

**Youth Strategic Advocacy Group submission into the
Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry
into Public School Funding**

What happened to being the 'Education State'?

December 2025

The Youth Strategic Advocacy Group Great South Coast (YSAG) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the *Inquiry into Public School Funding*.

We wish to concentrate on the disproportionate impacts that the decision to delay raising the funding for our government schools will have on the students, workforce and communities in rural Victoria. While this paper describes the potential impact on the Great South Coast, the experience would be similar to other rural communities.

Our submission reflects direct concerns raised by young people, educators, frontline workers, and business and community members across the Great South Coast.

These impacts will not only impact our rural communities but will be felt more broadly, impacting our ability to maintain our excellent reputation in the food and fibre sector and damaging our international reputation as a world leader in education.

The message is clear: the current and proposed public education funding cuts will have **significant and long-lasting negative impacts** on an entire generation, particularly in our rural communities.

ABOUT US

YSAG is a regional youth advocacy body for the Great South Coast. We bring together youth-focused organisations, local government, community agencies, and young people to provide strategic direction and leadership for the region's youth sector.

YSAG's core priorities are to:

- Identify and progress regional advocacy priorities through effective partnerships and channels.
- Consolidate evidence of needs and strengths, informing a Regional Youth Strategy and Regional Workforce Strategy.
- Strengthen collaboration between agencies and communities to improve outcomes for young people.
- Provide high-level opportunities for young people to participate in regional planning and advocacy.

Rural young people are already educationally disadvantaged.

Cutting funding now will hard-wire poorer outcomes, poorer health, and shorter life chances into an entire generation.

Multiple inquiries, expert panels and youth consultations have reached the same conclusion: where a young person lives in Victoria still determines the quality of education they receive.¹

Further cuts will push rural students past the tipping point.

OUR REGION: GREAT SOUTH COAST

GSC Regional Partnership “Economic Futures 2020” highlighted the economic opportunities in our region.

Farming and food production are central to the local economy, with new opportunities in processing adding value to local raw products. The forestry industry is also expanding, supported by large plantations in the Green Triangle and growing interest in timber and bio-based products. The region is attracting major investment in renewable energy, especially wind, solar and bioenergy, and there is also interest in new technologies like waves and geothermal energy. Tourism is another strong area, with natural and cultural attractions like the Twelve Apostles and Budj Bim offering chances to grow eco and heritage tourism. The social and health sectors are also experiencing significant work force shortages.

We need a qualified and skilled future workforce if we are to make the most of these opportunities. The In Plain Sight report highlighted that to meet the economic prosperity goals of our region we must address the social inequity within the Great South Coast. It highlighted that certain groups faced significant barriers to economic participation. Young people were among this group.

We know that prior to these funding cuts, the Great South Coast (GSC) faced substantial barriers to successful education, employment, and life outcomes for young people.²

RURAL EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE IS REAL

Rural schools face significant challenges that their metropolitan counterparts do not:

- unreliable internet and connectivity (REDS 2022)
- limited access to allied health and specialist services
- long travel distances
- workforce shortages

¹ Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students; YACVic Rural; Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, 2024.

² In Plain Sight report 2022

- Lack of access to equitable vocational training and breadth of academic and alternative education opportunities
- Small numbers
- reliance on schools as community hubs and emergency centres

Over the past two years local place-based supports such as School Focused Youth Service have been cut with others in an insecure position with no guarantee of ongoing funding into the future. The culminative impact of this loss of services for rural students where little other support exists, further disadvantages of our vulnerable students. Rural LLENs have faced significant reductions in their funding; the Navigator program numbers have been reduced. Reduction of VET band funding has made access to vocational training for our most vulnerable students less achievable. There is significant concern in our area that as schools and departments absorb reductions through staffing freezes, program shrinkage, and reduced local budgets, the cumulative effect is not widely understood by the public. In the same respect there has been funding of Department of Education programs which duplicate current provision

The GSC Social Futures Report (2023) confirms higher rates of socioeconomic disadvantage and service gaps across the region.

Education, connection and mental health supports are what matter most – and what they struggle hardest to access. (Young People comments YACVic Rural report 2018)

Cuts to public education risk increasing local unemployment as school-based roles, traineeships, and community partnerships are reduced.

