

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2021–22 and 2022–23 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne – Wednesday 22 November 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

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, Acting Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

Tom Kirkland, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority,

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

Jessica Trinder, Executive Director, Victorian School Building Authority, and

David Robinson, Executive Director, Workforce Policy and Strategy, Department of Education.

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

On behalf of the Parliament the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2021–22 and 2022–23 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to assess what the government achieved in both financial years compared to what the government planned to achieve.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream this afternoon and other committee members.

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.

I welcome the Secretary of the Department of Education, Ms Jenny Atta, as well as officials. Secretary, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, and this will be followed by some questions.

Jenny ATTA: Thank you, Chair and committee members. I acknowledge the Wurundjeri people, the traditional owners of these lands, and pay my respects to elders past and present. I thank the committee for the opportunity to present today.

Visual presentation.

Jenny ATTA: I might go straight to slide 3, David, which shows an overview of the department's expenditure over the two-year period. We can see expenditure grew to \$14.6 billion in 2022–23 across the key output groups, with the breakdown shown there, and of course our two biggest expenditure groups are school education for primary and secondary.

To start with the early years, the past two years have seen major reforms within the early childhood education space. In 2022 a significant expansion to the scope of early childhood reforms was announced, and this combination of free kinder, pre-prep and three-year-old kindergarten and the establishment of 50 government-run early learning and childcare centres come together as the Best Start, Best Life reforms, one of the biggest reforms in early childhood education across the nation. As part of this, free kinder became a permanent part of the landscape in 2023 after a trial in 2021. This year it is saving around 140,000 families up to \$2500 per child at a participating service. The staged rollout of the three-year-old kindergarten program has now reached every corner of the state, and more than 60,000 children enrolled in 2022.

Supporting early childhood infrastructure has been critical to this reform. Thirty-four new kinders on school sites were delivered or approved across the last two financial years. Building Blocks grants and partnerships

were also approved in great numbers as we work to help deliver thousands of extra licensed kindergarten places. Work is underway to establish by 2025 the first four of our new 50 early learning and childcare centres.

The department works to ensure that children are also better able to access services. School readiness funding is now a permanent part of the kindergarten funding system, and we have seen increased kinder participation for disadvantaged and vulnerable children, thanks in large part to the Early Start Kindergarten program, with more than 4000 enrolments in 2022, increasing by almost 1000 since 2021. This has helped strong participation of Aboriginal children, with around 100 per cent enrolment in four-year-old kinder and almost 91 per cent for three-year-olds.

Having enough teachers and educators is also critical to delivering high-quality programs. In early childhood almost 1800 scholarships were awarded over the two years to remove financial barriers to entering the profession, and more than 1100 grants have helped early childhood teachers progress to full registration across the last two financial years. In addition, more than 2300 professionals have been able to use the three-year-old kindergarten teaching toolkit to assist in improving practice.

In the school education portfolio, some context here: Victoria has more than 1 million students in around 2290 schools. Sixty-three per cent of students learn in our 1566 government schools, which the department has responsibility for managing and delivering. In relation to school outcomes – and it is always important to look at NAPLAN results, among other measures – NAPLAN across 2022 and 2023 continued to show some outstanding results across our schools. In 2023 it is noteworthy that Victoria ranked first or second in 16 of the 20 NAPLAN domains by mean score. In secondary schools we had the smallest or the second-smallest proportion of students needing additional support in all 20 domains across all years, 3, 5, 7 and 9. Our primary school students have also been performing strongly, with over 70 per cent of year 3 and 80 per cent of year 5 students achieving ‘strong’ or exceeding proficiency levels for reading. Strong NAPLAN results can also be attributed to new programs that are offering extra support for students who need it. The tutor learning initiative launched in 2021 and has supported more than 345,000 student places across the two years in government and non-government schools, and the middle years literacy and numeracy support, a supplementary program, also assisted a large number of students.

Across these two years we have also been introducing the biggest senior secondary reform in Victoria since the introduction of the VCE itself. This year saw the first of our students undertake the Victorian certificate of education vocational major – 22,000 year 11 and 12 students are completing the VCE vocational major – and the latest national figures show 52,000 Victorian school students are enrolled in accredited vocational education and training programs, and we are the only state that is growing those enrolments.

Improving learning outcomes for students is also directly linked to supporting their wellbeing, and as part of this the department continues to deliver a range of programs to assist our most vulnerable and disadvantaged students. That includes the school breakfast clubs program, which as at June this year has delivered more than 33 million meals since the program started. It is also worth noting the Glasses for Kids program, which has vision-screened more than 12,000 students and made available more than 2700 free eyeglasses for students. Strong investment in learning environments through our infrastructure program also enables and assists student wellbeing and improved academic outcomes. In the past two years we have opened 27 new schools, accommodating over 17,000 students, and completed 151 upgrades right across our school system.

Turning to health and wellbeing, and in response to the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, there have been a range of reforms introduced across our schools. The Schools Mental Health Fund and menu was an important outcome from that royal commission, and we are implementing it across schools. Over the past financial year 1116 schools have received funding for a range of evidence-based initiatives such as bullying prevention, cultural safety programs, counselling programs and therapy dogs. Making schools more inclusive has also been a critical focus, and we have entered the third year of the \$1.6 billion disability inclusion reforms rollout. These reforms are about enabling students of every ability to thrive at school. More than 850 schools have now moved to the new strengths-based funding model, with another 720 schools coming on over the next couple of years.

And of course along with every other jurisdiction in Australia we are working hard on the significant challenge presented by the tightening of the teacher supply. Victorian Institute of Teaching figures for the end of the 2022–23 financial year show the number of registered teachers has grown to more than 146,000, including

8000 more schoolteachers than in June 2020. Our government schools over that time have gained an extra 1248 teaching staff and more than 3000 education support staff.

As we support schools to recruit and retain teachers, we have also made professional development a priority. I particularly want to mention the newly created Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, which has now opened state-of-the-art facilities in East Melbourne as well as seven regional centres across the state. And the Career Start pilot supported almost 1600 graduate teachers in government schools over the reporting period. I will close by thanking our partners across all sectors. Together we are working hard to make improvements to the education and care of children and young people in Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. I am going to throw to Mr O'Brien for the first 21 minutes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, Secretary and witnesses. Secretary, can I ask: during the reporting period, was any work done to determine the areas across the state suffering the severe shortage of teachers?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, Mr O'Brien, we have been very, very focused on that, and carefully trying to map what supply and demand looks like across the system because it is uneven. The majority of our schools are fully staffed, or close to fully staffed, but we have other schools that are under significant pressure.

Danny O'BRIEN: Where are they? Is there a geographic area that is –

Jenny ATTA: The geographic areas are most particularly the growth corridors of Melbourne and different parts of regional Victoria.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is there data on that that could be provided to the committee?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, it is possible that we could – Mr Robinson might be able to talk to our key areas that we are focused on, but we could certainly provide –

Danny O'BRIEN: I do not want to go through a whole lot of detail but if there are actually lists of areas that are under-served at the moment that would be good.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, we will follow that up, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Take that on notice. Thank you. The teacher supply and demand report from 2021 showed that one in five graduate teachers leave the profession within five years. What is the department doing to understand why that is the case and address it?

Jenny ATTA: Yes. The numbers are quite striking. It is a really significant issue and we see it replicated across school systems across the country. We generally manage to keep teachers for the first couple of years but, as you have said, we have seen them start to move out of teaching in that third, fourth or fifth year. The key work that we have been doing to address it is through our mentoring program that we have been able to introduce – if you bear with me for a moment – our Career Start program. In 2021–22 and 2022–23 we have continued implementation of that program. It is focused on providing a supported start to graduate teachers in the first years of their teaching career through mentoring, time release and professional supports. As of June 2023, over 800 graduates were participating in or had completed Career Start, with funding to expand the program across a large proportion of Victorian schools announced in September 2023. That is the feedback from graduate teachers – that they lack support in those early years, and that when they have had to move straight into a full teaching load, they have not felt able to do the preparation and planning and feel confident in their work. So this program provides for some time release and that important professional mentoring and support.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I ask specifically about rural and regional areas and what programs you had to incentivise teachers into schools there? I know there was specifically a maths program, I think, in the reporting period, and I am interested to know what it was and did it work.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, thanks. I might ask Mr Robinson to come up to the table to supplement my answer.

Danny O'BRIEN: He is already here, Secretary. He has made it.

Jenny ATTA: He is here. A focus of those incentives has been to get people into harder to staff schools, some of which are in regional Victoria. Thanks, David.

David ROBINSON: Thanks, Secretary. There is a range of things that we do to both support the system as a whole and rural and regional Victoria, as well as individual targeted schools where they need it. The first thing to say is we have the targeted teacher financial incentive program, which is providing incentives of up to \$50,000 for teachers to move into rural and regional areas, with retention payments of \$9000 per year for every year that they stay in those schools.

Danny O'BRIEN: Was that just geographically based or on particular specialties?

David ROBINSON: It is geographically based, but the incentives increase based on how rural and remote a particular community is. It is \$25,000 for those regional schools, and then it rises to \$50,000 for those schools that are in more rural areas.

Danny O'BRIEN: And has it actually worked?

David ROBINSON: We have filled all of the incentives that were available over the reporting period. For the reporting period there were 400 of those funded, and all of them have been filled. The retention of those teachers in schools has been relatively good, with upwards of 90 per cent staying within the school that they were recruited to or staying within the government school system, so –

Danny O'BRIEN: For a period of how long?

David ROBINSON: Over the period of the funding of the program since 2019 – the most recent data on that retention is not available, but for that period that is what we have seen.

Danny O'BRIEN: Would you be able to share that data with the committee?

David ROBINSON: Yes, we can take that on notice.

Danny O'BRIEN: That would be great. And can I ask too – a bit of feedback from my own prins is that that also causes some industrial relations issues. Has it been a bit of a problem managing – that is, someone gets paid more to come and fill a gap and there are already 50 teachers at the school who say, 'We were here already'?

Jenny ATTA: It is a tricky issue to balance, and we have heard that feedback. On balance, most of the feedback is being pleased to fill a vacancy and get some new blood, if you like, into the school, but we recognise that it is tricky at the local level for principals managing their whole teams.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I ask some of the data that you have reported in your presentation: 8000 more VIT-registered schoolteachers compared with June 2020. Would I be right in hazarding a guess that the bulk of that will have been because of the tutor program post COVID, given that there are only 1248 more actual teaching staff in government schools?

Jenny ATTA: Yes. That data is around registered teachers, so teachers who are available to teach, but David, you might have a better sense of the breakdown.

David ROBINSON: As the Secretary said, 8000 teachers are newly registered teachers, or an increase in the number of registered teachers with the Victorian Institute of Teaching. Within the government school system there has been an increase of, as the Secretary's presentation said, around 1200 teachers over the course of the last year. That has largely been driven by a couple of things: the introduction of the tutor learning initiative, as well as the reduction in face-to-face teaching time in this year. Those are the two main drivers of the number of teachers going into government schools.

Jenny ATTA: And it is important to say that it has been critical getting those teachers into schools. It is helping schools to keep their heads above water. We have got at least a couple of years more in front of us of challenging circumstances, but we have got a suite of initiatives now – a multifaceted approach – that are tackling both retention and attraction, and we will need all of that suite of work to make the difference for our schools.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I switch to early childhood but on the workforce issue still, and again on your slides there is a lot of data there of good what you might call inputs but not necessarily outcomes. So 878 and 899 scholarships awarded, 180 trainees, and then grants to staff for being provisionally registered. Can I ask, though, out of those, how many actually completed the traineeships, completed the scholarships, and are now working in the early childhood sector?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, and of course it is early days to see the full outcomes as people take up those options. Ms FitzGerald might be able to add to that, though.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: We will need to take on notice the specifics of completion rates. Some of those numbers – those students – are still studying. They have commenced their scholarship and are receiving support to study, but they have not completed, and the payments for the scholarship will go into the period of employment as well.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is there an incentive, as in you do not get the last payments until –

Bronwen FITZGERALD: That is right – you get a series of staged payments to continue study and then continue employment once you are done. We can take on notice the completion for both the scholarships and the trainees.

Danny O'BRIEN: Traineeships and the grants for the provisionally registered – how many of those have actually gone into the system?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: The grants for provisionally registered teachers are for teachers already teaching in the sector. It is to translate their qualification from provisionally registered to fully registered, but we can also provide some further information about that.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. That would be good. Sorry, just back on schools – can the department provide a breakdown on schools across Victoria who have an acting or temporary principal and have not had a permanent principal for more than 12 months?

Jenny ATTA: Yes. We will have a look and see what we can provide on that, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you. Moving on, during the reporting period can you give me a bit of background on how the VCE exams were drafted and finalised?

Jenny ATTA: I will ask Dr Howes to supplement my answer, but the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority has a very comprehensive methodology for putting the exams together which involves a range of input, including from experts and expert subject matter specialists. Dr Howes, could you add to that?

David HOWES: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. It is a very detailed and painstaking process. For every study a panel is appointed, and that will include a range of experts in the field and practising teachers to get that balance. It then goes through a vetting process that will include vetting for accessibility for a range of students, and there will be what is called a sitter vetter who will sit the exam as it is presented to ensure it can be completed in the set time and that its level is appropriate for the students. A key consideration is of course making sure that the questions do apply to the relevant study design.

Danny O'BRIEN: Who actually writes the exams ultimately? Those panels?

David HOWES: Those panels, that is right.

Danny O'BRIEN: Are they VCAA employees or departmental employees?

David HOWES: There are a range of people who are appointed – both VCAA staff and a range of external people who are engaged for the purposes of being part of what is called the examination setting panel.

Danny O'BRIEN: Right. It is a joint effort for each exam – it has not got one individual that will write it all.

David HOWES: Correct.

Danny O'BRIEN: What quality assurance processes do you have in place to ensure that mistakes and errors do not occur in VCE exams?

