

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021-22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Thursday, 27 May 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Mr James Merlino, MP, Deputy Premier and Minister for Education,

Ms Jenny Atta, Secretary,

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

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

Mr Ian Burrage, Acting Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support,

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

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

Mr Andrew Nipe, Executive Director, Performance and Evaluation, Policy, Strategy and Performance, Department of Education and Training.

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

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2021–22 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

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

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

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

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I welcome you, Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, Secretary and officers from your departments. We invite you to make an opening statement of 10 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Mr MERLINO: Terrific. Thank you, Chair and committee members, and thanks for the opportunity to present on the education, or the schools, budget. Can I begin again by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather and pay my respects to elders past and present.

If we go through the slide deck, our massive investment since coming to office has transformed education in this state and is already making a huge difference to the lives of young Victorians. The school system in Victoria is unrecognisable from the one we inherited back in 2014, and this budget continues the transformation of our schools. We are delivering the schools Victoria's families deserve, thanks to a further \$3.1 billion in support for our schools and further infrastructure initiatives, which I will take you through.

The growth in Victorian government expenditure in schools has increased by more than any other state and territory since 2014–15. Our spending on schools has increased by 15 per cent over the five years to 2018–19. While there are not yet figures available up to this current financial year, the department estimates that this figure will increase to 21 per cent after 2020–21. It often takes a while before you get the ROGS data so that you can make that comparison, but we are in a position at this end of the term to start getting that data through. And you can quite clearly see how we are tracking in terms of investment compared to other states and territories.

The pandemic was a sharp reminder of the critical role schools play in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our students. We know that supporting young people after an extremely difficult year must take

priority. The last budget invested in more than 5000 tutors to enable students to catch up academically, but there is much more that needs to be done as we respond to the challenges of supporting students academically and meeting their wellbeing needs. To ensure our children and young people receive the mental health support when and where they need it, this budget invests \$217.8 million in new support for schools. This responds to a key recommendation of the landmark Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. A new framework to guide school leaders puts learning and wellbeing at the centre of our schools. The new \$200 million School Mental Health Fund will significantly increase mental health and wellbeing support. Schools will choose mental health and wellbeing programs from an evidence-based menu to meet the needs of its students—positive mental health promotion, high-quality wellbeing programs and employing mental health and wellbeing professionals are all options. The new funding will also continue and expand the Mental Health in Primary Schools pilot to reach 100 schools.

We want Victorians to get the very best education, and we know the most important way to do that is by having the best teachers. A new Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership will ensure teachers have the world-leading training they need to be their best. The academy will deliver advanced professional learning for high-performing teachers. It will be a flagship one-year program for more than 500 highly skilled teachers per year. It will advance their professional practice by drawing on contemporary research and best practice across key curriculum areas. The academy will also deliver six new school leadership programs. A purpose-built site will be established in the Melbourne CBD at 41 St Andrews Place, and at seven regional sites.

The budget also invests \$20.5 million to increase access to the Victorian government's 10 tech schools. These tech schools are building students' STEM skills while connecting them to the jobs of the future. The budget invests \$19.5 million to continue the work of turnaround teams in government schools. These teams are working intensively with schools facing significant and complex challenges to improve student outcomes. Importantly, we have also introduced measures to further protect our principals, teachers and support staff from violent and aggressive parents, carers and community members. These initiatives demonstrate the high regard in which this government holds our principals, teachers and all who work in our schools.

Koori kids, families and organisations will lead our efforts to better support Koori students under a new co-design initiative. Engagement with Koori communities will take place with our key partner, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated. This initiative will deliver community-led changes in our schools, ensuring Aboriginal Victorians have a voice on what is working and what is not working for Koori students in our schools. The budget also invests \$31.2 million over four years to improve the educational outcomes for Victoria's Koori students. The investment continues the Koori literacy and numeracy and the Koori engagement support officer programs.

Our investment in services and supports for our students and their families represents a turning point in the role schools play in our communities. While they are still institutions of learning, our schools also play an increasing role in providing universal support for the health and wellbeing of every young Victorian. It is why this budget includes \$43.4 million to continue the successful Doctors in Secondary Schools program. This budget continues funding for our music in schools program, swimming and water safety education, and the students with disability transport program. To attract and develop quality teachers for Victorian schools, the budget invests \$4.8 million to equip an additional 95 teaching students to work in schools in disadvantaged areas.

We all want the best facilities for our kids to create jobs as we emerge from the pandemic. That is why in the past seven years this government has invested almost \$11 billion as part of the school building boom in more than 1700 school upgrades, creating around 13 500 jobs in construction and associated industries. With this budget we are rolling out the next phase of the state's biggest ever school building construction boom. This budget invests \$1.6 billion to build, upgrade and renovate schools to ensure our kids have the best facilities in which to learn. This investment will create more than 3500 additional jobs in construction and associated industries, including more than 2900 jobs in metropolitan Melbourne and around 615 jobs in regional Victoria, and it will create more than 20 800 extra places for students.

Despite the pandemic, school enrolments remain strong, and this is expected to be the case over the long term. This means that we need to continue building schools. This budget invests over \$491.6 million to build 13 new schools, with 12 schools opening in 2023 and one in 2024. Funding will also be provided to Cranbourne West Secondary College, Elevation Secondary College and Tarneit Senior College to deliver further stages of construction. Land will be acquired in our fastest growing communities—Cardinia, Casey, Hume, Melton,

Mitchell, Port Phillip and Wyndham—for 14 future school sites, through a \$276.4 million investment. We are already up to 62 of the 100 new schools we promised to open by 2026. 52 schools will be upgraded through a \$340 million boost, including 35 metro schools and 17 regional schools. The budget includes \$105.3 million for new relocatable buildings to provide additional space for schools experiencing enrolment growth in 2022; \$85 million to expand capacity to meet growing enrolments at six schools for the 2024 school year; and \$1 million to plan for the Verney Road School in Shepparton and to broader specialist provision across the Greater Shepparton region. There is an additional \$188 million that will go towards essential maintenance and compliance to ensure schools are safe, modern and properly maintained.

The budget includes \$20 million to improve learning environments, as well as the condition and character of schools through the Minor Capital Works Fund. There is also \$15 million for the accessible buildings program, and an additional \$10 million for the Inclusive Schools Fund to help schools better cater for the needs of young people with a disability.

Chair, this is a budget that continues to build Victoria as the Education State, whether it is better support in the classroom, better training for teachers or state-of-the-art facilities. We are delivering the funding our kids need to make that a reality. This budget builds on every one of our previous budgets, to ensure Victorian students have every support they need to fulfil their potential. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Premier. I will pass to the Deputy Chair.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair. Welcome back, education minister. Budget paper 3, page 158, talks about remote learning. The OECD, World Health Organization and other groups, including the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, have all concluded that students need to be kept at school. Your decision to do the lockdown again today again flies in the face of that, particularly for many country communities, and we know through the My School website and other stats that country students compared to their city cousins have terrible outcomes, and yet we are sending them all home today. Why?

Mr MERLINO: Well, the why in terms of the lockdown—and that includes schools other than for vulnerable children or children of authorised workers, so for those kids there is still the ability for schools to open and be available for their supervision. For the majority of children and young people, we are heading into a period of a circuit-breaker lockdown and remote learning. I announced today that tomorrow, for example, Mr Riordan, will be a pupil-free day, and then there will be remote learning for a few days next week as part of that circuit-breaker period. In terms of the why, the why goes to advice from public health in terms of restrictions—

Mr RIORDAN: What about the OECD, WHO and Murdoch advice?

Mr MERLINO: I will come to that. But the first decision point and the priority in the face of a pandemic—and this goes to Mr Limbrick's conversations earlier and at previous hearings—and the first issue is our response to a public health emergency and the advice from the public health team. In terms of the why for students and for teachers, we have got a million students at our schools. Then you add in the tens of thousands of teachers, then you add in the parents and then you add in other support staff. The restrictions in a circuit-breaker lockdown are around movement of people to allow the public health team, particularly the contact tracers, to get ahead of the outbreak. The best way to do that is if for a very short period of time we stop the movement of people. So that goes to your question of why we are doing what we are doing.

As I have said a number of times to this community and elsewhere, we understand that that has an impact, so we know that we need to—it is not business as usual. It is why in the budget six months ago there was a massive commitment for the additional tutors, and we have now got 5600 tutors across government, Catholic and independent schools supporting students, Mr Riordan, that struggled during remote learning. As we know, some students thrived and others did not.

