

VERIFIED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Budget Estimates 2017–18

Melbourne — 16 May 2017

Members

Mr Danny Pearson — Chair

Ms Sue Pennicuik

Mr David Morris — Deputy Chair

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Steve Dimopoulos

Mr Tim Smith

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Vicki Ward

Ms Fiona Patten

Witnesses

Mr James Merlino, Minister for Education,

Ms Gill Callister, Secretary,

Ms Katy Haire, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood and School Education Group,

Ms Jenny Atta, Deputy Secretary, Infrastructure and Finance Services Group, and

Mr Chris Keating, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority, Department of Education and Training.

The CHAIR — Firstly I would just like to make a brief statement on behalf of the membership of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. As many members would be aware, Danny O’Brien, the member for Gippsland South, suffered a heart attack on Friday night. Danny is in hospital and is recovering well. I am sure I speak on behalf of all members of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, that we wish Danny a speedy recovery.

Ms SHING — I hope he is listening along, wherever he is right now.

Ms PATTEN — Well, who would miss it?

Ms SHING — Who would miss it? Who would miss this opportunity?

The CHAIR — I declare open the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the 2017–18 budget estimates.

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to welcome the Minister for Education, the Honourable James Merlino, MP; Ms Gill Callister, secretary, Department of Education and Training; Katy Haire, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood and School Education Group; Jenny Atta, Deputy Secretary, Infrastructure and Finance Services Group; Chris Keating, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority; and in the gallery is Katherine Whetton, Deputy Secretary, Strategy and Performance Group.

All evidence is taken by the committee under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Comments made outside the hearing, including on social media, are not afforded such privilege.

Witnesses will not be sworn but are requested to answer all questions succinctly, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with proof versions of the transcript for verification as soon as available. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee’s website as soon as possible.

All written communication to witnesses must be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the public gallery cannot participate in the committee’s proceedings in any way and cannot photograph, audio record or videorecord any part of these proceedings.

Members of the media must remain focused only on the persons speaking. Any filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing.

I now invite the witnesses to make a very brief opening statement of no more than 10 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Chair. Can I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak with you this morning, and can I also convey my best wishes to Danny O’Brien in his recovery. I am sure there was a number of schools he would have liked to mention this morning, so best wishes to him.

Thank you for the opportunity today to talk about the 2017–18 budget outcomes and explain how this government is fulfilling its promise to make Victoria the Education State. It is a long slide pack, but I will try to get through it as quickly as I can.

The Education State school reforms are about giving schools the support to be ready to help kids reach their potential, whatever their needs. Our first two budgets were unprecedented in their education investment. We provided over \$4 billion to our schools, including significant investment in school infrastructure. We have funded our election commitments. We delivered on our share of the Gonski agreement for 2015–16 and this

year, and we established the Education State by building an education system that produces excellence and reduces the impact of disadvantage.

Ms SHING — That is Gonski 1.0, is it not, Minister?

Mr MERLINO — That is Gonski 1.0.

A key initiative of the Education State is to provide targeted school funding to support schools with students who face more barriers to success than their peers do. That is why we have provided \$566 million over four years to schools based on their levels of disadvantage at their school. So that funding is comprised of \$493 million to support schools with students who face more barriers to success than their peers, and 72.3 to target students who have not met the national NAPLAN standard. This includes \$2000 extra for each secondary school student who did not meet the national minimum NAPLAN standard for reading in year 5.

Schools are using this equity funding for a range of initiatives. Principals have indicated that the majority of equity funding is spent on staffing — for example, classroom teachers, education support staff and leadership positions to support targeted programs. Principals have indicated that intervention programs — for example, to support improved literacy and numeracy and wellbeing programs — are also being supported through equity funding.

If I can go to the next slide, an example of how this equity funding is being used in practice is Dallas Brooks Community Primary School. The school received \$1.6 million in equity funding in 2017. Our investment in equity funding has enabled Dallas Brooks to appoint a full-time social worker, increase the English as an additional language offering, and employ not only a maths consultant but also literacy and numeracy coaches for their teachers. Through the work of these coaches the whole school staff are learning about best practice and the most effective methods of improving numeracy and literacy at their school. That is exactly what equity money is supposed to do: improve the quality of the teaching in the classroom, because that is what makes the difference to students lives and their results.

But the most important and innovative way that the school has used their equity funding is a very targeted support to their student cohort. They have employed a play therapist to help students who have experienced trauma in their backgrounds. I may speak further on trauma in question time.

In terms of the next slide, the 17–18 budget builds on these investments by providing \$1.1 billion for the portfolio: \$675 million for new schools, school upgrades and new buildings; and \$457 million in output funding to support our students, teachers, principals and support staff. This is a significant investment that continues our commitment to education in Victoria.

Another big highlight over the last few months has been the finalisation of the schools EBA. We were able to reach a great agreement on the \$2.3 billion EBA for principals, teachers and support staff. This is on top of our investments that you see in the 17–18 budget papers. The EBA puts teachers at the forefront of our school improvement agenda.

There are 3000 learning specialists across the system, so now teachers do not need to leave the classroom to pursue a leadership pathway. Two and a half thousand teachers and 5000 support staff will move from uncertain contract employment to ongoing employment, providing principals with the pay and support they deserve as well as appropriate pay rises for teachers and support staff. We know Victoria's dedicated and hardworking teachers, principals and support staff make a real difference in our classrooms and in the lives of our children, so we will continue to provide opportunity to develop professional, passionate teachers and principals and equip them with the right knowledge and skills for a modern classroom.

If I go to the next slide and focus on infrastructure, we know a great education starts with a great school. That is why in the 17–18 budget we are building and upgrading even more schools to give Victorian kids the best start in life.

Slide 8: a funding boost of \$675 million in this year's budget means a further 13 new schools and scores of schools getting upgrades and new buildings. With Victoria's population continuing to boom, this year we are investing a further \$265.1 million to plan, acquire land and build new schools where they are needed,

particularly obviously in our growth corridors. There is a further funding increase of \$85 million to progress the government's commitment to removing asbestos from all government schools.

On the next slide, \$195.2 million to upgrade and modernise for the upgrade and modernisation fund, which means students at 59 rural and regional schools and 49 metropolitan schools will have their facilities upgraded.

Students at six special schools will benefit from upgrades, thanks to a further \$44.4 million investment, including Bayside Special Development School, Diamond Valley Special Developmental School, Kalianna School, Sale Specialist School, Yarra Ranges Special Developmental School and Yarrabah School.

Schools with increasing enrolments will be able to meet immediate demand, thanks to \$75 million for new relocatable classrooms that will be coming online this year.

In our next slide, this huge investment in our schools and kids brings the state's investment in infrastructure to \$2.5 billion over our last three budgets. That means 56 new schools are now in the pipeline right across Victoria. Based on Victoria's significant population growth, we will need to accommodate an extra 90 000 students over the next five years. This is across government, Catholic and independent systems, and that is requiring significant infrastructure investment. That slide there is pretty telling and gives you the average over the first three budgets under this current government of \$843 million compared to the first three years of the previous government of \$237 million, so we are making the investment that is required.

In terms of the next slide 'Supporting our students', it is not just school infrastructure where we are making key investments. We are also giving Victorian students a great education to thrive in life. The Victorian budget invests over \$457 million in additional funding in our schools, maintaining our track record of significant and continued investment in building the Education State, ensuring that each and every student, no matter what their postcode, is supported.

As mentioned previously, as part of this investment the Victorian government has met our obligations to the original Gonski agreement for 2018, with further investments throughout the year regarding how the \$90 million in Education State funding will be allocated to initiatives that will have the greatest impact helping students. So each and every year of this government we have delivered on our obligations to the original Gonski agreement — 2015, 16, 17 and now 18.

We have also listened to concerns from schools about the quality of IT support, internet access and bandwidth, particularly in regional and rural schools, so we are investing across the board just under \$68 million for better IT support for schools and students to provide reliable access to digital services in the classroom that are essential to teaching and learning. One thing I am particularly proud of is that there is \$16.4 million to provide increased bandwidth and digital connectivity for regional schools, so lifting our rural and regional schools to the same speed as metropolitan schools.

In addition to this we have invested in a broad range of initiatives aimed at supporting students: \$9.2 million to support swimming in schools as part of the Victorian curriculum. We heard the message from schools loud and clear, we made it compulsory in the curriculum and in the budget we are providing this support for schools to deliver that commitment.

There is \$7.8 million to extend the successful Navigator student re-engagement pilot. That will support an additional 1700 students. There is \$5.7 million more for schools to better enable them to accept late student enrolments. This was a particularly hot issue for principals. It is about re-engaging young people and providing that financial support to schools in their school budgets so that they can receive funding for those late enrolments. There is also \$1.7 million to extend student mentoring to an additional 800 students.

We have reaffirmed our commitment to support initiatives aimed at supporting students with additional needs by investing \$58.4 million to meet demand for the program for students with disabilities; \$21 million for student transport to again meet increased demand; and \$19.5 million to boost teaching of English as an additional language.

There are a range of slides. I am not sure how much time I have got, Chair.

The CHAIR — You are eating into government time, but if you wish to proceed with your presentation — —

Mr MERLINO — I am happy to come back. There are three or four slides on what we are doing to support our teachers, and I am sure that I will be able to answer those during the question period. Also members will have this slide deck.

If we can go to slide 18, this shows the annual investment in the education portfolio of approximately 5.8 per cent over our first three budgets, which is in again stark contrast to the 2.15 per cent under the previous government. That has allowed us to provide funding to support schools and students who need it most. Just making the point graphically, both a massive increase in infrastructure investment and a massive increase in output investment in supporting teachers and students in the classroom.

I might leave it there, Chair, but thank you again for the opportunity. I am happy to answer questions, but this is again a great education budget for the people of Victoria.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I refer you to budget paper 3, page 176, ‘School education — primary’, and specifically the performance measure ‘Number of Victorian schools participating as a “lead school” for the respectful relationships initiative’. Can you outline to the committee the impact that this initiative is having on schools and student learning, please?

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Chair. I am really happy to kick off talking about respectful relationships. This is one of the issues where there is a lot of public debate about what it is and what it is not. I think it is important to get on the public record through PAEC to explain why it is important and why it was one of the key recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

I want to start with a pretty stark statistic that emphasises the sad reality that learning outcomes for children affected by family violence are lower than for their peers. You would make that logical connection, but this has been shown through linking NAPLAN data to the school entry health questionnaire. Across the state that shows that 36 per cent of children who witness violence achieved in the top two bands of NAPLAN reading in year 3. This compares to 52 per cent of children who did not witness violence — so a direct correlation between children who witness violence and their ability to achieve in the top two levels of NAPLAN in year 3 reading. So we cannot turn our back on students that experience violence, and if we are to improve student outcomes, we must address this sad reality.

As members would be aware, the government committed to implementing all recommendations arising from the Royal Commission into Family Violence — no picking and choosing which recommendations. We committed to all recommendations. Recommendation 189 states that:

The Victorian government mandate the introduction of respectful relationships education into every government school in Victoria from prep to year 12. Implementation should be staged to ensure school readiness and to allow for ongoing evaluation and adaptation. It should be delivered through a whole-of-school approach and be consistent with best practice, building on the evaluation of the model being tested by the Department of Education and Training through Our Watch —

and that was within five years.

The royal commission highlighted the importance of respectful relationships as a long-term family violence prevention initiative. As part of the government’s \$572 million initial response to the royal commission launched in April 2016, \$21.8 million over two years was provided to commence implementation of this recommendation. The point of primary prevention and why this particular recommendation is so important is that it prevents problems before they emerge.