David HOWES: As I broadly indicated, with those other processes that go through, the panel works painstakingly over an extended period of time to ensure that the quality of the questions is right, and then each exam goes through an editing process as well the vetting process. That process that I indicated around making sure the exam can be completed by a well-equipped student in the time that is available is part of the measure.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am more particularly looking at the errors and mistakes not being in the exams themselves. How many sets of eyes would see a final exam?

David HOWES: The short answer is many.

Danny O'BRIEN: It varies probably by subject?

David HOWES: No. The editing process, in my view and my experience, would be thorough and nearly always effective.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is there a back-up exam prepared for each subject?

David HOWES: No, there is not, and there is a good reason for that. The exam-setting process, as I said, there are two parts to this. It is extraordinarily comprehensive and thorough. So the time to set a separate exam would be almost unfeasible because of the amount of work that is done the first time. But commensurate with that are really, really stringent security systems and processes that are put in place that ensure that the integrity of that exam cannot be breached. You can imagine then if there is any chance that the integrity of the exam has been breached, then it is a fact that you would have to go through the whole process again, and that is not feasible.

Danny O'BRIEN: Speaking of that, do the people involved have to sign confidentiality agreements as part of the process?

David HOWES: So many. Yes, they do, and very strict.

Danny O'BRIEN: Do any students get asked to sign confidentiality agreements before or they have taken an exam?

David HOWES: I understand there was an instance this year where that happened in very unusual circumstances.

Danny O'BRIEN: What were the circumstances? Was that the Chinese exam?

David HOWES: That happened this year, that is right. But as far as I am aware, there were no incidents during the reporting period.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. What processes then do you have in place to ensure that exams are not leaked or copied or otherwise, and then what processes are in place if it does happen?

David HOWES: I can talk in some detail about what happened in the recent past, and my assumption is that it happens now. There were no papers that were allowed off the VCAA premises. People were required to come in, and there were very strict protocols around how those papers could even be moved, in which rooms they could be observed and how they could be transported, even within the building. Then externally obviously a big risk is the printing of those exams. There is a very, very strict tender process that is done to identify the few companies who are able to provide the level of security that is required for those exams. Again that is a lengthy process that is gone through, and my recollection is that there are audits done of those companies to make sure that the processes that they had signed up to are implemented. There are very, very strict instructions that are given to the schools about how to manage the storage of those papers and the security requirements that they are required to have. So there are the three levels of security: what happens inside the VCAA building, what happens when the exams get printed and what happens when they get to the school.

Danny O'BRIEN: Given, though, as you said, there are many eyes involved in the development of the exam, particularly when you get towards the end, what about digital security? Because presumably it is not everyone literally looking at a hard copy. I assume they are whizzing around to experts via email and the like at times.

David HOWES: No, that would not be the case. I would need to come back to you with the detail of what the most recent practice is.

Danny O'BRIEN: They would be physically in a room working on the exam.

David HOWES: That has been the past practice. I would need to get back to you with –

Danny O'BRIEN: If you would not mind, a bit of detail on that would be useful. During the reporting period did the VCAA undertake a review of any of the VCE exams for mistakes or errors, and was there an internal or an external review undertaken?

Jenny ATTA: Mr O'Brien, the VCAA, as I am advised, had undertaken a review of some mathematics examinations after a range of issues had been raised with them. I do not have the detail of that with me, but there was a review that they undertook 12, 18 months ago.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, you said you would come back to me with some detail?

Jenny ATTA: I said I do not have the detail on that, but we can come back to you on the scope and timing and nature of that.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is it publicly available?

Jenny ATTA: Is it publicly available? I do not believe so.

David HOWES: My understanding is it was a review of the mathematics exam. They engaged a company to look at that, and one of the questions was 'Were there errors of mathematics in the exam?' My understanding – and I am happy to take this one on notice – is that they did not find there were errors of mathematics. There were some recommendations about how some language could be tightened.

Danny O'BRIEN: Any further information you can provide would be welcome. If you can provide a copy of the review, then we would welcome it as well. This might be also for you, Mr Howes – Dr Howes?

David HOWES: Happy with 'Mr'.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry. What is the department's approach to teaching and reading in Victorian schools?

David HOWES: I will start, Mr O'Brien, by saying that the data would suggest it is very successful. Our students in year 3 – which is obviously that critical measure in the NAPLAN results of how effective has teaching and reading been in the first three years, and it is one of those areas that is absolutely foundational to the rest of learning – are producing the best results in the country, bar none. That was the case for both 2022 and 2023. If you do not mind, I would take this moment to acknowledge that is the result of extraordinary efforts of principals and teachers given the challenges that we faced in those years. To produce those results is outstanding. What they are using is the evidence-based advice that we provide around what have been demonstrated to be the most effective ways in which to support the widest range of students to achieve the best possible results in developing their ability to read.

Danny O'BRIEN: Speaking of evidence based, I am sure you are probably aware of the La Trobe Uni school of education study into six primary schools. I think it was called *Transforming Evidence into Practice for Reading and Spelling Instruction: A Descriptive Study of Six Victorian Schools*. Are you aware of that particular report?

David HOWES: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Why has that study, which was taxpayer funded, not been released? Sorry, I should put it in a different way. I think the department said it would likely:

... inhibit frankness and candour in the making of communications.

But I would have thought it is a good thing to have out in public debate.

David HOWES: I think there were a range of discussions with those researchers, and we were looking at how the work that had been done in that study, particularly through the case studies of some of those schools, could be published. I think those discussions are still underway.

Danny O'BRIEN: Still underway? So you are not ruling out releasing the study?

David HOWES: No.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Are you able to tell us the schools that were included?

David HOWES: No, I do not have that –

Danny O'BRIEN: Obviously it looked into – and I am going to mess this up – systematic synthetic phonics, and I know schools like Churchill Primary School, very close to my electorate, have been quite prominent. I think they have been inundated by other teachers and friends coming to see them because of the results they have got. Is the department open to more promotion of that process in teaching kids reading?

David HOWES: Churchill have done a really terrific job. The advice that is given by the department is that the teaching of phonics should be a very central part of every school's teaching to read program for those three years. So we are clear and unambiguous about that.

Danny O'BRIEN: What about that specific term, systematic synthetic phonics? Because I understand there is a difference.

David HOWES: We do support the use of that. There is evidence that says it is particularly effective for students who have struggled with some aspects of learning to read.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, okay. I think I am out of time, but thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. We will go to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Secretary and officials, for joining us today. Secretary, I would like to start by talking about student health and wellbeing initiatives, referencing 2022–23 budget paper 3 page 18, which specifically talks about this and includes examples such as additional school nurses and allied health services. Can you please provide me an overview of what services have been delivered in our study period here and how many schools and how many students took part in the program?

Jenny ATTA: Yes. Thanks, Mr Galea. It has been really for the last three to four years a major area of reform in our school system to really lift the level of health and wellbeing resources available to children at school. We know attending to health and wellbeing is critical to having students able to learn, and to learn well, and I think Victoria, arguably more than any other state and territory in the country, has led the way with this. I might ask Mr Fraser to talk through the detail of those programs and numbers of schools and students.

Stephen FRASER: Thank you, Secretary, and thank you, Mr Galea, for the question. As the Secretary outlined both in her presentation and comments then, supporting students' health and wellbeing, and particularly mental health, is really central to the success of Victoria's education system and to individual students and schools, and it really complements our focus on student learning. We cannot have success in learning without students being healthy and well, so that really underpins the rationale for the investment.

You mentioned the early intervention investment framework, and that is a framework across government to support investment in those interventions, particularly early interventions and service delivery, that have quantifiable impacts, and really investigating reliable pathways to sustained investment and scale-up in those services. Many of our investments in student health and wellbeing programs do fall under that wider framework. Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic years, supporting students' wellbeing and really working hard to re-establish those routines for learning have been a major focus of work across the school system in the reporting years. Even in the period before the pandemic, Victoria's royal commission into our mental health system found that around one in seven children and young people aged four to 17 will experience a mental

illness each year. So even without the COVID context, investment in this area has been absolutely essential to support students' wellbeing and learning.

Now, working backwards over the reporting periods, the 2022–23 state budget provided \$41.3 million over four years to invest in ongoing, sustained mental health services, including continuing the mental health practitioners in specialist schools and the partnership with Headspace that we have to deliver counselling services to students along with mental health training for our school staff. And it invested that \$200.6 million for the statewide expansion of what was then a pilot program and our partnership with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and University of Melbourne into the mental health in primary schools program, which has been essential. And then in the budget before that, still in the reporting period, there was \$200 million to establish the new Schools Mental Health Fund, which again was responding to a specific recommendation, recommendation 17, out of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

To take each of those programs in turn – delivering the funding for the mental health practitioners in all government secondary and specialist schools across the state: this is really about providing direct counselling support to students along with broader mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention supports in schools. And we are really proud I think of the fact that we delivered that mental health practitioners in schools initiative a year earlier than originally planned, in direct response to the challenges coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moving on to the mental health in primary schools program, this builds on, as I said, that successful pilot with Murdoch Children's Research Institute. Under this initiative schools are funded to employ a mental health and wellbeing leader to implement what we call a 'whole-school' approach to mental health and wellbeing, which is the approach that the evidence really supports. We know that in those younger years children do not typically present with diagnosable mental health concerns, so a lot of the effort is about health promotion and building students' resilience and their understanding and teachers' awareness to look out for the early warning signs of mental health illness.

From term 1 2023 all government and low-fee non-government schools in the Brimbank, Melton, Hume, Merri-bek, Goulburn, Barwon and outer Gippsland areas joined the program – so that is over 390 schools and 495 campuses now in the program, again, across government schools and the low-fee non-government school sectors. And more schools will join that program each year before we reach full scale in term 1 2026. So by that time we will have over 1800 campuses right across the state being part of the program. And we continually assess the outcomes of that program. The pilot that I mentioned – the initial evaluation reported that 96 per cent of those mental health and wellbeing leaders reported that the program enhanced their skills in being able to identify and respond to mental health concerns in their students and 97 per cent of teachers had applied that learning to their role in supporting that whole-school approach. So we will continue to monitor the impact of those investments through the early intervention investment framework.

And then, finally, moving on to the mental health fund – as I mentioned, a direct response to the royal commission recommendations – the rollout of that program and fund, again, in line with the royal commission, was to prioritise rural and regional schools, and all schools in rural and regional areas received their fund allocations in July 2022. And that will be now followed by schools in some of the urban parts of Melbourne. Those schools will receive their funding at the beginning of this year, and as of June of this year we have had 1116 schools receive that funding. The remaining metropolitan schools, western Melbourne, Hume, Merri-bek, inner eastern Melbourne, Bayside and the peninsula, will join that program in January next year.

We also saw in the 2021–22 budget \$2.2 million invested to support our partnership with Headspace, again to deliver direct counselling to students and support for teachers. So this is really about providing a sustained level of funding for staffing and service provision. It complements a range of other programs that we have in the area, including our student support services program, – our SSS staff – and our primary school nursing program along with our doctors in secondary schools, delivering a GP presence in 100 secondary schools in disadvantaged communities right across the state.

If I can go on to describe that SSS program, that is really about delivering teams of allied health professionals employed by the department to provide specialist critical incident responses and individual assessments of student needs – so psychologists, speech pathologists, youth workers and occupational therapists working right

across our system. And they have played such a critical role not only in the post-pandemic years but in responding to bushfires and floods that we have seen right across the system.

Michael GALEA: Quite extensive, thank you. It is particularly good to note the mental health practitioners already in every state secondary school ahead of schedule, which is very pleasing to see and will be very, very useful I am sure in each of those schools, as well as of course the early intervention investment framework that you mentioned. It was good to get an update on the progress of that within this reporting period that we are looking at. I want to jump as well – and I will direct it back to the Secretary just in case it is another area, but I suspect it might be back to you, Mr Fraser – I would like to ask about the primary care vaccination in schools program. I remember back in grade 5 getting my meningococcal C shot; I am not sure if that is still part of the same program. It is funny, the things that you remember – I had lots of shots in school, I do not remember the others, but I remember that one. Can you give an update on the status of that program: how it is tracking and what has been rolled out in these two years.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, thanks, Mr Galea. It probably is back to Mr Fraser for the detail on that one.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

Stephen FRASER: Thanks, Secretary. This was obviously a really important part of our support for schools and school communities, particularly more vulnerable students coming through the reporting years. Four million dollars was invested in that primary care vaccination in schools grants program. It provided grants to GPs and pharmacists right across the state to deliver COVID-19 vaccinations through school in-reach clinics across communities where students were encountering access challenges for a range of reasons and in areas with lower COVID-19 vaccination rates. We delivered the program in three rounds, covering January 2022 through to June 2022. Over that time we had 71 providers who provided vaccination clinics in 322 government and non-government schools. We had a total of 6118 COVID-19 vaccination doses delivered in that period, which included 4839 doses to children aged five to 11, 1771 doses delivered to children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, 578 doses to children with disability and 62 doses to children from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background. We also took the opportunity, with access and that presence of GPs and pharmacists in our schools, to deliver 2804 flu vaccines over that period.

The program provided school communities with – as I said there were communities facing those access barriers and a big part of that was delivering convenience for those children and families. We know that the feeling of safety is a really important barrier to overcome if children and families are not feeling safe to go into an unfamiliar environment. So that is where the school, and particularly many of our specialist schools, was that safe and trusted environment for families, school staff and local community members. We worked really hard with schools and the Department of Health, our colleagues there, to encourage families to access those vaccinations and to promote the school-based clinics. A range of tools and approaches were used: newsletters, social media promotion, stakeholder communication packs, and I should acknowledge the contribution that our partners, the Association for Children with Disabilities, YDAS and other disability peak organisations played in really promoting that support and making sure that those clinics were safe and that they were known about. Through that program we managed to deliver a range of vaccinations to children and families who would not otherwise have been able to overcome those access barriers and get vaccinated.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Just on those access barriers, what were some of the key themes in terms of those barriers that you found recurred quite a bit, and how did you address them? I think you have spoken about some of the things such as in-school so that there was a feeling of a safe environment, but what were some of the key issues that you faced in overcoming barriers?