Mr RIORDAN: But my question is not about that. My question is why you are taking Brett Sutton's advice but ignoring the WHO, ignoring the OECD and ignoring our own Murdoch Children's Research Institute that have all said we need to keep students at school where possible. Now, you cannot possibly argue that the movement of people in a little village like Carlisle River that has seven kids at it is a huge risk. I mean, is that health advice not weighing up the possibility that these kids have gone straight from their own farmhouse to a very small little school and back again not interacting with anybody else? We know that those kids do not

having internet access, we know that at many of the schools—I think I have got the most schools out of any electorate—the kids that left last year in grade 6 took the computers with them and they still have not been replaced, so what is the position for some of these poor, remote country schools when you enforce that lockdown like that?

Mr MERLINO: Well, it is based on public health advice, Mr Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: But what about educational advice?

Mr MERLINO: I am happy to answer your question. It is the public health advice to respond to a public health emergency and a global pandemic. We have got right now more than 150 exposure sites—at Cohuna, in Bendigo and along the border. We need to make sure, for a very short period of time, that there is a reduction in the movement of people right across the state. There is risk. If we do not, Mr Riordan—

Mr RIORDAN: But these kids are already the most disadvantaged.

Mr MERLINO: I understand your question. But if we—

Mr RIORDAN: And you have not guaranteed them computers.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Mr RIORDAN: You have not guaranteed them access next week.

Mr MERLINO: No. Well—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you allow the minister to answer.

Mr RIORDAN: It is another week off.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Mr MERLINO: Mr Riordan, we have supplied—and the pandemic exposed a number of—

Mr RIORDAN: Supplied but not replaced.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you keep interrupting the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education. If you would like your question answered—

Mr MERLINO: A number of inequalities were exposed during the period of the pandemic, including inequality in terms of digital technology in the home, and we responded to that with tens of thousands of devices and thousands and thousands of dongles to provide internet access. We have got the ability—

Mr RIORDAN: But you have not provided them—hang on.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Mr MERLINO: You raised this issue, and I am responding.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, but it is what you did last year. You have not replaced for many of the schools in regional areas the computers that were lost last year that the grade 6s had taken home. For a little school that has 20 kids and had three grade 6s that is three less laptops that they have got this year, and you have not yet replaced them.

Mr MERLINO: Mr Riordan, I might ask the Secretary or the Deputy Secretary to respond to this issue. We did a couple of things: we provided tens of thousands of devices to students—

Mr RIORDAN: Last year.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, and we made the call. I understand this was not easy for every school and not every principal was in favour of this decision that I made, but I felt it was appropriate. Given that we are not out of this pandemic, given that there may be times in which the public health advice would be that we need to go to

remote learning, I made the call that those students should retain the devices that had been provided. Funding was then provided to schools to ensure that they were appropriately recompensed for that cost.

Mr RIORDAN: I notice you avoided using the words ‘adequately recompensed’. Anyway, we will move on, because we have got 3 minutes left.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are casting aspersions. It is inappropriate to put words in the Minister’s—

Mr RIORDAN: Well, he went to say it. We just do not need the Chair’s comments. You brought this up, Chair. Stop wasting our time with your commentary.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I ask you not to put words in people’s mouths, particularly witnesses’ mouths, and allow them to answer their questions themselves.

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, moving on to budget paper 4, page 44, regarding the Greater Shepparton Secondary College. Given the school is not working as promised, what is the government’s plan to offer students’ families choice? I refer specifically to the experience of my own electorate of Colac where it was a Labor government that decided a large rural community only needed one school. I will just give you some basic statistics that I can see playing out in Shepparton. In Colac, for example—and considering you have been education minister the whole entire time of this government—since you have been education minister, at the Colac combined secondary college enrolments have reduced from 556 down to 462 in a community that is growing. Under your regime, in single-school communities, children that are bullied, children that are harassed, children that are not suited to that school—what is your offer to those students who cannot go to a school for a variety of reasons? What do they do in a country community? And what will the students in Shepparton do if they do not fit the mould of that school that you are providing up there?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Riordan, for the question. This is a really critical issue for the community of Shepparton, Mooroopna and the broader region, and I think it is important in answering your question to make the point very, very clearly: the status quo, business as usual, is absolutely not a consideration. We need to go back to—

Mr RIORDAN: You have not done much in Colac in these seven years.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Mr MERLINO: You can interrupt every 15 seconds, Mr Riordan. That is your prerogative, and you can—

Mr RIORDAN: You just said the status quo was not up to it, but you let the status quo remain in Colac.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are running your clock down.

Mr MERLINO: I want to inform the committee about why we implemented the *Shepparton Education Plan* and went out and conducted extensive consultation with the community, with all the schools in the region, with the council, with school leaders, with students and with parents. The recommendation coming back through that extensive consultation was we needed to do something, and the recommendation was the creation of the Greater Shepparton Secondary College. I want to tell you, Mr Riordan—

Mr RIORDAN: That is exactly what you did in Colac, and it has been an absolute disaster through lack of support.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are being extremely rude and disrespectful to the witnesses and the other members of the committee, and I would ask that you control your behaviour, please.

Mr RIORDAN: Well, it is the same story in another town. You are about to embark on disadvantaging country kids again without a solution.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, your dissatisfaction with the answer is not an excuse to be rude to either the witnesses or your fellow committee members.

Mr RIORDAN: The minister cannot just filibuster an answer when it is just not true.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are the one who is running down your own clock. If you would like the minister to answer the question, then I suggest you listen respectfully.

Mr MERLINO: So I will tell you why we needed to do something. Three of the four schools had more than 60 per cent of students in the lowest 25 per cent of academic achievement across the state.

Mr RIORDAN: I have got 62 per cent—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan.

Mr MERLINO: The fourth school had a percentage of just under 50 per cent in this bracket. Less than one in 10 year 9 students in Greater Shepparton were achieving in the top two bands of reading, compared to double the rate across all Victorian government schools.

Mr RIORDAN: After seven years, at 62 per cent—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I am sorry. You need to learn to control yourself. Could you allow the Minister to answer the question?

Mr MERLINO: Numeracy results were very poor, at 6 per cent compared to 24 per cent across all schools. The four Greater Shepparton secondary schools also had consistently lower VCE scores and completion rates. We had to do something, and the community came back with a recommendation through the *Shepparton Education Plan*.

Mr RIORDAN: And seven years later, those figures are even worse in Colac.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Riordan. Mr Riordan, your time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Acting Premier—now appearing in your capacity as Minister for Education—and thank you to your departmental team as well, for your appearance. I would like to go to the topic of mental health reform in education, and specifically I would like to talk about recommendation 17 from the royal commission. Just by way of background, the royal commission recommended that government should fund, firstly:

... evidence-informed initiatives, including anti-stigma and anti-bullying programs, to assist schools in supporting students' mental health and wellbeing.

Secondly to:

... develop a digital platform that contains a validated list of these initiatives.

And thirdly to:

... develop a fund, modelled on School Readiness Funding for kindergartens, to support schools, with priority given to those in rural and regional areas, to select the most appropriate suite of initiatives for them.

So to the substantive question, would you be able to explain how the funding that is provided for in this state budget will deliver on recommendation 17 of the royal commission?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Maas, for the question. I am really excited about this initiative. This initiative, and the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, they are the two that get me very excited. So as you have outlined, the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System delivered the final report on 2 March, outlining a new, system-wide approach to mental health and wellbeing. The Victorian government has committed to implementing all 65 recommendations, including one directly related to education, which is recommendation 17.

So recommendation 17 recommends that we continue funding evidence-informed initiatives, and the report actually highlights a couple really successful, strong programs—it is just not universal, that is the challenge—and the reasoning for this recommendation. So continue funding evidence-informed initiatives; develop a digital platform for schools, listing these initiatives; develop a fund to support schools to select the most suitable evidence-based initiative for their school. So we are investing \$217.83 million over four years and \$87.52 million ongoing to drive this reform.

Central to this is \$200.585 million over four years and \$86.85 million ongoing to create a new schools mental health fund and menu. The fund will significantly increase the number of health and wellbeing professionals supporting our schools, approximately 1040 new jobs at full scale. The mental health fund will be rolled out to all 680 government rural and regional schools from term 3 in 2022, delivering on the royal commission's recommendation that rural and regional schools must be prioritised—approximately 165 000 students will benefit from the first phase of the rollout—and then all government metro schools, 646 000 students, by 2024. So we will roll—2022, all rural and regional, and 2023 and 2024, progressively all metros.

Underpinning the mental health fund will be an evidence-based menu to give schools confidence in purchasing programs and interventions that work and that will meet their needs. As recommended by the royal commission, the menu will be modelled on the school readiness funding for kindergartens. And again, it works in the same way: kinders have a menu of initiatives and they choose what is best for their kids.

These reforms will be supported by a reference group to guide the design and implementation of the schools mental health fund, consisting of principals, teachers, students, parents and in-school mental health practitioners, along with mental health experts, redeveloping the framework for improving student outcomes to place student health and wellbeing at the centre of our system as an enabler for engagement and learning. An expert panel will guide this work, comprised of Professor Frank Oberklaid, Professor Helen Cahill and Dr Mary Jean Gallagher.