Respectful relationships as primary prevention seeks to ensure that children and young people are not forming the attitudes that evidence shows are the core drivers of family violence. All forms of violence are unacceptable and not all family violence is by men against women, but family violence overwhelmingly affects women. In Australia at least one woman a week is killed by her partner or former partner. Intimate partner violence contributes to more death, disability and illness in women aged 15 to 44 than any other preventable risk factor, and women are at least three times more likely than men to experience violence from an intimate partner and five times more likely to need medical attention because of it.

So the underlying drivers of family violence are found in gender inequality, most commonly expressed in four ways: condoning of violence against women; men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence; rigid gender roles and identities; and male peer relations that emphasise aggression and

disrespect towards women. So of course gender inequality is not the only factor that contributes to family violence, and the royal commission made that clear. Mental health, alcohol, financial stress and history of violence are all risk factors, but these factors will play out in different ways and in different individual cases. Gender inequality is the core underlying driver of family violence. This is not a radical idea. For over a decade this has been the basis of family violence prevention policy and practice in Victoria and across the state.

Can I also say, Chair, to the committee: work in schools on gender inequality as a violence prevention initiative is also not new. VicHealth undertook a review of the evidence for this type of initiative in 2008 for the Department of Education and Training, and that was extensive. The report identified the core components of effective primary prevention in schools, upon which the department has based the model for implementation of the respectful relationships initiative. The report highlighted that effective school-based initiatives can lead to a reduction in attitudes that support family violence over time. So the evidence is very clear, the recommendation is very clear, and that is why we are unapologetic about rolling over this respectful relationships.

The CHAIR — So the cause of children being traumatised at home either through experiencing family violence or seeing it firsthand, the government, in implementing the recommendations of the family violence royal commission, is trying to ensure that that investment assists with the general learning of those children who have experienced that level of trauma. Can you talk to the committee about some of the things that the program does do in terms of addressing issues around learning? Can you just outline to the committee what that means in a very practical sense in terms of assisting students with their learning?

Mr MERLINO — One of the aims of the Education State in schools is ensuring kids are happy, healthy, resilient and engaged. If they are not, they are not going to learn. So this initiative contributes to Education State objectives in many ways. As I said, one of our targets is that children are happy, healthy and resilient. Teaching of respectful relationships is a key component of the new Victorian curriculum through the health and physical education and personal and social capability curriculum areas. All Victorian government schools and Catholic schools are required to follow that curriculum.

The resilience, rights and respectful relationship teaching and learning materials, developed by education experts at the University of Melbourne, build important skills such as emotional literacy, positive coping, problem solving, stress management and help seeking in addition to content on gender and positive and respectful relationships. Evaluation of the respectful relationships education in schools pilot — this was across 19 Victorian schools in 2015 — highlighted that participating schools showed improved behaviour at school and improved engagement with their learning. So improved engagement — student engagement resulting from this initiative — will have huge flow-on benefits across all curriculum areas in schools.

Ms SHING — Minister, how many schools has the respectful relationships program been rolled out to at this point? Feel free to take that on notice or to answer it in the course of further answers, if you like.

Mr MERLINO — In February I announced 126 government, Catholic and independent leading schools to commence implementing the whole-school approach in their school, and from term 3 this year partner schools will commence their implementation of this initiative. Our target is 900 partner schools, with almost 600 schools expressing interest to date, so there is a high level of engagement in our respectful relationships curriculum. Almost 3000 teachers and school-based staff have participated in professional learning to date. This shows how systemic the rollout is.

Mr T. SMITH — With reference to the portfolio output summary on page 167 of BP 3 and the \$300 000 allocated to the Safe Schools program in 2015 —

Ms SHING — The Safe Schools bingo has begun.

Mr T. SMITH — Ms Shing, let me ask my question, please — for the 2017–18 financial year — that is BP 3 on page 47 in 2015–16, your departmental secretary said in February that your Safe Schools program is purely a statement, in some cases a pledge, a policy approach, it is not an element of the curriculum, it is not an element of the teaching program, and she did not know about it being compulsory. Is this program compulsory, Minister?

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Tim, for the question. The secretary is absolutely correct: Safe Schools is not part of the curriculum; it is a resource provided to schools. Every school will take what they need that is relevant

to their school community. This is a resource. It is about professional learning support for teachers and staff at the school, so it is correct to say that it is not part of the curriculum.

Mr T. SMITH — No, I asked you whether it was compulsory.

Ms SHING — There were a number of elements to your question, Mr Smith.

Ms WARD — You said it was a compulsory part of the curriculum, but it is not a part of the curriculum.

The CHAIR — Order!

Mr MERLINO — It is not a compulsory part of the curriculum because it is not curriculum. We made a commitment at the last election that every government secondary school will be a part of the Safe Schools program through this term of government, and we will deliver on that. We have got about 70 per cent of government secondary schools already engaged in the Safe Schools program, so we will deliver that across the state. And there is a reason for that, Tim. I am not surprised that this is your first question. I have been asked many questions on this topic for the last couple of years. I make the point to you, and I make it both as a parent and the Minister for Education: if a child or a young person does not feel safe at school, they are not going to learn.

We have discussed this previously. Safe Schools is a universal anti-bullying program. Many LGBTI students are bullied at school and, sadly, some same-sex-attracted young people are six times more likely to attempt suicide. The department has commenced the direct delivery of the program and will continue to provide tailored support to all Victorian schools, students and their families. This will include support for children and young people who are same-sex-attracted or transitioning gender and assist schools to prevent and respond to bullying, particularly incidents of homophobia and transphobia.

If I can just go to what is expected of schools, as you would be aware, Safe Schools was initially outside of the department and many times pilot programs are delivered outside of the program and outside of the department. In March — —

Mr T. SMITH — Not often led by Marxists.

Mr MERLINO — No. I will go to the point of your question, Tim, which is about what is expected of schools in relation to Safe Schools — —

Mr T. SMITH — No, it was about whether it is compulsory, Minister. Is it compulsory?

Ms WARD — He has already answered that question, Mr Smith.

Mr MERLINO — I have already answered your question, and I am happy to provide information to the committee.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — It cannot be compulsory if it is not in the curriculum, Mr Smith.

The CHAIR — Order! Mr Dimopoulos.

Mr MERLINO — I am happy to provide information to the committee on what is expected of schools.

Ms SHING — Mr Smith is just not listening to the answers to the questions.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Shing.

Mr MERLINO — In March 2017, the Safe Schools program transferred to direct management by the Department of Education and Training, along with our other universal anti-bullying programs. The Safe Schools program continues to provide tailored support to Victorian schools, students and their families. To be a safe school, schools need to take the following steps: make a public commitment to create a safe and inclusive school environment for LGBTI students; secondly, outline actions that identify what activities the schools will undertake to achieve the commitment; thirdly, identify the intended outcomes of implementing the school's actions and commitment; and, fourthly, publicly communicate the commitment, proposed actions and intended

outcomes. That is what it is about, and it will be different for each and every school. But it is not a compulsory part of the curriculum; it is not curriculum.

Mr T. SMITH — But you have said it is going to be compulsorily rolled out to every Victorian school, so the question is: if parents do not like this program, will you allow them to pull their children out of it?

Ms WARD — It is not taught.

Ms SHING — The question has been answered four times now, Mr Smith.

Ms WARD — It is not taught.

The CHAIR — Order!

Mr T. SMITH — Chair, are you going to do your job and, you know?

Mr MERLINO — In regards to —

The CHAIR — I think the minister is attempting to answer the member's question.

Mr MERLINO — So, Tim, to your question in terms of —

The CHAIR — Order! Minister, can you refer to members as Mr Smith or Ms Ward, please.

Mr MERLINO — Apologies, Chair. Mr Smith, in terms of your question about parental engagement, parental engagement is always encouraged and supported as part of the Safe Schools program, but you would be well aware that schools have a responsibility under Australian law and under Victorian law to ensure our schools are free of discrimination, and that is what this is about. We have an obligation under law to provide a safe environment — —

Mr T. SMITH — No, this is hard-left ideology being indoctrinated into primary school children, Deputy Premier.

Ms SHING — Many of Mr Smith's colleagues agree with you, Minister — many of Mr Smith's colleagues agree.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Shing.

Mr T. SMITH — The simple fact is that you cannot explain whether or not this is part of the curriculum. It is compulsory in all schools yet you will not allow parents to remove their children from this program. You cannot have it both ways, Minister.

Ms SHING — On a point of order, Chair, the question has now been answered four times by the minister —

Mr T. SMITH — It has not been answered.

Mr MORRIS — No, it has not.

Ms WARD — It has been answered, Mr Morris; it has been answered comprehensively.

The CHAIR — Order!

Mr T. SMITH — We have had the Sir Humphrey talking point for the best part of 10 minutes.

The CHAIR — Order!

Ms WARD — It has been answered, Mr Smith; you just have not understood it.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Ward!

Ms SHING — I will be heard on the point of order. The question has now been asked and answered four times —

Mr T. SMITH — Chair, when are you going to tell Ms Shing that you are the Chair?

Ms SHING — and on this basis Mr Smith may not like the answer but everybody else has heard it very clearly.

Mr T. SMITH — That is not a point of order, Chair, with respect; that is a debating point that is wasting my time.

Ms SHING — Tedious repetition, Mr Smith.

Mr T. SMITH — Chair, you are the Chair. Can you tell Ms Shing that you are the Chair please, for all our sakes?

The CHAIR — Mr Smith, have you got a question?

Mr T. SMITH — My question stands as put.

The CHAIR — Minister?

Mr MERLINO — Can Mr Smith repeat the question?

Mr T. SMITH — Will you allow parents to remove their children from this program if they do not feel comfortable with it?

Mr MERLINO — It is a universal antibullying program. We have got a responsibility — —

Mr T. SMITH — No, it is radical gender studies —

Mr MERLINO — It is not.

Mr T. SMITH — and hard-left Marxist theory being indoctrinated into primary school children.

Members interjecting.

Mr MERLINO — Well, Mr Smith, I know you are highly engaged on this issue, but can I reject your description of what this program is. It is not part of the Victorian curriculum. These are resources, professional learning for teachers to ensure that our schools are safe and free of discrimination. I can tell you that if a student does not feel safe at school, they will not learn. And we have a responsibility, Mr Smith, to every child in our schools.

Mr T. SMITH — Minister, are you denying that this program, in no way, shape or form, constitutes a teaching material to children?

Mr MERLINO — It is not part of the curriculum, Mr Smith. I cannot be any clearer than that.

Mr T. SMITH — Sir Humphrey, we can go around in circles here.

Ms SHING — Point of order.

Mr T. SMITH — I withdraw.

Mr MERLINO — I would remind you, Mr Smith, that the Safe Schools program had the support of the former Minister for Education, Mr Dixon.

Mr T. SMITH — Not in the form it is in now.

Members interjecting.

Mr MERLINO — The former member for Prahran.

Mr T. SMITH — How many schools, Minister, have refused to introduce this program?

Mr MERLINO — As I said before, around 70 per cent of government secondary schools are part of the Safe Schools program. We have made a commitment that all government secondary schools will deliver this program, and we will meet that delivery. Now of course there are a lot of myths and misinformation that are out there in the community, so of course some school communities look at those myths — and, Mr Smith, you are probably at the forefront of talking about those. There is engagement between the Safe Schools team within the Department of Education and Training and all government secondary schools. We will deliver on this program and, as I said, schools will deliver it in a public way through commonsense actions that are relevant to their local school community.

Mr T. SMITH — So, Minister, if it is not a teaching resource and it is not part of the curriculum — —

Ms SHING — It is a teaching resource.

Mr T. SMITH — For those of us who are not particularly down with bureaucratic speak, which is what you are burdening us with this morning, what exactly then are you imparting on children through this program?

Ms Shing interjected.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Shing!

Mr MERLINO — It is about ensuring that a school community is a safe community for all children. So, for example, we have a universal program through eSmart which tackles cyberbullying. We have a universal program through Safe Schools which tackles discrimination for same-sex attracted young people. It is like all of our universal anti-discrimination, antibullying programs.

