

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into 2020–21 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne—Wednesday, 10 November 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O’Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Jenny Atta, PSM, Secretary,

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

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

Ms Kim Little, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

Ms Lill Healy, Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills,

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

Ms Kylie White, Deputy Secretary, Policy, Strategy and Performance,

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

Mr Stephen Gniel, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority,

Dr Simon Booth, Executive Director, Tertiary Education Policy and Performance, and

Dr Xavier Csar, Chief Executive Officer, Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery, Department of Education and Training.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be here today.

On behalf of the Parliament the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2020–21 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government achieved in 2020–21 compared to what the government planned to achieve.

We note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

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

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

We welcome the Secretary of the Department of Education and Training and officers, and we invite you to make a 10-minute opening statement. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Ms ATTA: Thank you, Chair and committee, for the opportunity to be here today. The Department of Education and Training provides services that have an impact on the lives of so many Victorians. Our vision is to give every Victorian the best learning and development experience, making our state a smarter, fairer and more prosperous place. Delivering education and training services is more critical than ever as we navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic and the learning and development challenges of the past 12 months. The department is doing this for more than 1 million students enrolled in Victorian schools, around 400 000 children and families in early childhood services and nearly 300 000 government-funded enrolments in TAFE and other training providers. In 2020–21 the department's output expenditure totalled \$16.54 billion across seven output groups to deliver these critical education and training services.

Continuing to build an education system that achieves the best learning and development outcomes for all Victorians remains at the heart of the education and training reforms that the department has responsibility for, and we know that providing quality early learning services is one of the best ways to give children a head start in life. Almost 91 per cent of Victoria's early childhood education and care services now meet or exceed the national quality standard for programs and practices, and the department has continued its rollout of the child information sharing scheme. The scheme enables approximately 370 000 professionals who work with children and families to share information and promote children's wellbeing and safety, and this gives professionals a complete view of the children they work with, making it easier to identify and act on wellbeing or safety needs earlier.

This year was the second year of the department's rollout of the three-year-old kindergarten program. More than 2600 three-year-olds in 21 local government areas are benefiting from up to 15 hours per week of kindergarten. To support this 10-year rollout, more than \$69.8 million was allocated to 56 projects through the Building Blocks program to upgrade kindergartens across the state, and we are also continuing to build our early childhood workforce, with the two early childhood qualifications added to the free TAFE for priority course list in 2019 continuing to be among the most popular free TAFE courses.

When it comes to school education, we continue to build and improve the state's infrastructure to meet the community's learning needs. As this graph shows, more than 1.3 million students are projected to be enrolled in Victorian schools by 2051, and we are building for this growth. Fourteen new schools opened in 2021, many in our fastest growing areas, and 400 schools were upgraded and modernised.

While our schools continue to be centres of learning excellence, they also provide critical health and wellbeing support. The Royal Commission into Family Violence recommended the introduction of Respectful Relationships education into every government school from prep to year 12 by March 2021, and the department has acquitted that recommendation with all government schools part of the 1950 government, Catholic and independent schools signed on to the initiative. We have also met our target to expand the important school breakfast club program, from 500 to 1000 schools, and helped tens of thousands of secondary students see a doctor through the important Doctors in Secondary Schools program.

Improving the quality of teaching was another strong focus for the department during the period. In May 2021 \$126.4 million over four years and \$21.8 million in capital funding was allocated to the department to establish the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership in Melbourne and in seven regional centres. The academy will build on the outstanding legacy of the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership. It will be established as an independent statutory authority dedicated to advanced professional learning. Importantly, the department also continued implementing the recommendations of the review into vocational and applied learning pathways in senior secondary schooling to increase the quality of and access to vocational pathways for students across the state.

In terms of student outcomes, I am very pleased to report that through the challenges of the pandemic Victoria's teachers have been able to not only maintain but in several areas improve the academic performance of Victorian students, as measured by the NAPLAN tests. Victoria achieved the highest percentage of students achieving above the national minimum standard in 19 out of 20 measures, and given Victorian schools were in remote learning for the longest period of any jurisdiction, everyone involved across the school system can be justifiably proud of that outcome. Not only did schools achieve the highest results of any jurisdiction, but we also improved on our own performance in the previous NAPLAN tests in 2019 on half of the NAPLAN domains—for example, increasing the proportion of students in the top two bands in all year levels for reading compared to 2019.

Since free TAFE for priority courses began on 1 January 2019, up until the end of June this year more than 87 000 students had commenced training for in-demand jobs. It was particularly pleasing to see significant growth, up to 50 per cent, in the number of women taking up training opportunities over this time. Free TAFE continues to give more Victorians from different backgrounds access to the skills they need. Free TAFE for priority courses is also giving Victorians direct connections to jobs working on state government priorities and major projects. Better TAFE facilities are also crucial to better training outcomes. We have progressed the redevelopment of Chisholm Institute's Frankston campus and Melbourne Polytechnic's Collingwood campus through the Building Better TAFEs Fund, the Box Hill Institute's Lilydale campus integrated centre for

sustainable construction technologies opened and construction of three important regional TAFE facilities commenced.

The global COVID pandemic has of course continued to have a significant impact on all education sectors. Kindergarten services were provided with a range of supports, including the free kinder initiative to make kindergarten free or low cost in 2021 for all Victorian children at participating services. The initiative is part of economic recovery support for Victorians during 2021. Over the past year schools successfully maintained learning and implemented measures to keep schools safe when students and teachers have been able to return to classrooms. 6050 tutors were employed at schools to help students catch up through the tutor learning initiative. Having the extra support of onsite tutors available from term 1 this year has ensured that these teaching teams could provide dedicated and individualised support for students who need help. We know also that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people across the state, and that is why fast-tracking the rollout of the vital mental health practitioners in secondary schools initiative was so important.

The training and skills sector again rose to the challenges, including the move to and from remote learning and the delivery of courses contributing directly to the state's response. Apprenticeships Victoria was established within the department to ensure the supply of quality apprenticeships and skilled workers critical to rebuilding the economy. The \$350 million Victorian Higher Education State Investment Fund recognises the critical role that our universities play in driving productivity and the economic recovery of our state.

In conclusion, Chair, our education and training system is supporting our learners and ensuring Victorians have the skills they need, and of course that is not possible without the hard work, dedication and adaptability of the department's workforces during another difficult year. I want to thank the educators, teachers, principals, support staff and specialists who have continued to deliver improvements across our education portfolios, and I particularly want to thank and acknowledge Victorian parents and carers, who continue to do an extraordinary job supporting young learners through this challenging period and continue to be our most important partners in the work that we do. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. Deputy Chair.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Secretary and team, for being here this afternoon. Secretary, you mentioned just a moment ago the mental health practitioners program. Are you able to provide data on the number of Victorian students per education region that sought mental health support through their school or otherwise through their educational facility?

Ms ATTA: Mr O'Brien, we will have some data for particular programs. There is a range of different supports through schools, including referrals to tertiary services and dedicated programs within the schools. There is funding for Headspace counselling. We have got some data across those programs, so I am happy to look at what we can put together.

Mr D O'BRIEN: If you could provide it on notice—I guess whatever you have got would be good, but I am specifically interested in the mental health practitioners program that you mentioned, which as you said was run through secondary schools. Was there data for primary students who were seeking mental health support?

Ms ATTA: Within primary schools the mental health in primary schools initiative is a key initiative that we have expanded, partly of course in response to the challenges through the pandemic. That is a program that looks at training up a specialist teacher within the school in terms of mental health literacy et cetera to be able to identify concerns and guide the school's response to those, including external referrals. Again, I would have to see if we have got specific data. A lot of that response within primary schools is within that program.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, if it is kept, if you have data on the level of support that was sought by students, that would be good. The specific mental health practitioners program you mentioned for secondary schools: in the department questionnaire it talks about funding that was provided:

... to employ over 190 qualified mental health professionals ...

Are they contractors or are they full-time in schools?

Ms ATTA: They are not necessarily full time, but they are employed through schools.

Mr D O'BRIEN: What I am getting at and where I am going with this is there is obviously a shortage and significant demand for mental health professionals broadly in society, and I am wanting to know whether you have actually employed 190 or whether they are just brought in on a contract basis for a couple of hours or days a week.

Ms ATTA: They are employed at the local school level. They are not full-time employees. I can perhaps ask Mr Fraser if he can talk to some of the detail of that program for you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Perhaps, Mr Fraser—I think the Secretary has probably answered my question, but specifically, as I said, the questionnaire refers to 190. Did you actually find 190?

Mr FRASER: We did. We have mental health practitioners employed now in every secondary school and also 82 additional mental health practitioners employed in special settings with secondary-age students.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So, sorry, every secondary school had someone?

Mr FRASER: Had someone.

Mr D O'BRIEN: There are more than 190, though. Are they spread across numerous schools?

Mr FRASER: They were additional, along with the 82 specialist schools with secondary-age students.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. Sorry to bring you forward, because I am now going to move on. Secretary, the questionnaire details also the Bridging the Digital Divide program and the announcement by the minister in December that all the laptops and dongles provided throughout the remote learning period could be kept by students and families. I believe the government announced \$24.5 million to compensate schools for those that they had to effectively hand over. Was every school fully reimbursed for any loss that occurred?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. I will ask Mr Bates to talk to the detail of that.

Mr BATES: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. Yes. So we have made payments to I think 975 schools. There is a group of about 24 or so that we are still in discussion with where, when we did the reconciliation between their computer inventory, can I say, and the amounts they were claiming, some of them had overclaimed, some of them had underclaimed. But we have spent I think about \$17.5 million worth of payments so far to those—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Seven and a half?

Mr BATES: Seventeen point five. And I think as I have spoken to the committee about before, we have done payments to those schools. We had a number of schools who had leased devices, and we did work with a number of them who were having trouble with their lease companies, and we have managed to resolve all those issues. So there are no schools that are reporting they out of pocket. And there are—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, that was a question I was coming to. So on the leased issue, no schools are out of pocket for having to break leases?

Mr BATES: That is right. No. Occasionally we had to intervene with the lease company, but when we did we were able to make sure that the reimbursement under the Bridging the Digital Divide program was sufficient to pay out the lease.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right.

Mr BATES: And then there is a group of a further 20 schools where we have provided about 1000 devices. So a number of the schools rather than taking a cash payment asked if we could give them a new device to replace the one that they had given to the children. So we spent a bit over \$1.2 million providing devices to those 20 schools.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right. So of the \$24.5 million does that mean there is still \$7 million left?

Mr BATES: Yes. So there has been about \$17.5 million in payments. There was about \$1.25 million for the devices. So we have got about \$2 million to \$3 million. I will just check the numbers. We have got some

money that we still need to deploy, but as I said, we are still in discussions with about 50 schools reconciling their claims.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So subject to discussions, which obviously will be about whether or not this has been a cost of the school, can the department guarantee that no school will be worse off, as it were?

Mr BATES: Yes, we can guarantee that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. Perhaps if you can give me the figures on what is left over, Mr Bates, on notice, that would be good.

Can I just go to a little bit of a left-field one, Secretary? Question 17 of the questionnaire relates to contractors, consultants and labour hire, and there was \$147 million spent by the department in the relevant year on contractors, consultants and labour hire. Do the department or schools directly pay for security services at schools?

Ms ATTA: I am just trying to make sure I have the right answer for that. So the department certainly invests in an overarching central capacity to work with schools and monitor security incidents. I am not aware—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am talking about third-party security providers in particular.

Ms ATTA: Yes. I am not aware, Mr O'Brien, that schools specifically contract to employ security staff. I will get some advice if that is incorrect, but I am not aware that schools employ contractors on that basis unless perhaps it is for a particular event.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. But there would be after-hours security patrols and things, I would assume.

Ms ATTA: That is right, and that is centrally managed by the department.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That is the department. Are there any, that you are aware of, actual security guards onsite at schools?

Ms ATTA: Not on a regular basis, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right. A constituent has forwarded me an advertisement on seek.com for Executive Security Solutions for armed security officers. Literally the title was 'Armed Security Officer (Schools)', and the detail goes to:

... positions are based in the south-eastern suburbs with the majority of work being Monday - Friday 0700 - 1700.

Would that be for state government schools?

Ms ATTA: I am not aware of that—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, I should add my constituent actually inquired with the company and said, 'Was this public or private?', and the response was 'Public and private'. So I am just wanting to know whether the department is advertising for armed security officers in schools.

Ms ATTA: No, the department is not. I am just seeing if Dr Howes can add anything there.

Dr HOWES: No, not to my knowledge. No schools have requested armed security guards.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. The ad, I have got a hard copy of it, because the ad has been updated and removed the reference to schools, but it is still the same ad. Does the department advertise for security officers, full stop, for any schools?

Ms ATTA: No, again, not to my knowledge, Mr O'Brien. We have got the central capacity to oversight schools. There may be some independent schools that employ security. I think, for instance—and it may have been over the past year—some of the Jewish independent schools with concerns about security may have sought staff, but for—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. It was the fact that the response came back from the company saying that there were public and private. You have said not that you are aware of. Can I ask you to check that and come back to us on notice just to confirm whether there are any schools—state.