\$11.37 million over two years will see the mental health in primary schools pilot expanded to 100 schools in 2022, including 90 in government schools and 10 in non-government schools. The pilot provides primary schools with funding for a mental health and wellbeing lead to implement a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. The royal commission was clear: we should continue and extend the pilot to more schools if evidence shows it is effective. This expansion will allow us to gather the evidence, so hopefully the evidence delivers what we think it will and then there will be future investments that we will make in future budgets. The royal commission highlights the important role education settings have in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing; providing support to children, young people and students experiencing mental illness, particularly in rural and regional areas; and connecting students to specialist services where needed. So we are delivering on recommendation 17 through significant mental health and wellbeing reform across the government school system, positioning student health and wellbeing as an outcome in its own right and as an enabler of learning and academic achievement.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thank you, Acting Premier. If I could take you to budget paper 3 and page 8, it details there that the package includes just over \$200 million to establish a mental health fund for schools. I was hoping you would be able to take the committee through the detail of that and what it would actually deliver for schools.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Maas. So, as I mentioned, this new fund will see a significant increase in the number of health and wellbeing professionals supporting our school students, and this is in addition to schools' existing wellbeing teams. It is in addition to the rollout of mental health practitioners to every government secondary school, which we will have completed by the end of the year. This is on top of that. So, as I said, around 1040 new jobs at full scale, including mental health professionals engaged directly by schools and in community organisations that will deliver programs and services to schools. It will create hundreds of new jobs for professionals working in and with schools, contributing to our continued economic recovery from COVID-19.

The royal commission highlighted the particular mental health and wellbeing challenges that students and schools in rural and regional areas face and called, as I said, for priority to be given to those. The fund will therefore provide an additional loading for rural and regional schools and commence rollout in rural and regional areas first. We are delivering on the royal commission's recommendation by funding all of those schools in rural and regional Victoria. This will not only complement existing wellbeing teams and the rollout of mental health practitioners in government secondary schools, but it will complement the equity funding as well. So there is equity funding that goes towards disadvantage. Schools will now have that equity funding component in their SRP as well as this new mental health fund.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. You have made some mention previously of the evidence-based menu. I was hoping you would be able to provide us some more detail on that: what it actually is, what it will deliver for schools and what will be on it.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, thanks. This is really the main underpinning of the fund. Delivering on the recommendation of the royal commission is having an evidenced-based menu. It is a bit like professional learning: there are thousands of professional learning opportunities; some are excellent, some are good and some are pretty poor. This is the royal commission saying to us, 'Find what works and give that in a dedicated menu to schools so they know that every single dollar will deliver an outcome for them'. The menu will use three categories and provide opportunities to purchase support for whole-school initiatives that promote mental health and wellbeing, enable schools to intervene early to support students and provide targeted support to individual students in need. So, for example, schools could invest in positive mental health promotion to embed a culture of mental health in schools. One of the items in the menu will be the positive education model based on the successful MaroonDAH network model, participating in the schoolwide positive behaviour support program to drive a whole-school approach or by increasing training for teachers in high-quality social and emotional learning and mental health literacy.

Schools may also opt to invest in early intervention initiatives that help them identify issues and focus on these particular issues and cohorts, so for example: mental health first aid training for staff and students; programs to support trauma-informed practice—you know, you go to a number of schools and so many kids come from refugee backgrounds, as an example; evidence-based programs that take a therapeutic approach for students, such as therapy dogs—the power of therapy dogs is just extraordinary, and a lot of schools already do it but I think, putting it up in lights, this is an initiative that we know makes a difference, particularly for kids with additional needs, kids from trauma backgrounds; arts therapy is another example of a program that we know engages kids back into their learning; cultural awareness training about providing holistic support to Aboriginal students.

There will also be menu items that list targeted support, like additional mental health and wellbeing professionals based at the school or counselling services by mental health and community agencies. It can also be in rural and regional settings, Mr Riordan. Groups of small primary schools may get together and out of their menu combine their funding and get additional mental health professionals that will work across a number of schools in that particular area. Schools will receive support and guidance to choose from the menu, including a needs-based assessment developed with mental health experts to guide their choice of interventions. In 2022 a full expression of interest process will be run with providers across the mental health and wellbeing sector to apply to be included on the 2023 menu, so it will be a bit iterative. There are evidence-based programs we know already and will put on the menu, but there may be others that over time we will include in the menu.

Mr MAAS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, Secretary and your team, for appearing this evening. I will start off on a positive note.

Mr MERLINO: Oh, that is always good.

Mr HIBBINS: You would be well aware my colleague the Member for Melbourne is a very strong advocate for funding for Kensington Primary, and they received \$7.36 million for upgrades and maintenance of Kensington Primary School, but I understand that the school is not actually aware in terms of what exactly that funding will actually cover and the process from here. Now, there has been \$173 000 allocated for next year. What will that \$173 000 be for and what is actually included in the entire scope of the \$7.36 million? They have got a very long list of urgent works like gutters and toilets, as well as some big plans for classrooms, so what exactly will that money cover?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Hibbins, for that question. I want to acknowledge the advocacy of both the Member for Melbourne, in the Assembly, as well as the upper house member, who have both been really strong advocates. I have visited the school with both of them and had a good chat to school leadership, parents and students about the needs of the school, and they go to all the things that you have talked about—water damage,

roof, gutters, as well as what is needed to modernise what is a beautiful school delivering fantastic outcomes for their kids but does need a modernisation.

In terms of what happens next and the funding you have identified, this is how building upgrade projects work. I think I have talked to this committee before in terms of in the past when we first came into government; the time lines were almost never-ending in terms of that engagement between the department, the architects and the schools. You would be two years before you could get even a shovel in the ground to turn a sod. Over a couple of years we really, through the VSBA, brought that process through to about—60 weeks?

Mr KIRKLAND: Sixty-eight weeks.

Mr MERLINO: Sixty-eight weeks—in terms of getting an architect and having that engagement. That is why there is that figure that you have identified in the first part of the year. But in terms of my understanding of that particular approach and having visited the school, it will include both addressing the critical needs around the toilets and leaking as well as a modernisation of the school facilities. I am not sure if the acting CEO of the VSBA has anything further to add.

Mr KIRKLAND: Not at this stage. That is exactly right, Minister.

Mr MERLINO: But as you said, this is a really positive project, and I want to acknowledge the two local members who advocated for it.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. One issue that has come up is there were recently some media reports about the prospect some of our alternative schools, like Hester Hornbrook, who have a campus in Prahran, in my electorate, as well as a number of other alternative schools, could miss out on what I understand is federal funding. Because many of their students are still engaging online—they are not necessarily attending school. And because the rules have now changed back to qualify for the students, they are not going to be at school. Is the department taking any action there—you know, the schools that are teaching our kids, often without them there is nothing else—to look at that?

Mr MERLINO: I might defer to the Secretary or the Deputy Secretary in a moment. I am aware of those reports, Mr Hibbins. These are non-government schools, and the majority provider of funding is obviously the commonwealth government. My understanding is that is an issue around enrolments, and it is a similar way to the way we fund outside of loadings—we fund based on enrolments. If enrolments at a particular school are dropping—and that may well be post-pandemic decisions of parents and carers—that may well lead to a reduction in federal funding. But I am not sure—

Mr HIBBINS: The issue here is that they are still engaging through maybe online and Zoom but not physically attending the school, and if they are doing that—they are not physically attending the school—they are not qualifying for the funding.

Mr MERLINO: I might ask either the Secretary or the Deputy Secretary if they have got anything to add.

Ms ATTA: Yes. My understanding is that it is around the rules, if you like—the parameters that the commonwealth sets its funding around around student attendance et cetera—so there are some discussions with the commonwealth around that. I do not have details of any resolution at this point. Dr Howes, was there anything you could add?

Dr HOWES: We have also been in discussions with VRQA about what constitutes enrolment.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, okay. So it is a matter that the department is taking up with the relevant authorities.

Dr HOWES: Yes.

Mr HIBBINS: Terrific. Great. Thank you. I will turn now to the savings initiatives that are outlined for the department of education in this financial year. Now, on the top of the \$31.9 million in this year's budget there are still savings from previous savings initiatives totalling up to around about the \$120 million to \$130 million mark. Can you give any specifics in terms of just exactly how the department of education is meeting these savings targets?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. I might pass to the Secretary in terms of those savings initiatives.

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. Previous years savings initiatives, I think as set out in the department's response to the questionnaire, have largely been achieved through a range of administrative efficiencies, including reduced use of contractors and consultants, administrative efficiencies around minimising any duplication of functions et cetera, procurement savings—

Mr HIBBINS: Could you give the committee a specific example of duplicating functions?