And I will give you a couple of case studies, Mr Smith. Matthew Flinders Girls Secondary College in Geelong, a girls-only 7–12 school, have done a number of things. For example, since becoming a member, Matthew Flinders girls secondary school has done the following — —

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Pennicuik until 10.10.

Ms SHING — Provide the rest of it on notice, perhaps.

Mr MERLINO — I am happy to provide on notice those case studies.

Ms PENNICUIK — Thank you, Minister, Secretary and all the other staff from the department for coming today. Matthew Flinders has a great music program too.

I think one of the burning questions is funding — the federal-state funding mix and the Gonski changes that are in the wind. On page 2 of your presentation, Minister, it says:

Funded our share of the Gonski agreement for 2015, 2016 and 2017

and I think you mentioned 2018 when you were speaking. I am not sure that is particularly clear, how that is expressed in the budget. I wondered if you had any more clarification in terms of the government's commitment to this year, 2017–18 and beyond — 2018–19.

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Ms Pennicuik. I am happy to provide clarification on that, and it is absolutely the case. On coming to government we made a commitment that the Andrews government would deliver on the Gonski national agreement. We came into government and there was frankly a black hole in terms of delivery of the state's obligations to 2015. The point made in that second slide was that we, in our previous two budgets, delivered in full on our obligations for 2015, 16 and 17.

This year we are delivering in full on our obligations for the 2018 school year, and that is incorporated within the output of \$456 million. As you can see on page 53 of budget paper 3, there is the reference to the \$90 million which is 'Education State in 2018'. Many elements of school investment go to what is considered to be the state's delivery of our obligations under Gonski. So that includes — and this is part of NRIPS, which is the National — —

Ms SHING — Take the initialisation; we can get that later.

Mr MERLINO — I will provide clarity to the committee, but there is the national agreement and NRIPS, which is how that calculation is delivered. So a number of these items that you can see, Ms Pennicuik, go towards our delivery of our obligations under the Gonski national agreement, but the ‘Education State in 2018’, that \$90 million is an indication that there will be further announcements that we will be making over the course of this year for delivery in 2018. So I am pretty keen that that \$90 million includes further investments in special needs, for example. But we have not made those announcements today. We will be working with our partners in education and we will make announcements through the course of this year, but the critical thing is that this is investment that is made in the 2018 school year to deliver on the state’s obligations under Gonski. Our record is absolutely clear: every single year of this government we have delivered on the state’s obligations under Gonski.

You cannot say the same thing about the federal government. What is being proposed by the federal government, the difference between the original national agreement signed by the federal government of the day and the state government of the day — states and territories across the country — the difference for Victorian schools across the state is \$630 million each and every year. That is the difference between what Malcolm Turnbull has put on the table and delivered through their budget last week: the difference for Victorian schools is \$630 million.

Ms PENNICUIK — Thank you, Minister. I am not sure that I am completely clarified. Your page reference there was budget paper 3, page 53; is that correct?

Mr MERLINO — Yes.

Ms PENNICUIK — What is the relationship between the \$630 million shortfall that the government is saying will occur as a result of the federal government’s announcements? Over how many years, and how does that relate to your saying that you are actually fulfilling the 2018 commitment of \$456 million?

Mr MERLINO — That \$630 million shortfall is not reflected in the budget papers, and nor would we expect it to be. What is reflected in the budget papers is the state delivering its obligations. In terms of the figure of \$630 million, we look at enrolment growth and indexation that the federal government have put forward. There has been engagement between my department and the federal department. While the proposal means a slight increase in commonwealth funding compared to the last budget, it is around a \$40 million improvement, Ms Pennicuik. But whilst there is a slight improvement, it falls massively short of the original Gonski deal. Under the Gonski deal the commonwealth would have contributed around — —

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Ward until 10.21 a.m.

Ms PENNICUIK — Chair, I wonder if I could get the rest of that question on notice?

Mr MERLINO — Yes, absolutely. I am happy to provide how the calculation of 630 million was reached.

Ms PENNICUIK — Yes, thank you.

Ms WARD — Morning, everyone. Happy PAEC. Minister, I just wanted to bring you back to your presentation where you spoke about building the Education State. You talked about the huge investment in school infrastructure of 2.5 billion, and you spoke about 56 new schools across the state. Can you talk us through the areas that those schools are going into? I understand that \$70.5 million has been provided for land for new schools. Now, in the north, as I am sure you are aware, we have got huge growth occurring. Can you please talk us through where these are going to be located?

Mr MERLINO — Yes, thank you, Ms Ward. I am happy to talk in further detail about the investments we are making, particularly where we have got massive enrolment pressures in our growth corridors. We need to desperately get ahead of that curve, get ahead of that demand, and that is why we need significant and continued, consistent investment in infrastructure. So in the last budget — in our budget — we are investing \$265.1 million to plan, acquire land and build new schools and, as I have said and as you have mentioned, too, Ms Ward, that brings the pipeline of new schools to 56, which is quite extraordinary when you think that in 2016 not one new school in Victoria opened, because it takes a couple of years to design, fund and build a new school. Not one new school in 2016. We have now got a pipeline — —

Ms WARD — So there was inadequate planning in the past to ensure that there would be schools built in 2016?

Mr MERLINO — Yes. We have now got 56 schools in the pipeline, 10 of which opened at the start of this school year; a further 11 will open next school year. There was also a report handed down by VAGO last week which highlighted the need for 50 additional schools for the five years to 2021, around 10 per year. As I said, we are experiencing unprecedented population growth, which is leading to obvious pressure at existing schools, and this is a challenge we do not shy away from. We require 90 000 new student places over the next five years across government and non-government, so this is a joint responsibility. We need to deliver around 56 000 places in government schools and 34 000 in non-government schools. Many of these new families and students are in areas like Wyndham, Casey, Melton, Whittlesea and Melbourne inner-city, which is an area of enrolment growth, and these are the areas where new schools are being rolled out. The Department of Education and Training uses demographic modelling based on ABS census data and local enrolment and capacity data to determine the need, location and timing of school provision and to develop an annual investment pipeline for government consideration to meet the needs of Victoria's growing community.

Developing a new school is a significant investment. It involves a number of stages to ensure that public money is invested in the right place at the right time. These stages include demographic assessment and a site suitability assessment, followed by land acquisition, design and, finally, construction. There is regular consultation with local governments, with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and with developers to accurately predict growth at a local level, and this data is constantly updated and reviewed. The department annually reviews the need for new schools using detailed demographic modelling and works with the state and local planning authorities, including, obviously, the Victorian Planning Authority and local councils to identify and plan future sites.

So it is a big program, but when you think of the 90 000 over five years, the investment over the last three budgets means that we are well on our way to meeting that demand pressure.

Ms WARD — With the new schools that are opening next year, where are they up to, are they on time, has anything fallen behind, and what are the enrolments looking like for those schools?

Mr MERLINO — Over the next little while, 20 new schools will be opening over the next two years, helping to ease the enrolment pressure. In 2018, 11 schools will open, and an additional nine are anticipated to open in 2019 — so absolutely meeting the need that was identified in that VAGO report. And in terms of where those schools are: Armstrong Creek education precinct, Bannockburn prep to year 12. Huge issue for Bannockburn — not one government secondary school in Golden Plains shire. The previous government made a commitment to primary provision. We made a commitment to secondary provision as well, so I am really excited about that project. North Geelong special development school, Torquay North primary, Beaumaris secondary, Gum Scrub Creek primary, Richmond High School, Taylors Hill West secondary college, Edgars Creek secondary school, Tarneit West primary school and Ferrars Street in South Melbourne primary school, which is our first government vertical school, which is incredibly exciting. So all schools are progressing on schedule and expected to open term 1 next year. And of the 11 schools, enrolment has already opened at three schools, and enrolments for the remaining schools are anticipated to open later in the year.

In 2019 Aitken Hill primary, Burnside primary and Prahran secondary — which is another iconic school, along with Richmond high. Prahran secondary in 19. South Melbourne Park primary, Yarrambat Park primary, Preston high school, Pakenham North East and a further two schools, subject to land acquisition being finalised — those are Sanctuary Lakes South primary school and Truganina East P-9 — and stage 5 of Manor Lakes P-12 and stage 2 of Tarneit senior secondary.

South Melbourne is an interesting one. Two brand-new schools over the next couple of years: Ferrars Street and then South Melbourne park primary, and I think they are the first new schools in South Melbourne for a century, I think — it is a long, long time — which shows that pressure in inner Melbourne.

Ms WARD — So with the 90 000 student places that you have mentioned, and you have broken that up into 56 000 state school and 34 000 private school, or independent schools, how many of them are being accommodated in the plans that you have got for the next two years?

Mr MERLINO — We are ahead of the curve. So 90 000 additional enrolments over the next five years. As I said, the analysis of state government places — student enrolments — is around 56. Looking at our total capital program, what we inherited and the investment over three years, we are meeting the needs of 70 000 additional enrolments, so this is one of the great achievements of the Andrews government, and it is the outcome. It is one thing to talk about dollars, it is one thing to talk about the number of schools; this is meeting the needs. We knew that in South Melbourne, for example, if we did not have a school opening next year, we would literally not have the room to meet the needs of prep students for that year. We have to get it opened. So there are 70 000 new student places, and that is across land acquisitions, construction of new schools and the relocatable building program. So there is more work to be done. The first step is purchasing the land and then obviously a future funding allocation for construction.

Ms WARD — This game of catch-up must have placed considerable pressure on your department.

Mr MERLINO — Yes. That was one of the reasons why we wanted to establish a dedicated infrastructure arm for education, reducing the time lines that it takes to build schools. That is exactly why we created the VSBA — additional expertise, more efficient delivery of our construction pipeline. But Chris Keating, who is the CEO of the Victorian School Building Authority, might want to add a few words.

Mr KEATING — So certainly the focus on delivery has been huge in terms of scaling up to meet that challenge. What we have also really found as we have delivered in these communities is that strong desire for communities to actually be engaged in the process. We have really made sure that every step of the way we have ramped up that public facing — the town hall meetings, the information on our website, so they can actually be engaged in the process. We have really had an incredible response from that, so that has really been another big part of the uplift.

Ms WARD — In having those consultations, has it changed the way that you have actually designed the school? The way you initially thought the school might look — have the community consultations shown different ways of thinking about schools and how schools are built?

Mr KEATING — Yes. I think every time we engage we get different messages from different communities. One of the things that comes through most strongly is that every community wants their school to be part of the community, not just an educational institution. They want it to be open out of hours, open for adult education, accessible services. So that has come through pretty much through every single community.

The other big thing is speaking to students. Historically we have engaged with educators, but actually sitting down with students and getting their views and their aspirations is a big part as well.

Ms WARD — Minister, can I get you to go to budget paper 3, page 56, where there is a line item regarding relocatable classrooms. I have to say that portables have come a long way since I was a kid.

Mr MERLINO — They have.

Ms WARD — They really have — some of the relocatables that I have got in my community are just fantastic. I have to say teachers and principals are really happy with them.

Ms SHING — Page 59, sorry.

Ms WARD — Did I say 58? Sorry, I meant 59. Can you give us more information about how this funding is going to be allocated? Seventy-five million is quite a lot of money.

Mr MERLINO — Yes, it is a lot of money. Ms Ward, that is \$75 million to build more than 220 new single and multistorey relocatable classrooms, so that brings our total to 640 new relocatables funded over the past three budgets, and that has added more than 30 000 places to the system. There was a chronic lack of investment in our relocatable program when we came into government — —

The CHAIR — The Deputy Chair until 10 32 a.m.