Stephen FRASER: Yes. As I mentioned, a big part of it was around that trust and familiarity, so the mere fact that the clinics were held on school sites overcame many of those barriers. Parents and families already had good transport links to their local school, but a lot of it was about familiar faces as well. I can talk about Port Phillip Specialist School, where one of our disability liaison officers with existing relationships with families in that community was present at each of the vaccination clinic sessions, and they worked to provide sensory items to distract students. We do that with young children in a whole range of ways; we do it in a very particular way for students with disability. That allowed families to choose spaces that they knew would be comfortable for their children, and feedback from parents and carers of children, particularly those with severe

and complex needs, including autism and a range of sensory behavioural challenges, has been really positive. We learnt a lot through the process.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. You also mentioned students with disabilities, and the same budget paper talks about the students with disabilities transport program. I am assuming this would also be for you, Mr Fraser?

Jenny ATTA: I might give Mr Fraser a rest –

Michael GALEA: A well-earned rest.

Jenny ATTA: but Mr Bates could speak to the disability transport program.

Anthony BATES: Just a general update on the reporting period?

Michael GALEA: On the reporting period, yes, please.

Anthony BATES: Thanks, Mr Galea. It is a really important program to support families to get children to our specialist schools. In the 2021 school year we had services supporting 82 schools. We had 8895 children using the program, and in 2022 the number increased to 8957 children. We have got three modes of delivery. We have got about 440 bus services that the department contracts. We are really careful with these bus services, so all of the services have a driver and a supervisor. As you can imagine, some of the children need support and can get a bit agitated on the trip. We have got seatbelts on all the buses. We have got appropriate anchoring points for children who are in wheelchairs. Buses are typically 20 children per bus, or 25. That is the sort of number we have running on those department-contracted services. There are a further 20 bus services where the school actually owns the bus, so they have school staff operating the bus.

Then we actually do about 22 taxi services, so it is for about 100 children that we have taxis. Similarly, we have a driver and a supervisor in the taxis. They tend to be what we call the maxi taxis, and those ones tend to be for our hearing specialist schools, so both Aurora and the Victorian institute for the deaf down on St Kilda Road. Those taxis tend to be for smaller kids. We have children sometimes in preschool programs, sometimes in the lower primary years, who are coming from all over Melbourne. Typically we have a designated transport area around each of the specialist schools, and we run those services.

The program continues to expand, so in the reporting period we added a new service down at Armstrong Creek outside Geelong, a new service for the Broadmeadows Special Developmental School and a new service at Glenroy Specialist School. Then we have had a couple of new schools open. There is a new school at Endeavour Hills, so there are two new services down there. Warringa Park School out Wyndham way, that school has been there for quite a while, but they are opening some new campuses. In that growth corridor there are quite a lot of students needing that support there, so we have got some new services there, and then also up at the new Mount Ridley Special School, which I think is called Wayi. At the Wayi School I think there were five new services to support that school opening.

So it is, again, a very important program to support children getting to school. We do a lot of work to ensure we have maximum travel times on the bus of no more than about an hour, and the buses are often running around, and we redesign the routes every year when we get the enrolment information. So as I say, a lot of work goes into making sure that we can get the children quickly and safely to school. It is a bit of a challenge in the growth areas, I have to say. Particularly with the modern design in the growth areas, with a lot of courts and those sorts of things, getting buses in and out can be a bit of a challenge.

Overall it is about 70 per cent of the students that are using the program, so there is 30 per cent – another 3000 or 4000 students – who are not using the bus program. It is a particularly important skill, the principals tell me – particularly as students get into the secondary years – to learn to use Myki and public transport. It is a very important skill for the students to be independent in later life, so we tend to see particularly as the students move into the middle-to-upper secondary, a number of schools actually have a program where they will have support staff who will go and meet the student and help them come to school on public transport. To repeat myself, it is an important life skill for them to use, but I think overall a pretty good support that we are providing to parents.

Actually, also I might just mention it is recognised as an in-kind support under the NDIS, so it is part of the Commonwealth–state agreement for the NDIS. So that roughly \$90 million per year that we are spending is recognised as part of the state’s in-kind contribution to the NDIS.

Michael GALEA: Interesting. Thank you. It is really good to hear about those older secondary students and that sort of freedom that they can still get by getting used to public transport and being supported through that as well, which is of course, as you say, really important for building their development as they go on. You mentioned supervised operation in buses and taxis as well. I am assuming that is obviously to support whatever particular needs that student might have but also to provide that extra level of safety reassurance, is that right?

Anthony BATES: Yes, that is right. As I said, we want to minimise the amount of time on the bus as much as we can, so get the students on and get the bus moving. The onboard supervisor really helps to make sure that students are securely seated. You can get some behavioural issues between the students, so the fact that we have got the two of them there means that the driver is driving and the supervisor is concentrating on the safety of the students and just helping with any behavioural issues that they get there. There can be some challenges particularly in the morning. Like all kids, sometimes they do not want to go to school, so often the onboard supervisor is working in partnership with the parents to make sure the children can get smoothly onto the bus service.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Mr Bates. Just one more on wellbeing. Secretary, I understand that a number of government secondary schools, and quite possibly primary schools as well, still have wellbeing dogs to support the kids. Is there any particular program that that is run through, or is it run on a school-by-school basis? If there is a program, can you outline that program over the past two years?

Jenny ATTA: Thanks, Mr Galea. Primarily schools will be using funding through the Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu that is rolling out and making its way right across the system. Importantly, it is an evidence-based, quality-assured menu of options that schools can use allocated funding on to support student health and wellbeing, and one of those options is therapy dogs. I think there has been reasonable coverage in the media where we have seen students and staff talking about how for some schools and some students that has been a really important wellbeing measure going to whole-of-school climate as well as support for some individual students.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much for that. I believe my time is up.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. We will now go to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Good afternoon to everyone. Page 147 of the Department of Education and Training annual report 2021–22 refers to employee expenses, including payroll tax. Secretary, can the department provide a list of how much each school in Victoria pays in payroll tax?

Jenny ATTA: Mr McGowan, are you talking about the reporting period?

Nick McGOWAN: For any period. The two reporting periods would be great, but if you can do this year as well, that would be awesome.

Jenny ATTA: Anything you would add, Mr Bates?

Anthony BATES: Yes, we can, Mr McGowan. Payroll tax for most school staff, so teachers and support staff, is all paid centrally, so we do all of those payroll tax calculations and remissions on behalf of schools. I do not have it at hand, but my team can produce a list by school.

Nick McGOWAN: That would be awesome; thank you very much. Secretary, do you know whether the government have ever considering removing payroll tax on government schools in the periods we are reviewing?

Jenny ATTA: I am not aware of any considerations, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: Over the reporting period, when was it first raised that government would consider levying the payroll tax on non-government schools for the first time, to your recollection?

Jenny ATTA: Mr McGowan, my understanding is that it was a revenue measure in the 2023–24 state budget. That is the first point at which I had any visibility of it.

Nick McGOWAN: So that recommendation had not been considered in previous years, the years that we are looking at?

Jenny ATTA: Not through the Department of Education, to my knowledge.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay, not through your department. Thank you. Given the introduction of the payroll tax on non-government schools was announced in this reporting period, do you know when the minister was first briefed?

Jenny ATTA: No, I could not specify when the minister was first briefed. As I said, it was an initiative announced as part of the 2023–24 state budget.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Just picking up on some of the conversation earlier about the schools for children with some disabilities. Heatherwood School I know obviously had the fire just recently, and I know the kids and the community there are very keen to make sure that they have as little interruption as possible, notwithstanding there is construction occurring there, so it was very, very bad timing on many fronts. I am wondering if you could give some assurance at least to the community locally that starting the new year next year there will be some sort of certainty going forward for them in terms of what their future looks like there.

Jenny ATTA: Look, I do not have the details with me, Mr McGowan, but we would be absolutely wanting to make sure that at every step of the way the school community had as much clarity as we could give them. It is really unfortunate and tough on that school community.

Nick McGOWAN: Totally. If the local member there could have a briefing perhaps with you or with the department or anyone you deem fit, that would be very useful.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, we can follow that up through the minister's office.

Nick McGOWAN: I am meaning Nicole Werner; she is the local member there. The Victorian High Ability program – I have got two students in one of my schools in the district of Ringwood, from Heathmont East Primary School, and they have written to the minister about the high ability program. They have used and had the benefit of that program. They love it so much that they would like it to be extended to not just one year but two. Their question is currently before the minister, so full disclosure, but of course many other kids would love the opportunity too. We back our sports kids so much, which is great, but here we have got a couple of young achievers who would like to do more than just a one-off in grade 5, because in grade 6 you cannot do it anymore. Is there some prospect for those aspiring young students that maybe – just maybe – that school might be able to access something for next year for them?

Jenny ATTA: It is fantastic to hear that, and we do hear really great feedback from lots of schools and students, and we think it is a fantastic program.

Nick McGOWAN: Can I take that as a yes, Secretary?

Jenny ATTA: I do not want to pre-empt any decisions of government, but we also have that feedback.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. I do not know the capacity. I am in conversation with many principals about this sort of thing. If there is that capacity where students are keen to do more, I am assuming it is not going to inundate the system, but if we can facilitate them in some way, that would be amazing.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, it is a funded program at the moment. Mr Fraser, I do not know if you can –

Stephen FRASER: I am happy to look at the details of that case. It is a focus of ours, and the purpose of this program was to recognise that while we have had very considerable success in lifting the students who struggled with their learning out of those bottom bands, we do want to focus as well on those students who are at the top and who are excited about their learning and engaged in their learning. That is why we have got the program, and we are happy to look at any individual cases.

Nick McGOWAN: That would be amazing. Thank you. I will just direct these to you, Secretary, if you do not mind, and then feel free if someone is more appropriate. On Best Start, Best Life, obviously there has been an increase in demand for kinder places, but I know locally for me at least – it is out in Knox – there have been some unintended consequences, and we seeing some providers currently vacate that space. Has the department had a look at this and sort of forecast, in the periods we are looking at, how that might impact the provision of those services going forward?

Jenny ATTA: We certainly monitor this very closely as we are rolling out the whole reform and the expansion of services. It is a system where, as I think I said earlier, there are different providers and different modes of service offering. So there is some real complexity to it, but we do spend a lot of time on this. Ms FitzGerald might speak to some of that detail.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Absolutely. Thanks for the question. Generally speaking, where there is a circumstance where a particular provider is looking to change their profile of provision, there is a series of supports that the department makes available to step them through that process. It is their process to manage, but we provide a series of sort of specialist assistance to them to help them through that.

In respect of Knox and local government generally, we really value the partnership that we have with local governments across Victoria, all 79 of them. For all 79 we have done written provision plans, called kindergarten infrastructure and service plans, or KISPs, where we have worked with the council to project what the demand and supply for that local area will be over time. Those KISPs will be revisited for the pre-prep program, because that will create new demand and a new assessment of supply will be needed. That process has commenced with all 79 councils, but particularly with those of highest priority and with the highest amount of growth. In relation to Knox, they have been, historically, a very critical contributor to the kindergarten and ECC system in their area as an asset owner but also as a service provider. Individual council decisions about changes to their roles in the early childhood sector are a matter for council and their community. In this circumstance they have elected to go with a particular approach, and they are in the process of doing open market testing at the moment to secure alternative providers for their services. The department are supporting them in that process, and we will factor in any change to the provision in that area as part of the revised KISP that we are doing for their expansion.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. In my electorate of Ringwood there are also a number of principals who already have the opportunity to experience what it is like to be co-located, and one of the things I get feedback from the principals on is the difficulty in terms of the systems. Whether it be human resources or whether it be recruiting, you are obviously dealing very often with two separate systems. In the period we are looking at for the purpose of this review but also going forward – because obviously there is going to be a lot more of this given the legislation that has come through the Parliament recently – is the department looking at how they can align those two systems so principals are not left with those sorts of dual lines of reporting and so forth?

Jenny ATTA: We certainly, as we develop more and more kindergartens on the school sites, want to make it seamless and smooth both for the parents and families who are using it as well as for the principal who is managing the school site and has the relationship with usually a different provider. We of course directly deliver the government school system, but we do not deliver the kindergarten services, so we have to keep working on ways to make that process as smooth as possible. It is a big focus for us. But at the moment there is that difference in that the principal is part of the school system and part of the department and we are the funder and steward, if you like, for the early childhood education sector.

Nick McGOWAN: I appreciate that. I have another question in terms of high schools. Where parents who are of a view, Secretary, that they do not want their children to participate in a particular class, whatever that class might be – there could be a philosophical reason; there could be a religious reason – is the expectation that the principal provide at least a space where those students can remain on the campus while that lesson is taught?

Jenny ATTA: There are a couple of things in that question. I might ask Dr Howes to go to it, because the principal does have an obligation to deliver the school curriculum for all students but also needs to cater for a range of individual needs within the school.

David HOWES: Thanks, Secretary. There is the capacity for some particularly sensitive areas for parents to request that the student not participate in those – that is of course not across the whole curriculum, by any means, but in some particular areas – and then the school would make alternative arrangements for that child.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. And the expectation of course would be that the children stay on campus if they are just missing a class. Unless it was at the end of the day and they were being picked up, the expectation would be that they remain there.

David HOWES: That is right, with that exception, as you said.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Bev McARTHUR: Ms FitzGerald, given the level of cost shifting that has occurred between the state government and local government, why would any local government looking after their ratepayers continue with child care or early learning? Why wouldn't you be just totally responsible for it, your department?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: First of all, the most important message, I think, is that as part of the expansion reforms, we have completely transformed the funding available for local governments to fulfil their role in the early childhood system. Local governments have a range of different roles in the system. Many of them are asset owners; all of them undertake a planning role. Some have a service delivery role as well, and many of them take that role very seriously and participate very, very enthusiastically with us.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, why don't you fund it totally and let them deliver it?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Our funding has increased substantially.