Ms ATTA: Well, procurement savings—as I was about to indicate, just by way of an example there, we have been able to look at large-scale procurements that schools might undertake otherwise individually, look at how we can look at better purchasing options, if you like, to get better prices there. We have been able to do that on a range of IT-related procurement for the department. So we are always looking to try and drive improved procurement practices. We have, as I think the last two annual reports for the department set out, reduced expenditure on consultants across the last couple of years—so that is another saving. Those previous savings, they have been absorbed into our base, if you like, now. So we have dealt with those.

Mr HIBBINS: In terms of the reduction in, say, consultants or contractors, does that mean a reduction in scope of what the department is doing? Or whatever the function that that consultant or contractor was actually undertaking, is that absorbed back into the department?

Ms ATTA: Both, in a sense. We have been able to work to reduce reliance on contractors, and sometimes that means that we are absorbing some of that cost into the department through VPS staff, but with a saving involved. It is more expensive in an ongoing sense to rely on contractors at any sort of scale, so that is an example. With consultants, it is a range of ways. Sometimes it is about smarter use of consultants, if you like, in terms of when we might need some additional expertise around a particular project or a piece of work, and sometimes it is about building, as we have sought to do over a number of years now, better internal capability in some areas in which previously we might have relied on consultants.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. In regard to the current EBA negotiations with the teachers, will they be covered by the new government wages policy—which obviously reduced it down to 1.5 per cent, 2 per cent—as well, or are they covered by the old wages policy?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Hibbins, for the question. The department is in negotiations with the AEU right now, so they are subject to the previous wages policy—not the one that will be in place from January next year. So we hope to have a fair and appropriate agreement for our wonderful teachers, principals and support staff finalised in the next few months or so.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. Again, I may have asked this at previous hearings as well, but in terms of the funding envelope that you have from the schools funding agreement as well, are all the initiatives that are covered in the budget going towards acquitting that funding envelope? Does it match up? Is there any funding that is not covered in the initiatives in this year's budget or does it sort of match up?

Ms ATTA: Overwhelmingly the expenditure in this budget goes to acquit the state's commitments under the agreement. There are a couple of areas, and I think the transport programs is one of those, that sit outside.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. All right.

Mr MERLINO: Getting to 75 per cent of the SRS means significant additional investment.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, just going back to the questions Mr Riordan was asking about the schools and lockdown: does the chief health officer when providing you with health advice balance the risks of COVID with the mental health risks and the educational outcomes for children? Is that considered, given that the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act* actually calls for him to provide proportionate responses? I am just wanting to know, because if it was just, 'We've got to stop COVID', then sure, we would lock everything down. Are you aware whether there is any balance provided in that advice?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, there is, in answer to your question, and I go back to the DPC Deputy Secretary, who talked to the processes and the considerations of the public health team and the chief health officer and then the advice to government. It does consider health and wellbeing, but as I said, ultimately the imperative is our response to a public health emergency and then ‘What are we doing in response?’. So, for example, to Mr Limbrick, mental health impact on young people and eating disorders—direct supports to combat that issue. For students who have struggled through remote learning—a focus on mental health and wellbeing in our schools and a focus on the tutors to support those kids that have fallen behind. But the answer to your question is, yes, the chief health officer does.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Sure. Do you acknowledge that all the money in the world will not necessarily fix the problems that have been created? Just by way of background, I do not mean to be alarmist about this at all, but one of my secondary school principals told me that in the first term this year he had sent seven kids to hospital with mental health/suicide ideation—seven kids from a pretty small school. I was shocked—surprised, but shocked as well. I just worry that we are not considering those issues—and I should add, those were directly as a result of the stress from last year, in his mind.

Mr MERLINO: Yes. Thanks, Mr O’Brien. I do not dispute that at all. I can absolutely tell you, hand on heart, the number one issue raised with me—and you would be the same, as the local member—across the board, by teachers, principals, parents and students, is mental health and wellbeing, and that has been the case for a number of years. The pandemic has absolutely, undoubtedly, exacerbated it, but this has been the single most important issue—significant issue. That is why prior to the pandemic, Mr O’Brien, we made the commitment of additional mental health practitioners at every single government secondary school. That is why we introduced GPs in 100 secondary schools. Half of the GPs’ work in secondary schools, in those hundred schools, is mental health and referrals and support.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Can I ask about that and your response to Mr Maas earlier. Where are the mental health professionals going to come from, because on top of this we have now got the state government’s \$3.8 billion—and I have read through a lot of the mental health initiatives in the budget. There is one about additional nursing places for nurse practitioners trained in mental health. But seriously, we can say we are funding mental health, but where are they going to come from?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, I think that is a critical question that you ask. Whether it is the mental health initiatives in education or whether it is our broad response to the mental health royal commission, if we do not get the workforce right, it does not matter what the recommendations are; it does not matter what commitments we make if we cannot get the workforce right. So you are absolutely right to identify that as an issue. In my other portfolio—and we can talk about this later on today—there is investment in this year’s budget to assist in workforce. There is also a commitment as per the recommendation of the royal commission to have a workforce strategy by the end of this year. We are very conscious in education about this challenge, particularly in rural and regional Victoria, and that is why the menu is so important. There may be a period of time where a rural school has identified the need for a mental health practitioner but they cannot find that person.

Mr D O’BRIEN: I know some of mine, as you said before, are going to cooperate with neighbouring schools, but they have still got to find a psychologist or a psychiatrist or whoever it is.

Mr MERLINO: Well, that is right. There are two ways to combat this as we focus on workforce—and believe me, that is my number one priority across the two portfolios: how do we get the pipeline of skilled workers? But it will be either schools combining and that becoming an attractive destination for someone or identifying those programs in the menu where there are existing staff, or it is a program that a school can implement.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Okay. Can I move on to school performance. This is going back a couple of years now, but the PISA results from 2018 nationally—and I am not just talking about Victoria here—were poor. I think the key statistic was that Australian students were a year further behind than they were at the turn of the century. What is the government doing? We are putting a lot of extra money into education, but what are we actually doing to get better results, particularly in maths, which is an area that we actually went backwards in?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, there are a few things that we are doing to improve performance, particularly in maths, and then I will talk about some of the outcomes. In terms of what we are doing, we need to make—and

this is a national issue—maths more engaging in the curriculum, and that is why we took the lead at a national level as part of ACARA’s review into the curriculum to focus on maths and science. We need to make it more engaging, particularly for primary school students. The second thing that we are doing is addressing the issue of teachers working out of field. If you have got a teacher working out of field teaching maths, they are not going to be comfortable, they are not going to be confident, so we have put some funding into training up those teachers who are working out of field. The third thing we are doing is incentives to attract teachers in field to go to hard-to-staff locations, particularly in rural and regional Victoria. We have got additional funding across a number of budgets in terms of maths and science specialists in primary schools. So that is what we are doing.

In terms of our outcomes, though, Victoria is a leader in our nation, and whilst absolutely you can point to PISA, you can point to other outcomes where we need to do better as a nation, I just want to get on the record, Mr O’Brien—I do not want to take up much time—we are the leading nation in the last round of NAPLAN tests in the primary sector. We were the first-ranked jurisdiction on seven out of 10 measures. We achieved higher levels of excellence in NAPLAN numeracy than all other jurisdictions. Nearly 45 per cent of year 3 and 33 per cent of year 5 students now achieve results in the top two bands of NAPLAN. That is the best in the country and an improvement on 2018. In NAPLAN reading nearly 60 per cent of year 3 and 40 per cent of year 5 students achieve results in the top two band. This was more than any other jurisdiction in year 3 and ahead of all other jurisdictions except the ACT in year 5.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Okay. I am running out of time, Minister, so can I just move on? And for committee members, probably the local questions. Sale College got some funding in this budget. Can you just confirm exactly what that is for? It is \$3 million I think for planning and stage 1. As you would be aware, I have been campaigning to get a master plan done to consolidate the school onto one site. Can you confirm that is what that money is for?

Mr MERLINO: I will see if I can find it. I am not sure if I have got the details of individual schools.

Mr D O’BRIEN: I am happy to take it on notice, or if one of the officials knows the information.