Mr MORRIS — Morning, Minister. Budget paper 3, page 167, which is the output summary for the department, but particularly the Safe Schools program. The Safe Schools website, which is part of the DET website, some of the advisory material there encourages students to visit a GP about accessing medical

transitioning and gender therapy and also indicates that that gender therapy may include genital surgery and cosmetic surgery and the prescription of puberty blockers and HRT, or hormone replacement therapy. I was just wondering how it is appropriate for a student to undertake medical treatment for gender transitioning without parental consent.

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Mr Morris, and I might ask Katy Haire, deputy secretary, to also provide some additional comments. I just want to put on the record again: Safe Schools does not teach sexual practices, it does not talk about chest binding. It is simply a way to engage teachers, school communities and students to provide a safe environment for all kids — for all kids. I might ask Katy to add to my comments.

Ms SHING — That is probably why so many Liberal MPs support it.

Ms HAIRE — There is a range of resources that the department makes available to schools to help them create safe and inclusive environments. As the minister said earlier, none of the materials are compulsory or part of the curriculum. Through the contract that we had with La Trobe University the department contracted for the development of the resource known as All Of Us, and that resource is linked on our website.

The other resources on our website which I think you are referring to, Mr Morris, have been produced by organisations, not by the department nor by our contractors, and are there as additional material to provide helpful information to teachers and schools, should they need to assist students or families who are going through homophobic bullying or other issues. The material says, I think, on the website, that those resources are resources that staff at safe schools may access to address the needs of their students. School staff use their judgement to determine how and when to provide these materials to students and how to communicate with them about these matters. This is part of what our teachers and school leaders do every day in the classroom. The resource that you are referring to, Mr Morris, which I am aware of, is not part of the suite of resources which is produced by the department. It is part of a set of other material which schools may refer students to, should they need to.

Mr MORRIS — Thank you for the explanation. I guess the point is that the link from the Safe Schools subset of the DET website — and I am addressing the minister more directly than Ms Haire at this point — links to this material, which includes the words ‘It may be possible to consider a student able to make decisions without parental consent’. It clearly says this in the information which is housed on the department website, even if it is accessed from third parties — apparently endorsed third parties, or it would not be on the website.

So the question remains: is it appropriate for a student to undertake medical treatment for gender transitioning without the consent of their parents? I am asking you, Minister, with respect, for a direct response to that question, in a policy sense.

Mr MERLINO — As the deputy secretary outlined, Mr Morris, this is information to guide teachers and school communities.

Ms HAIRE — In conversation.

Mr MERLINO — None of these resources are compulsory. I will go back to — —

Mr MORRIS — No, I am asking you: is it appropriate? As the head of education in the state of Victoria, is it appropriate?

Ms SHING — On a point of order, you are asking for an opinion — —

Mr MORRIS — I am asking the minister whether it is appropriate — —

Ms WARD — How is that relevant to the budget papers, Mr Morris?

Ms SHING — You can get angry all you want, Mr Morris.

Mr T. SMITH — It is a good question, Chair.

Mr MORRIS — This is not going to descent into a total farce. You will keep your members in order.

Ms WARD — The farce is the ridiculous nature of these questions, Mr Morris.

Members interjecting.

Ms SHING — Last Friday when I in fact raised a similar point of order, Mr Morris, I actually detected you nodding across the table, and it was in exactly the same terms. So on that basis, you are asking for an opinion — —

Mr MORRIS — I have asked the minister — —

Ms SHING — Is it appropriate.

Mr MORRIS — a question.

Ms SHING — You are asking for a value judgement or an opinion. That is contrary to standing orders.

Mr MORRIS — I am asking the head of education in the state of Victoria whether he considers it is appropriate, given that the department of which he is head has material directly accessed from its website that effectively says that. I am asking him if he agrees with that view.

Ms SHING — And you are asking for an opinion.

Ms WARD — It is a resource; it is not curriculum.

The CHAIR — The question stands.

Mr MERLINO — Mr Morris, in regards to your question, as the deputy secretary outlined, these are resources and information provided to school communities — —

Mr MORRIS — Do you, as the head of the department — —

Members interjecting.

Mr MORRIS — Do you endorse that view? I am not interested in the three sections removed. Do you endorse the view or not?

Mr MERLINO — Mr Morris, if you are going to interrupt me every time I am attempting to answer your question — firstly, in terms of the resources and the materials, these are all age-appropriate resources developed by experts — —

Mr MORRIS — That is not the question. The question is whether you endorse that view.

Ms WARD — Again, Mr Morris, you are interrupting, and you are not letting the minister get to the substance of his answer.

The CHAIR — Order, Ms Ward.

Mr MERLINO — Mr Morris, I am happy to answer your question. In regards to — —

Mr MORRIS — You are answering a different question. I am trying to get you to answer the question I am asking.

Mr MERLINO — Mr Morris, in regards to medical issues, there is — —

Mr MORRIS — I am asking you. I am not asking about the website. I am not asking about third-party endorsements. I am not asking about other issues. I am asking about your views.

Mr MERLINO — I think this reflects poorly on you, Deputy Chair.

Ms SHING — On a point of order, Chair, pursuant to the standing orders, there is no capacity to compel a person to answer a question in a specific way. In addition to that, you have in fact asked for an opinion. When you ask for an opinion, Mr Morris, you actually need to accept what you are given because of the very nature of the question that you have posed.

The CHAIR — I have heard enough on the point of order. The minister to continue.

Mr MERLINO — As I have been trying to say for quite a while, medical treatment is a matter for doctors, not educators.

Members interjecting.

Mr MERLINO — It is between young people, their doctor and their family. There is a longstanding legal requirement on doctors in regards to mature minors. So GPs — —

Mr MORRIS — We are not talking about doctors here. We are talking about — —

Mr MERLINO — Mr Morris, you have asked me a medical question, and I am giving you an answer. Medical issues are for doctors to determine — —

Mr MORRIS — We are talking about a program that you have set up. Do you endorse it?

Ms WARD — Chair, I have a point of order, and my point of order is that as the only parent here with a child attending a safe school, and a safe school that has been a part of the program for more than a decade, this line of questioning is not relevant to my daughter's experience or anyone at that school.

Mr MORRIS — That is not a point of order, that is a delaying tactic.

The CHAIR — There is no point of order. Mr Morris, I think the minister was attempting to answer your question.

Mr MORRIS — Indeed. He was going nowhere near it.

Mr MERLINO — Medical treatment, medical issues, are for doctors and their patients, and where appropriate —

Mr MORRIS — I did not ask about doctors. I asked whether you thought it was appropriate.

Mr MERLINO — parents. If the GP — —

Mr MORRIS — Do you think it is appropriate?

Mr MERLINO — If the medical practitioner considers that the young person is not a mature minor, then parents are engaged. That is the longstanding process. There is no — —

Mr T. SMITH — Why is it connected to the DET website if it is a matter for doctors?

Mr MORRIS — This is information on the DET website. Do you think it is appropriate?

Mr MERLINO — I have answered your question, Mr Morris. This line of questioning reflects poorly on you.

Mr MORRIS — No, that you continue in failing to answer it reflects very poorly on you.

Mr MERLINO — Are you opposing the concept of mature minors and how they engage with their doctors?

Mr MORRIS — I am asking you a question which you are refusing to answer.

Mr MERLINO — No, that is it completely incorrect, Mr Morris.

Mr MORRIS — Do you think it is appropriate — yes or no?

Ms WARD — Your obsession with this issue is unhealthy.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Ward!

Mr MORRIS — Do you think it is appropriate?

Mr MERLINO — The materials are absolutely age appropriate. There are resources to support teachers and students and school communities. This is a program, including in this line of questioning, that was supported by the former Liberal Minister for Education, the former Liberal-Nationals government — —

Mr MORRIS — Is it appropriate for a student to undertake medical treatment for gender transitioning without the consent of their parents?

Mr MERLINO — I would leave that appropriately to medical practitioners, their patients and if in the view — —

Mr MORRIS — So you are prepared to run the department, you are prepared to put the information up on the website, but you have no view.

Mr MERLINO — I am just outlining to you how medical practice is delivered in this country. If a young person — —

Mr MORRIS — I am not asking about medical practice. I am asking about you, what you think as the head of the department. You are the head of the department. Do you think it is appropriate, yes or no?

Mr MERLINO — Actually the secretary is the head of the department.

Ms WARD — Let us not talk about building programs. Let us not talk about teacher resources. Let us just talk about Safe Schools.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Ward!

Mr MORRIS — Apparently were not going to get an answer.

Ms PATTEN — Thank you, Minister and team. I just turn to page 182 of budget paper 3 and also in regard to your presentation on equity funding in schools. I was interested to look at your targets for NAPLAN testing in particular for Aboriginal students and for all students overall. I note that the targets around performance measures for year 7 and year 9 NAPLAN testing have not changed from the previous budget. I also note that our targets for Aboriginal students are half those of non-Aboriginal students. I am wondering if that is because it is a small number of students, so how many Aboriginal students are we speaking about? In looking at those figures, it is sort of suggesting that we are satisfied that 70 per cent of Aboriginal students would be in the bottom three levels of the 10 NAPLAN levels.

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Ms Patten. This is an issue of some debate between myself and the department in regard to the targets that we set for Indigenous students. You are correct in outlining that this is quite a challenge. We took a conscious decision that we are not going to reduce the targets, even though across many of them we are not meeting those targets at the moment. We took a conscious decision not to reduce those targets. So there are investments that we are making across the board supporting all students that will also include our Koori students.

We have got a good education system in Victoria. It compares well nationally and internationally, but one of the characteristics of education, not only in Victoria but across the nation, is the connection between disadvantage and poor student outcomes. So when we compare ourselves to other like jurisdictions we have got too long a tail between outcomes and too much impact from disadvantage on poor student outcomes.

Ms PATTEN — I guess because you have invested another \$72 million into targeting those students who are not reaching some NAPLAN standards, I guess I would have expected slightly more ambitious targets given the amount of money that you are putting towards it.

Mr MERLINO — The targets against the measures for Koori students were informed by the Council of Australian Government's close the gap target to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements by 2018, so these are quite ambitious stretch targets, Ms Patten.

Ms PATTEN — They are the same as last year's.

Mr MERLINO — Yes, they are, but the reason is that we did not want to reduce them. We know that this is a tough area of public policy. How can we lift those standards? In 2006 five of the eight BP3 NAPLAN targets set for Koori students were met with a 95 per cent confidence interval. These relate to years 3, 5 and 7 reading and years 3 and 7 numeracy, but we will be increasing our efforts to meet the targets for year 9 and year 5 numeracy and year 9 numeracy.

We have got a number of initiatives. I mentioned in my presentation the overall investment in needs-based funding. So it is a 70 per cent increase in needs-based funding — \$566 million directly to schools. In addition to that in July 2016 we launched Marrung, which is our 10-year Aboriginal education plan developed in partnership with the Victorian Koori community, and that underpins the delivery of the Education State for Koori learners and includes actions to achieve improved attendance and achievement of Koori students.

Ms PATTEN — And these seem like really positive programs that you are implementing. Still I guess I go back to why we would not be going forward at a higher rate than sort of 0.8 per cent, and again we are targeting 26 per cent of Aboriginal students to be above the bottom three bands of reading in year 9. I am happy to get a more detailed response.

Mr MERLINO — I am happy to deliver some further information for you, Ms Patten.

Ms PATTEN — That would be great. Maybe with some numbers of how many Aboriginal students we are speaking about.

Mr MERLINO — Yes, absolutely, and there are a number of issues in Marrung, which I am pleased to provide to the committee. I do not have time now to go through it, but —

Ms PATTEN — If you could give me a specific briefing on that.

Mr MERLINO — it is a significant focus of our investment in the Education State.