Bev McARTHUR: Because it dropped off dramatically.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Well, I do not agree with that characterisation. Our funding has increased significantly over time, and most recently the free kinder funding has represented for councils across the state a 30 per cent to 40 per cent increase in the funding that they are receiving compared to the parent fees that were in existence prior. That is in addition to the base funding rates available in the sector growing over time. Councils also have received a 40 per cent boost in their early years management funding, so all councils that are a service provider in their area are early years managers. They manage a suite of services across their municipality, and they have additional service level funding that they receive for that early years management role. That boost in that early years management funding is in addition to the boost in funding that they get for the free kinder funding. To support them in their other roles, not just this service delivery role but their planning and infrastructure roles as well, there is a suite of infrastructure supports available, including infrastructure grants for new builds that have increased by 60 to 166 per cent. For example, for a new two-room kinder, the funding for that has increased from \$1.5 million to \$4 million recently. Modular kinders are now fully funded also for councils, so if they are interested in having a new kinder available we can fully fund the build for that kinder.

Bev McARTHUR: Not only the build, though. What about the ongoing expenses – the utilities, removing the rubbish, fixing the garden – do you fund all that? I do not think so.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: All services across our system, be they councils or other providers, are supported through their base funding for all responsibilities that come with the delivery of kindergarten services, not just the teaching and the room. I would also say that more than \$70 million has been made available to councils specifically to upgrade existing services, and there is a range of planning grants available to councils to support them in planning for their future infrastructure needs.

Nick McGOWAN: Secretary, during the reporting period, did the department conduct any modelling on the number of students that it predicted might leave the non-government school sector as a consequence of the schools tax?

Jenny ATTA: No, not to my knowledge. No, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. During the reporting period did the department consider how many of the independent schools on the non-exempt list will have their payroll tax bill exceed the funding they receive from the state government?

Jenny ATTA: Sorry, do you mind just repeating that?

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, sure. Did the department consider how many of the independent schools on the non-exempt list will have their payroll tax bill exceed the funding they receive from government?

Mathew HILAKARI: Are we talking about this budget or previous budgets?

The CHAIR: Mr McGowan –

Danny O'BRIEN: He specifically said during the reporting period.

Mathew HILAKARI: Oh, okay.

Nick McGOWAN: You can take it on notice – if you are not sure, that is.

Jenny ATTA: Well, I do not think we did any modelling.

Nick McGOWAN: No modelling on that?

Anthony BATES: No, we did not do any modelling of that nature in the reporting period.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Again, during the reporting period, have you had any interactions with other departments or DPC or anyone else in respect to how many teachers may be impacted by the government's proposed changes to WorkCover compensation legislation which is currently before the Parliament? So teachers that would be on WorkCover currently.

Jenny ATTA: We have had general discussions with colleagues in other departments as those proposed reforms have made their way through as we have sought to have briefings and understand the proposal. So we have had discussions in general.

Nick McGOWAN: In terms of quantity, do you know how many teachers might be affected, or staff under the department's remit?

Jenny ATTA: No, I do not have any numbers on that sort of scenario modelling about what that would look like.

Nick McGOWAN: Would you know the quantity of teachers who might be on WorkCover for greater than 130 weeks?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, we would have that data.

Nick McGOWAN: Would you mind providing that to us?

Jenny ATTA: We will have a look at what we can provide.

Nick McGOWAN: Under 30-plus or coming up to that. During the reporting period, did the department conduct any modelling on the impact of the application of payroll tax on non-government school fees?

Jenny ATTA: No, we did not.

Nick McGOWAN: Forgive me for this one, but it is one that kids are passionate about and so are teachers – toilets. I am sure you hear about this more than you would like to but –

Jenny ATTA: Not all that often.

Nick McGOWAN: any particular program or funding in the offing that we can go back to our constituencies and say guess what, the Secretary has got good news for you?

Jenny ATTA: In terms of upgrades to toilet and bathroom facilities?

Nick McGOWAN: Exactly.

Jenny ATTA: It is a really important issue for schools, and we do have, through our minor capital works, a whole range of projects already underway across different schools. Mr Kirkland might have some of the detail of that, but it will need to be an ongoing feature of our capital works program and we recognise that there are a range of schools that we are yet to get to with that sort of funding.

Nick McGOWAN: I appreciate that. It can sound like a funny issue, but certainly in the reporting period we are not planning to tackle both ability issues – but obviously also in terms of safe spaces for the kids where they feel safe to go into the toilets and use them. I mean there are some toilets, of course, where littlies cannot even reach the buttons and things like that.

Jenny ATTA: Yes. And look, we do take it very seriously in terms of planning for new schools and the upgrading of existing schools with toilet facilities – giving priority to them being safe, equitable, dignified, allowing appropriate passive supervision of handwashing and more general spaces. There is a lot of thought and planning that goes into that. There are construction code standards that we have to take account of as well. It is always – when we are looking at new builds or upgrades – an important part of the consultation process with the schools, and often one of the things they will want to talk to us about first.

Bev McARTHUR: I am going to follow on from that, Secretary, because there clearly was little or no consultation at the Clifton Springs Primary School when you demolished the existing toilets, and you built a new block of toilets that are unisex. Who in the department issued a threat to the mothers for stalking when they decided that they should hold a meeting about this issue?

Jenny ATTA: I think there are two questions there, Mrs McArthur. I can confirm that there was a consultation process with the Clifton Springs Primary School and its school community in relation to new building plans, including all elements of that. I am advised, and I am confident, that the consultation process was in place.

Bev McARTHUR: But, Secretary, if I can interrupt there – apparently the consultation did not include having no single-sex toilet facilities. They understood that there were going to be some unisex toilets but believed the single-sex toilets were not going to be demolished. But they have been, and there is nothing to replace them, and it is a serious issue. The consultation could not have been adequate.

Jenny ATTA: I should say for the record that the existing toilets are not being demolished, they are being upgraded. They will continue –

Bev McARTHUR: Well, they have been demolished to upgrade the single-sex toilets.

Jenny ATTA: The department has not issued any threats, and nor would we to parents, so I am not sure that there is much more I can say about that.

Bev McARTHUR: Advise you of the threats that were issued.

Jenny ATTA: Dr Howes, is there anything –

David HOWES: I am happy to get further advice about this. My understanding is there was an indication, as the Secretary said, that was very far from a threat, but there was communication to the principal at that school that made that principal feel very uncomfortable. We do place the highest priority on the wellbeing of our principals, and that communication was designed to support that principal.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Howes. We will go to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Secretary. Through you, on student health and wellbeing: there was further funding for special schools in the 2021–22 budget, including a new special school in Melbourne's north, the Wayi special school. Secretary, can you update the committee on the delivery of this new school and how this pipeline of continued investment will improve outcomes?

Jenny ATTA: Yes. Thank you for the question. The 2022–23 state budget was a really important one for investment in capital projects for our specialist schools. It provided \$326 million in upgrade and modernisation projects to improve the condition of 36 specialist schools across the state. This included \$223 million to fund upgrades at 22 metropolitan specialist schools and \$103 million to fund upgrades at 14 regional specialist schools. Of those 36 projects in last year's state budget, six are now currently being constructed, 26 are in the tendering phase and four are in the planning phase. That investment means that all 82 specialist schools in Victoria will have either received a major upgrade since 2015 or been newly built and opened during that time.

You mentioned Wayi School. It is a prep–12 specialist school in Craigieburn. It opened its doors in term 1 this year to 100 students. The school includes junior and senior learning neighbourhoods and a community hub with a competition-grade gym, canteen and performing arts space. It is important, I think, to mention that prior to that school opening many of the students had to travel up to an hour each way to go to Broadmeadows on a bus, which can be really challenging for students particularly with intellectual and sensory disabilities. Now many of those students are within that designated transport area for Wayi and picked up by a bus and can attend school much closer to home. The upgrade at Wayi, as is the case with our other new or upgraded specialist schools, is a source of great excitement for the students and a fantastic relief in many ways for parents too. They have that assurance that their child is attending a school with modern, fit-for-purpose infrastructure that, particularly for this student cohort, creates a safe and engaging learning environment. It has been a really important investment. As I said, a number of those 36 schools are still in the tendering or planning phase, but we look forward to seeing the rollout of those upgrades.

Meng Heang TAK: Same here – fantastic. I am really pleased to hear it. The same budget, 2021–22, provides significant funding to support students with disability, including funding for a pilot program – outside school hours care – and a school holiday program for young people with disability which delivered free, high-intensity support at six government school sites. Can you please update the committee on this pilot program?

Jenny ATTA: Yes. Thank you. This, through that 2021–22 budget funding, enabled us to set up a really important pilot program that parents had been asking for for some time, and it has had a really significant impact. I might ask Mr Fraser if he could talk to the detail of that.

Stephen FRASER: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you for that question. As the Secretary has outlined, that funding was for a pilot program in six schools. The outside school hours care program and particularly the high-intensity outside school hours care program – what we call high-intensity OSHC – deliver free outside school hours care specifically designed to meet the needs of children and young people with disability. We see that through these programs children and young people are involved in a diverse range of activities, including both incursions and excursions. They are given opportunities to engage in a range of social and life skills activities with the support of higher staff-to-child ratios, which is important. It really makes these programs possible. We have an average of one staff member to every two students through these programs, so that is the high-intensity nature of them. Again, to the Secretary's point around ensuring that students feel safe and can participate, given sometimes the complexity of their needs, this funding is absolutely critical. It allows schools to purchase a range of specialist services and resources to both deliver professional learning and training to educators and ensure that the services support the unique needs of those children and young people participating. As you said, the pilot program was for six schools. We have five specialist government schools through that pilot: Jackson School, Yarrabah School, Bendigo SDS, Kalianna School and Officer Specialist. Then we have our one mainstream school, which is Laurimar Primary School. Across these six sites we have got approximately 470 children and young people benefiting from attending these services – and again, with parents benefiting also from the increased time that they have available and the wider economic benefits of increased workforce participation and access to respite care that can come about through their children's participation in these programs. We have evaluated the pilot program and those really positive economic benefits for families are reinforced by that evaluation.

We followed that pilot through the 2023–24 budget with an additional \$121 million investment to offer that high-intensity OSHC in 20 schools in 2024 and then building to 30 schools by 2026. That program is funded through to June 2027. I will not go through the 20 schools that are starting the program next year, but each of them has gone through a really intensive expression of interest process where they indicated both their capacity to support that service delivery and the level of demand in their community. The department is now finalising the procurement process to engage suppliers at all 20 of those schools for 2024, but increasing the number and the accessibility of those high-intensity OSHC programs will, as reinforced by that evaluation of the pilot,

deliver some really extensive benefits for more children and families right across Victoria and reduce those access gaps that we see, particularly for parents and carers of children with disability, in our system.

Meng Heang TAK: Perhaps just a follow-up question: out of the 420 students that benefited from this program, do you expect the number to increase in the near future?

Stephen FRASER: The number will increase dramatically. Those 470 were in the six pilot schools, so expanding to 20 schools in 2024 will see at least a trebling of that benefit. But we can go into details if needed on the precise size of each of those schools that are selected.

Meng Heang TAK: Before I go to my next question, I will just ask if you have any follow-up?

Mathew HILAKARI: It sounds like this pilot was a real success, when you are going from six to 20 to 36 schools. What are some of the learnings that we took from that initial pilot? Because obviously you do a pilot to understand how you can improve things or do things slightly better than you initially set out, so have you got some learnings that you could share with the committee?

Stephen FRASER: Yes, thank you. As the Secretary said, the expansion of that pilot was really in response to demand from parents. We know that caring for a child with high and complex needs is time intensive, so –

Mathew HILAKARI: Over the course of the pilot did you see an increase in the schools – say, from the term 1 school holidays through to term 3?

Stephen FRASER: No, the pilot was conducted throughout the reporting period for all of those six schools in almost a consistent manner. But what we did see was the importance of really close relationships with those providers and ensuring that those providers had a really comprehensive understanding of the needs of those schools, the way they worked, the specific needs of students they were serving and the needs of parents. So important was ensuring that transport, accessibility and staffing – those really important ratios – were attended to and that the range of activities were tailored to the needs and the strengths of students participating in those programs. Ensuring student voice was an important component in the design of the services and that those service providers did not come in with a prepackaged idea of what kinds of programs would be delivered – that they worked in partnership with schools, building on the students' own ideas and interests. So it was about the kinds of activities that they wanted to engage in both through the incursions – those activities delivered inside the school – and the excursions happening outside of school hours and during school holidays.

Mathew HILAKARI: Terrific. Thank you.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Again the 2022–23 budget also provides more than \$1.5 billion to support students with special needs and disabilities. Are you able to highlight some of the initiatives and programs that this delivers and how it helps students?

Stephen FRASER: Thank you for the question. This is such a significant investment in the inclusion of our system and specifically that support that is provided directly for students with disabilities and their families. As you said, over \$1.5 billion was invested back in the 2020–21 budget, providing an ongoing boost to school-based resourcing and enhancing the supports for students with disabilities in our schools. The new disability inclusion funding and support model is being progressively rolled out across the Victorian government system from 2021 through to 2025. So we have just concluded, or we are just about to conclude, year 3 and we are about to move into year 4 of implementation. It is really designed to deliver capability-building initiatives across the system, a new strengths-based disability inclusion profile and a new tiered model of additional school-level investments.

One of the major aspects of the reform – that disability inclusion profile – is a strengths-based process to help schools and families identify each individual student's strengths and needs, the kinds of educational adjustments that schools can make to support that student's participation and learning and wellbeing outcomes, and the key people in their lives who understand that student's education and support needs. It is about those people coming together to complete the profile together – the student, their family, school staff and other qualified support staff. All of that activity in the creation of the disability inclusion profile is supported by a newly created facilitator role, which helps schools and families work together through that new approach.

Schools have been working with families and those disability inclusion facilitators to complete those profiles, and we have now completed, over the almost first three years of the program, 5000 profiles for students with disability across the state. We have had the work supported by a really important investigation by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office, which has found that implementation has been strong and is likely to produce the kind of outcomes we are seeking from the program. I will not go through each of the rollout areas, but it is important to say whilst we are in year 3 of the rollout of the moment, all schools across Victoria are engaging with disability inclusion system capacity-building initiatives.