Ms ATTA: Yes. Certainly not on any kind of regular basis do we seek to employ security guards at schools, but I will check in terms of the questions that you have asked.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Would there be a policy position against armed security guards on schools?

Ms ATTA: Well, I do not know that we have ever had the need for a policy position against it. We do not have a policy position around having security guards at schools.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Okay. All right. Can I move on to higher education. The TAFE sector—I know we asked about this last year with respect to financial letters of comfort. Are you able to advise how many TAFEs required or will require a letter of comfort for the 2020–21 year?

Ms ATTA: Just bear with me, Mr O'Brien. What I can tell you for the 2020 year is that the department provided all TAFEs with a letter of comfort for 2020 operations.

Mr D O'BRIEN: All TAFEs?

Ms ATTA: That is correct.

Mr D O'BRIEN: How many? Is that 12?

Ms ATTA: That is right.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Twelve TAFEs.

Ms ATTA: For 12 TAFEs. Of course this was particularly in the context of the global pandemic and some uncertainty as we moved through that in terms of impacts on revenue et cetera.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So 2020—that is calendar year, though, too, isn't it, for TAFEs?

Ms ATTA: That is calendar year for TAFEs.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So every one of them got a letter of comfort. Okay. Well, we are only at November, I guess. Is it too early to be asking about 2021?

Ms ATTA: For 2021 eight TAFEs have been provided with a letter of comfort and four TAFEs have not required that for 2021. And again, having been through 2020, and in terms of the outcomes for that year, there was a bit more certainty around what 2021 looked like, despite the continuing disruption.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So continuing on the theme, obviously international student enrolment has been an issue; we just have not had them. Are you able to provide a list, or do you know a list, of how much revenue was lost by each TAFE due to the loss of international students?

Ms ATTA: To look at it for each TAFE, we could see what information we could provide for you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, if you could provide that.

Ms ATTA: So certainly for each of the TAFEs in terms of the range of their revenue sources and commercial revenue there have been differential impacts across institutes. Clearly at the start of the pandemic some international students were already here, but that has been a significant disruption, as you would be aware, for international students being able to come in and continue.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Before I move on, a quick one from me which I have actually also already put to the minister through Parliament, but if it can be answered today. The port of Sale campus began, I think it was, in February this year and is scheduled to be open in February next year. Are you able to confirm whether that will in fact open for the start of the school year next year? Sorry, TAFE Gippsland, obviously.

Ms ATTA: The port of Sale is expected to be completed in February 2022, so it is still on track.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. So there have not been any delays? Because it certainly does not look like it at the moment, but I am not an expert of course.

Ms ATTA: Does not look like delays or does not—

Mr D O'BRIEN: It does not look like it is ready to go or will be ready to go with only a couple of months to go.

Ms ATTA: My advice is that that is still the expected completion date.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Right. We will wait and see.

Just turning to vocational education and training, the questionnaire showed that the completion rate for VET in 2020 dropped dramatically to 71 000, down some 22 000 completions. Are you able to tell me which courses were most impacted by that, or which courses were the main reason behind it?

Ms ATTA: Sure. That is right. It is an important measure, and 2020 was a year where a number of these measures were impacted by the changing circumstances. I might ask Dr Booth if he can talk to the detail on this one.

Mr D O'BRIEN: While he is coming up, Secretary, do you know why it has dropped so much? I mean, in 2016 the completions were 107 000. We are now down to 71 000. As I said, it is down 22 000 this year alone.

Ms ATTA: And certainly the disruption through the pandemic is a key issue there, but Simon might be able to talk to that in a little more detail on completions.

Dr BOOTH: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. What we saw over the course of the 2020 year was a significant increase in the number of continuing enrolments. The pandemic in particular affected the ability of learners to undertake a range of the practical elements for their qualifications, so you would appreciate that under the national training packages there are specific requirements around, for example, onsite assessment which were not able to be undertaken through remote access. Also, there were challenges for learners to complete practical placements. What we actually saw was—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Because there weren't jobs available for them?

Dr BOOTH: Well, because those worksites were unable to be accessed, because of the health orders. So what we saw was a significant increase in the number of continuing students, and that has carried over into this year. While we had an overall decline in enrolments, the number of students who continued their study through 2020 increased, but because of that you have more students who are I suppose continuing and not completing. So effectively what we have seen—

Mr D O'BRIEN: They deferred in a sense?

Dr BOOTH: Yes. That is right. The TAFEs and the other RTOs have been able to maintain those connections with the students, so they have to tell us if the student has dropped out or withdrawn and the students who have not withdrawn but instead are continuing but they have not been able to complete their study. What we would expect to see prospectively is that those students who will continue to see that pattern will have the opportunity to finish, so we will see an increase in those rates.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So you would expect from 2021 the number would bump back up again?

Dr BOOTH: Yes, and then obviously following that, because there is a kind of lag with the restrictions we have had this year as well.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Do you have actual forecasts for what the completions are? I know it is probably hard to.

Dr BOOTH: No, we do not forecast completion rates. No, we do not. We set the target obviously in the budget papers though.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. The original question though was about which courses were most affected. Do you have—

Dr BOOTH: I do not have a breakdown, so I will have to go away and we can have a look at which courses were most affected.

Mr D O'BRIEN: If you could provide that on notice, that would be good. Likewise, there was a decline in disability, unemployed learners and Indigenous people participating in VET. Perhaps on notice, have you got how much funding was spent in those sectors in 2021 and what the reason for the decline might have been?

Dr BOOTH: On those particular learners?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, in that cohort.

Dr BOOTH: Yes. I think the overall declines for those learners were consistent with the overall declines for all students. My answer there would be we saw all student commencements drop to some level—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Or completions, I am talking about, but yes.

Dr BOOTH: Oh, in relation to completions. We can take a look at that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Chair; and thank you, Secretary Atta and your team, for presenting and giving us evidence this afternoon. I would like to turn my attention to three-year-old kinder, if I may. My first question is in two parts really. Firstly, I would just like an update on how the implementation is going, and the second part to the question is: the last budget made a funding allocation towards that, and I would just like to know how that funding has supported the implementation.

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Maas, and it has been a big year for us—the second year of progressing this really important reform. As you know, it is nearly \$5 billion over the 10 years to deliver the commitment. We are well progressed in terms of what we were seeking to achieve in the 2020–21 year and for the rollout. I might ask Ms Little to talk some of that detail.

Ms LITTLE: Thank you. Thank you for your question. I might say to begin with something about what we have seen in the 2021 year. So very consistent with the first year of the rollout in 2020, we have had really remarkable uptake by services across 21 local government areas, which were the first two rollout years. We have seen almost 90 per cent of ECEC services in those areas—centre-based services—taking up the opportunity to offer three-year-old along with four-year-old kindergarten into their communities. That provided enough supply in those communities. We also saw very strong adoption by communities, by families themselves, in terms of participating in those programs. There are about 2000 children now enrolled in the 2021 early rollout areas that would not have had the opportunity to access subsidised kindergarten before that, and that is largely rural and regional areas, as you would be aware. We have also seen the employment of 42 new teachers across those rural and regional areas, along with expansion of programs, including using existing staff to deliver those programs, so providing lots of opportunities in that space.

As we go forward, we have had the investment, as you note, in three-year-old kindergarten in the budget last year. That was an investment of over \$300 million, and that was split not quite equally between infrastructure investment, because the infrastructure program is obviously critical to the roll out of this reform, and we are working very closely with our partners in local government and in the not-for-profit sector on co-investing new projects and expansions. The second part of that investment was around continuing to support service delivery, particularly in the fourth year of the forward estimates.

So the three tranches of action which we have been pursuing across the reference period for this committee are obviously supporting infrastructure and infrastructure expansion as required, both for the first two years of that rollout but also forward into the full rollout across the next seven years. Secondly, supporting the growth of the workforce—we have had wonderful uptake from our scholarships program. Over 2000 people—2200 people—have taken up scholarships to become kindergarten teachers here in Victoria. We have seen good use of our

incentives for hard-to-staff areas and a whole range of other supports for that workforce, including, as has already been mentioned, free TAFE. And the final stream of action has been around what we call broadly change management. That is about working with parents and communities to encourage and support them to know about three-year-old kindergarten and to engage with it, including through initiatives such as the Kinder Tick, which is now available and on display across the whole state; promotional campaigns, including local campaigns; and of course working with services and the staff in themselves to make sure they are ready to receive three-year-old when their area's time comes.

Mr MAAS: Excellent. Thank you. Speaking about those areas whose time has now come, the rollout is going out across 15 additional local government areas, and I believe that has commenced. How is that progressing? Can you give us an update on that?

Ms LITTLE: Yes, that has gone very well. Very similarly to the first year, we did see that really strong uptake. There are 154 centre-based services in those 15 local government areas, and 137 of them—so that is around 90 per cent—worked with us and chose to take up the opportunity to offer two years of kindergarten. In addition, as I mentioned, we have seen 2000 children—that is a participation rate of around 80 per cent—which is fabulous for the first year of something being available universally in those areas, take up that opportunity to participate in funded three-year-old kindergarten. So the reform has progressed really well, and I would like here to do a special shout-out to the sector. Obviously in an environment of COVID that puts some bumps in the road. To see the level of commitment amongst providers, services, teachers, educators and communities to this initiative and to making it work in their local communities so that children can get those evidence-based benefits of two years of kindergarten has been really spectacular at a tough time. I would especially—and I am sure the Secretary would echo—like to thank the sector for all the work they have done, and we are right there supporting them to do that work.

Mr MAAS: Keeping in mind those difficulties you have just mentioned, are things ready then for next year—for the final phase of the rollout?

Ms LITTLE: Yes. So even though we have had the bumps again this year, as we have spoken about, we have continued to see that really strong engagement. So, for example, the majority of councils in Victoria have central enrolment schemes. We are seeing strong demand coming through those schemes. We are seeing strong demand on the provider side to offer three-year-old kindergarten, people progressing their plans. We have rolled out training programs for teachers and educators who may not have taught three-year-olds before. We have worked with them on how they program within their service to optimise the ability of people to access. Of special note, I will call out the supports that are available around workforce. So in addition to scholarships and incentives for 'hard to staff' and for people to rejoin the profession who may have left it—in addition to those things, we are also ensuring that we have a recruitment panel available for services who might be finding difficulty, particularly in rural and regional areas, in recruiting staff to give them that extra support they need.

So the feedback we are getting from the sector is that, both in terms of demand from parents and families and also in terms of preparedness, things are going well. We know there are services which are still in the course of recruiting their teachers or additional educators for next year. Of course we are keeping a very close eye on that, and if they experience difficulties, we have those incentives and we have that recruitment panel support available to support them. So we are generally optimistic about next year, COVID notwithstanding, and where there may be localised issues that emerge we are ready to get in and work with providers and services about how those can be managed and overcome.

Mr MAAS: Okay. I think you touched upon expected uptake for next year. What are we looking at in terms of families seeking to enrol in three-year-old kinder for next year?

Ms LITTLE: Yes. So as I mentioned, we do have central enrolment available, and as a side note I will say that one of the state government investments has been in expanding central enrolments. So what central enrolment does is allow families to put their preferences in to their council for at least the community-run services. It is usually the sessional services rather than the long day care ones in their local community. So most councils have that now, and we have been working very closely with them to expand that program. And what we see through that is really healthy demand coming through. We have also been talking to our long day care stakeholders, because as we are very keen to point out, three-year-old kindergarten is available in both sessional and long day care settings, because we know that for many families having their kinder in their long day care

setting is absolutely the best option for them, and the advice we are getting back from the long day care sector is they are seeing really healthy engagement as well. We will not know what the numbers look like until later in 2022 because enrolments get entered into the system across the first part of next year. But all the early indications are that, just as we got strong demand in 2020 and 2021, we are likely to get strong demand, especially in what will be the first year of the full rollout next year.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thank you. And just in terms of measures and reporting, is implementation of three-year-old kinder being reviewed, and what outcomes are being reported?

Ms LITTLE: Yes, we certainly look very closely and evaluate how the implementation is going. At this stage that work is focused on, if you like, implementation evaluation rather than outcomes evaluation, because outcomes data is not yet available, given the early stage of the reform. So in terms of that evaluation of implementation, that has been very positive. We are getting extremely positive feedback from the sector about the kinds of supports that have been put in place, and of course we can see in the data for 2020 and 2021 how well those two years have gone notwithstanding the impacts of COVID. So we do look very closely and track the numbers as they become available, and we also really do rely on our sector partners, who are, after all, the providers—they are the employers, they are the people who are delivering these programs. Along with our wonderful engagement from local government, we do really rely on them to give us real-time qualitative information as well about how the reform is going, and all of that has been really positive.