The Poverty Line Indicator (PLI) measures the weekly earning of people over the age of 20 years compared to the poverty line which has been set at \$480 per week for adults. The PLI shows Glenelg, Southern Grampians, Moyne, and Corangamite with a higher percentage of the population than the Victorian state average (at 29%) living below the poverty line. The PLI for four towns in the GSC is more than 10% higher than the state average – Coleraine at 46%, Lismore at 44%, Casterton at 43% and Mortlake at 40%. The PLI for four other major towns in the region is greater than 5% higher than the state average with Simpson at 38%, Terang at 37%, Portland at 36% and Camperdown at 35%.³

³ YSAG Inquiry submission no 264, 2023

2021 Census figures demonstrate significant educational disadvantages in the region. Both Local government areas demonstrate low completion of people over 15 years having completed Year 12 or equivalent (Glenelg has 34.7% completion and Southern Grampians at 40.1%) as compared with the state (59.5%) and Australian figures (56.8%).⁴

Our rural government schools work with some of the most marginalised students in the area. A snapshot of secondary schools in the Glenelg and Southern Grampians communities shows school populations which demonstrate the greatest student vulnerability, most of whom are in the government school sector with the percentage of students in the two bottom percentiles ranging from 95% -85% in the two most vulnerable groups. Two other non-government schools have over 50% of their students in the two bottom percentiles.⁵

THE IMPACT OF THIS DELAY AND FUNDING CUT ON THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS ENROLLED AT VICTORIAN SCHOOLS TODAY AND THOSE STARTING PRIOR TO 2031

Students currently in the Victorian Great South Coast school system have lived through six formative years affected by disrupted learning, lost social development, mental health decline, and community instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The *In Plain Sight* report by MGA for the Great South Coast Regional Partnership identified the significant impact of COVID on educational engagement for students in the region. “Consultations reveal continuing high levels of absenteeism at both primary and secondary school levels, an increase in instances of poor behavioral regulation and difficulties in engaging parents to assist in addressing issues.”⁶

Educators, families, and youth workers across our region report:

- ongoing literacy and numeracy gaps
- heightened anxiety and disengagement
- increased behavioral and safety risks
- students who have not re-engaged with education

The Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students found rural students experience compounded disadvantages due to distance, workforce shortages, and limited-service

⁴ YSAG Inquiry submission no 264, 2023

⁵ YSAG Inquiry submission no 264, 2023

⁶ In Plain Sight 2023

access. Cutting funding now removes the support that prevents disengagement, harm, and long-term cost.

“Prevention is cheaper – and more humane – than repair” (For Every Child, 2025).

Funding cuts at this moment, when young people most need stability and investment, will exacerbate and amplify existing inequities. The timing could not be worse.

In rural areas, schools are often the only place young people can access mental health support, early intervention, and trusted adults. Wellbeing programs and re-engagement pathways are not extras – they are protective factors for our children.

Removing wellbeing capacity leads directly to:

- increased incidents
- reduced safety
- higher absenteeism
- worse mental health outcomes

This is not theoretical. It is already being reported across the GSC.

CONSEQUENCES OF THIS FUNDING CUT ON VICTORIA’S TEACHING AND SCHOOL WORKFORCE

The announced \$2.4 billion in Victorian education funding cuts represent a substantial withdrawal of support from the state’s most vulnerable students; those in rural areas and those needing additional support. Broken down, this equates to approximately:

\$3.75 per government school student per school day. (Assuming 640,000 students and cuts spread over five years.)

The cumulative effect of these cuts across the sector is profound. This is not an abstract number: \$3.75 per day is the cost of a school meal, a session of wellbeing support, or a contribution to a literacy intervention. When multiplied across a full system, the loss becomes devastating.

Since COVID the teaching and school workforce has been in crisis with significant skill shortages and increased pressure on teachers. Rural schools are finding it extremely difficult to recruit their workforce with many teachers walking away from the sector in droves. Combined with this shortage, a reduction in funding for rural schools may require employing less experienced teachers. This may result in declining academic progress, poor behaviour management, and greater risk.

Funding cuts in rural schools mean:

- fewer teachers
- fewer subjects
- fewer pathways

In rural schools, one lost teacher can mean the loss of an entire subject area.