Whilst we are moving into year 4 next year and year 5 the year after, we also have system-wide initiatives, including what we call the Diverse Learners Hub, which is really about building expertise and resources to support the needs of students with autism and neurodiversity; the inclusion outreach coaching initiative, which is about tapping into the specialist expertise that exists in our specialist schools; employing those staff who work in specialist schools as coaches to work with their counterparts in mainstream settings; and supporting the ongoing building of expertise and capability in our teaching workforce through masters of inclusive education programs and scholarships for those programs and scholarships for graduate certificates right across the system.

The new funding model has delivered additional funding and school-level funding to schools through what we call tier 2 funding allocations. This is funding support to schools to make whole-school adjustments to their teaching and learning programs to be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of students with disability. As at the middle of this year, June 2023, implementation of that funding model was on track, and as the Secretary said in her presentation, we now have over 850 government schools in nine of Victoria's 17 areas transitioned to the new funding and support model.

I mentioned the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report and the wider evaluation that we have running alongside this work. One of key findings that we had from the initial rollout years was that providing schools with additional time and resources to prepare for the investment and the allocation of that tier 2 funding was incredibly beneficial. In response to this, those schools in year 4 and year 5 – so in 2024 and 2025 – are receiving their additional school-level allocation six months earlier than the original rollout schedule anticipated. That will help them prepare for that transition to disability inclusion and the new disability inclusion profile process. For the first time specialist schools will now receive additional school-level funding, as well as English language schools who provide such critical support for our refugee students and new arrivals and will now receive that funding for the first time. Schools and families are really appreciating, based on the evidence we have, the strength-based and collaborative nature of that disability inclusion profile process. We are really proud of the fact that over 90 per cent of the disability inclusion profile meetings have benefited from some form of student voice, so students making a direct contribution to those discussions and the identification of the supports and the adjustments that they will need to support their learning.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you very much. It is very pleasing to hear. Continuing on with student health and wellbeing: combined, budget paper 4 on page 34 in the 2021–22 budget and also budget paper 4 on page 35 in the 2022–23 budget provide over \$1 billion for new schools, with the objective of delivering 100 new schools across Victoria by 2026. Secretary, can you update the committee on the new schools funded in this budget?

Jenny ATTA: Thanks very much for the question. It is a big and significant part of our school capital program to deliver on the 100 new schools that the government has committed to from 2019 through to 2026. This included, it is worth mentioning, 14 new schools that opened in 2022 and 13 new schools that opened in 2023. As at 30 June this year we have got 61 new schools completed; 14 were in progress and nine were in planning and development. Those big numbers of new schools that were opening each year to meet the growth that we are seeing in our system have been supported by that very significant investment in the 2021–22 state budget – as you said, \$768 million for land acquisition and new schools construction – and in the 2022–23 budget, \$763 million for land acquisition and new school construction.

We are working hard this year, and Mr Kirkland may be able to supplement with more detail, but all schools that are scheduled to open for 2024 are on track to be open day one, term 1, which is exactly where we need them to be. We are doing all of the work in anticipation of those schools being open, such as bringing on and appointing principals who can then be part of being engaged in the planning ahead of time of that opening and engaging with the local school community in terms of how that new school will function, being there to work

through enrolment issues and other planning and set-up issues. I can ask, perhaps, Mr Kirkland to talk to some of the detail about where those new schools will be for 2024.

Tom KIRKLAND: Absolutely. Thank you, Secretary. With the challenging times in the construction market, we are very pleased to say that we are on track to open the 14 proposed new schools for the beginning of term 1, day one, 2024. It is now 22 November.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Kirkland. I have the privilege of being the timekeeper. The committee is now going to take a very short break and come back for the last session at 3:15 pm.

Thank you. The committee will now resume its consideration of the Department of Education. Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Who is responsible for retention rates?

Jenny ATTA: Retention rates –

Bev McARTHUR: Student retention rates.

Jenny ATTA: Student retention. Dr Howes could probably best –

Bev McARTHUR: Dr Howes. Across regional Victoria there are non-attendance rates of between 35 and 60 per cent. How do you account for that, and what are you doing about it?

David HOWES: Retention or attendance rates?

Bev McARTHUR: Sorry, attendance rates – school attendance rates. Keeping them at school longer, the same sort of thing – well, that is another aspect.

Jenny ATTA: Well, getting them to school each day. I might go to Mr Fraser.

Bev McARTHUR: Mr Fraser.

Stephen FRASER: Thank you for the question. Attendance is obviously one of the critical enablers to success in school. We are really proud of the fact that Victoria has the highest attendance rates of any jurisdiction in Australia. We see that in the data that is reported nationally through ACARA and on the My School website. It is important to call out I think the really important work that schools and teachers do, working in partnership with families –

Bev McARTHUR: Is that across Victoria, your average?

Stephen FRASER: That is across Victoria.

Bev McARTHUR: What about rural and regional Victoria? Let us just go to that area.

Stephen FRASER: What we often see is that attendance rates are highly correlated with levels of disadvantage. We know that some of those levels of disadvantage, particularly when there are access barriers – transport distances – and other indicators of disadvantage that lead to high rates of illness across the community, and that is precisely what we have seen coming out of the COVID-19 years –

Bev McARTHUR: This was even before COVID.

Stephen FRASER: Sorry, in the –

Bev McARTHUR: The attendance rates in rural Victoria even before COVID were appalling, so what have you been doing about it over this period of time?

Stephen FRASER: Over the reporting years, we have had the strongest attendance rates throughout the country before COVID and then after COVID.

Bev McARTHUR: But not in rural Victoria.

Stephen FRASER: Even when we look at the rural rates, Victoria's attendance rates for rural and regional students are strong. That is not to say that we rest on our laurels. We do have attendance targets, and we have fallen short of those attendance targets, particularly in the COVID years. We have a range of initiatives, working in partnership with our regional and area based teams and those schools individually, to get students back to school as quickly as possible. A lot of that work is focused on working in partnership with parents, and the kinds of initiatives and activities that we engage in in rural and regional areas are somewhat different to the kinds of activities and initiatives that we engage in in metropolitan areas. We do have higher concentrations of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds in many of our rural communities, and that really involves close partnership with communities and with local elders, and fundamentally ensuring our schools are safe places for our Koori students. That is where a lot of the work is focused on – ensuring that students feel safe, feel welcome and feel included at school. We know from the evidence that when we do that, we do boost attendance rates. That work is hard, and particularly, again, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic – where we have seen a decline from the pre-2019 rates – we know that the vast majority of absences, when we look behind the detail in that data and we see absence rates that are attributable to health-related reasons and parental choice, those two categories are the major drivers of lower attendance rates in our schools. That is true for rural and regional schools as well as metropolitan schools.

Bev McARTHUR: Who is responsible for the fee thresholds for non-government schools?

Jenny ATTA: I think Mr Bates can assist on non-government schools.

Bev McARTHUR: Mr Bates? Thank you. Okay. Turning to page 21 of the questionnaire, is there a fee threshold for non-government schools to apply under the non-government schools infrastructure fund?

Anthony BATES: The short answer is no, Mrs McArthur. There is some weighting depending on the fee level for the schools. I will just check with Ms Trinder. That is right? Yes. So there is no threshold at which people are cut in or out, but when we do the assessment criteria for the grant applications we do have a weighting, so lower fee schools get a higher score in the assessment process.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. So low fee paying schools are defined using an income-per-student value of \$8125 per year –

Anthony BATES: Yes.

Bev McARTHUR: or as otherwise decided by the minister. How long has the threshold been in place, and when was it publicly published?

Anthony BATES: We had versions of that threshold in the assessment process for a number of years, and I think we published that particular threshold earlier this year, so it would have been at the end of the reporting period we are talking about. To repeat myself, we do look at the thresholds across the years when we have been looking at the non-government school capital grants program, but to repeat myself, it is used more as a weighting rather than an absolute in or out.

Bev McARTHUR: So when did we decide on the \$15,000 for high fee paying schools?

Anthony BATES: That was done post budget at the end of the reporting period, which was when the Minister for Education in consultation with the Treasurer decided on what the exemption list would be. If it is helpful, I can talk through the policy rationale for the \$15,000.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. How do you decide the thresholds?

Anthony BATES: As in do the analysis for an individual school or set the \$15,000?

Bev McARTHUR: Yes – set the \$15,000, the arbitrary figures.

Anthony BATES: Broadly we use the Gonski school resourcing standards, so if you are familiar with that, there are different national rates for both primary and secondary. But if I pick secondary, for this year the national rate to operate an efficient school is about \$16,300. The features of the Commonwealth–state *National School Reform Agreement* mean that there is a minimum amount that every school gets no matter how high

their fees are. And again, for a secondary student – I will just round the numbers, Mrs McArthur – every school gets at least \$3200 per student no matter how high their fees are.

The policy logic we used was if you are charging fees of \$15,000 and you get a minimum of at least \$3200 from the Victorian and Commonwealth governments, that gives you about \$18,200 per student as a minimum. We know that non-government schools having to do their own capital funding typically try and raise around \$2000 to \$3000 per student towards their capital cost. So if you just follow that logic, \$15,000 in fees plus \$3,200 in funding from the Commonwealth and state governments less the \$2000 allowance for capital gets you to around about a \$16,000 point. So at that \$15,000 point, allowing for government funding and a capital allocation, it puts the school at the benchmark of the national SRS level. That is why that is the point.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. Thank you, Mr Bates. So has the department modelled how many schools will now be ineligible to apply for building grants under this fund as a result of the threshold?

Anthony BATES: As I said, Mrs McArthur, it is not an in-or-out threshold. The relative level of these is one of the weighting factors when we are assessing the projects that come in. So the short answer is no, it is zero; no one is ineligible. But the design of the program is to try and give a higher weighting to supporting capital projects at low-fee schools.

Nick McGOWAN: Excuse my ignorance, Secretary. Over the reporting period no doubt you have probably taken into consideration the worsening interest rates, and what I am getting at here is obviously parents are finding it harder and harder to pay the voluntary fees. Is there any mechanism where you are allowing for that fact with schools and supporting them somehow as less parents pay those fees and schools find themselves sort of struggling to cope?

Jenny ATTA: Again, Mr Bates, I think can talk –

Anthony BATES: Yes. Mr McGowan, you are I think just asking about that \$15,000 number. The way I would describe it is when we are doing assessments we are not using what I will call the sticker price or what is on the website. The assessment is done using actual fees collected. So typically – I will not name a school – for one who on their website has fees advertised of \$30,000 per year for years 11 and 12, what we use is what they actually collect, not what their advertised price is. So we are aware that schools have scholarship programs, bursary programs. I have had dozens of meetings with school principals since this policy was announced. A lot of schools will be doing things like where parents are in financial distress, they are not expelling students; so they are deferring fees or giving some sort of fee support. So the \$15,000 we are using in the assessment is the average actual collection, not the advertised.

Nick McGOWAN: I did not mean to conflate the two.

Anthony BATES: Sorry.

Nick McGOWAN: I was talking separately about government schools.

Bev McARTHUR: Who is responsible for teacher employment?

Jenny ATTA: Well, ultimately I am.

Bev McARTHUR: Oh, fabulous. Secretary, vaccine mandates were imposed on teachers. How many teachers left the profession in Victoria because of vaccine mandates?

Jenny ATTA: It was about 141 teachers, Mrs McArthur, at the period of time – I am just looking for the detail there – from 28 January 2022, following the chief health officer's determinations with regard to vaccination requirements and specifically with regard to staff working in schools or early childhood education and care settings. From January 2022 any teaching service employees who did not meet vaccination requirements and were not on preapproved leave were placed on unauthorised absence, and then after three months of unauthorised absence, if that was still the case, we were required to have staff who were vaccinated. If they still were not vaccinated, then their employment ceased at that time. I think it was about 141 teaching and support staff.

Bev McARTHUR: 141, okay. Thank you very much. Could you confirm, Secretary, whether in your government schools teachers can give gender transitioning advice without parental consent?

Jenny ATTA: No – I am confident that is not the case.

Bev McARTHUR: Not the case.

Jenny ATTA: Not the case.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you very much indeed.

Nick McGOWAN: Can I just go back to my earlier question – maybe I did not get it – in terms of government schools: when parents are not able to pay the voluntary fees, is there a mechanism where the department supports those schools? So, say 100 per cent of parents did not pay those fees this year and this will anticipate that –

Jenny ATTA: Sorry, Mr McGowan, in government schools?

Nick McGOWAN: Yes.

Jenny ATTA: The name is important – they are ‘voluntary fees’. So there is no parent or child, student who would be disadvantaged or under pressure if they are not paying a voluntary fee.

Nick McGOWAN: No, my question is: does the department support those schools? So some schools could have 100 per cent of parents pay all the voluntary fees, and the next school next door might have 10 per cent.

Jenny ATTA: Ah, I see.

Nick McGOWAN: So in terms of that, is there is a measure that kicks in where the department actually assists that principal to run the school given that there is a shortfall, albeit voluntary?

Jenny ATTA: Well, there is no set target around voluntary fee contributions, so it is not so much if there is a shortfall. But there are a range of programs that do provide assistance for families who, for instance, need assistance around camps, sports or excursions. There is a specific fund that healthcare card holders are able to apply for, and that reaches a significant number of families and students right across our schools. Some of the other programs are health and wellbeing programs – for instance, the Glasses for Kids program, affordable school uniforms. So there are a range of programs that are in place to assist with the cost of learning, if you like, for parents where they are struggling.

In terms of schools in general, schools do receive a budget to provide and deliver all elements of the curriculum, and voluntary contributions can be a way for schools to offer some additional or specialist offerings. But if a principal was struggling with the general provision of the curriculum and the general operation of the school, we would always be in discussion around what that looks like for them and what assistance or advice we can provide to ensure that all elements of schooling are delivered for all students.

Bev McARTHUR: Secretary, the Department of Education’s questionnaire states savings of \$31.9 million were achieved in 2021–22 through slowed engagement of contractors, consultants and other procurements. How does this align with the data provided that shows actual expenditure on contractors and consultants grew between 2020–21 and 2021–22?