That does not mean that there are not issues that emerge in local areas. What it does mean is we have confidence in large part from the sector that we are there to work with them. And one of the things that has come in place in recent years that has been part of this suite of investment that I think has made that difference is that government has funded early childhood improvement branches in each of the DET 17 area offices, and we get extremely good feedback from the sector about those small groups who go out and work with them in real time—will go out, virtually at the moment—on supporting them to do that rollout. So yes, we do continuously evaluate how the implementation is going and, in future of course, the outcomes that come out of it.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thank you. I would now like to move to the early childhood infrastructure side of the ledger, if I might. I was hoping you would be able to explain how the capital investment in the 2020–21 budget is building on previous investments in early childhood infrastructure.

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Maas. The \$230.5 million that was allocated in the 2020–21 budget builds on \$479 million—\$283 million for capital, \$156 million for output and \$39.8 million for the children's facilities capital program—that was allocated in the 2019–20 budget. So this is a rolling series of investments, if you like, because we know that this is a critical piece for this reform program over the period, the capital and infrastructure investment, to ensure that we are building the capacity in terms of upgrading of kindergartens, ensuring capacity for rooms—enough spaces, obviously, for teaching and learning and the high-quality spaces that we need—along with the investment that other partners and providers bring to the infrastructure component.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. Having kinders on school sites seems to be proving very popular. I have certainly had lots of feedback in my electorate of Narre Warren South about that. Are you able to inform the committee how many kinders have been delivered to school sites so far?

Ms ATTA: Yes, and I will ask Mr Kirkland to talk to some of the detail of this. It is popular. Certainly the value in addressing that double drop-off issue for so many parents—we get that feedback as well about how positively this is received, this commitment, where we have been able to, when we are building new schools, look to having a kindergarten on site or adjacent to the school. Mr Kirkland, in terms of numbers?

Mr KIRKLAND: Thank you for your question, and thank you, Secretary. Of the 10 new government primary schools opened in 2021, eight were co-located kindergartens operating at the time of the opening, including the government-delivered kindergarten at Docklands Primary, and a further two are anticipated to be operational in 2022. And of the six government primary schools scheduled to open in 2022, two co-located kindergartens are currently operational; four are anticipated to be operated by 2022.

Mr MAAS: Excellent. Thank you very much for that. And what other capital infrastructure programs are you delivering to help support the rollout of three-year-old kinder as well?

Ms ATTA: Mr Kirkland?

Mr KIRKLAND: Yes. Thank you. There are a number of programs in the kindergarten space. One is the kindergarten minor works and refurbishment grants—\$30 million for the early childhood refurbishment and minor works program to improve the learning environment, condition or character of Victoria’s kindergartens. The program is a short-term initiative aimed to stimulate the local economy by funding programs that support local jobs and communities. The program was also developed to address and respond to messages we have heard from the early childhood sector that they needed support to maintain and refurbish ageing infrastructure. Grants of up to \$50 000 are available for minor projects or \$500 000 for major projects. To support the sector to emerge from COVID we opened the first round of the program in December 2020, announcing just short of \$12 million and 105 successful projects in September 2021. A second round was opened in March 2021, with \$2.7 million announced for 32 projects in October 2021. There were also some inclusion grants under the umbrella of the building blocks inclusion stream, which also funds upgraded facilities and purchases equipment for a safe and inclusive environment for children of all needs and abilities.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. In terms of those building grants that have been mentioned, how do the building blocks, IT, the playground and equipment and the inclusion grants help provide an environment that improves early learning for Victorian children?

Ms ATTA: I think, Mr Maas, those grants are really critical to address safe, inclusive and high-quality environments. Often we have, as you know, a wide mix of providers operating in the early childhood sector, some standalone kinders, some provided through local government and others provided through clustered arrangements, so there are differing levels of capacity to modernise, to upgrade IT systems, to increase the quality of and inclusiveness of both indoor and outdoor spaces. So the range of assistance that is available through the improvement grants really goes to address all of those issues.

Mr MAAS: Excellent. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Secretary and your team, for appearing this afternoon. I would like to ask first for some clarity for the committee around the output initiatives that are listed in the budget on page 27 and how they contribute to the overall school funding as per the school funding agreement. Do all or some of the initiatives in the budget contribute to overall school funding as per the school funding agreement?

Ms ATTA: Overwhelmingly, Mr Hibbins. There may have been some minor exceptions to that. Mr Bates might be able to help me with that.

Mr HIBBINS: Sure. Thank you.

Mr BATES: Thanks, Secretary. Page 27 of BP3 from the 2020–21 budget papers: all that first group, which is ‘Early Childhood Education’, are out, but most of the initiatives, as the Secretary said, in the ‘School Education’ section do count towards the national school reform agreement acquittal. The minor capital works fund does not, so basically, capital projects do not. Funding to non-government schools counts. As you might understand, the agreement with the commonwealth has targets for both investment in government schools and support to non-government schools, so the funding that goes to non-government schools counts for that part of the agreement. I think on page 28 in the output group ‘Support for Students with Disabilities’ that the ‘Students with Disabilities Transport Program’ there, where there was \$14.5 million, the transport services were excluded from the commonwealth-state acquittal process.

Mr HIBBINS: But the item just above that, the ‘Inclusion for all: new funding and support model for school students with disability’, that would be included?

Ms ATTA: That is included. I think there was \$3.1 billion in output funding in the 2020–21 budget for Victorian schools, and overwhelmingly it contributes toward the expenditure for the bilateral agreement.

Mr HIBBINS: So the question then is we have already got an envelope of funding that has been agreed to with the federal government. It is now a case for the government or the department to then allocate that funding. It is not additional funding on top of the existing agreement.

Ms ATTA: The bilateral agreement with the commonwealth sets out the expenditure targets that the state acquits against, and the funding allocated to the department for school education through the state budget is essentially the means of acquitting against that target. As that money is expended, all of that reporting flows through to the National School Resourcing Board for acquittal and validation, in terms of performance against the targets.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. Now, there have been various independent studies in terms of how current school funding compares against the overall SRS of the Gonski school funding proposal, and Victoria comes up—estimates are over a billion dollars short of the full Gonski funding. I think it is almost two grand per student, which is obviously a significant amount for schools. Why is Victoria so far short of the full Gonski funding resource standard?

Ms ATTA: I think it is important, Mr Hibbins, to note that Victoria is on track to meet all of its milestones in relation to the national school reform agreement—the Victorian bilateral agreement. We have committed to increasing the funding contribution to government schools to 75 per cent by 2028. We are on track for the midway-point target in 2023 and on track for that 2028 target. So we are meeting all of the commitments made under that agreement. Funding to Victorian government schools and the *Report on Government Services* shows that we are fully compliant with those obligations and indeed growing our funding. If we go back to even prior to the agreement, Victoria's investment in schooling is growing faster than any other jurisdiction. We are certainly on track to meet all those commitments, so there is not a shortfall against the agreement that we are working within.

Mr HIBBINS: Not against the existing agreement but against the SRS as proposed by Gonski and what 100 per cent of that would actually look like.

Ms ATTA: I guess I can only talk to the work by the department to set up for that investment and acquit that expenditure against the agreement agreed between the two levels of government.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. Because when you look at Victoria's current share of funding, the SRS I think in 2021 sits at about 68.99 per cent, obviously reaching 75 per cent in 2028. But when you compare that with, say, Western Australia and South Australia—they are already at 75 per cent. New South Wales and Tasmania are in the 70 per cents. Queensland is just above us at 69 per cent. We are actually at the bottom of the table there.

Ms ATTA: It is true that states were at different starting points under the agreement. I think the key issue, the one that I have mentioned, is that the growth in investment in schools in Victoria and in government schools—the trajectory of that growth—is more significant than for any other jurisdiction. So we are accelerating investment in line with the agreement, and it is also fair to note that we are doing that, we are lifting that investment and we are getting some of the best outcomes in the country as well.

Mr HIBBINS: Well, that is very good. I do not want to get into a debate about semantics, but we are obviously increasing our investment to get to 75 per cent more rapidly than other states because we were already so far back than other states, and we are reaching our agreement of 75 per cent in 2028, which I think is the latest of states apart from Queensland. Within the agreement you mentioned it is a target. Is there anything stopping the Victorian government from funding additional funding to public schools beyond the target?

Ms ATTA: No. I do not think there is any hard ceiling on it, Mr Hibbins. In fact I think, subject to acquittal, our 2020 expenditure is likely to exceed the target, but certainly the department is focused on the commitments that we need to meet through that agreement.

Mr HIBBINS: Terrific. Thank you. I would like to ask now, and this is actually in response to a question I think I asked the IR minister at the last estimates, and it was in regard to whether the current EBA that is being negotiated with teachers actually falls under the new wage cap or the wage cap that is coming into place prior to I think 2022. So the new wage cap is coming into place I think at 1 January 2022. Will the current EBA negotiation be under the previous wage cap or under the new lower wage cap?

Ms ATTA: I think all negotiations that were under foot at the time of the last budget and the wages policy announcements will be concluded within existing wages policy, you know, subject to those agreements being reached before the new wages policy takes effect.

Mr HIBBINS: So if they do not reach agreement by 2022, suddenly the new lower wages would come into place.

Ms ATTA: We are certainly working hard to get an agreement, and my understanding is that, as announced at the time, anything under foot and underway already can be concluded under the existing wages policy, but obviously there is a new wages policy that will commence in 2022. But my understanding is this is underway, the aim is obviously to get it completed so that it sits within existing wages policy.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Because wouldn't that be a bit unfair if one party is not prepared to sign up to an agreement and suddenly it ticks over to 1 January 2022, and it is like, 'Sorry, we're under a new wages policy'?

Ms ATTA: It is probably a question for the Minister for Industrial Relations, Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: All right. Thank you. I would like to ask now about digital devices in schools. What is the status of the dongles that were given to students to access the internet? What is the status of them now?

Ms ATTA: They were initially provided in 2020 and retained and turned on again in 2021 as we went into lockdown. Mr Bates may be able to assist further there.

Mr BATES: Thanks, Secretary. Thanks, Mr Hibbins. I think, as we might have discussed before, we gave out to students and their families just under 28 500 wi-fi hotspots, and part of that was either dongles or we did do a lot of cellular-enabled iPads, so between the two of them. In the 2020–21 year we kept them on until Christmas last year, and then with the return to school we had turned off the internet access, but when we had the snap lockdown in February we basically reactivated any device that was being used in the previous year where the children were still in the government school system. So that meant we reactivated just short of 14 700 hotspots, and with the continuing periods of remote learning all those ones that we activated at the start of the year have been reactivated for term 4 and are still operational.

Mr HIBBINS: They are still activated.

Mr BATES: And I know it is out of scope, but we have also given out about another thousand devices post 30 June, so we have got I think about 17 500 internet hotspot devices that are active at the moment.

Mr HIBBINS: Even without remote learning, access to the internet at home you would have to consider now to be pretty essential for schooling and education. Are we going to be in a situation next year where again there are going to be students without access to an internet-enabled device at home?

Ms ATTA: It is certainly the case that the disruption of face-to-face learning and the reliance on remote learning across the last couple of years has thrown this issue into sharp relief. We have seen that while the majority of schools and students moved reasonably seamlessly into the use of devices at home, as Mr Bates has talked about and as we have talked with the committee about before, significant investment and effort was required to ensure that all students had access to the internet and access to appropriate devices. We are continuing within the department to look at what is the future state in terms of a modern, digitally enabled school system—all elements of that, including student access to devices. It is true, though, that there are no students across the system for whom there is not access to a device. It has often been a school-based device that they have been able to use at home as necessary. In normal school operations there has not been that gap. We have had to take different actions to ensure that there has been that equity and access during remote learning. We are continuing with our planning around what is that ideal future state and how do we best set up for that.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. I mean, that was going to be my next question in terms of what is actually being undertaken to look at ensuring that all school students have access to the internet and a device at home, because obviously the pandemic has exposed that there are so many kids out there just without that access. Some kids who might have been school refusers, now they have got access to it actually now have been going to school.

Ms ATTA: Yes. One of the things we have learned through this period is that technology can actually be an important enabler of engagement for some students who may not have been as engaged previously. But in

terms of looking at that future state, looking at the digital horizon, if you like, for the school system, there is a whole range of elements, including, for instance, how parents and families connect with and communicate with schools—a whole range of things where we have seen really positive and effective set-ups at some schools, less so at others. We are looking at a whole raft of issues related to, as I said, that sort of modernised, contemporary, digital school system. Where are our gaps? Where do we need to do more?

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, good. Thank you. I have got a couple of minutes left. One of the issues that I think often comes up amongst my colleagues in terms of schools is obviously we all love our public schools. Often some of them are very popular and have pressures, but then sometimes you get schools where enrolments are declining. What sort of interventions does the department take when they are faced with an issue of a school with declining enrolments?