Mr MERLINO: ‘Sale College planning and early works for future consolidation of the campuses’, Mr O’Brien.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Excellent. Thank you. Hansard, just make sure you have got that down. That is great. And just going back to some of the work on rural education. Budget paper 3 has performance targets for schools overall and for Aboriginal students, for example, under NAPLAN. Does the department do likewise for metro versus regional, and is that something that you can introduce if not, noting that our regional results are normally worse than metro?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. Thanks, Mr O’Brien. And that is why we had a focus on our rural and regional strategy to address that. I cannot recall, Dr Howes, whether it is 10 per cent or 20 per cent differentiation between rural and regional outcomes and metro outcomes, but there is a lot of work we are doing. The primary one—because the quality of education is the biggest difference outside a student’s family, that makes the biggest difference. That is why the focus of that funding—and this goes back about 18 months—is towards attracting teachers to hard-to-staff areas, particularly in rural and regional Victoria.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Probably my last question: there is a series there that perhaps you might like to take on notice, but we are interested in the retention rates or attrition rates, depending on which way you look at it, for teachers. So that includes ITE—initial teacher education—those that actually stay; how many stay after five years; and indeed experienced teachers and the attrition rate of how many are leaving. Can the department provide that information perhaps on notice, with a breakdown by region and by metro and country areas?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. We will look at what information we can provide, Mr O’Brien. We will take that on notice.

Mr D O’BRIEN: That would be appreciated. Thank you. I think I am out of time. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O’Brien. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Acting Premier and Secretary and officials as well. I am going to take up some of the conversations and areas that you were exploring then with Mr O'Brien around mental health—or earlier with Mr O'Brien around mental health—and particularly mental health in primary schools. Noting budget paper 3, page 12, there is a description that refers to the mental health in primary schools pilot, and I am interested in understanding what benefits you are seeing in the existing schools that have been part of that pilot and what the process is for the expansion of that.

Mr MERLINO: Terrific. Thanks, Ms Richards, for the question. You go back to the royal commission and it is quite clear as far as education is concerned: a priority of rural and regional schools and a focus on primary schools in particular. We all know this as local members and from talking to school communities: mental health is an increasing challenge for the younger kids, and it goes to the issue of early intervention and identification of issues.

The royal commission stated in its final report that we should continue and extend the mental health in primary schools pilot to more schools. We already had in place 10 schools, and then we went to 26 schools, so the pilot is currently rolling out to 26, benefiting 10 000 students, with evidence of positive outcomes. Preliminary evidence indicates there is a clear and demonstrated need for the mental health and wellbeing lead role and training program, which is why we are investing \$11.37 million over two years to continue and expand the pilot to 100 schools to participate in 2022. This includes 90 government schools and 10 Catholic schools. Schools receive critical support through a mental health and wellbeing lead, whose role is to implement a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

We will continue to work in partnership with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute Melbourne and the Graduate School of Education to build the capacity of primary school staff to identify and respond to mental health issues affecting students. Like the current 26 schools, the additional 74 will be chosen based on need, and we will announce those schools in September this year. Evidence produced through the pilot is informing larger-scale research and development of what works to support primary school students' mental health and wellbeing.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks for that additional information. Just using the same budget reference again, I am interested in and you mentioned earlier actually the Maroondah positive education initiative. I think you spoke about that in response to an earlier question. Can you provide evidence to the committee about this education model and what that funding will deliver?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you. The Maroondah positive education initiative aims to increase the wellbeing and education outcomes of students in 27 government schools in Maroondah through the implementation of positive education and targeted wellbeing initiatives. It is really unique. It is a partnership between Maroondah City Council, the Maroondah Principals Network, the department, the University of Melbourne and the Institute of Positive Education. Using a collective impact framework, council and local schools are working together with community agencies and world leaders in positive education to share practice, build expertise and work collaboratively to achieve meaningful outcomes for young people.

For example, Heathmont College is a lead school in the Maroondah Positive Education Network. The college focuses on building a positive climate for learning through the provision of high-quality teaching and learning and through focusing on students' strengths instead of their weaknesses: you know, actually identifying and celebrating 'What are your character strengths?'. Earlier this year I had the pleasure of officially opening their brand-new HOPE centre, which is a facility available to the entire Maroondah Positive Education Network. The HOPE centre provides crucial student wellbeing and counselling services and supports a vibrant, motivated and connected learner community. It plays a central role in the Maroondah positive education initiative.

The funding in this budget will continue this important initiative, it will enable the community practice to continue and it will enable the teacher training and knowledge sharing to continue as well, and it will provide funding to continue to build an important evidence base of its impact. Through recommendation 17 the royal commission recommended funding evidence-informed initiatives that support school leaders and staff to integrate the promotion of mental health and wellbeing into their planning and delivery across teaching and learning and in their school culture and environment. The Maroondah positive education model does just this, so it is critical that we capture the impact through its evaluation so that we can continue to build a strong evidence base for this unique model.

The evidence base for the Maroondah positive education model will build on what we already know about positive education more broadly. It aims to teach students and teachers how to be resilient, how to care for others. It is about strengthening resilience, focusing on personal strengths and giving young people a sense of optimism and a sense of hope and enthusiasm for their own future. It is quite transformational. There is lots of literature, lots of evidence, that if we focus on positive education, it makes an incredible difference, and that is why as part of the \$200 million fund that will be one of the menu items available for schools.

Ms RICHARDS: It going to be really fascinating to watch, actually. Earlier in your presentation you spoke about the Victorian academy of teaching. I would like to refer you to budget paper 3, pages 21 and 30. I am interested in how the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership will benefit the teaching profession.

Mr MERLINO: Thank you. The Victorian government has transformed school infrastructure across the state. That is undeniable. We have delivered unprecedented levels of funding and programs to support disadvantaged students and to support learning and wellbeing in schools. We have provided support and professional learning for our school leaders. The Bastow institute is a wonderful, wonderful, and well-regarded pathway for aspiring principals and other leaders within our education system. We have got, as I said before, tons and tons of professional learning opportunities out there. We have sought to increase and improve the quality of teaching through a number of mechanisms, whether that is increasing the ATAR so the new graduates coming into the system are the top 30 per cent—and not just their academic results but also looking at those non-academic qualities, their empathy for students, their passion for teaching. So there is a whole range of areas where we are focused on improving the quality of teaching.

But there is a missing piece in the puzzle, and it was a trip to Singapore a couple of years ago. In Singapore they have got the national institute of teaching. They focus on their highest performing teachers. They are exceptional teachers. Within this institute you have got master teachers—so a master teacher in physics teaching the very exceptional physics teachers in Singapore, and they become leaders in that particular area. It is something that just struck me, that we have nothing of the sort, and it is another way that we elevate the profession and the pathway. So that was the thinking behind having that opportunity and experience for our exceptional teachers.

So we are investing \$126.4 million over four years and \$21.8 million in capital funding to establish a new statutory authority, the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership. The academy will be a cross-sectorial statutory authority which will deliver a new Australia-first program of advanced professional learning for high-performing teachers in government, Catholic and independent schools. So this has been co-designed from the beginning with government, Catholic and independent school involvement in the drafting of the legislation, which we hope to introduce in the Parliament over the next few months. The board will have cross-sectorial representation. The academy will be a specialist cross-sector entity dedicated to teaching and leadership excellence and raising the status of the Victorian teaching profession. The teaching excellence program delivered by the new academy will provide an unprecedented opportunity for our best teachers to remain in the classroom and receive additional development to become recognised as statewide leaders in teaching excellence. So, as I said, we want to follow in the footsteps of high-performing jurisdictions like Singapore, where I witnessed the impact of that approach.

The programs will be delivered from a purpose-built site in Melbourne's CBD at 41 St Andrews Place, and that is well known to the education sector. That is the former VCAA, so government, Catholic and independent teachers will know this place. We are transforming it at the moment. Even more importantly, there will be seven regional sites as well as the existing Bastow site in North Melbourne, which is the leadership program. Research shows that lifting the capability of teachers is necessary for improving student outcomes and that the quality of educational leadership and the quality of teaching are the biggest in-school influences on student outcomes, so there are clear student and system benefits from this investment. Students will benefit from being taught by high-performing teachers who have been supported to reach the highest levels of excellence. Participating teachers will benefit from sharing expertise with high-performing peers from each of the three sectors: government, Catholic and independent.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you again, Acting Premier and team, for appearing today. We have spoken before and much has been said today about the range of harms that were caused by remote learning last year and a couple of other times—and from tomorrow. I think when we first spoke about it, it was pretty obvious that there were some harms, and we spoke about mental health as one of those harms. I am just wondering what sort of research has been done to quantify those harms, because a lot of the budget measures that we see here seem designed to try and fix some of those harms, but unless you sort of quantify them first, you might find it difficult to fix them. What sort of research has been done to quantify and identify these harms so that they can be managed?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Limbrick, for your question. There was a review into remote learning—what worked and what did not. It is not all bad, and I do not want the PAEC committee to feel that it was overwhelmingly a bad outcome for students. In many ways, whether it is addressing digital inequality for students, which we have done, or whether it is a massive uplift in the capability of teachers, staff and students in terms of digital learning and in terms of developing innovative ways of teaching and learning, there is a lot of good that came out of it that will hold our system in good stead. It means that right now there will be a pupil-free day tomorrow and teachers and staff know what they can deliver and how they can deliver it, and we are giving them some time to prepare for remote learning next week.