Jenny ATTA: I think our consultant expenditure reduced between 2021–22 and 2022–23 and our contractor expenditure increased. The savings were applied to the allocated budget for the department in relation to consultants and contractors and so those savings were real. Any growth in expenditure historically related to new initiatives, new reforms, new requirements. Often with contractors it is about technical specialists in areas of the school capital program – within the information management and technology area, for instance. So the savings are real and delivered. At the same time, with new initiatives and new investments coming into the department there can be further growth or demand for short-term, fixed-term or specialist expertise.

Danny O’BRIEN: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Can I start with a committee member’s prerogative, a local one. Sale College was given \$3 million I think in the 2021–22 budget for master planning of the school. Can

you give me an update as to what has happened with that, because we are now a few years down the track. I believe the master plan is done, I believe there is a lot of work being done by the VSBA on sites and all of that and discussions with council, but we do not have a school.

Jenny ATTA: Yes. I am aware that this has been a really important project. It is had multiple stages. I might ask Mr Kirkland to provide an update on the status of the work.

Tom KIRKLAND: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you for your question, Mr O'Brien. There are two streams of work following the \$3 million investment in 2021–22. One was we engaged a principal design consultant and had positive and productive user group conversations with the school to develop a proposal to aggregate the school on a new site. That process is complete, so we went from a master plan with schematic designs through detailed design and tender drawings. So they are done and on the shelf, good to go. In parallel we have been working with the Wellington Shire Council regarding some land acquisition, and we are working with them around the contract of sale for the preferred site. So we are finalising the contract terms, finalising and confirming the design of a roundabout at the corner of Cobains and Gibsons roads. This will determine the area of the school site, the creation of the proposed plan of subdivision incorporating the final roundabout design and the school site. We are also working with them to get a joint valuer-general valuation submission to see what the proposed piece of land is valued at, and then council will approve whatever council approves at the next shire council meeting. So conversations are ongoing. The longest lead time was really the plan of subdivision, and once the road finalisation around that intersection gets determined we do not foresee there will be any major hiccups to proceeding in terms of concluding the land acquisition. And then it is a matter for government – should they fund the capital in one or two stages as they see fit. It is progressing. It is in a positive a state as it can be in in the environment in which we are in.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I ask how much the proposed new school will cost?

Tom KIRKLAND: Not at this stage. We are only at cost plans level.

Danny O'BRIEN: Righto. On a broader question, can I ask how the VSBA prioritises school upgrades? Separate to new schools specifically and growth areas and the like, is there a list, either by state or by region, of the next ones that need either rebuilding, replacement or significant upgrades? I am not just talking about maintenance.

Tom KIRKLAND: Yes, there is a systematic approach to upgrades that we provide advice to government on based on the work that we do. Back in 2012 we did a complete portfolio condition audit of all government schools in the state. In 2018 we rolled out a program of some significance called the rolling facilities evaluation program, and we look at, over a five-year period, 20 per cent of the schools every year – so roughly 300, 325 schools per year. We send in external auditors to look at the school condition. The first, between 2018 and 2023, was really on the condition of visibility – so structure, roofing, glazing, that sort of thing.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is that done on a statewide basis or by region?

Tom KIRKLAND: No, it is done statewide.

Danny O'BRIEN: Righto. Can I ask where Sale is on the statewide list?

Tom KIRKLAND: I do not have that information to hand.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is it something that you are able to share with us or not?

Tom KIRKLAND: Yes, we can find out where Sale is on a routine.

Danny O'BRIEN: If I could ask you to take that a notice, that would be wonderful.

Tom KIRKLAND: Thank you.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: You slipped that one in quick, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: I actually am allowed to do it, Chair.

The CHAIR: We will now go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: I might just take this as well to the teaching workforce. I know in budget paper 3, page 8, in 2022–23 it outlined somewhere near \$800 million to recruit 1900 teachers. This is about giving more classroom time back to teachers to prepare for students and focus on their needs. Are you able to outline how we have gone since that time and how those initiatives are going?

Jenny ATTA: Yes. Thanks, Mr Hilakari. This was a big and important shift that goes to the quality of teaching as well as addressing teacher workload issues and ensuring that students in a classroom have the best quality planning and preparation. So quality teaching is the most important in-school factor in terms of influencing outcomes. In a contemporary world, teaching is an increasingly complex job, so reducing the maximum face-to-face teaching time for all Victorian government teachers is about providing more time for teachers to undertake high-value teaching activities – planning, preparing, lesson development, assessing student progress et cetera. The initiative was about giving teachers more time for those important tasks to enable them to better adapt their teaching to meet the needs of students and influence positive student outcomes. It does recognise the wide range of responsibilities that a typical teacher carries. It is not limited to their standard scheduled classes. So reducing face-to-face teaching time and ensuring that there is a maximum that principals and schools do not allocate above will give teachers more time to be able to do all aspects of their jobs effectively. I might ask Mr Robinson just to supplement, but that has phased in a 1-hour reduction and then a half-hour – or the other way around. But Mr Robinson can comment on where we are up to.

David ROBINSON: So the introduction of the face-to-face teaching reduction is coming in over two tranches – the first this year, 2023; and then the second in 2024. So in 2023 the face-to-face hours for secondary school teachers reduced from 20 to 19 hours, and then an additional 30 minutes of reduction in face-to-face teaching will occur next year from the start of 2024. For primary schools there was an hour reduction from 22.5 face-to-face hours in 2023 to 21.5. Then next year it will be a further reduction of 30 minutes down to 20 hours maximum face to face for primary schools.

Mathew HILAKARI: Great. Have we got any feedback over the course of this year on what that is producing for teachers? Is that reducing some of the stress or improving some of the class preparation times? I would be keen to understand some of what we are understanding from early thoughts on that.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, certainly talking to teachers and principals across the system, where that pressure on some of our teachers has been able to be released through this initiative it is having a positive impact both in terms of workload and stress, if you like, on the individual teacher. But it also means that, increasingly in our schools it is so important that teachers can collaborate and plan together, and it provides more opportunity for that to happen. Dr Howes, is there anything else you would supplement from teaching staff?

David HOWES: It is doing what it was intended to do.

Mathew HILAKARI: Great. In terms of retention, I mean, teachers starting out their teaching career compared to somebody who has been in there for some time – there is an incredible difference. People just pick up the tips of the trade and they get better at their job year in, year out. Are we hoping to see improved teacher retention through this program?

Jenny ATTA: We certainly hope so. Obviously it is very early days in terms of measuring any impact on retention, but we know from feedback from our teachers here and from feedback nationally from teachers and the teaching profession that workload is a major issue that is one consideration when someone is deciding whether they want to take up teaching versus an alternative profession or whether they want to stay in teaching. Ensuring that we have got a healthy and supported teaching workforce is a really critical plank in our objective to not only attract new people into the profession and into Victoria's schools but to have them stay in our schools. As I touched on earlier, it is important across the board, but it is really important that we have been able to make this sort of change as we try and tackle that issue of teachers leaving the system in the first five years. So we want to ensure that they are supported and feel like they are in a supported, valued and sustainable profession from day one. This is a really important initiative as part of that.

Mathew HILAKARI: Are there any other initiatives that we have been rolling out on either of the budgets to attract and develop quality teachers?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, we are doing a lot across what we call five pillars or five elements in a whole suite of initiatives. But I might ask Mr Robinson to go to some of that detail.

David ROBINSON: Thanks, Secretary. I think the first, overarching thing I would say on the approach the department is taking to supporting our teaching workforce is that there is no one thing that is going to address some of the challenges that the teaching workforce is facing at the moment. We have taken an approach which goes across five key areas, the first being attraction of people into teaching; the second being recruitment, so supporting our schools to recruit the best teachers into those schools that they possibly can; the third being, as the Secretary mentioned, the support for our early-career teachers and particularly the Career Start program; the fourth being that question more broadly of retention; and finally, there is how we provide career pathways for our more experienced teachers so that they have a career pathway that they can aspire to. Some of the key elements across those areas include, on the attraction front, the investment in the Teach the Future communications campaign to raise the profile and send a positive message to the community about our teaching workforce, and the second is our Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow employment-based employment programs. They are programs which provide those people that are graduates, and particularly recent graduates and career changers, to work in a school while they are studying their postgraduate degree in teaching. And they can do that with permission to teach arrangements, so they are both studying at university but also carrying some of the teaching load for the school that they are working in. This does a couple of things, I think. The first is we know that a transition into teaching when you need to take two years out of your career or out of your life to study can be expensive, particularly with that lost income, so it provides an income for those teachers transitioning into teaching, and the second is it gives those people undertaking that program really valuable hands-on, school-based education alongside their university program. So those two programs on the attraction side are rolling out at the moment and there are currently 400 participants in those employment-based programs.

As a part of our approach to recruitment – we talked about the teacher financial incentives earlier in the committee hearing – we also have support for international teacher recruitment. That comprises both incentives for teachers to come to Australia and support them with their relocation expenses as well as a central service for all schools to help them navigate through the complex migration and registration requirements for people coming from overseas.

Mathew HILAKARI: I had some New Zealand teachers talk about the value of those relocation costs and the importance to them, so thank you for that. I might actually just take us to early childhood education. We are going to have to have a massive uplift in early childhood educators as we roll out some of the Best Start, Best Life programs. As I make my way around to early childhood education centres, they talk about some of the incentive training that is going on. They are really appreciative of it, so continuing to teach while they are training in centres. Did you want to talk a little bit about both the recruitment side, because we just actually need more early childhood educators, but also some of those training opportunities?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, thanks. We have got a strategy on the school side and we have got a strategy on the early childhood education side, and while there are some similarities, there are some particular differences in the types of challenges and the way we think we could best support the attraction and recruitment of new teachers and early childhood educators as well as retaining them in the system. So I might ask Ms FitzGerald to talk a little more to what we are doing.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Absolutely. Thank you for the question. One of the most important pieces of context is that we are not the direct employer of the staff that are in our sector. We have got nearly 2900 services that are delivering a kindergarten program. It is a mix of sessional kindergartens and long day care services, and each of those kindergarten programs will be led by a bachelor-qualified teacher but will often have vocationally qualified educators supporting the teacher in the operation of the program. So there are different pieces of work going on to support the recruitment and retention of those two sort of sub-workforces in our sector, and it is done in partnership with our sector, with the peak bodies and with the tertiary education providers who are working to do that training work for the teachers and educators we need to attract into our system. There are a range of initiatives we have underway that support that attraction and then the retention and quality piece after that point. One of our flagship initiatives is the scholarship program, which we mentioned

earlier. That is for students who are planning to undertake the teaching qualification, and there are a range of scholarships available there based on what course is being undertaken and some of the individual characteristics of the student, but the financial support ranges from \$12,000 through to \$34,000. As I said before, it is distributed in a series of staged payments. Those payments are given during the period of study and then into employment. The payments can be used to contribute to course fees, to the living costs or other costs associated with study, and more than 3500 scholarships have been awarded. We will follow up on the completion data, but we are seeing a large number of those students enter our sector now. What we have heard from the tertiary providers is that the retention-in-study data is better when those scholarships are in place.

In addition, and sort of combined with the scholarships, we have an innovative initial teacher education program, which is supporting diploma-qualified educators who already work in our sector to upskill to become early childhood teachers and take on that leadership role. Through that program they can stay in the workforce and continue working while they study and then as they complete their course transfer into a more senior role in their service or another service that they apply for. For that educator group, for the cert III and diploma-qualified group, we have a partnership with Jobs Victoria and Chisholm Institute, and that partnership delivers a program where they undertake their cert III or their diploma in ECEC while gaining practical skills in the workplace alongside that, so they are earning and learning under that program.

We have also got our version of an incentives program, which is about the distribution of staff into hard-to-staff services across the state. We define 'hard to staff' in different ways. There are a range of locations in regional Victoria that attract hard-to-staff status, but there are also a range of metro locations. We look at the historical figures around what those services are doing and how difficult they find it to attract and retain staff. All of this supply work is supported by a jobs website that we administer, and we also provide recruitment support directly to employers in our sector who have hard-to-staff services so that they are getting support to find candidates, because often they do not necessarily have all the networks they need to be able to find good candidates to be attracted to their services.

That is the attraction side. We also have a retention side, which is about providing a range of supports to existing staff and which includes professional development. It also includes wellbeing support and a range of we call them early years learning networks and early years leadership forums, and they are about connecting the professionals in our sector. Often kindergartens can be quite small entities. You want to give the staff in those entities an opportunity to form a community of practice with the people in their local area and share their practice successes and go through the process of comparing notes on how they are doing the reform activity. So that is what those forums do, and we have got a huge range of professional learning opportunities that are targeted to different aspects of the work in the profession. The Secretary mentioned earlier the teaching toolkit, which is targeted specifically towards taking on the three-year-old kindergarten program, but there are a range of other professional learning and wellbeing supports that are available for staff as well.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much, and I just want to draw the attention – I saw in the slide deck that you provided that Aboriginal children accessing three-year-old kinder has gone from 75.5 per cent in 2021 to 90.7 per cent. That is an incredible outcome. Could you just talk to some of the factors that led to that really great uplift? Certainly I am really keen if you talk about the four-year-olds as well, which have gone from 93 per cent, just under, to 100 per cent.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, and it is one of the shining lights really for early childhood education in Victoria. We have had a strong result in the four-year-old kindergarten space for a few years now, and a lot of that is off the back of fantastic engagement with and by Aboriginal communities and the valuing of early childhood education and then the work of services and teachers and educators in terms of ensuring an engaging program, a safe place to be and engaging not only with the child but with the family as well. Ms FitzGerald might want to say a little bit more about how the service sector is achieving those results.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Yes. We are really pleased with the outcome, but it is an important one to sustain. It is a real credit to some of the organisations in our sector who have partnered on this with us for a number of years now, specifically our Aboriginal Best Start partners: the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. There has been a collective partnership between those bodies and the department to work with community to build trust in the program and to normalise participation in the program. A shout-out also needs to go to our Aboriginal community controlled services across the sector, who are doing a wonderful job.