Ms ATTA: It is a good question, Mr Hibbins, and it really goes to a pretty comprehensive approach we have got to school provisioning and monitoring and planning. It is different in different contexts. For instance, in our established areas of metropolitan Melbourne we have some significant growth in some pockets and 5 k's away, 10 k's away there might be a school with declining enrolments. We have done a lot of work to look at how we plan for areas within areas, if you like—within established areas. What do we need to do to meet that growth that one school or a couple of schools are struggling to manage? That might be about additional capacity on those sites where possible, but it is also about looking at schools that might have additional capacity, surplus capacity, nearby and what is needed there. Is it around upgrade to infrastructure? Is it around teaching and learning and leadership of the school and the performance of that school? So it is really an integrated approach we take. In some rural and regional areas where we have declining enrolments, that again is about working closely with that school and that school community to understand what that might look like in three years time, five years et cetera and what we need to be planning for.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Deputy Chair.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Just a very quick one before I pass to Mr Newbury. Just going to my question earlier, Secretary and Dr Howes, about security guards: I notice they reported in the *Sunday Herald Sun* on 4 April earlier this year about security being beefed up at Richmond West Primary School. There would not be security guards being employed at that school?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. I think at least for a period of time there have been security guards employed at Richmond West. While the issue of some of the independent schools came to mind earlier, I did not think of that example. Again, it is not a regular issue for us, the employment of security guards at schools, unless it might be for particular events et cetera. But I think it is correct that for a period of time there were security guards—or there was additional support for security—at that school. Dr Howes, can you add to that?

Dr HOWES: There was some additional support put in, but it was much closer to what you would describe as community support officers. It was through a partnership with an NGO employing local people just for periods of time at the start of the day and at the end of the day.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay, so there have not been any armed security guards employed at Richmond West or any other school?

Ms ATTA: No.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you.

Mr NEWBURY: Just while we are on that topic, you said that there was some employment of local people. Are you saying that there was no employment of any person who could be characterised as a professional in relation to security? I mean, you made it sound like it was a local dad.

Dr HOWES: Mr Newbury, are you referring to Richmond specifically?

Mr NEWBURY: Yes, continuing on.

Dr HOWES: Certainly the ongoing arrangement for—

Mr NEWBURY: No, that specific period of time you were talking about I am referring to.

Dr HOWES: I would have to go back and check whether there was an instance where a professional security guard had been employed—

Mr NEWBURY: So there could have been a professional security person employed at Richmond.

Dr HOWES: I will have to go back and check on that, but the intent of the program that was provided and what happened at Richmond was that, through an NGO, community members were employed to support students and families as they were arriving at and departing from school.

Mr NEWBURY: So you are saying you were employing local parents, but there may have been—and you are able to check whether or not there were any—people with professional capacity.

Ms ATTA: We are certainly happy to follow that up, Mr Newbury, in terms of security arrangements for Richmond West.

Mr NEWBURY: Because, as you can probably appreciate, you used the words ‘not regular’ before in relation to that particular instance. I know this one particularly did not come to mind immediately, but have there been any other schools in your recollection where a school has needed to employ somebody, which may have included a professional security person—may have, and I appreciate you are going to check that? Are you aware of any other instance where that has happened?

Ms ATTA: I think for a period of time at Shepparton college there may have been security arrangements put in place that involved professional security operatives, but I am sitting here not aware of any others. They are pretty rare instances.

Mr NEWBURY: Would it be a fair assumption to say you would only enhance security or hire people in a security capacity, whatever their professional background, if there was a genuine reason for it—i.e. it would not necessarily be because someone asked? It could be because in the department’s mind a decision has been taken that there is at least some security need. However big or small, there is a genuine security need.

Ms ATTA: And I think a genuine need to provide that assurance around a safe school environment. Now, that might be about perception; it might be about actual instance. But certainly if we think about those two instances, we have wanted to give that assurance that we have got a safe school environment for students, families and staff.

Mr NEWBURY: I think, as you can probably appreciate, you could probably look at the situation and say, ‘An injecting room has caused a school to require security’. I am not asking you to suppose but, you know, I look at that and I say if the injecting room was not there, the school would not need security. So I will leave that. I will—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, Mr M. O’Brien’s original question was within scope—

Mr NEWBURY: I am entitled—

The CHAIR: and I think we have been generous in that—

Mr NEWBURY: Well, the fact that this—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please—

Mr NEWBURY: Hang on, hang on. No, no.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please—

Mr NEWBURY: The state is employing security because they are concerned—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: about an injecting room’s security in relation to that neighbouring school.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, it is unfortunate that you are about to head down this path again, but I would appreciate it if you do not speak over the top of the Chair. Mr O'Brien's original question was within the scope of the terms of reference of this inquiry. I think we have generously allowed the conversation to continue, but I would remind you to bring your questions back to the terms of reference of this inquiry, which are the financial and performance outcomes for the years 2020–21.

Mr NEWBURY: The specific period in question is that period of time, and the cost of security in that time would be paid for by the state.

The CHAIR: Well, Mr Newbury, if that is your question, keep your question to the terms of reference rather than—

Mr NEWBURY: I completely understand the political concern.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, please stop interrupting.

Mr NEWBURY: I completely understand your political concern.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, please stop interrupting me. I ask that you keep your questions to the terms of reference rather than straying into hypotheticals.

Mr NEWBURY: Would it be possible, Secretary, to come back to the committee and confirm whether that security arrangement provided in the financial year in question included anybody with a professional background in security?

Ms ATTA: Happy to do that, Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Moving on to other issues—and I raised this with the Minister when he was here previously—I had a look at metro school upgrades over the last financial year, and I discussed this with the Minister when he was last here. Perception of political conflict is a real thing, especially when it comes to taxpayer money, and when I had a look at metro school project upgrades over that period of time what I noticed—coincidentally perhaps; I would suggest purposefully, but coincidentally at least—was five out of six upgrades were in Labor electorates, and that is not reflective of the number of seats held by Labor across that space, across metro. I would ask: when you look at government funding in schools, do you overlay any political—you know, who holds that seat—when you look at the schools?

Ms ATTA: No, we do not, Mr Newbury. We do not in any way track school planning or investment around electorates.

Mr NEWBURY: After the Minister was here last time, and I raised these issues then, did you brief the Minister on any of the matters that were raised by myself or the committee?

Ms ATTA: In relation to this to this issue?

Mr NEWBURY: School funding and my concerns around school funding.

Ms ATTA: No, Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: So I have raised it in Parliament and the Minister has responded to me—this very issue. I presume the department actually wrote the letter.

Ms ATTA: Well, I am happy to follow that up, Mr Newbury. I thought you were asking me in response to discussions at the last estimates hearing: did we subsequently then specifically brief the Minister on that discussion at the committee? No, we did not. But that is not to say that if questions have been asked, obviously the department would always provide advice to the Minister to support any response.

Mr NEWBURY: I think I have raised it three times since, in the Parliament—just for background, when the department is going to have a look—so it is something that I have raised numerous times. Because when you look at how school funding is apportioned, I think that the community would expect that pork-barrelling not occur. And I am not in any way suggesting it has, other than to say when schools are getting money because

they are in Labor electorates, or there is a perception thereof, people, when they do not live in those electorates, feel quite concerned. I mean, I have had a look at, for background, your School Building Authority map. This is the southern region, and as you can see there is lots of school funding there—terrific. You see that little lonely area there? That is Brighton. That is Brighton, Brighton East and Hampton. Do you know why that would be so lonely, that area?

Ms ATTA: Mr Newbury, if I could take a step back and talk a bit about how the department goes about its planning for school provisioning and the advice it provides off the back of that, it is a pretty comprehensive evidence-based methodology to ensure that we have got a robust approach to planning for growth. We are annually reviewing the need for new schools and new upgrades using demographic modelling around residential growth—looking at demographic change, looking at enrolment trends at schools across Victoria. I think any analysis of new schools funded in recent budgets would see that the majority of those are going to growth areas of the state where the need is.

In terms of condition upgrades for schools, there is a robust methodology around assessing the condition of schools. Schools now, on a cyclical rolling basis, are having those condition assessments upgraded, and the department is working through the advice around where the investment is most needed in terms of the condition of schools—

Mr NEWBURY: Just for background, I know in one of my schools the fire escape stairs—I mean, it is a century-old school; a lot of the schools in my area are a century old, so they are very old schools, some of the older schools in the state—are non-compliant and are made out of wood, which if there were a fire I imagine would be pretty problematic. I mean, I have talked about it at this committee before. Sometimes perception of these issues is as bad as if something wrongheaded was occurring, and when you look at the maps, the lonely area are Liberal areas. Now, I am in no way saying that there is an absolute reason for that, but clearly when you look at the maps and that is the case, there is a perception, at the very least, of a problem. So I am saying to you I appreciate the hard work you are doing, but what do I say to my local community when the schools come to me and say, ‘Why is this area of this school funding—if you look at all the other areas—barren of any school funding? Why would that be the case?’. What should I say to those local schools?

Ms ATTA: Mr Newbury, what I can say to you is that the department, as I have said, has a comprehensive and robust approach to planning for investment in the school system. I think we can look back almost over any period over the last 10 years or so and see that investment is spread across the state. We certainly do not track it via electorate. We are trying to both plan and upgrade schools to meet community needs, make sure that as a first priority we have got capacity for what has been considerable growth in student enrolments, consistent with population growth in Victoria in recent years, and the bulk of that funding has necessarily gone to the growth corridors of Melbourne where new schools have been established, but equally across established areas of Melbourne—

Mr NEWBURY: If you saw a map, would it concern you if there were areas that were specifically without funding and you knew there were lots of schools there? Would that concern you? I mean, would you look at it and say—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I have allowed your line of questioning, but I would ask that you keep your questions to the financial and performance outcomes for 2019–20.

Mr NEWBURY: Look, please, we do not need Labor Chair right now.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, stop being so rude.

Ms ATTA: Mr Newbury, the assurance that I would want as Secretary is that we have a robust and comprehensive approach to provision planning for the state’s school education needs, and that is what I am focused on—ensuring that we have got that in place and that that is looking at both capacity of the system to be able to account for the growth that is coming through, that pipeline of enrolments, as well as the condition of schools across the system. Now, there are more than 1550 schools across the state. I am not sure how many upgrades we have delivered in recent years. It is very substantial. It is both across metropolitan—

Mr NEWBURY: In my area in Bentleigh, which was a marginal seat, you have basically paved the streets in gold.

Ms ATTA: and rural areas. There are important investments across a whole range of established areas within inner and middle Melbourne to account for both condition but also for that growth that we are experiencing in established areas of Melbourne. So as Secretary of the department that is the assurance that I am looking for—that we have got an approach to planning and provisioning that we can be transparent about and that it is based on need. I am confident that we have that, and—

Mr NEWBURY: I am glad that we have had the discussion, and noting the current way that funding has been recently apportioned, at least we have had that conversation—perhaps when you look at a map and you see areas like mine, which are very, very lonely of any school funding and you see that five out of six recent upgrades have been made in Labor seats, we have had that conversation. I am not in any way saying that it can be anything more than a perception of inappropriate apportioning of funding, but there it is.

Ms ATTA: I would certainly reject any suggestion that the department has inappropriately apportioned funding.

Mr NEWBURY: I do not think that you have.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you allow the Secretary the opportunity to answer your proposition, please.

Mr NEWBURY: I absolutely do not think that you have. I am sure the minister would have a different answer.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you allow the Secretary—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! Would the Secretary like to—

Ms ATTA: Just to reiterate the point that all of the advice that the department provides on the planning and provisioning for school upgrades—upgrades for school growth—is based on a comprehensive, robust methodology for identifying needs.

Mr NEWBURY: I believe that entirely. Do you mind if I quickly return back to the Deputy Chair's questioning on the mental health practitioners? That program was not rolled out to primary schools. What advice did you provide the minister in relation to that decision?

Ms ATTA: There are a range of programs that we have—

Mr NEWBURY: Was that correct, that that program does not go to primary schools?

Ms ATTA: The specialist mental health practitioners approach does not go to primary schools, but we have worked with experts—the Murdoch research institute, for instance—on the right model for primary schools, and our mental health in primary schools approach that really invests in teacher mental health literacy and expertise to work with small children, identify needs and look at—

Mr NEWBURY: Are you saying that Murdoch suggested that they not need specialist advice?

Ms ATTA: Mr Newbury, I might ask Dr Howes if he would make some further comments on our approach in primary schools.

Mr NEWBURY: If you would not mind taking that on notice, because I know we are out of time, that would be great.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, if you would allow Dr Howes to answer your question.

Dr HOWES: Thanks, Mr Newbury. Just to make the comment in the time available that the advice from the experts has been that an approach on prevention is crucial and the first priority for primary students.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Howes. As we are halfway through proceedings we might take a 10-minute break and resume at 3.05 pm. Thank you.

I reopen this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and the call is with Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Secretary and officials. It is a good opportunity, as you did at the beginning, to show our appreciation for educators. I will be pursuing some conversations around the early childhood education workforce, parents and the people who care for and love our children, and the students as well. I would like to explore the early childhood workforce and refer you to budget 3, page 21, and the reference to supporting the expansion of the workforce to deliver three-year-old kinder, so our little ones again. I am interested in perhaps understanding how the budget invested in the workforce necessary to deliver the three-year-old kinder program.