It is highly likely that the funding cuts will directly influence decision making by schools, likely to result in money being directed to 'core curriculum' and essential facility maintenance and away from extracurricular and wellbeing programs, which are often the first to be cut despite being central to engagement and mental health.

It will reduce access to worthwhile alternative education pathways, such as Warrnambool's WAVE School and Portland's Re-engagement Program which are essential for re-engaging vulnerable young people.

The education workforce has not recovered from COVID-19. Principals, teachers and other school staff are facing ever increasing demands from above and working with young people with increasingly challenging and complex needs. Schools are reporting staff who are stressed, under-resourced, and feeling undervalued. Many are burnt out and are choosing to leave the education profession. This is happening in the context of the baby boomer cohort who is in the process of retiring and new graduates who are leaving the profession after an average of five years or less. Rural areas are already facing enormous difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff in the education and early years sectors. The situation is dire, and the impact of these cuts will have a major consequence on our future.

Funding cuts to state schools disproportionately affect women due to the education workforce being made up of over 70% women, particularly in teaching, support, administration and education support roles. When budgets are reduced, schools may respond by freezing recruitment, increasing class sizes, cutting specialists and support programs, and expecting existing staff to do more with less. This intensifies workload, emotional labour and role strain for women, who are already more likely to be in part-time, lower-paid or insecure positions.

Reduced funding can also limit access to paid professional development, leadership opportunities and secure contracts, further entrenching the gender pay gap and slowing women’s progression into senior roles.

EFFECT THE FUNDING CUT WILL HAVE ON THE ABILITY OF VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS TO PURCHASE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES, TEACHING MATERIALS, CAPITAL EQUIPMENT AND BUILDING AND SCHOOL GROUNDS MAINTENANCE

The 2024 Legislative Council inquiry into *The State Education System in Victoria* warned, rural schools operate with:

- smaller staffing pools
- limited access to external services
- higher proportions of educational disadvantage

The South West has the highest proportion of public schools in the state. Cuts therefore hit hardest where public education is often the only option.

These cuts directly contradict the findings and recommendations of Parliament’s own inquiry.⁷

Rural communities do not have equitable access to mental health services and support. Funding cuts to health and wellbeing services and loss of wellbeing staff, counsellors, and support programs will lead to:

- increased behavioral incidents
- reduced capacity for early intervention
- heightened health and safety risks
- worsening mental health outcomes for students and staff
- greater disengagement and absenteeism
- poorer educational outcomes for students

These programs are lifelines—especially in rural communities lacking access to external services.

⁷ Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, Oct 2024.

IMPACT THE FUNDING CUTS WILL HAVE ON THE WIDER COMMUNITY

People on the ground—youth workers, local governments, service providers, teachers, parents, and young people—are expressing deep concern. Many have told YSAG they are **afraid of the permanent and lifelong impacts these cuts will have.**

Rural communities will experience disproportionately severe impacts due to:

- lower staff numbers, meaning cuts directly translate into lost programs.
- Many services are not provided at a local level or within achievable distances. With limited local service options—schools often fill gaps where external services are unavailable.
- greater transport barriers
- internet being unreliable and constantly dropping out
- Lack of teacher expertise or availability in rural school's results in reduction of subjects offered to students and access to classes. Leading to increased social isolation
- reduced access to before- and after-school care, increasing pressure on working families.
- School staff job losses resulting in loss of professionals in rural towns, meaning less families, sports coaches, volunteers and flow on economic impacts.

Funding cuts will dismantle and destroy opportunities and growth in our communities through:

REDUCING EQUITY

Funding cuts to Victorian rural and regional public schools risk deepening educational inequality by disproportionately undermining already under-resourced communities, widening class gaps, and entrenching a two-tier system, where opportunity is determined by postcode.

When rural public schools lack the funding to hire enough teachers, maintain facilities, or support students with additional needs, disadvantaged students fall further behind their better-resourced peers—especially those in affluent urban or private schools.

According to the Australian Education Union, inequitable funding has allowed private schools to pull ahead, while most public schools still do not meet their Schooling Resource Standard. The latest OECD *Education at a Glance* report confirms that Australia's public investment in schools lags compared to its OECD peers: public funding per student is well below many countries, while private school expenditure is among the highest.

