

Submission to the Parliament of Victoria
Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee
Inquiry Into the State Education System in Victoria

October 12, 2023

1. I am a teacher working for the Department of Education in Victoria
2. I am also a student in the Master of Teaching (Secondary) Internship programme at the University of Melbourne
3. I make the following submission with regards to the terms of reference of the committee

Trends in student learning outcomes

The most significant issue facing the education sector in Victoria is the splintering of the education system between the public and private sector. Historically, the reason for the dominance of private schools in Victoria is due to political decisions made by the Victorian government in the 19th century to fund and guarantee a private monopoly on secondary school until the creation of Melbourne High School in 1905.

This creates the risk of entrenching inequalities between those who can access better resourced schools and those who cannot. Furthermore, public education is essential in the development of a liberal democratic society by ensuring people of different background can meet each and other and share similar experiences in a system without sectarian interests, which was why public schools were created at a time Australians sent their children to be educated in either Irish Catholic, Scottish Presbyterian, and English Anglican schools. The division of children by social class is leading to children being raised in entire community bubbles where a privately education child in Toorak lives in a radically different world to a child going to a prestigious public school such as the University High School, which already is a significantly different experience to a child going to public school in Dandenong. If we expect people to be able to sit around a table and share a similar culture and worldview, it is important that we foster a common public sphere, and this is why public schools are important.

The state of the teaching profession in Victoria,

I am a Master of Teaching (Secondary) Internship student and a secondary school teacher in a Department of Education school in Victoria. The Victorian Government's Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow programmes are an excellent way of training new teachers given the current teacher shortage.

However more must be done to reduce the workload of teachers. For example, secondary school teachers in German speaking countries have had for over a century only 18 contact hours per week (In German schools, one teaching hour is 45 minutes and there are 24 of them so $24 \times 0.75 = 18$ hours). In France, the highly qualified agrégé secondary school teachers teach 16 contact hours per week while every other teacher teaches 18 hours per week.

But the main difference I have experienced between when I was teaching in France and my experience as a teacher here in Australia is the additional workload and burden of having to stay in school from 8:45am until 4:30pm. As a teacher in France, the French Education Act guarantees la liberté pédagogique or pedagogical/professional autonomy. Consequently, there is a high trust in the professionalism of teachers as apart from having a school inspector visit them every seven years, once teachers have passed the state teaching exam, they become public servants and are entirely responsible for the curriculum they teach in their classrooms and cannot be fired unless they commit a crime.

When I was in France, teachers came in only when they had classes to teach and left school when they had finished teaching. This professionalism and ability to manage one's own time is essential as often after teaching a full day of classes, teachers are often exhausted and if principals force teachers to stay until 4:30pm (due to the Time-in-lieu clause of the Victorian Government Schools Agreement) as often is happening, it causes enormous friction in staffrooms and erodes the good-will of teachers doing unpaid work outside of school hours, which is a necessary part of teaching as lesson planning, marking and contacting parents/students cannot be confined to school hours.

Also in France, there are only three compulsory meetings that teachers must attend every year. The first is parent-teacher interviews, the second is the pedagogical planning meetings at the start and the end of the school year (usually two days each) and the last is a staff meeting for all teachers of home groups to decide whether a student is retained or can progress on to the next year level (three times a year). The frequency (usually twice a week) of after school staff meetings in Australian schools is exhausting for all teachers involved, especially given that many meetings only take place because they are required to take place and there is nothing relevant that happens during the meeting.

Lastly in France, education support staff were responsible for yard duty, time out, after school detention, and covering extras (replacing teachers who are absent). Education support staff are underutilised, and it does not make sense to pay highly qualified teachers to do supervision of grounds work that requires no specialised skills. The role of education support staff needs to be expanded.

What also urgently needs to be considered is the teacher's pay relative to a country's GDP per capita. Whereas in absolutely terms, Australian teachers are well paid, what really matters is the pay relative to similarly qualified professionals and relative to the general population considering cost of living. Already graduate teachers in ACT will be earning \$91,000 per year from 2026 and from next year in NSW, graduate teachers will start at \$85,000. In Victoria, graduate teachers start at \$76,000. The status of the profession depends on career progression possibilities and what the salary of teachers are relative to the average salary. There needs to be further career and pay progression opportunities for teachers who wish to remain teaching in the classroom and not become part of middle or senior management in the school.

The current state of student wellbeing in Victoria

Teachers need to have more professional development resources and time to be able to address arising student well-being concerns. This include financial resources for schools so that teachers can attend professional developments, but also professional development coming into schools to equip teachers to deal with these issues that are becoming more prevalent in the classroom.

The administrative burden on teachers

The administrative burden is one of the biggest things leading to burnout. There are too many administrative meetings that are run simply because there is a departmental or administrative directive, rather than teacher-led meetings that respond to an actual need.

Furthermore, measures of improving 'accountability' are counterproductive as they result only in box-ticking exercises that provide no value to students, parents, or teachers. Examples of this include having to include certain additional phrases in school reports to meet department guidelines or having to undertake summative assessments several times a term. As a result, almost half of class time can end up being dedicated to assessments which reduces teaching and learning time.

Examples of best practice

To improve both student learning outcomes and wellbeing, Australia should consider looking at what New Zealand did in 2004, when we eliminated our ATAR equivalent of ranking secondary school students according to a bell curve norm and instead, opting for a criterion-based assessment. This ensures students work to improve themselves based on a developmental progression as opposed to comparing themselves with other students. This will be significantly less stressful for students and will ensure that students can measure themselves according to concrete objectives, rather than in relation to everyone else.

School funding adequacy

The current level of school funding is impeding schools from being able to offer a full programme. Because public schools are under-resourced, more and more middle-class families are opting to send children to low-cost private schools that are effectively government schools as most of the funding comes from the Commonwealth government. This deprives government schools of the middle-class base it needs to attract a broad variety of students. As a result, government schools become an option of last resort for parents with no other options and have children with higher levels of need. As a result, a cycle is created where to go to prestigious public institutions such as the University of Melbourne or selective courses such as medicine, it is vital to send children to private schools.

Instead, Victoria should look at how England, Canada, France, and New Zealand fund private schools. In New Zealand, there is a category of state schools called state integrated schools. These are mostly Catholic schools but also encompass Steiner, Anglican, Presbyterian, and other schools. The salaries of teachers are funded by the government but in return, they must follow the government curriculum and they cannot charge tuition fees. This effectively creates an obligation to private schools to deliver a public service.

England has a similar structure called voluntary aided and voluntary maintained schools. In France, these are called schools 'conventionné' or with an agreement with the State.