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Ms Richards. It twinned in a way with the infrastructure piece. The other big enabling piece for the reform is the workforce supply and workforce development. I will ask Ms Little if she could talk to the detail on this one.

Ms LITTLE: Yes, very happy to. Thank you, Secretary. As I noted earlier in passing, during the reference year for this committee we did have a very strong uptake of a number of the offers which we have been making to attract people into the early childhood education and care sector, specifically around the kindergarten offer, which is the state's lead responsibility. In the reference period of 2020–21, 931 people received scholarships to study early childhood teaching, with a total of more than, as I mentioned before, 2200 people receiving financial scholarships across the life of that initiative to date. So we had very, very strong take-up of that. In addition, as has already been mentioned by the Secretary in her opening presentation, amongst the most popular courses under the free TAFE initiative have been the certificate III and the diploma, which are the two regulated VET qualifications required to work in early childhood education and care, including in kindergarten.

I might say a few other things about some of the investments that have been made. In addition to those core scholarships and free TAFE opportunities, we also have a number of other ways in which we are supporting the profession both in terms of attraction and retention. On the attraction side, as I might have mentioned in passing before, we do have incentives of between \$9000 and \$50 000, which are the same rates as for the schools incentives for hard-to-staff services and locations, so the amount that is available depends upon how hard to staff the area is and the specifics of the particular service. We have used those hard-to-staff incentives to great effect in the first two years of the rollout, and they will be used as needed in the next year of the rollout. We have also introduced incentives for people to return to the profession. There are people who at various times in their lives—and it is a highly feminised workforce—may make decisions to leave for various reasons for a period, and we now have financial incentives available to attract them back into working in the sector and support for them around their professional development.

We also know that, as with many professions, the real period where you tend to get attrition from the profession is in those first five years. That is true across, as far as I understand it, basically all professions, because people need to bed themselves down and feel comfortable, and they need extra support. So one of the additional things that we have done is introduce mentoring and networks and support for kindergarten teachers in their first five years, working very closely with their employers to help retain them in the profession. More broadly, we have area forums and networks available to people who work in kindergarten services across the board, which we use as a vehicle to help support their professional development, help give them support, especially if they are in a service on their own. One of the differences between kindergarten services and schools, all but the smallest schools, is you can have a kindergarten service that only has one teacher and a couple of other VET-qualified staff. So making sure they do not feel professionally isolated, making sure they are allowed to be part of a community of practice and are supported to be part of a community of practice is a really big part of what we are doing in that space. We have seen an expansion of the teaching workforce in those first two rollout areas. It is an important but relatively modest expansion of around 42 new teachers.

We have also seen educators and teachers increase their hours. Many educators and teachers up until this point, particularly in rural and regional communities, have been part-time, because that is all the demand that has been there, for four-year-olds. With three-year-olds coming in, they are often able to increase their hours, so that gives them more opportunity in those communities. With the rollout across the state of the minimum of 5 hours next year we are obviously seeing many more opportunities for teachers and educators to come on board, and

they will persist and grow across the life of the reform as we head to 15 hours for everyone. So we have a really comprehensive suite, and I will say that in talking to other colleagues across the nation and major stakeholders it is well recognised that Victoria has the most comprehensive workforce strategy around the preschool workforce available in Australia at this time.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Ms Little. We might have a comprehensive workforce strategy, and you have got a comprehensive answer, so I feel like I have covered that off and the committee has the opportunity for a really deep understanding. So I am going to perhaps move on to another area of interest and something that has been of interest to many of us, of course, which is the mental health programs in schools, and it does lead on from some discussions earlier, Secretary.

In the questionnaire you reported \$8.6 million has been expended on youth mental health support, and I am interested in perhaps understanding how funding the Headspace mental health training, expanding the mental health practitioners program to include specialist schools—and I know that many of us have a great interest in the specialist schools in our own constituencies, but of course we are here to talk about the whole state—and expanding the mental health in primary schools pilot initiatives are helping to meet government targets.

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Ms Richards. It has been such a significant issue across last year—the last two years, really, as we have touched on a few times this afternoon. I might ask Mr Fraser if he would talk to the detail of some of these investments. Some of them are expansions to existing programs to address growing need but, you know, we have seen it as a critical priority for the state, for the school system. Obviously high-quality teaching and learning remains core for our schools, but increasingly health and wellbeing of students is of equal status for us and has certainly been a major focus over the last couple of years. But I will ask Mr Fraser to talk to the detail of some of those programs and what we are hoping that they will help us achieve.

Mr FRASER: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you, Ms Richards, for the question. Mental health and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of Victorian students is obviously critical at any time but particularly given the COVID-19 crisis and what students have been through. You mentioned the additional funding from August 2020. That was part of a broader \$28.5 million investment, which includes responses to mental health over two years. That includes, as you say, an additional \$9.9 million specifically to expand the mental health practitioners program to specialist schools and specifically those specialist schools with secondary age students.

I mentioned before the 82 specialist schools that were funded through that support: 50 of those schools now have those mental health practitioners employed, and obviously that is expanding through this year. And we have 288 mental health practitioners employed across the system, and they are on time fractions from 0.2 up to a full-time allocation. That program is obviously about supporting, as you say, those specific circumstances in specialist school settings and working hand in glove with teachers, with the specialist expertise that they have. The \$8.6 million also included \$3.5 million, as you said, to expand the mental health in primary schools program to an additional 26 schools—of course the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System recommend that we proceed with that pilot approach, knowing that we need to learn more about what works for primary-age students—and as Dr Howes said, really focusing on prevention in primary schools rather than those post-mention and interventionist approaches that we need in secondary schools. And then additional funding came in the 2021 budget to expand that pilot to a total of 100 schools. And that is now underway and will proceed through 2022.

Ms RICHARDS: Terrific. Thank you. It will be fascinating to follow up on that in future opportunities. I am interested perhaps in understanding a little bit more about the rollout of the Headspace mental health training, and I understand that was introduced to support the COVID-19 pandemic response. Could you outline how many of the 1500 government schools are on track to participate in the SAFEMinds and suicide risk continuum training that supports students as we move beyond the pandemic?

Mr FRASER: Thank you for the question. The partnership with Headspace is critical to our mental health support, and Headspace training and professional learning to school staff is across a range of areas, one of which, as you mentioned, is the SAFEMinds training. That is really about increasing the knowledge of mental health issues in children—emerging concerns around anxiety, depression, self-harm, all those things that teachers need to be aware of; the suicide risk continuum training, which focuses on understanding and responding to self-harm and suicide ideation in children and young people; then skills-based training focused

on suicide risk management, which is referred to as the STORM training, which really focuses on risk assessment and the capacity of classroom teachers to make those risk-based assessments of need; and then post-mention support for those unfortunate attempts at suicide, which is really aimed at wellbeing roles, working with schools, including those mental health practitioners and school nurses. So, they are a really rich range of programs across a range of really complex issues that classroom teachers, unfortunately, do need to deal with.

Between July 2020 and June 2021 of this year, Headspace provided over 170 SAFEMinds and STORM training sessions supporting 1200 school staff across the system, and since the department's partnership with Headspace began in 2018, Headspace has delivered 450 of those SAFEMinds, suicide risk training sessions and STORM training sessions to over 3000 staff. I do not have the precise number of schools in total that have been supported, but 3000 staff across the system in total since that 2018 period.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks for that additional evidence. Page 133 of the evaluation outlines that there was a costing of \$720 000 for the mental health practitioners initiative, and that has, I understand, been undertaken. I would like to explore the ways that the evaluation is expected to support mental health support for students.

Mr FRASER: Thanks again for the question. The evaluation is really focusing on whether the mental health practitioners initiative is achieving its intended outcomes and being implemented effectively. Not dissimilar to the rollout of three-year-old kinder, we are really in that early stage and focusing on implementation at the moment, so gathering a lot of evidence from data surveys, including surveys of the workforce, case studies of individual schools implementing the mental health practitioners program, and we are looking at the early findings of that at the moment. Recruitment challenges—alluding to the earlier question that we had—have been a major challenge so far and a key implementation issue, amplified by the COVID-19 context. A number of actions have been taken already to address these recruitment challenges. We are working with case study videos of schools that have succeeded in attracting an appropriately trained mental health workforce and particularly retaining those key staff in regional and rural areas as well.

Early recruitment of area-based mental health coordinators to support schools through their recruitment process has proven to be effective, and that is one of the key findings already through the evaluation. And, as at the start of term 4 this year, all schools have now received their funding, and that 2022 part of the equation will begin to focus on the outcomes and whether those are being achieved.

Ms RICHARDS: Again, just staying in that area of interest that I am sure we all have, on page 13 there are the outcomes of the mental health practitioners initiative, as expanded in 2021, so I am interested in perhaps having you outline where the initiative was expanded into and what additional actions were taken by DET. You have started to speak about better recruitment, and I am interested in gaining some more understanding around professional development and other ways that we are supporting mental health practitioners that are participating in this initiative—so just going a little bit deeper if you are inclined.

Mr FRASER: Thank you, and as you say, this initiative was rolled out in a staggered way across each of our areas, with more schools joining over time. In 2020–21 mainstream government secondary schools in the areas of Hume-Moreland, Central Highlands, southern Melbourne, western Melbourne, outer-eastern Melbourne, Ovens Murray and the Mallee all received the funding to recruit their mental health practitioners. As I have said, at the start of this term all schools across the state have now received that funding.

On 7 August 2020 the government announced the expansion of the program to specialist schools, as I mentioned before, those 82 specialist schools, and that recruitment is now underway, with those 50 mental health practitioners already commenced. We continued the recruitment, the support and the professional development through, as I mentioned, those area base coordinators. They are supporting schools in their area with their recruitment effort and coordinating the professional supports for those practitioners.

The funding has supported the development of a practice advice line providing mental health practitioners with an opportunity for secondary consultation and practice support. Through this service is clinical advice, because those mental health practitioners are teachers who are being supported to build their expertise, but they do not have clinical expertise, so that practice advice line provides a direct line of support through Orygen to clinical specialists so they have got that on-demand support in place.

The development of the attraction and retention strategy, as I mentioned before, and those case study videos has really been focused on promoting the initiatives and the benefits of the school mental health practitioner

program. There is a range of guidance available for alternative delivery, including online support, which has been vital through periods of lockdown for those schools that might have struggled to recruit someone to come into the school directly.

Ms RICHARDS: Great. Thank you. I think I will leave it there. I have got a smidge of time, but thank you very much for your evidence this afternoon.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Richards. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, team, for appearing today. The last financial year was a time when the public health directions effectively conducted a huge experiment on the school system that we have never before, shutting it down and moving it to home learning. A lot of the amazing work that we saw by teachers in dealing with that and being agile in trying to move to these technology solutions was amazing, but clearly, judging by some of the things in the presentation and things that I have spoken to many parents and teachers about, there were a lot of harms caused by that—not to all students but to many students there were harms. In your presentation you talk about trying to mitigate some of these harms through new mental health professionals for psychological damage that might have been caused and also academic damage—so with tutors to try and catch up. My question is: what sort of work is being done, either academic or internal research, to identify and quantify these harms that might have happened and ways that you may be able to mitigate them in the future?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Limbrick. It is a very good question because we have been through an unprecedented period, really, in terms of school education and the level of disruption that we have experienced, as have of course many other sectors—communities across the state. Some of the harms you have referenced are not exclusive to school settings. We know that in relation to stress, pressure and mental health issues there is some evidence of increased need more broadly across the community, but certainly we have not been immune from that.

In terms of how we are trying to best understand some of those issues, some of those impacts, if I go first to looking at impacts on learning and education attainment for students and the disruption to that continuity of face-to-face teaching and learning, we have been able to through our tutor learning program—and I might ask Dr Howes to talk to some of the early indications we are getting out of that—be allocated that investment to have a really specific and dedicated catch-up approach. It is a really exciting program, because it really is helping us to understand the benefits of very specifically differentiated learning more broadly, so there is a lot that we hope to get out of that. I will ask Dr Howes to talk about that in a moment.

One of the key things that we did across the past year, or the past 18 months really, was to look at surveying our school leaders, our school communities, across the period on a regular basis to get those insights and that feedback from the school system about what principals and teachers were seeing and experiencing in terms of what the impact was on students and indeed on the workforce. We commissioned other work last year to understand some of that. Dr Howes might be able to talk to some of that, as well as what we are learning through the tutor program.

Dr HOWES: Thanks, Secretary. Mr Limbrick, you are right. We have been acutely conscious of those two areas—of the impact of this on both learning and wellbeing, and we have got two measures for looking at the impact on learning in particular. Obviously one of the key ones is the NAPLAN results, and that was an area, you know, where it would be true to say there was some trepidation about what that was going to show, because the tests that were done in May 2021 obviously were reflecting the long impact. I think the community can take a huge amount of reassurance from those results in terms of the extraordinary success that schools had in being able to maintain learning growth. I am guessing that one of the areas in which people are most concerned are those students who struggle as well as the opportunity for those students to excel. But really one of the things that was most satisfying, I think, for schools was looking at the performance of students who achieved above the national minimum standard for literacy and numeracy. Now, that is obviously a crucial measure because being above the national minimum standard is central to being able to maintain your ongoing learning. There are 20 measures all up on NAPLAN. On 19 of the 20 we had the fewest number of students who were beneath the national minimum standards—or the most above, which is an extraordinary tribute to the work that has gone on and does suggest that the impact of the pandemic overall on learning attainment was not of the detrimental effect that people had been concerned about.

