and specifically to our partners at VAEAI, who have over a number of years worked really hard consistently to increase and then sustain a support within the Aboriginal community for kindergarten programs.

Yes, as you say, we have achieved a 100 per cent participation rate. The one caveat I would put on that is that it is reliant on self-reported data that families need to do when they do the enrolment. So we treat that as a great outcome but also a sign that the work is not done. We will continue our partnership work with VAEAI. The most significant of the programs is the Koorie Kids Shine program, but there are a range of other programmatic supports, like access to early learning, which I mentioned earlier, which also support members of that community to fully engage with the kindergarten program.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you. Secretary, I will throw to you, but you may well throw back to Ms FitzGerald in a moment. The Best Start, Best Life free kinder program, how has that driven fundamental changes in participation in three- and four-year-old kinder over time?

**Jenny ATTA:** It is still obviously early days for that –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** We have got a long way to go, yes.

**Jenny ATTA:** big reform but important early rollout. It is too early to see some of the impacts, but I will ask Ms FitzGerald to talk about that. The projected impact of course is just so significant for setting up young children for success in life. Sometimes it is referred to as, you know, one of the greatest investments we can have in our school system as well, those two years of quality early education. Over to you, Bron.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** I am happy to speak about free kinder and/or pre-prep, and I can focus –

**Bev McArthur** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur!

**Bev McARTHUR:** On a point of order, Chair, we have got to have accuracy here. There is no such thing as free kindergarten. For a start, the state are paying, but for most of the facilities the ratepayer is paying. It is not free.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Mr Galea, on a point of order.

**Michael GALEA:** On the point of order, this is blatantly not a point of order. This is a debating point, and aside from the accuracy – Mrs McArthur is clearly inaccurate – she is wasting government members' time, and I ask that she cease interjecting.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Galea.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Order! On the point of order, Mrs McArthur, points of order are not to be used for grandstanding.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I can confirm that it is free kinder. My child has had it free all year, just for your benefit. So thank you.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** I will start there. The free kinder program is benefiting approximately 140,000 children in three- and four-year-old kindergarten each year, so roughly 70,000 enrolments in each age

group, but it is a bit different for the two age groups. The funding saves families up to \$2563 per child per year and is also assisting, we understand, families to have one or both parents return to work. It is available to children in both sessional kindergarten and long day care settings, and it works differently in those two setting types. The funding rate in this calendar year is \$2563, as I said, for an eligible child in a funded sessional kindergarten service for a 15-hour program, and that is true for both the three-year-old and four-year-old age groups, the difference being that for the three-year-old age group if that child is not enrolled in a full 15-hour program, they will be funded for the free kinder amount at a pro rata level.

The funding arrangement for the long day care services is a \$2050 direct offset from parent fees for every eligible child in a 15-hour kindergarten program. That relies on parents having chosen that service to be their designated service for kindergarten delivery. We do understand that there are families that opt to have some long day care and some sessional kinder, and as part of that arrangement they need to nominate which service they would like to receive their free kinder funding at.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I have just filled in that paperwork again, so that is really enjoyable, and I have nominated appropriately.

It would incense Mrs McArthur even further that the state government is supporting kinders by doing builds at different kindergartens across the state, but I might move to the bush kinder program; I am hoping you can update the committee on the benefits of bush kinder. Mrs McArthur might like to hear a little bit about some of the bush kinder programs.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Speak up, Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Sorry. I am hoping to hear more about the bush kinder programs.

**Bev McArthur** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Order! Excuse me.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Sorry. For Mrs McArthur's benefit, yes, the state government is of course building different kindergarten facilities across the state, assisting councils but also building kindergartens at schools themselves, which is wonderful for avoiding the double drop-off. But my question goes to bush kinder and the rollout that we are undertaking and how that is improving the community and where the bush kinder rollout is up to.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** Thank you for the question. Bush kinder is a grants program that supports kindergartens to both establish and enhance bush kinder programs in their local outdoor space. These grants provide the opportunity for, at present, thousands of Victorian children to explore the outdoors and learn through playing in a range of different natural settings, which can include beach environments, park environments and local bushland. The grants enable children to experience different learning opportunities by playing with natural materials, learning through activities like exploring the bush under guided supervision, making play areas and watching and observing wildlife and natural materials. The programs are designed to be educational and fun by the services that run them. They are led by teachers and educators in the same way that a conventional centre-based program is delivered.

**Bev McArthur** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mrs McArthur. Please continue, Ms FitzGerald. Cease the interjection, please.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** I will say that the locations do vary, and as I say, they can be in different types of outdoor environments. The grants are for kindergartens to purchase equipment like puddle suits – I had not heard what a puddle suit was before, but they are a sort of all-over suit – binoculars, magnifying glasses, those sorts of things, as well as professional learning for the teachers and educators who lead the programs to maximise the educational outcome of the experience. To give some examples of the sorts of programs that are running at present, Child's Play in Torquay in the Surf Coast shire have used their grant to establish a beach kinder program, so a couple of times a week the children have the opportunity to explore and play in their local coastal environments, and they learn about sea life, local plants, weather and seasonal changes in the environment. Other examples include, in the City of Hume, services establishing fortnightly bush kinder in



their local park, and the services use their grant for, as I say, professional learning but also rain gear, a trolley and picnic mats so the children can have their usual food experiences in the –