The CHAIR — Take that on notice.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Welcome, Minister, and officers. Minister, I am going to ask you to elaborate on the EBA that you referred to in your presentation, but before I do I am just going to use 30 seconds of my time to say on the record how disgusted I am at the Liberal Party's trotting out of these old perceptions. We used to burn witches as a society. We used to believe in the tooth fairy, a whole bunch of things —

Mr T. SMITH — Mate, you just tweeted that 20 minutes ago. It was a grubby tweet.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — and we used to make Black people sit up the back.

Mr T. SMITH — It is another grubby little hit. Come on.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Human evolution has obviously bypassed some people. Minister, can I just say, your responses were outstanding. Your work in this area is outstanding. Thousands of kids around Victoria who depend on your work, your department's work and their school's work for their very survival — let alone their learning, their very survival — owe nothing to the Liberal Party of Victoria on this stuff at all. It is disgusting, absolutely disgusting.

Ms SHING — Despite members within their ranks who want the Safe Schools program to proceed.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — That is right, and it is a political ploy that does not even work electorally in their favour anyway.

Mr T. SMITH — Can we get to the question, Chair, or are we going to have a full commentary?

The CHAIR — Mr Dimopoulos.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Nonetheless, Minister, I had to get that out because it was so pathetic, those responses.

Mr T. SMITH — Here we go. There is another big hit.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — On the EBA, Minister — —

Ms SHING — Now you can talk about how much you hate unions, Mr Smith.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Shing.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — You talked a bit about it in your presentation. What I am particularly interested in is — the link may seem natural, but I think it needs a bit more exploration — how does it actually impact? How does the EBA, which I think went through without much trouble at all, actually improve student learning outcomes other than just rewarding teachers, who I think need to be rewarded. How does it translate to the classroom? I have got a couple of follow-ups for you as well.

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Mr Dimopoulos, and for your comments as well. This was a great EBA, and I am quite proud that it was the first EBA in some 20 years that was achieved without industrial disputation. The thing I am most pleased about with the EBA is that not only is it a fair and reasonable outcome in terms of wages and conditions et cetera, but it really focuses on the difference that teachers, educational staff and principals can make in learning. Improving the quality in teaching is the single most important thing that we can do to improve student outcomes. So this agreement is about building teacher expertise, encouraging greater collaboration and professional development and giving the teachers the time they need to learn from the best in their profession.

I have already outlined a few key highlights — the 3000 learning specialists. That means now that a teacher with leadership skills and ambition does not need to leave the classroom to become a year-level coordinator, assistant principal or principal. They can stay in the classroom, and that is what these 3000 learning specialists will do. So they will predominantly be classroom teachers but also have a responsibility to coach, engage and collaborate with their colleagues and improve the teaching practice of their fellow teachers. The 2500 contract teachers and 5000 contract education support staff — transforming their lives, as individuals and their families, by giving them ongoing employment. Recognising the role of principals as leaders — so a 4 per cent pay rise for principals compared to 3.25 per cent for teachers. But also the principal network leaders — so there are about 67 principal network leaders — they will receive an additional \$10 000.

We have taken steps to respond to issues of workload by introducing a model that will regulate teacher activities outside the classroom that have a direct focus on improvements in the classroom. So 20 hours face to face, for example, and 10 hours — so between 20 and 30 hours — will be delivered for teaching practice: collaborating with colleagues, planning, all of those things that relate to their teaching practice. Then the remaining 8 hours are things that principals may require of teachers — the yard duty, the meetings et cetera. So really focusing on that practice and providing an opportunity for professional learning outside of the classroom — so four days a year. Students are still in their classroom being taught, but teachers will have the entitlement of four days of professional learning, collaboration and planning, so they can improve on their own practice.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Minister, can I take you back just a moment to the workload issue that you were referring to in relation to teachers. I have heard from several principals, and this is not only of course under this government, that the principals' workload is enormous. There is a group of them that I have spoken to that feel quite fatigued — there is a lot of red tape and paperwork and a whole range of those things. That is probably not new, but you talked about how you are trying to help teachers manage that workload. Is there anything in relation to principals — teachers are obviously a far bigger population size, so that matters, but just in terms of principals? That would be useful.

Mr MERLINO — There are a few things here, and you are absolutely right to identify the workload, the pressure. We expect a lot of our principals. You know, they are the bosses, they are counsellors, they are accountants but most importantly they are education leaders. They do a lot of roles and there is a lot of pressure on our principals as system leaders. So a couple of things — what I have talked about. So recognising that in terms of their remuneration — 4 per cent as well as the realignment of the principal classification budget levels, providing access to a higher salary range for about 20 per cent of principals, and the recognition of principals as network leaders.

So there is recognition in terms of remuneration, but we are also committed to providing a safe working environment in our schools. So strong work within the department, developed by former principals within the department, around providing principal health and wellbeing support: an employee assistance program with

access to four free confidential sessions to discuss any personal or work-related issues; access to resources such as the health and wellbeing portal; a manager assist program; a conflict resolution support service; the department's student and engagement guidance; provision of personal health and wellbeing-focused workshops through the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership; a significant increase in the principal support unit; and the creation, as I have mentioned to the committee before, of the additional 150 regional staff, providing that direct support either through senior education improvement leaders and other regional support staff to support principals.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Minister, with those, is it the full staffing profile coming on board with those regional support staff?

Mr MERLINO — Mr Dimopoulos, the full component is on board now. There is obviously movement in terms of people taking on different roles, and you get that every year with people moving back into a principal role or principals moving to a leadership role at a regional level, so there is always movement. But in terms of delivering that additional regional support, that is now embedded in the system. When we came into government, our schools were telling us quite clearly that they were islands without support; there was no-one at the other end of the phone. Now we have got multidisciplinary support teams, expert teams to come in when needed, and we have delivered a number of other initiatives in this year's budget in terms of supporting schools that are underperforming as well.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Minister, it is going to be a bit vague because I do not know the terminology, so bear with me. Thank you; that principal support sounds excellent, and I think it will probably take a bit of time. There is a bit of a lag, obviously, because some of those staff have just been recruited in the last, I imagine, year or so. Some of the principal commentary was around, and again I stress this has been consistent for them over several years — probably more to the Secretary on this question — some of the forms they are required to fill out. While they are formulaic, they feel that the department also expects formulaic responses. If they do not quite fit, they send it back to you and say, 'It doesn't quite fit'. I cannot remember what the forms are about, to be honest. Obviously when there are important things, like about expenditure or those other things that matter, that whole IBAC endeavour, the suggestion was the department be a bit more accommodating of principals filling out those forms in a way that is relevant and expeditious to them and should be sufficient to the department. I do not know —

Ms SHING — Standardisation.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Standardisation, but also allowing some room. So it is not very helpful, but I will get more information, but that was a clear message from my principals when I met them in unison — 14 of them the other day.

Mr MERLINO — That is right, and we hear that message as well. There are some things that have to be delivered — for example, the new child safe standards. We had to roll that across our system, across government and non-government. That was a fair amount of work, and we are hearing that message, so we are actually talking internally about 'How do we make sure that we allow principals some air time so that they are not stuck at the desk?'. Some things are unavoidable, but we are conscious of the fact that we need our principals to be first and foremost education leaders. We are very much aware of that. I might ask the secretary if she wants to add any further comments to that.

Ms CALLISTER — Mr Dimopoulos, we are very conscious, as the minister said, of the numbers of things that we ask schools to do, and we are very focused on the implementation phase of the equity funding and the work towards the 10 targets. So we are trying to keep some clear air for principals to focus on the teaching and learning and the leadership in their schools. As the minister said, there are some things that are —

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Inevitable.

Ms CALLISTER — inevitable. There are also some things we are trying to do to help schools, to take some pressure off them — to have more centralised approaches to procurement, for example, which I think we spoke about in the secretaries PAEC in February. We are also trying to consult with them and give them warning about what are the givens that we need to — —

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Through the year.

Ms CALLISTER — Yes, through the year, and have a sort of agreed calendar as much as possible so they know what is coming.

Mr T. SMITH — With reference to BP3, page 194, and department programs for students with disabilities, how many specialist and specialist development government schools are running the Safe Schools program?

Ms SHING — Bingo again! God, you've got nothing else to fixate on, have you, nothing else.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Shing!

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR — Order!

Mr MERLINO — It is extraordinary that we are almost an hour and a half into this hearing and the only questions coming from the Liberal Party are questions about Safe Schools.

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR — Order! Government members!

Mr MERLINO — In regard to the specific question, Mr Smith, I am happy to take that on notice. There are a number of special settings that deliver Safe Schools, but I will come back to you on notice.

Mr T. SMITH — Referring to BP3, page 167, and the funding for resilience, rights and respectful relationships programs, do you support the use of resources and materials provided through the Welcoming Schools website, which discusses transgenderism, as recommended in the resilience, rights and respectful relationships learning materials, for prep students?

Mr MERLINO — I will ask the deputy secretary, Katy Haire, to respond.

Ms HAIRE — Mr Smith, the respect, resilience and rights materials include a link to a specific page on the Welcoming Schools website: in topic 8 across each of the year level resources from foundation through to level 7 and 8. They do not link to any other pages of the website, nor do they endorse any of the materials, some of which you referred to at the last hearing. The link that is made from the RRRR materials to Welcoming Schools is specifically to a page entitled 'Be prepared for questions and put-downs about gender', and it is a resource offered to teachers, should they choose to use it. Again, similar to the Safe Schools, it is not a compulsory resource. It is there at the back as a link, as a further resource for schools and teachers, should they choose to use it, and the specific resource that is provided for their consideration and for teacher decision-making is about that question of questions and put-downs about gender. There is not any other link to Welcoming Schools. The link in each of the materials is to that specific page.

Mr T. SMITH — Are you aware that lesson plans contained on the Welcoming Schools website recommend the reading and discussion of children's picture books to children of kinder age, like *I Am Jazz* about a transgender child, which explains that 'One's gender is about who you know you are deep inside'.

Ms HAIRE — Yes, Mr Smith, I have looked at the website, and I am aware of the storybook that you are referring to. However, that is not the link that is in the resources. The link in our resources is to the specific page titled 'Be prepared for questions and put-downs about gender', and that goes back to the point the Deputy Premier was making before about the purpose of respectful relationships education, which is about addressing and preventing harmful attitudes about gender.

Mr T. SMITH — There are a number of other links on that web page, deputy secretary, for kinder-aged children to be confronted with these sorts of, I suppose, highly sensitive topics. Do you not think that is slightly age inappropriate?

Ms SHING — On a point of order, sorry, again Mr Smith perhaps you could rephrase your question so that you are not asking for an opinion.

Mr T. SMITH — Chair, I am not going to be told what I can and cannot ask by Ms Shing.

Ms SHING — Unfortunately you do not seem to understand the rules of the way that the PAEC process operates, and I will keep raising these issues until you get the point.

Mr T. SMITH — Clearly you think you can tell everyone else what to do in your own party and indeed this committee. This is not some sort of little union or Labor Party gathering. I can ask whatever I like, Ms Shing.

The CHAIR — Order!

Mr T. SMITH — Ms Shing is so used to telling everyone else what to do around here that she is not used to having someone answering back to her.

The CHAIR — Mr Smith, you are eating into your own time. I suggest you might want to direct that question to the minister as opposed to the deputy secretary.

Mr T. SMITH — I am happy to direct it to the minister.

Mr MERLINO — Can you repeat the question, Mr Smith?

Mr T. SMITH — The age appropriateness of the material — for example, the Welcoming Schools website, Minister.

Mr MERLINO — Well, Mr Smith, the deputy secretary has given a very fulsome answer in terms of the links to particular pages and what that relates to. In terms of resources, they are at all times age-appropriate.

Mr T. SMITH — But these are very, very difficult — how do I put this? — topics and sensitive subjects for five-year-olds to be dealing with, Minister. I do not think parents around Victoria think that their five-year-olds should be confronted with this sort of material.