Reduced public investment risks entrenching inequality across a generation. As public schools decline, families who can afford it shift to private schools, deepening the divide between:

- those with access to full subject suites, enrichment programs, and stable staffing, and
- those left in under-resourced schools with shrinking opportunities.

This is inconsistent with Victoria's commitment to equity and universal opportunity.

DECLINING EDUCATION PERFORMANCE

This underinvestment not only weakens rural school quality but also contributes to Australia's declining standing in international comparisons, reinforcing a system where students' opportunities are increasingly determined by postcode—and perpetuating the socioeconomic divides that a strong public education system should be working to eliminate.

The OECD has identified Australia's declining educational performance as a direct outcome of inequitable investment. Cutting funding accelerates this decline.

GREATER PRESSURE ON FAMILIES

A significant funding cut on our smaller rural schools will further reduce subject selection, ability to provide a range of areas and increase pressure for schools in small towns to amalgamate, with inequitable travel expectations placed on students, staff and families.

There will be greater pressure on families to contribute more and fundraise to pay for programs and facilities which are the state's responsibility, particularly unfair in the current cost of living crisis.

These reductions further entrench a two-tier education system, risking a shift of families who can ill afford it into private schooling while leaving most disadvantaged students behind.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOLS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Schools are the cornerstone of our rural communities. Decreased funding to schools will result in rural communities then lose not just teachers, but:

- volunteers
- coaches
- mentors
- local families

The economic and social cost to our smaller communities is immense.

Schools are not only places of learning—they are the centerpieces of community life in rural areas. In rural towns, schools are not just educational sites. They are community anchors, disaster response hubs, places of safety, and engines of social connection. In many small communities, they are the only government-based service.

When schools are weakened, entire communities fracture.

- reduced capacity for teachers and wellbeing staff to build meaningful relationships with students, families and carers
- loss of trust and connection between young people and adults
- diminished social capital
- increased youth isolation and disengagement

This generation has already endured unprecedented disruption. Removing stability from their school environments risks long-term social fragmentation.

- distance education becomes the default – despite poor connectivity
- students become isolated
- families absorb costs the state should carry

All reach the same conclusion: **rural disadvantage is real, entrenched, and solvable only through targeted investment – not cuts.**

YSAG RECOMMENDATION

Provide targeted additional rural funding to address the unique challenges of rural schools.

CONCLUSION

The Youth Strategic Advocacy Group Great South Coast urges the Parliament of Victoria to consider the serious and long-term consequences that education funding cuts will have on rural young people, education workforce and our communities.

“Education is everything for young people. The data says that staying involved in school and having positive peer relationships is a boundary for at-risk children that prevents them from crossing over into crime.” - Ben Carroll 2025⁸

Cuts to education do not make savings in the long term. Evidence consistently shows that lower educational attainment, higher disengagement, worsening mental health and increased isolation lead to higher justice, welfare, and health system costs.

We are already seeing a generation carrying the heavy weight of pandemic disruption, social isolation, and economic uncertainty. Cutting the foundations of their education at this moment will lock in disadvantage for decades.

Rural disadvantage is real, entrenched, and solvable only through targeted investment – not cuts.

EVIDENCE AND RESEARCH SUPPORTING THIS SUBMISSION

This submission draws on:

- [What Matters to Young People in Rural Victoria](#) (YACVic Rural, 2018)
- [Fund. Respect. Retain.](#) (Australian Education Union)
- [Investing in Australia’s Future 2025](#) (For Every Child 2025)

⁸ Nov 19 2025, Early Intervention Officers In Schools To Keep Kids On Track; Quotes attributable to Minister for Education Ben Carroll

- [*Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students*](#) (State Government of Victoria 2019)
- [*Educational Disadvantage in Regional and Rural Schools*](#) (ACER 2014)
- [*GSC REDS Supporting Analysis*](#) (State Government of Victoria 2022)
- [*In Plain Sight; investing in social equity to drive economic growth*](#) (Management Governance Australia GSC Social Futures Report 2023)
- [*The State Education System in Victoria Final Report*](#) (Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, Oct 2024)
- [*In Demand Industries*](#) (Youth Strategic Advocacy Group, July 2025)
- [*Inquiry into the State Education System Submission No 264*](#) (Youth Strategic Advocacy Group, December 2023)
- [*Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students*](#) (2019)
- [*Education at a Glance 2025 report*](#) (OECD 2025)