Mr LIMBRICK: Do you think that NAPLAN is like a gold standard sort of measure, though? Are there other assessments that could be done to look at learning? NAPLAN is like a single—

Dr HOWES: Sure.

Mr LIMBRICK: I do not know. When students study for NAPLAN it is a very focused thing. Right? It is a very specific test.

Dr HOWES: It is focused on literacy and numeracy—

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes.

Dr HOWES: but those are the two skills that obviously enable learning in other areas. It is certainly not the only assessment that is done, but it does give us that point in time comparison about how we have gone compared to previous years ourselves and how are we going compared to other jurisdictions, which is critical for this question of: what was the impact of the pandemic, given that schools in Victoria were closed for a longer period than in other jurisdictions.

But to come really to your point about other methods of assessment, NAPLAN looks at the overall aggregate results for the state. We can look at school data, and schools can look at their individual student results. But the tutor learning program has then been targeted not only at students who might be at the lower end of the attainment continua but also those students who were most impacted, to your point. And that can go to particular home circumstances and the way in which they responded as individuals to not having peers around them. That has been a program that has been intended to close the gap that might have opened up for each individual, and that is being evaluated now by Deloitte Access Economics. To go to your point about whether we are wanting to know: yes, absolutely we want to know. There was a commitment made that this would be evaluated independently and thoroughly. So a tender was let for that evaluation, and we are looking at every aspect of that around the extent to which the tutor learning program has supported engagement and attendance as well as learning. We will not be reliant just on the NAPLAN data for that.

Mr LIMBRICK: That is good to know. Another thing that I have had feedback from some parents and teachers about is gifted students or higher achieving students performing poorly with at-home learning. In some cases they were not motivated. I have got kids that have been doing the home learning as well. A lot of the kids get through their work and then say, 'I'm done', and there is no teacher there to push them. A lot of kids that were achieving really well might have fallen behind. How do you identify those people? Because they would not show up as easily in the NAPLAN sort of stuff, really, would they?

Dr HOWES: No, they do, because we do look very carefully at performance at the top end, the top two bands, and we can talk about that at length. I have got the data on that. From 2019 to 2021 year 3 students performing at that higher level went from 58 per cent to 62.3 per cent, and year 5 went from 40.9 per cent up to 45.5 per cent. Again, the aggregate data is really gratifying, but there are individual students on whom the pandemic impacted differentially. The question of gifted students is particularly interesting because I am sure you have heard other anecdotes of students who actually appreciated the chance to work at their own pace as well and actually exceeded the learning growth that teachers had anticipated. One of the things we determined to do is ask what the conditions were that enabled that to happen and how we replicate those as students return to face-to-face learning.

The tutor learning initiative was designed exactly to address the point that you have made, that the concern of schools and of individual teachers naturally tends towards those students who are at the lower end of the attainment spectrum, because you have got to make sure they have got the skills that they will need for their future. The tutor learning initiative asked schools to identify those students who had been most impacted, irrespective of their place on the learning continua. We are confident that it might not have picked up every student in that category, but schools have certainly made an effort to look at not just the low-performing students but those students who had been identified as missing out on the most learning, which as you have indicated, included in some circumstances those students at the high-achieving end.

Mr LIMBRICK: Another piece of feedback I have had from lots of parents about children and how they deal with learning from home—and I wonder if there has been any work done on looking at this—is that students with different personality types deal with it very differently. I am not an expert in this, but it has been

conveyed to me that students that are more introverted did pretty well at this home-learning thing, but students who are very social and into sports and stuff like that suffered greatly because they did not have that sort of interaction that they were used to. Conceptually that makes sense to me. Has there been much research into how different personalities might deal with this sort of environment and how you might improve that, God forbid that we ever have to do this again?

Dr HOWES: Well, that is looking particularly at that question of students who thrived and talking to schools about what they thought were the common characteristics of those students. The pattern that emerged is pretty consistent with the one that you have identified. But the flip side is kind of true as well: it has often been that for students who are extroverted who love interaction at school onsite learning is brilliant. Some students who do not find that as easy thrived in the at-home environment. What we want to do is say: what do we learn out of that and how do we better support those students as they return to school to thrive in the hurly-burly of school life?

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. I noticed this was in the questionnaire; schools also teach things that are really important for personal safety, and one of those things that I am really fond of is swimming. Now, a lot of kids have missed out on their swimming lessons. This is a really important safety thing that they have missed out on, and I noticed in the questionnaire hardly any certificates were handed out to children, for obvious reasons. What work is being done to catch up on that and make sure that those kids do not miss out on those sorts of skills that they are going to need to not drown, I suppose?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Limbrick. It was an element of schooling that was most disrupted because swimming pools were just not accessible for protracted periods. So it has been a significant issue for us, and there has been additional investment in recent years, including in the 2020–21 budget, to support swimming and water safety education.

Mr LIMBRICK: So part of that is catching up those students that missed out, is it?

Ms ATTA: There has been, in successive budgets I think, additional investment to really develop that swimming and water safety education component. Given the restrictions during 2020 and 2021, that certainly impacted on the ability of schools to deliver those programs as they would have in, say, 2019. The department has worked with Life Saving Victoria and the aquatic industry to look at what we can optimally do in terms of classroom and water-based options for schools at various restriction levels.

More recently schools that have been unable to deliver their swimming programs in 2021 can use that unexpended funding in 2022—and hopefully early in 2022—to run catch-up programs through the school swimming outside of school hours program with a voucher program allowing schools to pay for student swimming lessons, consistent with cancelled school swimming and water safety programs and, as I said, working with the industry, working with schools, to enable that to happen outside of school hours as an intensive or a catch-up approach after school, on weekends and during school holidays. So we have a very strong determination to look at where we can catch up and make sure that investment is used for that really important purpose. We are certainly very conscious that summer is upon us and there has been that real disruption. Is there anything else you would add, Dr Howes?

Dr HOWES: No, only that it is something that we are very conscious of, Mr Limbrick. I agree with you about the importance of swimming, absolutely, but it is all those other parts of school life that are so hard to do in remote learning, like music. I mean, there have been extraordinary experiences of schools being able to connect students to put on performances and so on during remote learning, but it is not the same. So one of the messages that we strongly want to give schools is they are doing a really good job in maintaining learning, but making sure that broader curriculum is—students have got the opportunity to participate in that as well.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. Just finally, and sort of going on from the swimming, on a sports issue, one thing that I noticed, and I have subsequently spoken to many parents about—in between some lockdowns I went swimming with my kids. My kids love swimming, and I like swimming too. We went to a pool, but one thing that shocked me when I came out of a long lockdown and went to the pool when it was open was the number of children that were overweight. Like, it was quite stark. I have spoken to many, many parents about this, and lots of children have gained weight because they have not been running around in the playground and

doing their sports and all that sort of thing. What sort of work has been done to address the physical harms of locking kids inside for so long?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Limbrick. Look, it is a question in part perhaps better answered through the health portfolio in terms of what they are seeing at sort of whole-of-population levels. But, as Dr Howes has said, we are certainly conscious of the absence of swimming and other sports. There have at various times been restrictions on, obviously, mingling between schools. Even as we have come back face to face, there have been at different times in the last two years limitations on interschool sport, for instance, and community sport. As Dr Howes has said, as schools have come back in term 4 we have been very keen to have that message that, as the restrictions are easing and there is more opportunity to engage in those broader school offerings, we are really encouraging schools not to be hesitant to do that once the directions, the public health restrictions, allow it, and we will set up for 2022 with that in mind as well, as a year where we will really want to support schools and promote those opportunities for children.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Hello, Secretary and your team. Thank you for being here today. I did want to explore programs for students with disability. I think it would be helpful for the committee to know more about what is going on in that space. I note in the questionnaire you have reported \$179.6 million has gone into the program for students with disabilities during 2019–20, but it notes also that there is additional funding that has been provided for the 2020 school year. Could you explain how this funding helped to ensure students with disability had access to the support that they needed during the reported period?

Ms ATTA: Yes, sure. Thanks, Ms Taylor. As you say, the 2019–20 budget provided almost the \$180 million over two years to continue key initiatives supporting students with disability. Part of that was additional demand funding over two years to meet growth in the existing program for students with disabilities for the 2020 school year to ensure that eligible students continued to receive the support they need. We have got approximately 29 000 students with disabilities with high needs, and the PSD aims to maximise student achievement in education and learning and ensure that that experience of school education for those children is an experience where they are valued, engaged and able to participate in all aspects of life, as their peers do. So that program for students with disabilities funding allows schools to make adjustments as required for students with high needs, promote social inclusion, build accessible school communities that are welcoming of students with a disability, and increase participation and achievement in schools with tailored programs that lead to better learning and, importantly, better post-school outcomes. In terms of how that funding was rolled out in 2020, what has been done in addition to that, I might ask Mr Fraser to talk to some of that detail.

Mr FRASER: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you for the question. So the Secretary has really highlighted that that funding that was provided in 2020 has been about meeting the demands of the program and ensuring that no student of those 29 000, which are roughly 4.5 per cent of the total student population supported by the PSD, miss out on those essential adjustments. And there is a range of adjustments in place at the schools, including equipment funding, specialist training for teachers, recruitment of additional specialist staff, that that PSD funding is used for.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. And if we can look at a specific initiative, the language and learning disabilities support program referenced under this initiative, how does it support students to overcome their language and learning challenges?

Mr FRASER: Thank you for the question. The language and learning disabilities support program is a specific component of our approach to supporting those students with disabilities that really focuses on those students with language and learning disabilities such as dyslexia and autism, so very specific requirements that are not funded under the program for students with disabilities because they do not meet the funding criteria. So this is specific language and learning disability funding for those disabilities, and it really is about providing expanded teaching and learning programs to better meet the needs of these students, given their specific needs. So, for example, that could include schoolwide investments such as dedicated staff responsible for the coordination of programs for those students or, as the Secretary mentioned, tailored and personalised arrangements that support those students' individual needs, so looking at provision of support to schools prior

to their transition to disability inclusion, which is the new approach to PSD funding. Those students with language and learning disabilities will need specific support as we move across to that approach, so this funding supports that transition arrangement as well.

Ms TAYLOR: Okay. Right. Page 7 of the questionnaire makes reference to the disability inclusion school funding model: can you elaborate on this new model? I understand it was announced as part of the 2020–21 budget and will replace the PSD program.

Mr FRASER: Correct.

Ms TAYLOR: And can you explain how this reform will help students with disability who are supported in government schools?

Mr FRASER: Disability inclusion is a major reform, as you say, announced in the 2020–21 budget that will replace the PSD program. It is a \$1.5 billion investment that will roll out over five years. A lot of that is around funding for anticipated increase in need across the system. We have more students coming into our system requiring this specific specialist expertise and support, but also around expanding two new streams of funding, which are what we call tier 2 funding, which is funding to schools as a whole, and then tier 3 funding, which goes specifically to individual students, replacing the PSD funding as you have said.

The tiers of funding really work together to provide support that meets the needs of all students so that, as the Secretary said, those students can participate in school and benefit from school on the same basis as their peers. Tier 1 funding, the way we refer to it, is the universal funding that all schools receive, so that is about funding all students and just teaching and learning, employing teachers, building school buildings. All of our students with disabilities benefit from those interventions as well, so that is what we refer to as tier 1. Tier 2 funding is school-level funding that goes to supporting whole-school approaches, so professional learning for all teachers so that they can respond to the needs of students with disabilities, even though they might not have specific responsibilities for those students. That funding can also support the development of specific programs, employment of staff, equipment purchases, and that is really about ensuring that the school is an inclusive and welcoming place for all students with disabilities.

Then we get to the tier 3 funding, which will replace the PSD funding, and that is about supporting individual students on the basis of their strengths rather than what they cannot do because of their disability. That really brings with it a different approach to identifying the needs and strengths and abilities of those students rather than taking a medicalised assessment process, which we currently do with the PSD. We are really focused on identifying what those students can do, given their specific disabilities, and working to identify the gaps and strengthen those abilities that they do have. Now, that will really involve a different way of assessing those needs, including the employment of an independent facilitator workforce. So those facilitators will work side by side with families and with those individual students to make an assessment of that student's strengths and their additional needs and design what we have called a disability and inclusion profile for each of those students. That profile will determine the range of supports that are put in place for that individual student.

Now, there is a range of additional supports that will work side by side with that facilitator workforce. Regional implementation teams are being put in place. There is inclusion outreach coaching, and this is about tapping into the specialist expertise that resides in our specialist schools and bringing that into mainstream schools, so that a mainstream classroom teacher can build up their expertise over time to work to have greater effect for those students with disabilities.