Mr MERLINO — All I can say is that the resources provided to teachers are age-appropriate resources. I come back to this fundamental point that every single child — we are not picking and choosing which children in our schools, Mr Smith, are protected from discrimination — should be safe, happy and engaged in our school system. That is what respectful relationships is about, that is what Safe Schools is about, that is what eSmart is about, which is combating cyberbullying. You do not learn if you are not safe, happy and engaged in our schools.

As a parent — I have got three kids — I want my children to be safe, happy and engaged in school. If one of my children was same-sex attracted, and may well be one day, I would want that child to be safe, happy and engaged in school.

Mr T. SMITH — And every school, Deputy Premier, has a duty of care.

Mr MERLINO — A duty of care to every child.

Mr T. SMITH — With or without your various different social programs, Minister, the simple fact is this: you are bringing in ideas and topics and indeed discussions to five-year-olds that most people in this society think are completely over the top and are inappropriate.

Mr MERLINO — I reject the statement. I reject the question.

Mr T. SMITH — Fancy talking to a five-year-old about transgenderism! I mean, what planet are you on, man?

Ms SHING — This is why people think politicians are out of touch. This is why people think politicians like you, Mr Smith — —

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Shing!

Mr T. SMITH — Once again Ms Shing has decided to tell us what is wrong with our profession — case in point. Thank you, Chair.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Will you stop picking on Ms Shing, you bully!

Mr T. SMITH — Ms Shing picks on everyone else.

The CHAIR — Order!

Mr MERLINO — For the benefit of the committee, Chair, an Australian study reported that young people's experiences of homophobia had negatively affected their schooling, finding that 29 per cent of respondents reported they could not concentrate in school; 20 per cent missed classes; 21 per cent missed days at school; 20 per cent, marks dropped; 18 per cent hid at recess and at lunch; 16 per cent did not use change rooms; 13 per cent dropped out of sport; 9 per cent did not use the toilet; 10 per cent moved schools; 8 per cent dropped out altogether — —

Mr T. SMITH — When I asked for evidence from your department about these facts in the Victorian schools for last year, they could not give it to me.

Mr MERLINO — Another Australian study conducted in 2014 asked young people in what ways homophobia and transphobia impacted on schooling, and it found that 32.6 per cent could not concentrate in class; 19.5 missed classes; 21 per cent missed days at school; 23.5 per cent, their marks dropped; 21 per cent hid at recess and lunch. These are young lives, Mr Smith.

Mr T. SMITH — And, Deputy Premier, I was talking about five-year-olds.

Mr MERLINO — I am talking about all kids.

Mr T. SMITH — You can quote as many stats as you like. I am talking about primary school aged kids. Stop politicising the first year at school, for God's sake.

Mr MERLINO — So, Mr Smith, if I can provide some further information to the committee, the topics that are engaged with students at foundation level, so the 5 and 6-year-olds, topic 1 is around emotional literacy: recognising and identifying their own emotions and describing situations that may evoke these emotions. Topic 2 is around personal strengths: identifying and describing personal strengths, explaining how these strengths help them to contribute to family and school life and identifying ways to care for others, including ways of making and keeping friends. Topic 3 is positive coping: reflecting on emotional responses, discussing ways in which they can take responsibility for their actions, describing ways to express emotions to show awareness of the feelings and needs of others — perhaps you should go back to foundation, Mr Smith — and practising techniques to deal with feelings of fear and anger. Topic 4, problem solving: recognising the needs and interests of others, listening to others' ideas and recognising that others may see things differently, recognising there are many ways to solve conflict and identifying options when making decisions to meet their needs and the needs of others.

I can go on. Topic 5, stress management: recognise and identify their own emotions, describe situations that may evoke these emotions, recognise and identify how those emotions influence the way they feel and act, express emotions constructively. Topic 6, help seeking. Topic 7, gender and identity: reflect on their gender identity, develop an awareness of positive and negative gender norms, challenge negative gender norms, develop an appreciation of difference. Topic 8, positive gender relationships.

Ms PENNICUIK — I would just like to go back briefly to where we left off before but also segue into a question that sort of spins off from that. You were referring to the \$90 million, 'Education State in 2018', on page 53. On page 56 of budget paper 3 it says:

As part of making Victoria the Education State, the government will allocate additional funding ...

I am presuming that is the 90 million. It will be 'held centrally and government will make further announcements' as to how that will be allocated.

Mr MERLINO — Yes.

Ms PENNICUIK — But you did mention in your remarks to me that that was going towards special needs.

Also, on your presentation, page 3, there would be an extra \$566 million over four years in additional equity funding —

Mr MERLINO — Yes.

Ms PENNICUIK — some of that to target students who have not met NAPLAN. Ms Patten was talking about that.

Mr MERLINO — Yes.

Ms PENNICUIK — Then there is the issue of \$50 million over four years for 350 of the lowest performing government schools.

Mr MERLINO — Yes.

Ms PENNICUIK — That is about 20 per cent of schools, or a bit over 20 per cent of government schools.

Mr MERLINO — Yes.

Ms PENNICUIK — My question about all of that and how it all fits together — equity funding, funding for the lowest performing government schools — is: how do you identify which are the lowest performing government schools? What are the criteria for that, and what is the lowest? Is there some sort of cut-off point that differentiates that 20 per cent of schools from the other 80 per cent?

Mr MERLINO — Yes. Okay. Thanks, Ms Pennicuik. There are a few things there. Firstly, the reference to 566 — that was the investment we made in previous budgets to tackle the link between disadvantage and poor outcomes. This is now part of schools' SRPs, part of their school budgets. It is additional funding that is there each and every year so schools are better able to — as I mentioned at the start, additional teachers, literacy coaches, numeracy coaches, increasing their wellbeing team. Every school is different, based on where their greatest need is, and that equity funding allows those schools to make those investments.

In relation to the \$90 million, that is not currently linked to any particular program or initiative. We will be making announcements over the course of this year. There is significant funding in this year's budget to meet demand for the program for students with a disability. Enrolment pressure is not just pressure on school buildings; it is pressure on programs such as PSD, transport and English as an additional language, so there is a demand funding increase — new money. Then one of the things I am keen to address with the \$90 million includes special needs. There will be other things that we will do, and we will make those announcements over the course of the next six months or so.

In relation to underperformance, this was one of the key themes in recommendations under the Bracks review. We will be investing \$50.7 million over the next four years, including more than 12 million in 17–18, to better support schools with complex challenges. Intensive support for Victoria's most complex schools is critical to achieving the Education State targets and reducing the impact of disadvantage, and it will be done in a number of ways.

For complex reasons and for a variety of reasons, schools may not be performing at the level we need them to be performing at. It may be highly disadvantaged communities, but there may be other reasons why schools are not performing. There will be eight turnaround teams that will build the capability of existing school leadership teams to lead each school's focus on delivering improved student outcomes. This is a turnaround team of a very experienced principal and teachers being embedded in a school community, working with the principal, the leadership teams and the teachers to improve their practice — so turnaround teams that get embedded in those schools. There will be up to 40 executive principals working in our most underperforming schools and improvement partnerships, so partnering up — 64 school improvement partnerships over four years, partnering up leadership teams from underperforming teams to high-performance schools.

Ms PENNICUIK — If I could just interrupt you and ask you to provide the rest of those figures that you were going through on notice?

Mr MERLINO — Yes.

Ms PENNICUIK — This funding of 12 million per school, is it the 350 schools that get funding over four years or — —

The CHAIR — Order! We will break for 10 minutes.

Ms PENNICUIK — Perhaps you could take that on notice.

Mr MERLINO — I am happy to take it on notice.

Ms SHING — Thank you, Minister and witnesses, for today's hearing. It is unfortunate that our coalition colleagues from the committee are just walking back in now. I would like to firstly declare that I am a Safe Schools ambassador

Mr MORRIS — We have to listen to another 10 minutes of this crap.

Ms SHING — In fact just to take up Mr Morris's interjection, 'We have to listen to another 10 minutes of this crap', I think was what he just said. The Safe Schools program being described in such a disgraceful way, in such a politicised way by those opposite in fact undermines a lot of the really good work that it is doing. As the first out woman in the Victorian Parliament, I can attest to the fact that for one reason or another I have had dozens and dozens and dozens of families and parents and students and schools contact me and come to me from all over Victoria to confirm that the respect and the dignity that their children are receiving as a consequence of this recognition of the need for greater equality has been absolutely unprecedented. It has been a total wave of support for progressive policies that for too long have been used as a political punching bag.

To that end, Minister, and just to refute a number of the claims made by others in the course of this committee, this is a program which enjoys widely held support. It is a program which is making a fundamental and positive difference. It is a program which is making a positive difference to older Victorians who have had to come out and deal with lifelong discrimination and being treated differently and often in a way that manifests in self-harm, greater levels of depression and anxiety, greater levels of suicide —

Mr T. SMITH — Are you telling the minister what to say or you going to ask your question?

The CHAIR — Order!

Ms SHING — and real life-changing progress —

Mr T. SMITH — Are you taking notes, Minister? This is what she wants you to say.

Ms SHING — around the hard work that governments do to make sure that nobody is left behind in the quest for greater educational and lifelong opportunity. To that end, I would like to take you to page 166 of BP 3.

Mr T. SMITH — I hope you remembered all that, Minister.

Ms SHING — I would like to talk about the departmental mission statement and the way in which that actually ascribes to making Victoria a place where children and young people are confident, optimistic, healthy and resilient; where students reach their potential, regardless of background, place, circumstance, abilities — and then in parentheses I would say or views from rich, white privileged people in the Liberal Party — Victorians develop knowledge, skills and attributes needed now and for the jobs of the future —

Mr T. SMITH — If you could say that too, Minister. I think that is what Harriet wants you to say.

Ms SHING — and the department's workforce is high-performing, empowered, valued and supported. To that end, whilst the opposition was busy banging on about their cute little political agenda, they omitted what they were talking about with a funny little task force around population work that Mr Smith was supposed to be spearheading to take account of the greater challenges that we will face as our communities grow and expand. We have heard from the Treasurer around the explosion of population. You have spoken to that in our metropolitan areas.

I would like to talk to you about regional growth in the way in which we can make sure that schools can provide better opportunities, particularly in areas which have long been neglected as far as infrastructure, as far as resourcing, and also the needs-based funding, which I think we doubled in the first year of coming to government.

To that end you have talked about 56 new schools. I would like you to talk us through the detail of the new regional schools, what has been allocated and what further work there is to do, because this budget, whilst it is a step forward further in the right direction, still has more to build on, given the backlog. Could you take us through the regional elements of this particular part of the budget?

Mr MERLINO — Thank you — —

Mr MORRIS — On a point of order, Chair, I did not quite catch that. Could you ask Ms Shing to repeat the question?

The CHAIR — I think we all heard the question. The minister heard the question. The minister, to answer Ms Shing's question.

Mr T. Smith interjected.

Ms SHING — Sorry, this is actually not a laughing matter, Mr Smith.

Mr T. SMITH — No, your question was — —

Ms SHING — No, Mr Smith — —

Ms WARD — No, Mr Smith, your behaviour is the problem here.

The CHAIR — Order!

Mr T. SMITH — Here we go!

Ms SHING — Here we go?

Mr T. SMITH — Yes.

Ms SHING — Kids kill themselves because they are discriminated against at school and through their entire lives. This is not funny.

Mr T. Smith interjected.

Ms WARD — You are a disgrace!

Ms SHING — It is not funny. You have spent the entire time deriding a program which actually saves lives.

Ms WARD — You are a disgrace.

Mr T. SMITH — Did you email him the question first?

The CHAIR — Order!

Ms SHING — This is not about a cute little line for the good burghers of Kew so you can sit around with your Royal Doulton in your Harris tweed and talk about how it is improper.