The one thing I want to call out is a particular communications program called Koorie Kids Shine, which has been developed in coordination with community, which has been in place for a number of years now and has really strong brand recognition in local communities. It is a trusted brand and is a way of communicating to families that these services are culturally sensitive and accepted within community and participation is a normal and positive thing to do. We are really happy with the results, but it will have constant maintenance.

Mathew HILAKARI: You are really right to highlight it and highlight those partner organisations. What an amazing job they are doing. I know as I go to early childhood centres and kindergartens the education around Aboriginality and locality is amazing, at so many steps above I think what all of us here would have experienced in our own time through kindergartens, including education about language and education about culture. It is just an incredible amount of work all our early childhood educators are doing. I think it is something to be really proud of, and those results I think reflect some of that pride. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. We will go straight to Ms Sandell.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. I have got a question for the Secretary, but then I will have one for Mr Kirkland, if you want to come back up. Secretary, this morning I asked the Department of Transport and Planning about Arden, which is a new suburb in my electorate which is expected to house around 20,000 new residents, but it will only have one primary school and no high school in current plans. They said that part of the reason for that is that it is the education department's policy that you cannot build more schools because there are already several schools in the surrounding suburbs in close proximity. But given that this is a suburb which is a very dense suburb – probably one of the highest densities in the entire state – and given that you probably already know that all of those schools surrounding are already full or overcapacity, could you just explain that to us, as to whether one school is acceptable and whether there is any policy that is actually preventing further schools from being planned for that area?

Jenny ATTA: Yes. Dr Howes might supplement my answer, but it is important for that area, and the way we do our planning and our provision planning is to consider growth projections and community needs as well as existing provision within a relevant area. It is important that we keep refreshing that work because those projections can change, and we have seen in some of the growth corridor areas that growth has exceeded what has been projected and the previous projection figures that we are working with. It is always looking at both sides of that equation. Dr Howes, in terms of where we are at currently with Arden –

David HOWES: Ms Sandell, I think that argument that was put was on the basis of the capacity that was going to be increased at Mount Alexander secondary, because I do not think Mount Alexander is at capacity, and of course Port Melbourne Secondary has just opened as well. But it is also true that right across Flemington, North Melbourne and Parkville we are seeing a change in – as you well know – the demographic mix and the rise of apartments and so on. That is a process that is in line with the way in which school provision is planned. It is subject to review and monitoring of those changing patterns.

Ellen SANDELL: Just so I can be clear, you are saying that the projections that were made around Arden are that there is one school but actually that is under review. Is that correct? Is that what you are saying?

Jenny ATTA: It is constantly under review, and –

Ellen SANDELL: I guess the thing is that the plans are being made now, and the department of planning, who is planning this neighbourhood, is saying, 'Well, we're only planning for one school', and they are putting in plans now for the land use. If we only have one school there, I am sure you can agree it will be very much insufficient very quickly.

Jenny ATTA: I think I can say that we are continuing to work with planning through the Department of Transport and Planning, but it is always a question as well of looking at that available capacity when that is going to be taken up – the size and scale of the primary school. But thinking about secondary school provision right across that area is a live issue for us.

Ellen SANDELL: I guess 20,000 people would be a similar size to a city such as Wangaratta, and Wangaratta has four public primary schools, a public high school, many Catholic and independent schools, and Catholic, independent and public schools in surrounding towns. Is the department worried, particularly given that? Also on top of that we have now had the announcement from the government that we are expecting to put

tens of thousands of extra people on the public housing estates in Flemington, North Melbourne and Carlton. Is that being taken into account in terms of how many schools will be put in Arden?

Jenny ATTA: On that, we are from the outset engaging closely with planning around where there are structural changes, if you like, through government policy and about what that means not only for schools but for early childhood education, as other departments would be part of that process in terms of key community service provision. So yes, it is very close engagement at the outset on looking at what implications there might be for that. There is probably not a lot more I could say right now in terms of any decisions or hard plans –

Ellen SANDELL: So the decision currently still stands at one primary school?

Jenny ATTA: Well, that decision has been made, and we are working hard towards that, but in terms of secondary school provision, we are continuing to look at that.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. A question for Mr Kirkland: you mentioned in response to Mr O'Brien that there is a list of where schools are in priority in terms of upgrades for capital works. You have a list, and you said you would provide information on where Sale College is at on that list. Is that correct? Am I correct in understanding that?

Tom KIRKLAND: Not entirely. That was part of the rolling facilities evaluation program, where we send external auditors in to look at the school and the state of the school infrastructure. They report back to us, and we make an assessment and advice to government for the following year's planned maintenance program to upgrade the schools. If a roof is in immediate need of repair or it can wait for repair for a period of months, that conversation takes place then, and we would provide advice to government accordingly. It is not so much that the department maintains a list of capital replacements or new schools accordingly. It is a different conversation, and there really is no such list. We just take the advice. We provide advice to government based on the data that we gather through the rolling facilities evaluation program, and as I mentioned before to Mr O'Brien, we did version 1 from 2018 to 2022 and we expanded the scope for the next five years as RFE 2 from 2023 five years forward – roughly 325 schools a year. But now we are looking at more services – in-ground fire and life safety systems, switchboards and those sorts of things. We are getting a clearer picture of the state of the portfolio over the five-year period.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. I just want to clarify what you have committed to provide to Mr O'Brien for Sale College. Is that just advice on where Sale College is up to in terms of its rolling facility?

Tom KIRKLAND: That is right. So I will go back to the team and we can provide where in the next five-year tranche Sale College is in that program, whether it is in the 2023 school year for example or the 24 school year. I honestly do not know, but I can certainly provide that information, through the minister's office, to Mr O'Brien.

Ellen SANDELL: And would you also be able to please provide that for Kensington Primary School?

Tom KIRKLAND: Absolutely.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. Just related to Kensington Primary School, the school did receive \$7.6 million in the 2021–22 budget, which is a part of this inquiry. They have a master plan, which is a five-year plan for their facilities, broken up into stages – so \$7.6 million funded stage 1 of their plan. There is no further funding for the other stages. I appreciate that capital funding is a decision for future government budgets, but I just wonder if you could help me understand: if schools already have a master plan, such as Kensington Primary, which has a five-year plan – very clearly articulated needs; they worked with the VSBA on that – do they then get prioritised for future funding? Because otherwise I guess what I am getting at is, if they are waiting much longer the five-year plan will be expired before it has been funded. Are they prioritised given that they already have a five-year plan?

Tom KIRKLAND: It is not so much a prioritisation; it is information available at a point in time. As the Secretary has said, the decisions of resource allocation are made by the government at the time during their budget process. So again, we would provide advice to government about the status of the infrastructure at Kensington Primary, noting that, yes, there was a master plan done at a point in time based on known inputs. I think it is the number of students, the condition of the asset; is it looking to grow? It is much as you said around

Arden: is it looking to long-term enrolment growth, is it declining, stagnant or growing? So all of those decisions are made. Should government make a decision to allocate the next stage of funding, well, then we would get on with it. But it is not so much a priority – it is just in a position to realise that yes, any further works at that school are considered on information that is best known at the time. So if the master plan is done, we do not have to go back and do it again – assuming the inputs that generated that master plan have not materially changed.

Ellen SANDELL: I guess parents are just a little bit frustrated because there is no certainty – they have a plan, they have engaged in this plan, it is very clear what needs to be done, but there is a frustration that they have no idea about whether any of that will be funded.

Tom KIRKLAND: Well, as I said –

Ellen SANDELL: I am sure you can appreciate that frustration.

Tom KIRKLAND: We do appreciate that. The minister and the government have to juggle the needs of 1560-odd government schools when there is limited funding available for capital. We clearly appreciate what is going on in the local community, who are very passionate about Kensington Primary School, absolutely.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. Just one further question for you: a few years ago, the parents at Kensington Primary fundraised for a kitchen on the school grounds, which was built. It is used primarily for the cooking and gardening program but also for local community events – fundraising for the school, for example. As part of their first stage of building works, the VSBA advised them that the kitchen needed to be demolished because it was in the area of the building works but that a new kitchen could not be built by the VSBA or funded as part of this program because it is not part of – and I might not get the technical term correct – their ‘facilities assessment’ or such. Parents obviously are rightly quite upset about this because they put their own money, just a few years ago, into a kitchen which is now being demolished by the government, but the government will not rebuild the kitchen and so the parents are being asked to go and fundraise again for a kitchen that they just built a few years ago. So is that VSBA and government policy – that they can demolish parent-fundraised facilities and then not rebuild them?

Tom KIRKLAND: I will make two comments: one, yes, it is the facilities area schedule. I might take the question on notice, and we can do a bit more work specifically around that issue and revert back to you.

Ellen SANDELL: Yes, thank you. I appreciate that.

Tom KIRKLAND: But as you would appreciate, for government schools we provide a facilities area schedule relative to the number of enrolments so there is some consistency of spaces across the state in government schools to enable teachers to provide the approved curriculum.

Ellen SANDELL: I appreciate that. I guess it is just that parents have fundraised over and above that. This is not something that was just provided as a course for the school.

Tom KIRKLAND: I understand that.

Ellen SANDELL: The parents fundraised for it, it is being demolished and they are being told, ‘Go fundraise for it again.’ Perhaps this one might be for the Secretary: how many Victorian public school students took part in the nuclear-powered submarine design competition – the Nuclear-powered Submarine Propulsion Challenge?

Jenny ATTA: I do not have that information to hand.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. Is it able to be provided?

Jenny ATTA: I am not sure, but I can find out.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. Thank you. You can probably see where I am going with this, but how does a military design program meet with the department’s policy? The department policy says that schools must not engage in a partnership with companies ‘involved in the sale or promotion of firearms’. So how does this program, which is essentially asking students to design weapons, accord with this department policy?

Jenny ATTA: Dr Howes, do you have the background?

David HOWES: I might have to get some more detail, but if it was in relation to the army –

Ellen SANDELL: It is. I believe it is a partnership with the –

David HOWES: Sorry, the navy.

Ellen SANDELL: I believe it is a partnership with the navy or the ADF, Department of Defence – a federal Department of Defence program that is being run through Victorian schools.

David HOWES: I would need to get some more detail.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. Thank you. Does the Department of Education formally support the AUKUS program? Is that why this is being run through Victorian schools?

Jenny ATTA: I do not think the department has a policy position on the AUKUS program.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. Are there any other programs in Victorian schools –

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Order!

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. Are there any other programs in Victorian schools that involve the Department of Defence?

Jenny ATTA: I am not sure. I would have to pull up the detail, but there is work at the senior secondary level in terms of development of vocational skills, vocational education and training. There may well be through our school-based apprenticeship programs and other things some arrangements that have some involvement in projects that sit with the Department of Defence. I do not know that that is the case, but I can find out.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. Thank you.

David HOWES: Certainly the Department of Defence would regularly engage in career advice, in seeking to recruit.

Ellen SANDELL: I appreciate that. Schools in South Australia, New South Wales and Western Australia are offering a program that has primary school children solve real-world challenges, a program developed by BAE Systems, one of the world's largest weapons manufacturers. Does the Victorian Department of Education have plans to also partner with BAE Systems?

Jenny ATTA: No plans that I am aware of, Ms Sandell.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. I would like to ask about traffic safety around schools. This relates to three schools, but I am sure it relates to many others. There is a new campus of Clifton Hill Primary School that opened just a few months ago, but there are a lot of issues with getting the kids safely to and from school in terms of traffic. They do not have a permanent pedestrian crossing at South Terrace and Gold Street. I think there is a temporary crossing that has not been converted into a permanent one. We also have similar issues at Docklands Primary where there are a lot of traffic management issues around the school and also the new North Melbourne Primary campus where there is the issue of getting kids between the two different campuses and a lot of traffic safety issues. My question is on these traffic planning issues – they do not seem to be considered as part of new school builds, because we are consistently seeing these types of issues. So how are those traffic management and safety issues considered when new schools are built?

Jenny ATTA: It is an important issue, particularly as we look to expand the footprint and find ways to increase capacity in established areas in Melbourne, and you have given some good examples there. So it is definitely part of early considerations. I do not know if Mr Kirkland can provide any more detail.

Tom KIRKLAND: Thank you, Secretary. Yes, there is certainly a live issue, and our engagement with councils varies by virtue of the council. We would love to have early engagement with local councils around traffic management. Both pedestrians and cyclists and vehicles outside a school gate are really managed by council. We are saying, 'We're looking to put in a campus here or a new school at this location; what's the infrastructure of the surrounding, where are the people are going to come from and how can we manage it?' At Clifton Hill there is an existing crossing point. It is probably not where the school or the council would like it, so we are engaged with the City of Yarra around that. I had the same line of conversations when we did Richmond Primary School, same sort of thing. So we really value those early engagements with them. At the end of the day we get a solution, and then we will work through the commercial relations with council to make that plan happen.

Ellen SANDELL: I guess one of the things that we are finding is often councils are quite willing to engage but it is some of the state government roads that are proving difficult – for example, at Docklands, where you have got that highway right outside the school. The difficulty the school has had is particularly around traffic calming on that road. So how are you working with the department of transport and roads to ensure that kids are safe getting to school?

Tom KIRKLAND: Yes, it is the same sort of process. You are right, it just got a bit complicated, because now we are no longer dealing with council on roads; it is a state government road. So we have an ongoing conversation with our colleagues at the Department of Transport and Planning around what sort of calming measures could be put in place to keep everyone in that area safe. But it is not an overnight solution, and you are right, it is a busy road.

Ellen SANDELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: Mr Kirkland, just off the back of that, Ms Sandell, because Wyndham has certainly suffered –

Ellen SANDELL: I have only got a few minutes, sorry.

The CHAIR: Sorry.

Ellen SANDELL: I only get limited time, unlike everyone else, who gets a little bit more. Is there any information you could provide me, Mr Kirkland, particularly just on Clifton Hill, Docklands and the new North Melbourne campus – just any information you are able to provide us on where some of those conversations are up to about traffic safety?