But we also know that there were some challenges. Whether it was an increase in support via Kids Helpline or Beyond Blue or whether it was information through student support services, there was an increase, as I mentioned before, in the number of young people presenting to emergency departments. I have taken this committee through some of that data, and we know that this trend is replicated across jurisdictions that were less impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns as well. So we understand the impact, and that is why you have seen both in our budget six months ago and this budget a focus both in our budget initiatives but also in the direction and the communication from the department to school leaders about what they need to focus on, and that is around student mental health and wellbeing.

But the biggest initiative and the most important initiative for the 2020–21 school year is the funding, the \$250 million fund, for tutors across our education system, across every government school and in non-government schools. We have done it. It is quite extraordinary. We have got, I think, now over 6000 teachers as tutors to support students whose engagement in learning has been disrupted through remote and flexible learning in 2020, and that gives me some confidence. I know there will be a lot of kids saying, ‘No worries. We’re going to remote learning for a few days next week’. There will be a bunch of other kids who will be dreading going to remote learning. The fact that our schools are more experienced, the fact that we have got some 6000 tutors in place right now—schools know intimately the kids that struggled last year, and they will be focusing on those kids throughout next week.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Minister. Also, is there any evidence that the harms become progressively worse for each lockdown? Because I have heard many anecdotal stories of children that—you know, when it was first announced, a lot of kids just thought, ‘Oh, wow, this is great. We’ll go home’, and then after a while it sort of dragged on. And then they got to go back to school, and then when they got told again that they had to go home, a lot of kids were really upset about that. And then again and again. Like, I can imagine. I have heard, and I have seen it in my own home as well, a lot of the kids seem to dread this more and more and more. And I acknowledge that it is not all of them. Some of them do well at home, but for the ones that do not, do we see this as progressive harm?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, it is an interesting question. And like you I experienced that in my own household. The little boy, he was delighted—‘Remote learning is coming!’. My eldest, she was devastated. So I think there is no doubt, and we have seen this through the bushfires, for example—the Black Saturday bushfires. We are still seeing the mental health and wellbeing impacts of that trauma event displayed right now. So I think for some students—and, you know, the presentations to emergency departments around eating disorders—this will have a long tail. I am absolutely not denying that. So there will be some young people where this will have an impact for quite some time. It goes to the importance of what I talked about earlier this afternoon around our \$3.8 billion investment in mental health and transforming our mental health system.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. It is interesting that you talk about eating. Away from mental health, and thinking about the general health of children, when the lockdowns first ended last year, one of the first things my kids wanted to do was go to the pool. And it was nice weather and stuff, so we went to the pool. And one

thing that I found alarming when I went to the pool is how many overweight kids there were—including my own, a little bit—and I wonder what is being done about this and whether this is just a problem in the pool I went to or whether it is a general problem. But it makes sense, if kids are sitting inside for a lot of time and not doing a lot of exercise, that they would put on weight.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, for all of us. That is right.

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes. You hear the joke about ‘COVID-19 kilos’ or whatever, but yes.

Mr MERLINO: It is a good question you raise. There was an impact on sedentary behaviour—so physical activity. Also the gap in swimming lessons we were worried about as well. So there is funding, as I mentioned I think at the outset, for the Swimming in Schools initiative, that will support students across all year levels in 21 to catch up to the achievement levels which they would otherwise have been expected to reach but for the impact of COVID-19. So we are trying to, not fill the gaps, but understand that there has been a mental health and wellbeing impact, there has been an academic impact and also one on physical activity and proficiency around water safety and swimming. And we also announced the Active Schools initiative, which is about trying to promote greater levels of physical activity, both in terms of supporting schools to better engage local clubs and associations in their community but also providing some support and resources to just be active as part of your teaching and learning. You know, you can be active as you are teaching maths, for example, or science or whatever it may be. But you are right to raise that issue, and that is particularly why we had a focus on ensuring that we have got a swim program this year.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. One final question: what is being done to support parents? Because it is not only some of the kids that dread this home learning; lots of parents, I know, dread it as well, and for many of them it is extremely stressful trying to manage kids whilst they are trying to work from home themselves. I have seen this firsthand, and I have spoken to lots of parents about this that have had really deep struggles with it. I have even seen cases where parents have just said, ‘It’s too hard’ and ‘I can’t do it’, and they have sort of just, you know—

Mr MERLINO: I think the struggle has been twofold. One, I was lucky in my experience. My youngest last year was grade 3, and they were pretty self-directed. Josh would try and do all his work in half an hour then muck around for the rest of the day, but they were all pretty self-directed. So the first challenge was families where maybe the kids were a bit younger—so prep, 1, 2, but not necessarily prep, 1, 2—just where it was difficult for the child to engage in their learning. Then that becomes a stress for the parent or carer. The second challenge—and this is where we have tried to assist schools, and it is at that local communication—is to parents and carers: trust your schools. We are not expecting you to be the teacher of your child, just that communication about encouragement, finding a space for your child where they would do their work—just a bit of observation, but not expectation that you are the child’s teacher.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: I wanted to explore a bit more about the statutory authority with regard to the academy and why it is a statutory authority. I should say I did study to be a teacher at least a century ago.

Ms RICHARDS: Did you?

Ms TAYLOR: Yes, I did, so I am quite interested on a personal level as well as for the benefit of the community.

Mr MERLINO: Thank you for the question. The establishment of the academy as a statutory authority reflects the high priority this government places on the development of our teachers and our school leaders. The establishment of the academy as an authority, a stat authority, provides an appropriate status for an entity focused on the professional development of schoolteachers and leaders. It means the new authority will be able to effectively support teachers in each of the three sectors. I think by having a stat authority board, it is not a unit of the Department of Education and Training, and we felt that that was an important signal to send to Catholic education, to Independent Schools Victoria and all their members, that this is for the profession, This is for the profession, with a board that is representative of the profession, and the only way you could do that in

my view was by the establishment of a statutory authority. In this the academy will reflect the same way the other statutory authorities—so we have got the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, we have got the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority—are sector-neutral authorities with representation and are highly regarded stat authorities. Further, as a statutory authority the work of new academy, as I mentioned, will be overseen by a board, which will bring high-level expertise to the work of the academy.

So there are various ways that you can elevate the profession: having this pathway for teachers; having a pathway for aspiring leaders; saying to the profession, ‘We value in the highest possible way exceptional teaching in the classroom and we want to encourage that, we want to share that expertise and we want to share it across all sectors’. The only way could you do that is via a statutory authority.

Ms TAYLOR: Okay. Thank you. I think it would be also helpful to understand more about the teaching excellence program.

Mr MERLINO: The teaching excellence program is the flagship program of the academy. It will deliver professional learning for those that have already demonstrated exceptional performance in the teaching of the core disciplines of the curriculum, and again this is engagement across the three sectors. Outside of the bread-and-butter professional learning that is offered across schools, offered via Catholic education, offered via ISV, offered by independent providers of professional learning, what do we need to focus on at the elite level? The core disciplines of the curriculum, including English, mathematics, science, social sciences, languages and the arts—that is agreed. Let us go to the highest performing areas in each of those core disciplines, but this will also have—I think this reflects a lot of the discussion we have been having with the mental health royal commission—health and wellbeing. What does excellence in health and wellbeing look like, and how can we deliver that to our best teachers?

It will be a practice-based program that will provide participants with access to the latest developments in the science of learning and new pedagogic practices with practitioner inquiry at the centre of the program. The teaching excellence program will enable participants to work with educational experts to develop, test and apply new strategies in the classroom to improve the learning of every student. It provides the opportunity for high-performing teachers to remain in the classroom, to continue to develop their practice to the highest level and to be recognised as an outstanding practitioner. So from a few years ago, you will recall, within the classifications of teachers we have now got ‘learning specialist’. So you may want to go down a leadership path—you will become a leading teacher, a year-level coordinator, an AP, a principal. We have also got a learning specialist path, so we see this academy of teaching as another professional step that our very best teachers can take—so classroom teacher, learning specialist, academy fellow.

A significant innovation of the program is that its most exceptional academy fellows—this is the Singapore model—so your most exceptional people that go through the academy, will then become master teachers at the academy. They might be seconded from their school for a year or two and teach fellow colleagues as master teachers at the academy. Further to providing increased professional recognition and professional pathways, this approach will ensure that the knowledge and expertise of Victoria’s most exceptional teachers are used to build the expertise of the profession. It will also support existing Victorian government efforts to retain the highest performing teachers in our classrooms, where they can make the greatest positive impact on student achievement.

Ms TAYLOR: Very good. So how does this differ from normal professional development that teachers do? I am just trying to position the various strata you have got there.