Ms WARD — You should be ashamed, Mr Smith.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Shing.

Ms SHING — You are a disgrace, Mr Smith!

The CHAIR — Order!

Ms SHING — I apologise to anybody following this who is as appalled as everybody else in this room —

Mr T. SMITH — Your language, conduct —

The CHAIR — Order!

Ms SHING — in relation to this absolutely inappropriate politicisation of lifesaving work being done by this government.

Mr T. SMITH — and hyperbole from you.

The CHAIR — Order!

Ms WARD — No, it is more than hyperbole, Mr Smith. It is her life, Mr Smith — and how dare you be so dismissive!

The CHAIR — Order!

Ms SHING — Now that the straight white privileged man has made his point yet again, Minister, would you like to take us through the regional initiatives around improving educational outcomes for children across the board?

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Ms Shing, for your question. I am really proud of the investment we are making across rural and regional Victoria. I have spoken a number of times about the connection between disadvantage and poor outcomes. When you look at the 70 per cent increase in needs-based funding, what that meant on a per student basis, on a per capita basis, was double the investment in students in rural and regional Victoria compared to students in metropolitan Melbourne, and that is a recognition in terms of that needs-based funding — the equity funding — that we need to make that investment in our schools across rural and regional Victoria.

But we are delivering it across the board. So whether it is in terms of needs-based output funding, whether it is the digital connectivity — which I mentioned earlier, so that is over \$16 million to ensure that our rural and regional schools have the same bandwidth, the same speed, the same digital connectivity as metropolitan schools — we made that investment. Then in terms of infrastructure, we have made 59 rural and regional school upgrades compared to 49 in metropolitan Melbourne. That is another illustration of our investment in rural and regional Victoria and the acknowledgement that the need is greater. There are a number of pressures. There are enrolment pressures in our growth corridors, inner Melbourne and regional centres; there are needs-based pressures. We are trying to make sure that our budget in total acquits all of that.

So the budget allocates \$64.1 million for 59 rural and regional upgrades and modernisation projects. An example of that would be Kurnai College, so \$1.5 million has been allocated to Kurnai, one of nine schools that will share in the \$5 million Latrobe Valley schools capital package, which you are intimately involved in — —

Ms SHING — Intimately, yes.

Mr MERLINO — We announced that in November last year. The Latrobe Valley package will deliver upgrade projects to improve learning environments for 4500 students across the Latrobe Valley. The \$750 000 allocated through the Latrobe Valley schools capital package will help the school rebuild their Hex building. The funding will build on the \$7.9 million allocated to Kurnai in our very first budget, 15–16. This funding allocated to Kurnai College will be used on a much-awaited modernisation project to redevelop its Morwell campus. The additional \$1.5 million allocated in 17–18 will allow the school to commence stage 2 of this important project, including the provision of administration facilities. I visited Kurnai with you, and it is a wonderful school doing a lot of great things. There is a significant allocation of equity funding to Kurnai as well, matching up additional resources for education and support staff, additional teachers and additional programs as well as providing a more modern teaching and learning space at the school.

Ms SHING — So just on that point, Minister, and I will take you to the flip side of a series of record budgets that have been intended to address a significant and longstanding backlog. There has been a concerted effort to improve the infrastructure across the board, and in the regional space there are still a number of schools where that funding is yet to be allocated.

I will take you to one school in particular for Gippsland, Wonthaggi Secondary College, which has a very large catchment area. The students and the staff and the teachers do an incredible job with what they have. One of the challenges, though, in this sort of large-scale funding requirement is finding a way to allocate that when we have got so much competition from the rest of the state. I have recently met with the principal, and the need has

not gone away. Can you talk to me about the further work to be done in this space as an illustration of the ongoing investment needed for education?

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Ms Shing. This is an important project, a significant project, and you have been a strong advocate for a new secondary school for Wonthaggi. The school received planning funding in last year's budget, and a lot of work has been undertaken over the last 12 months. Look, it is a challenge. The investment that we have made in our capital budgets over three years dwarfs the investment of the previous government, but we cannot do everything in one budget. So through you and to the Wonthaggi secondary community this is a higher priority project. We are in discussions with the VSBA. There is work that will be done. It will continue to happen over the course of the next several months. To ensure it is shovel-ready — so tender documentation. I am happy to provide some further information.

Ms SHING — Thank you. That would be great, if you could take that on notice.

Mr T. SMITH — Minister, before, you were talking about your respectful relationships and why you are teaching gender norms to five-year-olds.

Mr T. SMITH — I have seen the respectful relationships — —

Ms WARD — What is the budget paper reference here?

Mr T. SMITH — Budget paper 3, page 176. The respectful relationships training kit says 'an audit on the books, toys, experiences that are available in a given centre' — 'do they challenge or support gender biases or stereotypes?'. Minister, can you explain why teachers are being encouraged to audit a four-year-old child's toys, games and storybooks for gender biases and stereotypes as part of the government's respectful relationships training kit?

Ms WARD — On a point of order, Chair, while I find Mr Smith's line of questioning deeply offensive, especially from someone who has probably never experienced discrimination at all in his life and is actually the reason why these programs are in place — to deal with parents who may have Mr Smith's views — there is no indication in the budget papers that the minister or the department is going home, peeking into the bedrooms of any children and going through their toys. I would ask the member to please focus on the policy of the education department and what they are implementing instead of going on a witch-hunt.

The CHAIR — There is no point of order.

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Shing! Mr Smith, you might want to repeat your question.

Mr T. SMITH — This training kit is asking teachers to audit the books, toys and experiences that are available in a centre and whether they challenge or support gender biases or stereotypes. You talked before in your answer about gender norms for five-year-olds. Why are we having this discussion with preppies? Why?

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Mr Smith. I might make some general comments and then ask the deputy secretary to also make some comments. The longstanding evidence is clear that children develop their understanding of gender by a young age, and that by the age of four they largely adhere to gender norms. The point of primary prevention is that it prevents problems, as I said, before they emerge. Respectful relationships as primary prevention seeks to ensure that children and young people are not forming the attitudes that evidence shows are the core drivers of family violence. So this is developmentally appropriate. The initiative is not seeking to make children gender neutral. It is also not saying that children are sexist. We want to make sure that children and young people in our kindergartens and schools know that their opportunities are not limited by their gender, Mr Smith — that girls can grow up to be firefighters, that boys can grow up to be nurses. That is what this material is about. Now, I have taken you through — —

Mr T. SMITH — Minister, we all agree with equality of opportunity. You are teaching sociology to five-year-olds.

Mr MERLINO — Mr Smith, I have not finished by answer.

Mr T. SMITH — You are teaching sociology to five-year-olds; that is what you are doing.

Mr MERLINO — This obsession is extraordinary. I might ask the deputy secretary to add to my comments.

Ms HAIRE — Thank you, Minister. Mr Smith, I think you are referring to a pilot training program which was attached to a tender document, which was for the provision of services to develop professional learning for 4000 early childhood educators — so as part of the early childhood portfolio. I can speak about that tender if you would like me to. It is in a different portfolio to the minister's.

Mr T. SMITH — No, that is fine.

Mr MORRIS — Minister, BP3, page 60, asbestos in schools — —

Members interjecting.

Mr MORRIS — I am wondering why the government shifted its position from the original election commitment to remove asbestos from all Victorian schools to now, according to the budget papers, targeting and removing asbestos in schools that may pose a risk in the future.

Mr MERLINO — Sorry, what was the question, Mr Morris?

Mr MORRIS — While the original position of the government of 26 November 2014 was to remove asbestos from all Victorian schools, we now understand from the budget papers that it is about targeting and removing asbestos in schools that may pose a risk in the future, which seems to be rather different.

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Mr Morris, for the question. I am really pleased to be able to talk about asbestos removal, because this is not only in keeping absolutely with the commitment that we made but is in stark contrast to how asbestos was dealt with previously.

Mr MORRIS — How will asbestos that does not pose a risk into the future be handled, for example?

Mr MERLINO — Asbestos was dealt with previously in a reactive manner only. There was no dedicated funding program for asbestos removal. The approach under the previous government was slapping a sticker on the door and only dealing with it in a reactive manner.

Mr MORRIS — We are not interested in history. What we are interested in is the shift in policy.

Mr MERLINO — There is no shift, Mr Morris. If I can outline the commitment that was made — —

Mr MORRIS — So tell me then, Minister, if there has been no shift —

Mr MERLINO — No, absolutely not.

Mr MORRIS — how will asbestos that does not pose a risk into the future be handled? Will it be left in situ?

Mr MERLINO — We discussed this, as you recall, at last year's PAEC hearing. I am not sure about the Liberal Party policy but we are not about to tear down 30 000 buildings across the state. That was never the commitment that was made.

Mr MORRIS — What about the asbestos that apparently does not provide a risk?

Mr MERLINO — Let me first go to the commitment that was made and what we are delivering. Labor committed \$100 million for asbestos removal. Labor's commitment was provided for a specific — —

Mr MORRIS — I am interested in the change in terminology in this year's budget, which talks about asbestos that may pose a risk. We want to know about the asbestos that apparently does not pose a risk.

Mr MERLINO — Mr Morris, there is no change. We are delivering our election commitment in full. If you go back to 2014, we made a commitment of \$100 million, and that was provided for a specific purpose: to

complete a much-needed statewide audit of all schools. That was something that had not happened before.
Removing asbestos — —

Mr MORRIS — How many schools have been identified as having asbestos present?

Mr MERLINO — I am happy to go through all of this detail, because this is a very good story. The commitment was a statewide audit then removing asbestos where it posed an immediate risk to students and accelerating the retirement of old portable classrooms. So in terms of what we have delivered, we conducted a statewide audit of 1712 government school sites.

Mr MORRIS — No, we are talking about the budget papers for 17–18 and the new terminology.

Mr MERLINO — We found high-risk asbestos at 490 schools.

Mr MORRIS — We are not talking about ancient history. We are talking about the new terminology in this year's budget.

Mr MERLINO — By March 2016 we had removed all of that high-risk asbestos, Mr Morris. Not only did we do the audit, as we promised —

Mr MORRIS — No, you had a commitment to remove it all.

Mr MERLINO — we removed all of the high-risk asbestos —

Mr MORRIS — Your commitment has now shifted so it is only high risk.

Mr MERLINO — and this was a massive achievement. We are not leaving anything to chance. Asbestos that may pose a risk in the future —

Mr MORRIS — You changed your commitment. You have walked back on your election promise.

Mr MERLINO — will be removed by 2020, as we have promised. That is exactly what we have delivered. The 17–18 budget provides a further 85 million — —

Mr MORRIS — So why is it now only asbestos that may pose a risk?

Mr MERLINO — Mr Morris, there is no change. There is no change.

Mr MORRIS — Well, if there is no change, why have the words changed?

Mr MERLINO — We have delivered in full.

Mr MORRIS — Why is it now about asbestos that poses a risk, which is not a definition you made in your policy? It is not a distinction you have made previously.

Mr MERLINO — We will deliver in full on our election commitment, Mr Morris.

Mr MORRIS — Why are you now making the distinction?

Mr MERLINO — I have talked about the specific purpose of the original election commitment. We have already removed all high-risk asbestos. We had this discussion last year.

Mr MORRIS — The original commitment was not about high-risk asbestos. The election commitment, which I have in my left hand, was about all asbestos.

Mr MERLINO — It may be your policy, but we are not about to knock down 30 000 buildings —

Mr MORRIS — No, it is your policy that you are not delivering on.

Mr MERLINO — for very little benefit. We will remove asbestos where it poses a risk for teachers and for students.

Mr MORRIS — So now it is no longer about removing all asbestos, which was your promise. Is that correct?

Mr MERLINO — In addition to that, Mr Morris, it is part of our entire \$2.5 billion capital program.