Tom KIRKLAND: Yes.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you, appreciate that. I have got a few questions for Ms FitzGerald, if I may, around early learning. This might have been in the questionnaire; I apologise if it is. But do you have data on overall how many children are enrolled and then how many are not enrolled in early childhood education centres in total and then broken down by area?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Yes, we do have that in total. We look at it for both the age groups – for the four-year-old age group and the three-year-old age group.

Ellen SANDELL: And below that as well, or you do not collect that data?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: We do not publish that information. The more granular the area of data consideration, the less reliable the data becomes, and for those reasons we do not publish smaller breakdowns. If you have particular areas that you are interested in, we can –

Ellen SANDELL: I guess I am interested in the data overall and particularly broken down by whether you have it by how many hours they are attending – so how many kids are attending more than 5 hours, more than 15 hours, more than 30 hours for the state.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: First of all, the overall participation for the four-year-olds in 2022, which is the most recent data we have, is at 76,389 children, which is a participation rate of 91.6 per cent.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. So that is four-year-old?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: That is for the four-year-old program in 2022. In 2022 we have, for the three-year-old program, 60,455 three-year-old enrolments, which includes vulnerable children who are enrolled in the ESK program. We do have a look at the participation rate for both three- and four-year-old programs, and the three-year-old participation rate will be reported for the first time in the next budget paper coming up. The challenge that we have is that the population data comes from an ABS estimate rather than the actuals. We have actual enrolment data for the participation in the program, but the population number comes from an ABS estimate, and so the interaction between an actual and an estimate can sometimes make the overall participation rate data volatile at the statewide level, let alone when you start breaking it down to different areas.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. Appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Sandell. Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Chair, did you want to –

Ellen SANDELL: Sorry, Chair.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Sandell. Mr Kirkland, off the back of Ms Sandell's comments in relation to pedestrian safety and getting kids to and from schools, it is not just the seat of Melbourne. Wyndham also is struggling with those issues, and it does seem to me that it would be good if the departments could work together with the local council to have this in place before schools open. I do have the Trug North education precinct, as you would know, which opens in term 1 next year, and that is something that both those principals and I am sure the person heading up the kinder will also be struggling with if it is not sorted out this year.

Danny O'BRIEN: Chair, on indulgence – sorry to take up more time, Lauren – can I just add two things quickly? One, I have been told Sale College needs \$400,000 to replace toilets, so rather than waste that money a new school would be good. And two, I was late back before because I ran into the Fitzroy kindergarten in the chamber on my way back through and got talking to them. They were very excited about meeting a politician – not me obviously – including a mum who is a former Labor staffer in here. So I am giving them a little shout-out given we have been talking lots about preschool. They were great in learning about politics here. Sorry, Lauren.

Lauren KATHAGE: Well, it is good that you raise that, because I also want to focus on kinder. I want to focus on three-year-old kinder, and I do that not just as the representative of an area which is ranked something like 10th for under-fives for the electorate in this state but also as the mum of a three-year-old kinder student, so it is natural that I have got a bit of an interest. The rollout was sort of a phased rollout, starting with I think more disadvantaged LGAs. How has that rollout gone for the three-year-old kinder then, further across the state? What is the status of that rollout?

Bev McARTHUR: It is free for everyone.

Lauren KATHAGE: And you are welcome to attend kinder, Bev.

Jenny ATTA: Three-year-old kinder is now in rollout to every corner of the state, but I will ask Ms FitzGerald to talk to the detail.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Thank you, Secretary. So you are right: it is being implemented in stages. We are now at the statewide point. It started in 2020 with six local government areas. 2021 added another 15 local government areas to take it to 21 in total, and then in the 2022 calendar year we took the program statewide, with the remaining 59 local government areas being capped at 5 hours. This year we are now into flexible hours, where across the state services can offer the hours that they wish to. We have seen a really strong uptake. We are confident that it is on track, and we are really pleased with what we are hearing from services. They are reporting really strong uptake from families, and we are starting to see that in our enrolment data, as I mentioned previously. At the moment they have got the flexibility to scale up their hours over time, so if a service can go to 15 hours, they will be funded for the full 15-hour program, but if they can only make it at this stage to 10 hours, then they will be funded pro rata for that amount.

In 2021 – so for the first part of the reporting period – 5810 children were funded to participate in the three-year-old group, and in 2022, as I said, more than 60,000 children were participating. For this year, data is not

final yet, but indications are that the participation rates are very strong again, and we are really pleased with how it is tracking. We are seeing some feedback from teachers and educators that they are needing to adjust the four-year-old program because the children who are starting in the four-year-old year are that much more advanced than they used to be, so they need to extend the four-year-old program out further. They are doing less familiarisation and establishment work with the four-year-old group because they have already done that work through the three-year-old year. So we are seeing that positive feedback anecdotally now from services.

Lauren KATHAGE: With the day care setting for kinder and the number of hours, these flexible hours you are talking about, there are no perverse incentives for long day care to keep the hours low – it has all worked out?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: No, it works well in both settings. The program is available in a sessional kinder, where the hours will be stipulated by the service, usually by group. But in a long day care service, the teacher will be in a room for some or all of the days of that week and the child will be funded for the amount of hours they do in that week. So if they are there for two days, they may be funded at a 10-hour rate. If they are there for three, it may be at the 15-hour level. Services make their own programming decisions about how many hours per day the teacher is in the room leading the program. It is a bit variable, so we do not make statewide statements about how many hours per day because services do make varied choices. We are seeing really strong uptake in both long day care settings and in sessional programs, which providers are reporting to us as a positive.

Lauren KATHAGE: Great, thank you. I think you have already provided quite a bit of detail to Mrs McArthur around the infrastructure work that is going on to meet the increasing demand. In my area we have got kinders popping up all over the place, and we have got one opening next year onsite at Donnybrook Primary School. Basically, it seems like every corner you turn, there is a kinder onsite. But with the sessional and also the day care ones, you have got the Kinder Tick program. So for people who are sort of removed from a government setting – like for me in a long day care situation, there is a big tick outside my kid's child care – do you want to talk about what that actually means? What level of rigour is there in assessing? I might be asking you for myself, but I am asking as a member of the committee.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: The Kinder Tick is one of the more recognisable brands across the system. In a lot of locations parents have the choice about whether they are going to choose the sessional option or whether they are going to choose a long day care option, and they want to have the confidence that the program is equivalent in different services. What the Kinder Tick does is published through the external signage but also the other communications materials that that service uses. It publishes that the program that is delivered in that service meets the requirements of a kindergarten program. Those are that it will be led by a teacher; that it will be a play-based learning program that operates under our Victorian early years learning and development framework – so it is an age-appropriate pedagogy; that the program itself will be funded by the Victorian government; and that it complies with all the requirements of a kindergarten program and complies with the national quality framework. So that is what the Kinder Tick is telling parents regardless of the setting that they might be considering in their local area.

Lauren KATHAGE: Yes. It is really reassuring for working parents to know that they know its quality either way. So Kinder Ticks and kinder kits – my very well loved kinder kit at my home has transitioned to the doctor's bag, which is now carried around with all of the stethoscopes and whatnot in it. Is there some sort of ongoing feedback program or evaluation of the kinder kits and –

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Of the kits?

Lauren KATHAGE: Kinder kits.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: We have not had a formal evaluation conducted yet, but we have had a lot of feedback about the kits, and it has been uniformly positive. The deliberate design of those kits is to provide materials to families that children will engage with and that are age-appropriate and will extend the learning program that they are doing in the kinder into their home. There are a range of different products that are available, and those products are selected by an expert panel of early childhood educators and teachers as well as other experts around sustainability and product design, and they have a focus on Australian design and Australian manufacturers. What we are hearing from families is that children are really engaging with the

kinder kits and that it is helping families understand the way that children of this age group learn, which is through play. Play-based learning means that a child is learning important, fundamental skills through doing something that looks like free play. But when guided by a teacher or guided by a parent, which is what these kinder kits facilitate, you can see that the child is learning important regulation skills, fine and gross motor skills – there are a range of skills that are supported by the materials in that kinder kit.

Lauren KATHAGE: Great. Yes, we love the story cubes. And inclusive kindergartens – there was a funding initiative for building inclusive kindergartens. What did that include, or what were you doing with that funding?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: This is a very significant reform for our system. It contains a capital program element, an infrastructure element, and my colleague Ms Trinder will be able to speak to that. There is also a set of inclusion reforms that are about support for children with additional needs in kinders, which is about supporting the staff and specialist workers who support those children to participate fully in the learning program. But I might ask my colleague Ms Trinder to comment on the infrastructure matters.

Jessica TRINDER: Thank you. Yes, it is a great program. And in that budget the government funded \$11.9 million. That was for two rounds of grants for the inclusion stream of the Building Blocks program, and I think you would be aware that the Building Blocks program provides a range of streams for grants for early childhood for the sector, local government and other providers. So we have the capacity stream, as well as the improvement stream, which is about upgrading existing facilities, and then the inclusion stream, which this funding stream funded, provides the funding for kindergartens to upgrade their facilities, including playgrounds, and to purchase equipment to provide safe and more inclusive environments for children of all abilities. And within the inclusion stream there are two substreams: buildings and playgrounds, which are grants up to \$200,000 that make kindergarten activities safer, more inclusive, and accessible for children of all abilities; and then an equipment stream, which are grants up to \$10,000 and are for movable equipment such as mobility stools and sensory equipment that help those children engage in kindergarten programs.

The \$11.9 million in that budget, as I say, was for two rounds of grants – two years. So last year \$5.1 million was allocated to 170 projects, and then the remaining is being allocated this year with a round that was opened earlier in the year and is currently being assessed. I might just give a few examples of some of the projects that this program has funded. In the 2022–23 grants round that was allocated last year, Robina Scott Kindergarten received a bit over \$49,000 to deliver an upgrade to the disabled toilet to meet modern building standards, and that project was completed late last year and now meets those standards of accessibility and quality. The Belgrave Heights Christian School Early Learning Centre received a grant of \$150,803 to deliver a playground upgrade. The project was completed earlier this year, and it now incorporates an outdoor classroom space, custom play equipment, outdoor seating, and environmental improvements, including a sensory trail, plants, fencing.

Lauren KATHAGE: I might move on. Thank you. Thank you for those examples, and we do have a lovely one at our kindy in my area in Orchard Road. It had a lovely inclusive playground added. Over both financial years, though, what work did the department undertake to ensure that children in disadvantaged areas and children living in childcare deserts could have access to three- and four-year-old kinder, and was it successful?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: In relation to areas of the state where there is a thin market – there are provision challenges of one kind or another – the announcement of the early learning and childcare centres to be targeted at those areas of greatest need is significant. It is a new area of work. Of course that investment occurs in an area of policy and delivery that is the Commonwealth government's primary responsibility. That has been acknowledged by the Commonwealth as access to child care and some of these thin market locations are currently the subject of inquiries from the Productivity Commission and the ACCC. That said, though, the Victorian government's contribution to that through the early learning and childcare centres is determined based on the locations with greatest needs. Those locations are based on ABS statistical area 2 classifications, which is the best consistent data unit we have got to analyse supply and demand in a local childcare and kindergarten market. Those locations are identified through a data-driven process that takes account of three factors. The first is the current availability of child care in that community. The second is the estimated demand for child care in that community and how much of that demand is not being met by existing supply. And then the third is the level of disadvantage in that community.

Lauren KATHAGE: Do you use projected numbers at all? I am thinking of the growth areas that some of us represent where the population today is very different to the population in a month's time.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: That is right. So both the demand and the supply inputs into that data assessment include actuals for the current year but also include the best projections we have available about what will happen with population growth overall but specifically population growth in the relevant age group. And the disadvantage measure is based on the socio-economic indexes for areas, or SEIFA, which is an ABS dataset and is the best dataset we have to be able to compare areas across the state. When we look at those factors in combination and we rank locations, the locations that have been announced – of those 50 early learning and childcare centres – are those that most need that investment.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. Principal Glenn Simondson of Doreen Primary School is retiring after 30-plus years, which will be a loss to our community, but he has built a great school community. When speaking to him about his experience as a principal, he has spoken about the support that small school principals give each other and the networks they have to support each other. Something that he is passionate about is making sure that work that comes out of the department can easily be scaled down to the smaller schools with less than 100 students or 150 students. Is that something the department is cognisant of and builds into what they do?

Jenny ATTA: Absolutely, and I had the opportunity earlier this year to go down to the Otways area and meet with a cluster of small school principals to talk about a range of challenges that they experience in a way that medium and large schools do not. It is just materially a different job that they have really. So that was very helpful, to get those insights, and we talked a lot about that issue of scalability and implementation planning – the importance of that planning not assuming one sort of service delivery unit; it is going to be a very different experience for small schools. So I think we have made some ground in the area, particularly as we have rolled out, for instance, health and wellbeing reforms where we have thought about for small schools in an area or region the ways that they could work together or the regional area office could support them in some of the administrative implementation of a program, because often the small school principal is a teaching principal as well. We want the students in those schools to have all the opportunities, as far as possible, as other students, but everything has got to channel through one principal. It is very front of mind for us. I think we have been working on a small schools conference to pick up this very issue.

David HOWES: Thanks, Secretary. We have the opportunity for small schools to come together, so it is very much front of mind, because we do really value the small schools and the particular experience they give to students. One of the things we are doing is looking for where schools are interested in working in a cluster or a network, being able to do a joint strategic plan together and then a joint annual implementation plan. Partly that can support some of the administrative load, but its primary intent is to say how can we support each other and work towards the same goals. We are really keen to keep engaging with those small school principals, especially those who are experienced, and their ideas and input into this.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. Great. Sounds really good. Glenn is a teaching principal; he was also a chippie principal and built one of the buildings out there at Doreen Primary School. Vocational education and VCE – there are sort of changing attitudes around the value of different ways of learning and going about education.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Kathage. Thank you, Secretary and officials. We have come to the end of the day and the end of questions. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon; we really do appreciate it. The committee is going to follow up on any questions taken no 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 us today, Hansard and our secretariat. The committee will resume its consideration of the 2021–22 and 2022–23 financial and performance outcomes on 23 November. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.