Mr MERLINO: Professional development is a requirement. Via a teacher’s registration through the VIT, they are required to undertake regular professional development. Generally, professional development is provided for teachers without any entry limitations. The TEP, which is the one we are talking about, is intended only for already high-performing teachers. Professional learning in the education sector is often focused on leadership and career pathways that draw excellent teachers out of the classroom and into school and system leadership roles. Now, we want to see that, but we want to have an equally valued and rewarded path in terms of excellence in the classroom. So the teaching excellence program will extend over the course of a year and will therefore provide the opportunity for deep and extended engagement in the improvement of teaching practice, in contrast to more common short-course programs that are necessarily more limited in their scope. These are not unimportant. We want to keep having a focus of general professional development within all

schools, but we want to have this elevated path. You know, we want to see immediately people in the profession, teachers in the profession, looking at this academy and saying, 'I want to go there', and being an academy fellow seen as a badge of the highest honour in the teaching profession.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. But why is there a need for government to do this? Why couldn't existing professional development providers deliver this service?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you. So high-performing education systems are distinguished by their consistent integrated and coherent whole-of-system approach to building the capability of educational leaders and teachers through the design and delivery of high-quality professional learning across the career stages and their intentional approach to the recognition and promotion of aspiring and emerging leaders. The critical necessity of investing in the teaching profession to lift the calibre and the impact of teaching is a view supported by the 2019 report of the Victorian Auditor-General's Office, which states that, quote:

It is important for education systems to invest in professional learning, as teacher quality has a considerable influence on student outcomes.

Existing professional development third-party providers are necessarily focused on providing programs where participants cover the cost of those programs. By necessity this means programs must attract a broad number of participants. In contrast, the TEP is designed only, as I said, for high-performing, exceptional teachers, and it is intended to enable them to take their teaching practice to the highest level.

Ms TAYLOR: So you were talking before about a physical site for the academy. Why is that necessary?

Mr MERLINO: Whilst the capacity to deliver professional learning for teachers using digital technologies was accelerated during the move to remote learning, face-to-face delivery remains an important component of adult learning. There is no capacity at the existing Bastow site, that is the site in North Melbourne, to accommodate additional programs. A spillover site for Bastow's leadership programs is already rented to accommodate their programs, so there is no other venue that has been identified as available that provides state-of-the-art adult learning facilities. Therefore a new site adjoining the Victorian School Building Authority at 41 St Andrews Place will be delivered. The fit-out of the new site will be based on adult learning principles, incorporating flexible learning spaces, syndicate rooms and new learning technologies to integrate blended and face-to-face professional learning delivery. The new facility will be able to host a range of professional learning activities, including conferences and forums, and in addition there will be seven regional sites.

Ms TAYLOR: Oh, very good. On that point, how will this initiative help teachers in regional Victoria? You are talking about the regional site, so—

Mr MERLINO: This is the element of the announcement that I think got the greatest level of support when we made the announcement. A key objective of the academy is to increase the regional and rural reach of teacher professional development. The investment will enable equity of both opportunity and access for rural and regional teachers and leaders and fully accessible learning and development in hard-to-staff locations. This will address a key issue for teachers and leaders in rural and regional schools, which has been difficulty in accessing high-quality professional learning. They often have to drive for hours and hours—no longer.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Minister, you have spoken a couple of times tonight quite passionately about the upgrade of schools, upgrading schools—over recent months, several announcements on those upgrades—and I would like to spend a bit of time talking about that. How are decisions made on which schools are upgraded?

Mr MERLINO: There are a couple of ways, or a couple of steps in the process, if you like. There are three ways, Mr Newbury. Enrolment growth, and that is clear—you know, where are we bursting at the seams and needing to create capacity or build a new school—so capacity is one. Condition is the next—you know, Kensington Primary. Actually, Kensington Primary falls into two categories. So it is enrolment growth—demand pressure—condition of the school and, thirdly, functionality. So a school that was built in the 1980s, well maintained by the school, so it is clean, it is safe, but it is a bunch of boxes. So they are the three elements that are assessed, and sometimes they meet all three, particularly if you think about inner-city older schools—could be in poor condition, definitely low functionality and there are demand pressures—or it meets one of

those. Kensington would be the latter two. So that is the assessment that is made about each school, and we have got more than 1500 schools, more than 1700 campuses.

Mr NEWBURY: So you mentioned with regard to the example earlier that there was strong advocacy on that particular issue, on that particular school. And then on the second point that you just raised, presumably the two married together—there was strong advocacy and your determination was there was a need in terms of real issues at the school. Is that right?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. Advocacy is not a bad thing, and it could be advocacy—

Mr NEWBURY: Not at all.

Mr MERLINO: of local members, it could be advocacy of the school community directly to me as minister, it could be local government. Out in the west the local governments are often strong advocates for their schools as well as local members. So advocacy is important because we have got a massive school system and a huge number of schools, and it is good for us to get feedback about the state.

Mr NEWBURY: I hope you feel that I annoy you a lot with advocacy for my school.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, and I look down on local members who have zero advocacy. I much prefer colleagues across the aisle who advocate for their schools. Everyone I am facing has been a fierce advocate for their local schools, and that is a good thing. The next element that is really, really critical is: we have now got in place a rolling facilities evaluation process. What is the number of schools ever year, Tom?

Mr KIRKLAND: Three hundred per year.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, every year 300 schools are evaluated, so we have got this contemporary sense of what is the condition and the functionality of every school. Under the previous government there was an audit in 2012, but it was a static audit; it was just that year. So what we have got now is: every single year 300 schools are evaluated, and that provides information to the VSBA and then a priority of schools and an assessment of where they are.

Mr NEWBURY: So I am just looking at the budget website now on metro schools. For example—it is the drop-down menu in front of me—35 schools received upgrades. I presume a pool is given to you on a list and there are columns on the need, based on the issues you discuss, and then a judgement call is made. Is that pretty much the process?

Mr MERLINO: Like every budget process, through the departments, ministers—through ERC processes—are saying, ‘We’re advocating for X amount of money, X amount of new schools, X amount of upgrades’, and every budget is a reflection of the choices the government can make and the capacity in every given year, Mr Newbury. In terms of the investments we make, it is based on advice from the department about the enrolment pressure. There are, for example, this year no brand-new schools in regional Victoria, because new schools are delivered where there is enrolment growth, and it is a pretty easy assessment: where are the kids coming, and where do you need to build a new school? But Drouin needed an upgrade to cater for demand, so there is funding in the budget to deliver an upgrade at Drouin Primary School. Anyway, that is the assessment that is made.

Mr NEWBURY: So without making any reflection on the 35 schools that were upgraded in that announcement, 80 per cent of them are in Labor electorates. Would that surprise you?

Mr MERLINO: I think when you look at the investment of this government: the investment in rural and regional Victoria, the investment in non-government seats—

Mr NEWBURY: I am right now. There it is—a lot of red.

Mr MERLINO: There is a reflection, Mr Newbury, of the number of seats held by government MPs—

Mr NEWBURY: The Labor Party holds 60 per cent of the seats in the Parliament and in this current announcement received 80 per cent of the funding.

Mr MERLINO: and also, Mr Newbury, where enrolment pressures are as well. So for those reasons, that does not surprise me in terms of the number of seats that are represented by government MPs and where the growth is. Another example I would give you: when we came into government, across successive governments—and for historic reasons I cannot understand—in the Geelong region, for example, over decades a chronic lack of investment compared to other parts of Victoria and Melbourne. There has had to be a significant investment in the Geelong region because simply—and this is a reflection not just on Liberal governments but on previous Labor governments over a long period of time, and I do not know whether processes within the department were not adequate at the time—there has been chronic underinvestment. Now, for the majority of my time as a member of Parliament three of four—sometimes four of four—of those seats have been Labor seats. But it is a reflection of the need in terms of where we invest.

Mr NEWBURY: No, no, I was not making a reflection; I was just making a point. In the November announcement to upgrade 78 metro schools 85 per cent of the funding was delivered to Labor seats. Would that surprise you?

Mr MERLINO: Sorry, what is that referring to, Mr Newbury?

Mr NEWBURY: The November upgrade announcements for metro schools.

Mr RICHARDSON: You do not have any suburban seats or outer metropolitan seats.

Mr NEWBURY: I am in one.

Mr MERLINO: Well, again, Mr Newbury, I am happy to go through in some detail and am happy to provide this to the committee in terms of our historic investment over the last seven budgets in rural and regional Victoria. And I can tell you that it is a significant difference to the investment that the previous Liberal-Nationals government made in schools.

Mr NEWBURY: Did you just say you are offering to break down funding over the last six years by electorate? Because I would be more than happy to take that.

Mr MERLINO: I will provide you with significant—in fact what we should do is go back to—

Mr NEWBURY: Can we take that by electorate? Is that possible?

Mr MERLINO: I will give you a rural and regional versus metro breakdown.