This is a major reform that is being rolled out over five years and—similar to the way we talked about the mental health practitioners—on an area basis, so starting with three areas of the state who are already conducting their disability inclusion profile meetings this term and then rolling out to the rest of the state over the coming years.

Ms TAYLOR: I think you have gone some way to sort of differentiate it from the PSD model, but could you perhaps tease out a little further how the profile process differs to how assessments are made under PSD? I think you have explained it to some extent, though. And can you explain the benefits of the new model for students with disability?

Mr FRASER: Absolutely. We have seen successive reviews, research and stakeholder engagement all providing the basis for a need to reform the approach to the PSD and to have a broader, more inclusive education agenda for these students. The 2016 review of the program for students with disabilities; the 2016 government school funding review, which was referred to as the Bracks review at the time; the 2017 parliamentary *Inquiry into Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder* report—all of these reports and reviews identified the need for Victoria to shift to a more contemporary and inclusive approach to supporting students with disabilities in Victorian government schools, and we have shown through a range of evidence that that approach benefits not only those individual students and their families but other students in the broader school system. So there is a really strong, compelling need to move to this different approach.

Under the current program for students with disabilities, students with disability are assessed against medical criteria to show they cannot learn and participate in the school to the same extent as their peers without disabilities, and this is what is typically referred to as a deficit-based model. So looking at those students and identifying what they cannot do, rather than what they can do, is really focused on those deficits. And this is reflected in the PSD student needs assessment, which relies on that diagnosis and does not really reflect the rich information about student needs and, in the educational settings, what they can do and what those schools can do to support those students best.

So to get around this and derive a different, more inclusive, more strengths-based approach—rather than taking that deficit approach—in 2018 the department piloted the disability inclusion profile with over 100 schools and around 1000 students with disability across the system, and this process and the pilot were really aimed at testing and building an evidence base for how a new approach could address some of those issues that had been identified through those reviews and to build a new approach across the system. That is in fact that strength-based functional needs assessment approach, with the role of that facilitator being really critical for liaising between the student, their family and the school to come up with a profile of that student and what they can do, and to then determine their needs and the adjustments that need to be made in school to support their learning. That facilitator role has been created to identify individual students' strengths and those educational needs and to bring families, health professionals and schools together to guide the types of tailored supports that those students will need—as I said, a strengths-based process and really about identifying the strengths, the needs and the adjustments that schools will need to make.

This will really fundamentally change the tier 3 funding, which is currently delivered through the PSD and will be delivered through the inclusive education reforms. It will continue to be informed by evidence of disability, as is currently the case with the PSD. So that could include, for example, diagnostic information for intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorder or a physical disability or language or visual or hearing impairment. However, the support will not be limited to students who meet set criteria for the PSD as it has been in the past. So you could have, for instance, a student without a formal diagnosis but still with high functioning needs, as demonstrated by that disability inclusion profile, who may also receive tier 3 funding where they would not have previously received PSD funding. So that is the tier 3 funding and the assessment that will lead to that. It is supported, as I said earlier, by the tier 2 funding, which is school-based funding, and that will be based on a formula that looks at the overall level of need for the school community and without looking at the individual diagnosed needs of individual students. The new profile and that funding approach will be supported by a significant investment in the skills and the knowledge of our school workforces, with training, professional learning, scholarships, that inclusion outreach coaching, as I mentioned before, and extra support to support schools to implement inclusive practices.

Just to focus on the key benefits for students, it is about really focusing on individual students' goals, their strengths, their needs rather than the deficits, and we have had a lot of feedback directly from students with disability that this is a shift that they are looking to see. It will be easier for schools to access those resources that they need across the state to meet students' educational needs. Students and families will have a richer and more positive set of conversations with schools about students' needs and adjustments. Again, there is incredibly powerful feedback from families and peak organisations representing students with disabilities about the need for that strengths-based approach and for teachers to have access to the expertise that they need. We know we are seeing reform through the compulsory specialist component of initial teacher education—that is moving through the workforce, but there are many teachers that throughout their career have not had access to that expertise. This will help shift that over time.

Ms TAYLOR: I can see it is a really significant reform—really interesting. I am just going to move to school upgrades, and I note in section B you detail a significant investment in school infrastructure that was delivered over the 2020–21 financial year. I think it would be helpful for the committee to know how many school upgrade projects commenced construction in the 2020–21 financial year.

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Ms Taylor, and I will ask Mr Kirkland with the Victorian School Building Authority to step through that. Sorry, I have caught you on the hop, Tom.

Mr KIRKLAND: Thank you for your question. In summary, I am pleased to report that 91 school upgrade projects commenced construction in the 2020–21 year, and this is on the back of significant investment made through the building works stimulus program announced in May and the state budget announced in November—well over \$3.1 billion funding 235 school sites across the state. We will see those completed projects in coming years. But in direct answer to your question, in 2020–21, 91 projects commenced construction.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. Are you able to advise the committee if there are differences in the planning process when there is an allocation of school upgrade funding for the first time, as opposed to an allocation for the second stage of an existing master plan? I think, actually, it would be really helpful to understand that.

Mr KIRKLAND: Of course. Thank you for your question, Ms Taylor. When a project receives funding, it goes through a number of gates. The first one is an asset management plan, and it has two components. The first one is really to engage with the local school leadership to harness their enthusiasm and understand their school vision and leadership objectives, the condition and type of assets they have got and how they enliven their curriculum at that school. Whether it be in sports or STEAM or music or whatever there is, that is captured and documented. We also finalise the enrolment number for their school and how much it needs to grow, if at all. Then the next asset management plan really is when we bring an architect on board to understand the condition and where we would like to go with that school.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Sorry to interrupt you. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. My first question is to the Deputy Secretary of Higher Education and Skills. Victoria's universities cut numerous jobs last year. Was the department advised or aware of the cuts and the numbers?

Ms HEALY: Thanks very much for the question. The department works closely with universities through the partnership agreements that have been established, and these were established as part of the higher education state investment fund. That partnership approach to universities was enacted deliberately to support universities through the pandemic.

Mrs McARTHUR: Are you aware of the cuts?

Ms HEALY: Well, those agreements recognise the impact of the pandemic on universities and have deliberately gone to invest in state outcomes through research and capital et cetera. So in that process we have a strong relationship. We understand the commonwealth funding models, and universities of course keep us appraised of their intentions from time to time.

Mrs McARTHUR: So you know the figures?

Ms HEALY: The annual reports for the universities would be the place that we would go to for that information.

Mrs McARTHUR: So you do not have them offhand?

Ms HEALY: I do not have them offhand.

Mrs McARTHUR: Maybe take it on notice, if we could? Thank you. And also, how much in revenue by each of Victoria's universities was lost due to the loss of international students? Do you want to take that on notice too?

Ms HEALY: Again, I would need to take it on notice for detailed university by university—

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you.

Ms HEALY: but clearly the loss of international students, as obviously the biggest service export for Victoria, has been substantial, so happy to provide that data again. The universities make that available.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you so much. What state funding was provided to each of Victoria's universities in the last financial year?

Ms HEALY: In the year we are talking in scope, again the government's investment through the Higher Education State Investment Fund of \$350 million was deliberately established to really support again the university sector through what was and still is a very difficult time due to the impact of the pandemic. The \$350 million state investment fund has gone across all 10 universities. If I can refer to my notes, I am happy to provide you with the detail of that funding university by university if that is helpful.

Mrs McARTHUR: Take it on notice. That will be fine.

Ms HEALY: I am happy to go through an example now if that is helpful.

Mrs McARTHUR: I think for the benefit of time if you would provide it on notice.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mrs McArthur. I am sure a lot of preparation is put in to being able to provide the answers to your questions here, and if the answer is available, it would be preferable to the committee to provide it.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Well, press on.

Ms HEALY: Thank you. Perhaps I will start with the investment that was provided to Swinburne University—\$6.7 million in the MedTechVic project. I am starting here because it is one that is well underway, and it is a really terrific project, because it is focused around—

Mrs McARTHUR: Just the amounts per university if you could.

Ms HEALY: Yes. So \$6.7 million to the Swinburne project for the MedTech piece, which is about assistive technologies. The government has provided \$2 million to Australian Catholic University for its medical equipment for research project; provided \$1.8 million to Australian Catholic University for the next generation secure IT network—again really important research capability here; \$1.9 million to Australian Catholic University for the Ballarat nursing simulation ward refurbishment, again an area of really important workforce development in Ballarat. Chair, I am happy to table the broad list. This is publicly available information on the website. But overall the \$350 million Victorian Higher Education State Investment Fund focused on projects of both research, capital and of state benefit that create jobs and support the sector through the pandemic.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you so much. Given the emergency support for the sector, including I think payroll tax deferral, what is the modelled extra cost of the Victorian government's new big business payroll tax on each of Victoria's universities?

Ms HEALY: Thanks for the question and the reference to the payroll tax. The \$130 million payroll tax support is certainly part of that investment. I think in terms of the question in regard to the modelled impact, if I understand that correctly—

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes, correct.

Ms HEALY: that is one that I again think would probably be better in the Treasury portfolio given it refers to a taxation measure.

Mrs McARTHUR: But it will affect your sector?

Ms HEALY: Yes, it will be one that I think would be better shared through the Treasury portfolio. That is not something I am able to respond to at this point.

Mrs McARTHUR: So clearly university funding is an enormous issue. It is one of the hardest hit sectors and has been due to the pandemic. It is not a short-term thing, with students lost from year one not likely to

return in future years. And so there is a massive hole in university budgets, as they have all been telling me, which will last for some time. So I am asking: how seriously did the department advocate for universities to get back into business? And did your department at any stage engage with the willingness of universities to organise their own quarantine facilities? University vice-chancellors have clearly explained to me their ability to run safe programs for their students, which would have enabled additional students to return without pressuring hotel quarantine caps. Particularly this is an issue for regional universities with extensive campuses and non-densely populated areas. So was this idea discussed, and did you advocate this with DHHS and the Premier's office?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mrs McArthur. The department, and probably particularly through the pandemic, has, along with the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, established a regular channel of communication with university vice-chancellors to make sure that the state fully understands the impacts that they are experiencing. Of course the commonwealth government is the key tier of government with responsibilities for universities, including the essential, foundational funding model that supports universities.

In relation to public health restrictions and indeed solutions such as quarantine, that is really the domain of the health department and the chief health officer. We have certainly engaged strongly with universities in hearing about a range of potential solutions, opportunities and advocacy in relation to the international student program—obviously critical to our universities, absolutely critical to the state economy in relation to COVID-safe measures and being able to respond to and manage the public health restrictions throughout the year. Ms Healy might—

Mrs McARTHUR: Of course there are also international students in the secondary school system. In the Geelong area, for instance, there are in total about 4000 international students that have been lost to the education sector and the economy in general.

Ms ATTA: You know, major disruption obviously for international students and implications for schools, TAFEs and universities in relation to that program. Ms Healy might say a little bit more around the regular discussions on COVID-safe practices, public health restrictions as they have impacted—

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, I am just wanting you to confirm that you have advocated strongly that they can manage their international student intake. I take it you have.

Ms ATTA: I am sorry, Mrs McArthur. In relation to that, I think there has been very strong advocacy, and indeed very strong responsiveness across government to the concerns the universities have raised.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. We will move on to Mr Gniel, the executive officer of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

Ms ATTA: I will just invite the CEO to come up to the table.

Mrs McARTHUR: So, Mr Gniel, in March of this year, male students at Brauer College in Warrnambool were forced to stand up at assembly and apologise for their gender. A month later, still in this financial year in question, students at Parkdale Secondary College that were heterosexual, white and Christian were asked to stand up in front of their peers and were then told that they were oppressors because of their privilege. Were either of these views part of the Victorian curriculum in the last financial year? Is there anything in the Victorian curriculum which you think might have inspired these actions in these schools? Is intersectionality or critical theory part of the Victorian curriculum for any age group?

Ms ATTA: Mrs McArthur, I will come back to Mr Gniel, but just in relation to the incident you are referring to at Brauer, I might go to Dr Howes, who has responsibility for school operations, and come back to Mr Gniel on the curriculum question.

Mrs McARTHUR: Sure. Thank you so much.

Dr HOWES: Thanks for your question. Mrs McArthur, there was the incident, as you reported, at Brauer College, and the school has addressed that and apologised and acknowledged that it was inappropriate. It is the case that as a result of the specific recommendation from the Royal Commission into Family Violence we have been implementing the Respectful Relationships curriculum. So those actions were acknowledged to be outside

that, but the Respectful Relationships curriculum has been a very important part, as I said, in direct response to the recommendation from the royal commission, of establishing more respectful relationships, both in schools and across the community.

Mrs McARTHUR: I asked also—and I do not know whether you would like to answer the question, Dr Howes or Mr Gniel—

Ms ATTA: Steve, do you want to add to that on the issue of the curriculum?