**Bev McARTHUR:** So they do not sit on the ground.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** That is right. Another service in a regional city –

**Bev McArthur** interjected.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Mrs McArthur, I am glad you worked out what a mat does when you put it on the ground, but I would like to hear the answer to this question.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** Another service in a regional city has used a rotational model with smaller groups of children who have diverse needs to enable them to experience kinder with a smaller group – a more inclusive program. They have seen improvements in the children’s self-regulation, language skills and cooperative play since that program has been running. The grants recently closed for the 2024 year, for round 2, and once the assessment process is complete we are anticipating another 150 grants will be available for the next round of bush kinder programs.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Fantastic. That is great to hear. I would like a little bit of an update on the bilingual kinders and the new toy libraries that were funded in the 2023–24 budget.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** Absolutely. The bilingual kinders are part of a connected set of programs that are about expanding what the educational opportunities for a kinder program can be. At present the investment over a four-year period is to establish 10 additional bilingual kindergartens, which commenced at the start of 2024 – the 2024 calendar year. From that term 1 2024 timeframe we have actually exceeded that initial intention for 10 and we have made it to 11 bilingual kinder programs. By way of example, this includes Dala Yooro kindergarten in Bairnsdale, which is the first kindergarten in Victoria to offer a bilingual Aboriginal language program. The local Gunai/Kurnai people have been our partners in the development of that program down in Bairnsdale.

There are now also 21 services in total across the state running a bilingual language program, and that is where the children are spending at least 12 hours a week learning in that bilingual environment. In addition the early childhood language program supports four-year-old kindergarten programs in a language other than English for approximately 7000 children. It is at no additional cost to parents; it is part of the funded program. In total the program is employing approximately 200 teachers. The way that the programs are operating varies from service to service and varies with the different teachers and different languages being offered, but across all of them learning those languages other than English has a range of benefits at this really critical time in development when children’s neuroplasticity is at its highest and it really fosters prereading and prewriting skills. It really assists with self-esteem, and for some of the children in the service it strengthens their cultural identity too.

The 11 new bilingual kindergartens are Albanvale; Bethal Primary School; Brentwood Kindergarten; Dala Yooro, as I mentioned; Donvale Early Learning Centre; Iramoo Kindergarten; Shine Bright Helm Street Kindergarten; Springvale Service for Children; Vista Valley Kindergarten; Vista Way Kindergarten; and Woodhouse Grove Kindergarten.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Iramoo is just down the road from me. It is a really great facility. In terms of children with disability, you mentioned partially some of that before, but I am just hoping you could talk to some of the work about inclusion and support for children with disabilities in the kinder environment.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** Overall our approach to inclusion programs is about capacity building, and there are three main components to the inclusion support that we provide to kindergartens. The first of those is preschool field officers, or PSFOs, as they are known in the sector, who are really highly skilled and experienced professionals who work with services to strengthen and extend their inclusive practice.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Do they work across regions or just individual services?

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** They are an area-based team contracted by the department. They do not sit in one individual service; they work across services as effectively a sort of outreach service into the kindergarten

to support the kindergarten staff to extend their practice and adapt their program for the needs of the children in their service.

**Bev McARTHUR:** What is inclusive practice? Do we have a definition?

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mrs McArthur. We are coming to the end of this session.

**Bronwen FITZGERALD:** The second component of our supports is the specialised equipment program, which is about providing physical equipment on an as-needs basis to kindergartens across the state as children have particular needs to be able to participate in the program. The third element is what we call kindergarten inclusion support, or KIS, which is additional resourcing for kindergartens, which can come in the form of additional staff. It might also be professional learning or resources for the kindergarten.

The 2023–24 budget provided an additional \$18.1 million across four years to support children with inclusion needs, and that had two focuses. The first was on improving those existing supports I just mentioned. The second is on undertaking research to consider a new approach to supporting inclusion in kindergartens. The first part in existing inclusion supports have resulted in an expansion to that PSFO program to an additional 10 providers in 29 local government areas that have experienced significant growth in their four-year-old kindergarten enrolments, so that is about keeping pace with demand. Some of the local government areas included are City of Casey, City of Hume, Melton city, and Cardinia and Wyndham councils as well. The second part of the improvements was the continuation of the specialised equipment program, which in the last calendar year supported 92 children across 73 kindergarten services. And then the third part of that is about the KIS program that I mentioned. It is about establishing a single point to receive and respond to KIS applications across the state. This is quite a significant process for staff in our sector, and this single point of application strengthens both the timeliness and the consistency of the provision of the additional support. Since the start of term 4 this year when it came into effect, over a five-week period, we have seen about 560 applications have been received. So we are confident that that level of volume will be able to be met with the new arrangements that we have put in place.

Finally, that research component is really critical and is responding to something that the sector has raised with us over multiple years. The research is into a new approach to supporting children's participation, and that research has commenced. It involves gathering more in-depth information directly from services to better understand the number of children who have additional needs in our services and the types of supports they require.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms FitzGerald. I am going to stop you there.

Thank you, Mr Hilakari, Secretary and officers. Thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request. I would also like to thank secretaries and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, Hansard and the secretariat. The committee will resume its consideration of the 2023–24 financial and performance outcomes on Thursday 21 November.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**