Mr NEWBURY: No, no. I am just interested in electorates.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, can you allow the minister to answer the question.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, Labor Chair. I am having a discussion.

The CHAIR: Well, Mr Newbury, it is not just a discussion. You put a question; you need to afford the minister the opportunity to answer it.

Mr NEWBURY: Of the last 113 metro upgrades 93 have been in Labor seats. That is 83 per cent. So I am just interested in an electorate breakdown of school funding. I am not asking about rural; I am just interested in an electorate breakdown of school funding.

Mr MERLINO: I just return to the comments I made earlier, Mr Newbury. We have got a significant majority of seats—

Mr NEWBURY: Sixty per cent.

Mr MERLINO: in the Assembly, as well as a focus—and I am unapologetic about this—on addressing conditions in our existing schools. Now, that means there are schools in traditionally very strong Labor seats that have seen investment over the last several years because they have never seen investment at all—and I am talking about decades. I would—

Mr NEWBURY: It is the same in my electorate, by the way. I mean, I hear what you are saying, but in my electorate there are schools that have not received funding for decades and decades and decades.

Mr MERLINO: Look, I have explained to you the process for evaluation—

Mr NEWBURY: Yes, and I was not reflecting—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you allow the minister to complete his answer without interrupting him, please.

Mr MERLINO: enrolment, condition and functionality based on advice and assessment from the department on their rolling facilities evaluation.

Mr NEWBURY: And I was not making a reflection; I was just making the point that it could look like pork-barrelling.

Mr MERLINO: Well, that is absolutely not the case, I can assure you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Newbury. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and department representatives. I want to take you back, Minister, to budget paper 3, pages 21 and 30, around the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership. I wonder, for the committee's benefit, for those who might not be familiar, what is the difference between the academy and the existing Bastow Institute?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr Richardson, for your question. Professional learning in the education sector, including that offered by our outstanding Bastow Institute, has primarily focused on leadership and career pathways that draw excellent teachers out of the classroom and into schooling system leadership roles. The teaching excellence program seeks to elevate the teaching profession from within the classroom. Additionally, the Bastow Institute currently provides its suite of leadership programs to government school leaders. It is not reaching a cross-sectorial audience and it does not provide programs specifically for classroom teachers. Analysis of Bastow participants since 2018 indicates that participation by staff from independent or Catholic schools may be as low as 0.5 per cent of the total number of participants across all programs.

Across all sectors the Victorian government and non-government school workforce comprises 76 351 people in a total of 2263 Victorian schools: 1543 government, 498 Catholic and 222 independent. The exceptional teachers within the workforce will benefit from the professional learning that will be delivered by the TEP, expanding considerably on the current offering of Bastow. We have tried with Bastow, but we have got the Catholic Leadership Centre; we have got very strong leadership programs through ISV as well. The teaching excellence program design will harness the features of a networked community of experts to cement a strong professional identity for this elite cohort as experts in their field. Research shows that high-performing education systems develop expert teachers and deliver rigorous and practice-focused professional learning in classrooms and to school leaders. By expanding Bastow's remit, this investment expands its reach and impact across the state. It is through harnessing the capabilities and collective capacity of our exceptional professionals that we can raise student outcomes across Victoria.

Mr RICHARDSON: And just taking you to those student outcomes, because I think that is a really important point that has been raised by committee members particularly coming out of the pandemic, how will students and student outcomes benefit from being taught by teachers who have graduated from the academy, and what is the evidence and measurables that underpin this?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Richardson. The most important influence on a child outside of their immediate family is their teachers, and we all know the teachers that made a difference in our lives. Victoria has led the way nationally when it comes to raising the bar on teacher quality. Teaching matters when it comes to the quality of a child's education. It is one of the largest impacts on student outcomes and can make the difference between good and great performance. Evidence consistently indicates that the role of teachers is central to a high-performing education system. Teachers are critical to progressing and accelerating learning. An excellent teacher with strong professional skills, motivation and commitment can account for up to 30 per cent of the difference in achievement between students. That is from Professor John Hattie, from some of his

research. Research shows that high-performing education systems develop expert teachers and deliver rigorous, practice-focused professional learning in classrooms and to school leaders. It is through harnessing the capabilities and collective capacity of our exceptional professionals that we can raise student outcomes across Victoria.

Mr RICHARDSON: It is a pretty incredible time to be a teacher and to join the profession. I am interested, Minister, in how these teachers and leaders will be selected to participate in the academy.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, this is going to be the critical thing. Your most exceptional teacher might be a very humble person that will not put their hand up—and the students know, don't they, who the exceptional teachers are as well. We have got to be careful that we make sure we get the best applicants for this program rather than the most confident, the most outgoing—because they may well be the most exceptional, but they may not be. So participant entry and selection will be set by the academy board. This will be based on demonstrated evidence of teaching excellence. Teachers will need to demonstrate their expertise through, for example, presentation of a portfolio of practice, panel interviews, references from principals and peers or evidence of excellence, such as conference presentations and journal publications.

A teaching excellence program selection panel will be established by the new academy and will be made up of recognised education experts drawn from each of the three sectors. But in discussions with Deputy Secretary Howes and Secretary Atta, just making sure that we get those humble but exceptional teachers, we are thinking about how engagement with students will work in the selection and maybe also that it is not just the individual saying, 'I want to apply for the academy'; it may be that we give peers the opportunity to say, 'We reckon my colleague is the most exceptional teacher at this school', and nominate him or her on their behalf. We will work through the detail of that over the course of this year as we have the first intake of academy fellows. I think we will be doing 250 next year.

Mr RICHARDSON: Looking at the education sector as a system and what can be achieved by taking that professional practice back to the school, Minister, once the teacher has completed that teaching excellence program, what are you expecting to happen in the school community?

Mr MERLINO: TEP graduates' high-end expertise will enhance the quality of teaching at the school they teach at. That is the vision: that it is not just for individual benefit but there is a broader benefit at their home school. They will be able to provide demonstration classes for other teachers, model effective high-level teaching strategies and provide feedback to other teachers. This provides significant professional recognition and ensures the expertise of these teachers continues to benefit students in the classroom and is used to teach and train other aspiring expert teachers. Further and broader TEP impacts include: improvement in student outcomes; more teachers who apply greater precision in using leading-edge pedagogies, including in regional and rural areas; and more schools with access to expert teachers who can model and lead change in their area of expertise. Once it is up and running in full it will be around 500 teachers per year, so you can see the cumulative impact of having all of those high-performing teachers across our system.

Mr RICHARDSON: Finally on this part, Minister, how does the academy of teaching and leadership align with other workforce initiatives you have delivered recently in the past few years?

Mr MERLINO: The Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership teaching excellence program builds on other significant investments in the Victorian teaching workforce in recent years, creating a whole-of-career professional development offering. At the career entry stage of teaching, the excellence in teacher education reform initiatives improve the quality of initial teacher education, improve support and development for teachers early in their careers and increase the status of the teaching profession. Together these actions identify the most suitable candidates for teaching, provide them with excellent preparation and continue to support and develop them for the critical role they play in helping children and young people succeed in learning and in life. The excellence in teacher education actions build on the national agenda for initial teacher education reform implemented by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, AITSL. They leverage best practice already used in Victoria. Reforms are in place to attract the best and brightest. The minimum ATAR for a year 12 initial teacher education entry started off at 65 in 2018 and progressed to 70 per cent in 2019. The Victorian selection framework considers both academic capability and personal attributes.

In 2021 we invested \$2.3 million to continue and expand the National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools program, and this program will equip 300 high-performing teaching students with skills to work in schools in disadvantaged areas and through its placement program help to achieve a more equitable distribution of high-achieving graduates in government schools. To attract and develop teachers from all backgrounds we supported education providers to develop and promote high-quality alternate pathways that articulate into teacher education programs and designed an equivalence framework for entry into initial teacher education through these alternate pathways.

Further work to improve initial teacher education includes supporting rural candidates, especially those from designated equity groups, through scholarships and alternate pathways; expanding employment-based initial teacher education pathways to attract a more diverse range of high-quality candidates—that is the career changers; supporting and sustaining necessary partnerships between initial teacher education providers and schools with a focus on improving teaching practice and increasing Victoria’s knowledge of best practice initial teacher education; developing a feedback mechanism to improve quality of programs; a more consistent approach to assessing practicums and greater consistency in capstone assessments; and improving induction and mentoring through a statewide approach that establishes new teachers as lifelong learners. Beginning teachers will also benefit from a new pilot program, transforming the first years of their teaching career, which is being implemented in three areas currently.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. That concludes the time we have available for consideration of the education portfolio with you today. We thank you, as well as the Secretary and officials, for appearing here today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee’s request.

The committee will now take a short break before resuming consideration with you of the mental health portfolio.

Witnesses withdrew.