Mr GNIEL: Thanks, Secretary, and thank you for the question. I think David has covered off what the school's response to that is. In terms of the Victorian curriculum, that focuses on the eight key learning areas, as you would be aware, as legislated, and it also has our general capabilities in there. But the matter that you are referring to is, in the main, an issue at the school level of implementation, which would be far better, I think, dealt with through the Respectful Relationships curriculum, which is part of a department program rather than the VCAA.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you. So could you tell me whether any parts of the Victorian curriculum seek to promote Western values and culture, including individualism, rationalism and freedom of speech and association?

Mr GNIEL: Yes. Absolutely it does.

Mrs McARTHUR: Excellent. Thank you. Now to Ms Atta, Secretary of the Department of Education and Training. This is in relation to: is the department aware of any similar incidents across this area? Actually, it is in relation to the questionnaire, page 129, from the department, which we understand spent \$391 580 on an evaluation of the free sanitary pads and tampons in all public schools program to assess its progress and performance. Was this evaluation conducted internally or was the money spent on outside consultants?

Ms ATTA: Mrs McArthur, I might have to take that on notice. I just do not have that at hand as to whether it was an internal evaluation or an external one, but consistent with all of our programs, we do seek to make sure that we are evaluating their effectiveness and the degree to which they are meeting their targets. Mr Bates is assisting me, and it was an external evaluation.

Mrs McARTHUR: External? Would that be the same for the \$338 000 spent on evaluating the funding in three-year-old kindergarten? Outside consultants?

Ms ATTA: Yes, I think Ms Little has already spoken to that evaluation—again, a very significant investment in a critical reform. Of course we would not want to commence that without having an evaluation planned and in place.

Mrs McARTHUR: Clearly more money was spent on the evaluation of tampons than three-year-old kindergarten, but also throughout the questionnaire there is an endless list of millions of dollars of taxpayers money spent on the evaluation of programs and initiatives rather than on the actual services themselves. It seems like an extraordinary level of consultant expenditure. Is it totally necessary to have outside consultants do all this work?

Ms ATTA: I would have to say, Mrs McArthur, that we have got four portfolios within the department and expenditure of \$16.54 billion in 2020–21, so responsibility for very significant investment and delivery, and I think evaluation is a critical part of that. The department over the last 12 months or so has been internally reorganising to ensure that we are lifting our internal capability to deliver on evaluation, but we will always need to engage some assistance given the scale of the reform program we have and the delivery responsibilities that we have. I think I speak for most government departments in saying that when we are getting that investment through a budget process there is an expectation that we can report back on evaluation of outcomes.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, here is one. Have you conducted your own analysis on the correlation between expenditure and education standards? For instance, a new report from the Centre for Independent Studies suggests that beyond a certain point the correlation no longer exists.

Ms ATTA: I am sorry, I just missed the first part of that, Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Has the department conducted its own analysis on the correlation between expenditure and education standards—or the cost-benefit analysis of the effectiveness of class sizes, for instance?

Ms ATTA: No, I do not think there is anything in relation to class sizes that we have specifically done. But we have undertaken significant strategic evaluation of the school reforms, which is an ongoing one, that is looking at all of the investment going through our key school reform programs and looking at what benefits that is realising, what that is achieving, what gaps if any may exist. At that strategic level we are doing some of that work. I would not characterise that, though, specifically in relation to the question you have raised.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, department Secretary and officials, for joining us here this afternoon to go through the financial and performance outcomes for the department of education. I want to go back to the topic of school upgrades, and I think my colleague Ms Taylor was getting to a question around the differences in planning. I refer to the questionnaire and the portion that talks about projects where there has been a first allocation of modernisation funding—for example, Gladstone Park Primary School—and schools where the budget funded a second stage of works, such as at Ringwood Secondary College. For the committee's benefit, are you able to advise the differences in planning process when there is an allocation of school upgrade funding for the first time compared to the allocations for a second stage of an existing master plan?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Richardson. I think Mr Kirkland had started to outline the response there, talking about that first stage of funding, but when a school then receives funding for a subsequent stage of its master plan—perhaps, Mr Kirkland, you could pick that up.

Mr KIRKLAND: Okay. Thank you, Secretary. Thank you for your question, Mr Richardson. As I summarised before, the process begins with a document called an asset management plan, which is really just consolidation, documenting the school's vision of where they are now and where they would like to go. The first stage is an AMP 1—or asset management plan 1—which is the school's vision, and then it rolls into an asset management plan 2, where we bring on a principal design consultant or an architect to do a spatial master plan to understand how staff and students move around the site to ensure we keep vehicles away from people, the condition of the buildings, those sorts of things, and start to document it. The AMP process involves planning to seek the long-term perspective of the school. We would invite the school leadership team into a program called a bricks-and-mortar program that talks about the process of moving forward through a school building program.

As you would appreciate, with nearly 1540 schools, school leadership teams have a wide variety of interests in school buildings. Some really like to get their feet wet and actively involved, others not so much. So the process begins with a clear expectation of what the programs are, the milestones and the deliverables. That process then rolls into what some people would call the drawing and the documenting, so you would have the master plan, run the schematic design, roll into the detailed design and the tender drawings and then get a builder on board. So during those really four main gateways, about three months per gate, it takes roughly a year.

The main difference in time: for a school like Gladstone Park doing their primary stage it would take 52 to 68 weeks to go through, from the announcement from the minister right through to a builder being on site; for a school like Ringwood Secondary it can be a bit quicker because the school's master plan is relatively refreshed. There are not that many changes in how people are going to move around the site or the division of the school, so we can shave some time off at the front end and move right into the schematic design, detailed design, tender drawings and appoint a builder onto the site. So the main difference really is time at the front end, but the outputs are identical.

Mr RICHARDSON: And how many asset management plans were delivered as part of the 2020–21 financial year for schools that had received budget funding for an upgrade project?

Mr KIRKLAND: I can confirm that there were 117 asset management plans confirmed through that financial year.

Mr RICHARDSON: In the case of these two school upgrade projects, once the planning stage has concluded, what is the next stage of the process to deliver a school upgrade project?

Mr KIRKLAND: As we approach the tender drawings phase we would put the project out on the Buying for Victoria website to invite suitably qualified builders to look at the forward order book of the VSBA. They would nominate the jobs they are interested in. Some contractors would take a scattergun approach and nominate virtually everything. Others are a bit more strategic, whether it is in a regional area or a metro area, relative to other works that they may have on their books. We collate that information and look at the risk profile of particular firms. We would invite four firms to telegraph to the market that, in tight labour and supply areas, if you receive an invitation from the Department of Education you have got a one-in-four chance of winning the job. So it tends to harness people's energies and effort into responding to the tender. All of our builders have to be prequalified on the construction supplier register, which is a Department of Treasury and Finance whole-of-government database. And really to get on it there are two main criteria: one, they look at your trading history, and your occupational health and safety documentation would be the other one, to ensure that you are able to continue to work on government jobs. So we would invite four builders. The evaluation panel is run usually by the VSBA, a member from the school and/or school council, maybe regional colleagues, an external project manager, depending on the size and scale of the job, and a contract is awarded and the sod is turned.

Mr RICHARDSON: Can I take you to the process of builder appointment and an example at Delacombe Primary School that had works completed in the 2020–21 financial year. For the committee's benefit can you use this project as an example to explain to the committee the process of appointing a builder?

Mr KIRKLAND: Yes, I can do. So as I touched on in my earlier response, it is really about telegraphing to the market that these are funded jobs as identified through the Buying for Victoria website. All registered builders who are on the CSR can nominate. We will pull together a list of four, with some reserves, because builders—we might invite them; they may have picked up other work and they would withdraw from this process. They are invited, they receive a request for tender and their response, and the selection panel would evaluate those against the criteria that have been predetermined, preallocated and known to the industry.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. This might also be a point for the Secretary, but are we able to explain for the committee's benefit how the Victorian School Building Authority managed the challenges of delivering these school upgrades during the unprecedented times of the coronavirus pandemic throughout the 2020–21 financial year?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Richardson. There were some really significant challenges here, as there were for various parts of the department's delivery. One of the first things that the VSBA was able to do early in the process was switch to a purely online process for all projects in the design phase. I think really from 2020 and with the full implications of the pandemic starting to emerge, we immediately had an eye to time lines for delivery et cetera for planning for design. As you know, for school projects probably more than any other project, delivery on time is pretty critical, particularly for new schools that need to be ready at the start of the school year. Being able to innovate there and undertake design workshops with stakeholders all on videoconference in the design process, including the consultation with school communities—we put a lot of time and effort into that. It is a hallmark of the way the VSBA operates. That switch to an online approach utilising a wide range of virtual resources—being able, for example, to do virtual walk-throughs of 3D models et cetera and to ensure schools and their communities could be fully engaged in the design process—was really important.

For projects in construction we of course had builders, as was the case for the whole industry, required to comply with the directions of the chief health officer, and this included implementing COVID-safe plans on site—social distancing, mask wearing, electronic check-ins for construction sites et cetera. The VSBA worked closely with our builders and with that part of the industry to support them in ensuring that they were operating correctly in line with those directions and giving the department that assurance as well for those important requirements. Construction projects were of course subject to maximum workforce numbers in line with CHO directions, so we were able to work with builders and contractors to ensure that projects delivering additional capacity for the 2021 and 2022 school years were able to continue with the required staff numbers, subject to a number of industry safety measures. Those on those critical delivery time lines, if you like, were able to operate in that way, with other projects required to reduce to no more than 25 per cent of their workforce on site. The VSBA worked with builders to minimise the impacts of these reductions, particularly by working through how to resequence works on sites. There were a range of changes to practice for different parts of the planning, design and construction phases.

Mr RICHARDSON: Despite these significant challenges that were faced as part of the pandemic, are you able to inform the committee how many school upgrade projects reached practical completion over the 2020–2021 financial year?

Ms ATTA: I believe we were able to deliver on 71 school upgrade projects—just checking with Mr Kirkland—through that period, a really good result for the VSBA in a pretty difficult and challenging period.

Mr RICHARDSON: I might take you back to the questionnaire, Secretary, and the completed stages of school upgrades at Lilydale High School, Lilydale Heights College and Upper Yarra Secondary College, which are schools in the Lilydale and Yarra Valley education plan. Are you able to update the committee on the progress of all the education plans that the Department of Education and Training and the Victorian School Building Authority are working on and how they are being received by their local communities?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Richardson. These are really important projects. They are often long-term projects to transform the way education can be provided for those communities in those areas. I might ask Mr Kirkland to talk to that in more detail.

Mr KIRKLAND: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you, Mr Richardson. The Secretary outlined just a couple of main components of an education plan. One plank is infrastructure, and the other plank would be the education and operational side of the business done by Dr Howes and his team. Education plans are long-term projects that aim to transform education provision and improve student achievement, engagement and wellbeing outcomes for a group of schools in a geographic area. They provide a means of collectively responding to complex issues and infrastructure impacting schools and their communities. Education plans' potential responses to these issues are long term and beyond the scope of an individual school, being a collective solution with involvement of a range of partners. As a result, each plan is different, tailored to the local needs and aspirations, but generally they have common themes. One would be greater collaboration between schools to improve teaching and learning, as outlined earlier in our conversation, as well as more professional support for teachers, better health and social support for families, governments both state and local working collectively on specific projects to improve student achievement and wellbeing, and then from an infrastructure point of view we would roll in and assist in meeting those objectives.

Currently there are eight education plans in varying stages of implementation and planning across Victoria. These include Bayswater; Bendigo; Flemington; Footscray; and as you rightly say, Lilydale and Upper Yarra; Oakleigh; Frankston North; and Shepparton. Of the education plans in the implementation phase, six are currently receiving building works. This involves 17 projects across 13 schools and one integrated early learning centre. Community sentiment for the capital works component of these education plans has been well received, with local communities engaging positively in individual projects. For example, the *Flemington Education Plan*—94 participants attended a recent online information session and informed the local community about the design of the proposed Mount Alexander 7–12 College proposed works program. And in the one you referenced, the *Lilydale District and Yarra Valley Education Plan*, recent social media posts of completed stage 1 works at Lilydale Heights College and Upper Yarra Secondary College received 8945 individual views, with 450 directly engaging with the post. These school communities worked together to develop the plan's innovative, collaborative Indigenous strategy launched by the minister in term 2 of 2021 for Indigenous themes to be incorporated into the signage at both schools and building designs at Lilydale Heights College. For the *Shepparton Education Plan*, stage 1, Greater Shepparton Secondary College, there were four secondary schools brought together to one school on one site. Community sentiment has been varied. I am advised that as the build will be finished this year, community sentiment has improved.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you. Chair, I might leave it there in the time that we have got remaining. Thank you very much for that evidence. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Richardson. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration with you today. We thank you very much for appearing before the committee in your various capacities. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request. I also thank all secretaries and officers who have given evidence to the committee today; Hansard and the secretariat; as well as the cleaning, catering and

security staff who have looked after us. The committee will resume its consideration of the 2020–21 financial and performance outcomes tomorrow afternoon. Thank you for your time today.

Committee adjourned.