Mr MORRIS — Is it correct that it is no longer about removing all asbestos, which was your commitment?

Mr MERLINO — Mr Morris, our election commitment was never that, and it would just be farcical. It may be your policy, but we are not tearing down 30 000 buildings.

Ms PATTEN — I have got a couple of questions. Just a quick one in regard to the Docklands school planning that was announced, and \$1 million was put into the planning of that school, which was great news. I also note in budget paper 3, page 62, that there are another 11 schools that are in the budget for planning, but then I note in budget paper 4, page 38, that approximately \$2.9 million has been put into planning. I just want to confirm that out of that 2.9 million, 1 million is going to Docklands and the other 11 schools will be sharing in the residual of that?

Mr MERLINO — Not only is the Docklands an exciting project, but all of those new schools. There is not a specific quantum given to individual schools in those that have been identified for planning.

Ms PATTEN — No, but the 1 million has for Docklands?

Mr MERLINO — That is right. In terms of the other schools that have been identified, some will require quite complex planning and design work; others are more straightforward. That is why generally we do not put a quantum allocation to those schools.

Ms PATTEN — But for the other 11 schools, the planning process, I suppose you are assuming, will begin on those. Some will receive a very small amount.

Mr MERLINO — That is right. But for all of those projects the planning will begin in earnest. There are a number of schools that received planning last year. For example, Ms Shing raised the question of Wonthaggi secondary. That received planning last year. Not every school that receives planning gets capital funding the following year, but there is work that has to occur.

Ms PATTEN — Just ensuring that the Docklands \$1 million is safe there.

Mr MERLINO — Absolutely.

It is a priority project.

Ms PATTEN — Fantastic. Further, on the department's website you indicate that there are 15 priority schools that will be built with PPPs. The Auditor-General has suggested that, I guess, the jury is still out on the effectiveness of the PPPs. So you are going ahead with another 15, and maybe you would be able to identify, on page 62 of budget paper 3, which of those 15 schools will be undertaken by PPP, and have you confirmed the effectiveness of that program, of that type of partnership?

Mr MERLINO — I might hand over to the CEO of the VSBA to add to my comments. There are a number of schools that will be delivered by PPP. It is an interesting area of public policy, and it depends who you talk to in terms of — —

Ms PATTEN — Sometimes we used to call them private schools.

Mr MERLINO — It is not so much that. The principals of the PPP schools love it because for a period of 25 years the maintenance is the responsibility of the PPP provider, so for those principals, it is simply picking up the phone and getting their maintenance issues addressed. So the prins love it. It does deliver innovation in design and great outcomes in terms of quality build, but obviously they are more expensive up-front, and that is the balance that we need too.

Ms PATTEN — Sure. Will you be able to get me more information?

Mr KEATING — In terms of schools opening, they are opening this year and next year, so they are already well under construction.

Ms PATTEN — And about the effectiveness of PPPs, as I say, VAGO was saying the jury was a bit out on that process for schools. I am assuming you have got some assessment to say that it is — —

Mr MERLINO — Yes, we are happy to provide some information about the benefits and the balance that needs to be reached, because they are more expensive up-front. I think it will always be a part of the mix of our provision, but that up-front cost means it is the opportunity cost of not being able to do other school buildings.

Ms WARD — Minister, I wanted to talk to about excellence in teacher education and support for teachers. Can I get you to go to budget paper 3, page 53; halfway down you have got 'Excellence in teacher education'. I have to put in a disclaimer — I do live with a teacher.

Mr MERLINO — As do I.

Ms WARD — Can you please just talk us through these reforms and how the money will be allocated.

Mr MERLINO — Yes. Thank you, Ms Ward. As I said before, the most important thing we can do, the single greatest impact on improving student outcomes, is increasing the quality of the teaching — not the teachers, but the quality of the teaching. So our excellence in teacher education reforms raises the bar on how we select, prepare and develop our greatest asset, which is our teachers. The reforms promote teaching as a profession of choice for committed and capable people from a range of backgrounds. As I said, we know that quality teaching is the single greatest influence on student outcomes.

Let me take you through some of the initiatives, and we have consulted widely over the previous six to 12 months with universities, with principal associations, regional stakeholders right through to student representative council — the Vic SRC. So there is a range of things. Last year we introduced a minimum Australian tertiary admission rank, so the ATAR for year 12, into undergraduate teaching courses to 70 from 2019, starting at 65 next year. Not only are we raising the bar to the top 30 per cent, at the moment there are some university courses where you can get into with an ATAR of 35, 40, and you are simply not ready to be a teacher. So we are raising the bar in terms of entry standards.

We are also making it compulsory for universities to base entry into teacher courses not just on the academic performance and not just on the ATAR but also on the capabilities, the skills, the attributes of the applicants as well. That will be part of a new framework that will be introduced for the 2018 year. We are also developing a new vocational education and training accredited course as a stepping stone into that undergraduate course. So it may be that for whatever reason, the student did not get the ATAR that they wanted — —

Ms WARD — This is what you are referring to when you say that students are not ready when they have got that ATAR of 35, 40.

Mr MERLINO — That is right, but those young people may have a deep passion and the attributes to be a good teacher, so there is this vocational pathway which young people can access prior to entering into an undergraduate course.

We will also be providing 60 scholarships a year for students from regional areas or disadvantaged backgrounds to study teaching at Victorian universities from 2018, and we are also establishing a new rural teaching academy of professional practice in Gippsland to improve teaching quality by giving graduate and existing teachers in regional areas hands-on professional development. We are expanding employment-based pathways into teaching to attract a more diverse range of high-quality candidates. Significantly, we are improving induction in mentoring for graduate teachers in government schools, so giving them a much greater level of support as they come into the system for those first one or two years.

So we have funded approximately \$9.7 million. We made the ATAR announcement, the framework announcement, last year. In the budget are the things that cost the money to deliver, and that is \$9.7 million to lift the quality of graduate teachers and demonstrate the commitment to selecting the best candidates — so \$2 million to improve selection into teacher education, quality assurance of alternative entry pathways and course quality; 3.1 to encourage high-performing future teachers to teach in rural and disadvantaged areas — so,

again, going back to Ms Shing's question about how we are supporting rural and regional schools, greater support to encourage teachers; and \$4.6 million to improve induction and mentoring for beginner teachers.

Ms WARD — I will come back to mentoring because I think that is an important area to explore. Earlier in your answer you referred to promoting teaching as a profession of choice. How is this going to happen?

Mr MERLINO — Through the initiatives that I mentioned. There is a cultural difference — —

Ms WARD — Particularly for men, sorry. Ms Shing raises an important point.

Mr MERLINO — Indeed, for men in particular. There is a cultural barrier. If you go to other parts of the world that have good student outcomes, the profession is up here — you are a teacher, you are a principal — in terms of standing in the community. One of the ways I think that the standing of the profession has been impacted in Australia is that our academic standards are so low. That has developed over a period of time. One of the strong messages to potential teachers is that we are raising the profession, whether it is through the outcome in the EBA, whether it is through sending a strong message that we want the top 30 per cent, through our ATAR change, or whether it is supporting non-traditional teacher pathways like Teach for Australia — grabbing professionals in other areas of industry or community to become teachers — so really raising the standard. We have a long way to go, because it is not a change that can simply be implemented by government. This is a cultural change.

Ms WARD — So you are wanting to shift the community conversation around teachers, how teachers are regarded and the words that are used around teaching as a profession, recognising that teaching is actually a profession that is done by professionals.

Mr MERLINO — Yes, that is absolutely right. All of these reforms are around quality. There is a significant increase in investment in principal support and in training and professional development for aspiring principals so we are getting that next generation of leaders in the system — all of those things.

Ms SHING — I might just pick up on the notion that education is about investment. That seems to be one of the primary differences between the way that Labor approaches this issue and the way that coalition counterparts do. I would like to take you to budget paper 3, page 174, and the idea that from little things big things grow and the idea of breakfast club investments and the school camps and excursions fund. Can you talk to us about how this has in fact improved and increased participation and how those gaps were previously being met in relation to shortfalls and lack of provision of services to assist little Victorians to reach their potential?

Mr MERLINO — I go back to our target and our need to have students feel happy, safe, engaged and resilient. We made an election commitment of \$148.3 million to establish the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, and this is a fund I am extremely proud of. We fully funded this initiative in 15–16, our first budget, and I am proud to inform the committee that it reached over 205 000 students in 2016.

Ms SHING — Yes, there are a number of kids in Gippsland who for the very first time went on excursions as a result of that program last year.

Mr MERLINO — Absolutely. It provides those eligible students with a school credit of \$125 annually for primary school students and \$225 annually for secondary school students, and this is making a difference in their lives. They would otherwise have missed out on those excursions and on those sports activities if it was not for this fund.

In our planning in last year's budget papers we planned to allow for a target of 220 000 students to access the fund. Although 205 000 students received assistance, we did not revise the target below 220 000, because we want to make sure that every single student that needs and deserves support receives it. So it is about getting the message out. It is a target of 139 000 secondary students accessing the fund and 81 000 primary school students accessing the fund.

Ms SHING — And breakfast clubs, Minister?

Mr MERLINO — Breakfast clubs have been incredibly successful. Five hundred schools — 25 000 students — are receiving breakfast, a meal, each and every of the school week.

Ms SHING — And that is using local produce?

Mr MERLINO — That is using local produce. I was recently in Shepparton at SPC. The milk comes from the dairy farmers in that region. The fruit comes from SPC in Shepparton. One in seven children start the day on an empty stomach. Again, it is about the things we can do to make sure our students can learn. You are not going to learn on an empty stomach, and that has been rolled out across the state.

Mr T. SMITH — I refer to budget paper 4, pages 32 to 40, which lists new projects funded in this year's budget. I also refer to BP3, page 59, which confirms that 64.1 million has been allocated in this year's budget for rural and regional education projects. Despite this, this figure has seen a capital budget for rural and regional schools slashed from 151 million in 2016–17 — budget paper 3, page 65 — almost a 60 per cent cut in funding. It is little wonder that families at the Warrnambool Special Developmental School or Seymour P–12 are not very happy.

Further, Minister, the *Sentinel-Times* have called your abandonment of Wonthaggi Secondary College a '31 million disaster', and unfortunately it is a failure for Ms Shing. Minister, when you refused Ms Shing's submissions for funding for this school, what did you tell her?

Ms SHING — On a point of order, Chair, the conversation that the minister and I had in relation to a specific budget bid has absolutely nothing to do with the budget — —

Mr T. SMITH — Did you take your political life into your hands, Minister, telling Ms Shing no?

The CHAIR — There is a point of order before the Chair.

Ms SHING — Wow. You are showing that you care nothing about actual education, Mr Smith, unless it comes from Xavier.

The CHAIR — Minister, the question stands as put.

Ms SHING — What did you tell me, Minister? Let us have a conversation. Let us re-enact it, perhaps, for Mr Smith.

The CHAIR — In responding to Ms Shing's point of order, the minister can certainly talk about funding decisions in relation to Wonthaggi Secondary College. I do not believe that conversations between parliamentary colleagues in the framing of the budget will constitute subject matter for the estimates hearing.

Ms SHING — Minister, you play you, and I will play me, and then we will just put it all on the record.

Mr T. SMITH — The *Sentinel-Times*: it is awful, I am devastated. You got rolled, sorry.

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Chair, for your advice. I can tell the committee that there is no greater advocate for education in eastern Victoria than Ms Shing.

Members interjecting.

Mr MERLINO — Mr Smith, there are a couple of things I should point out to you. You have seen the presentation earlier, which compared the investment of this government in our first three budgets to the investment of the former Liberal-Nationals government, \$843 million compared to \$237 million.

Mr T. SMITH — Why did not you fund the school at Wonthaggi?

Mr MERLINO — Mr Smith, the gall of questions from the Liberal Party on education capital — —

Mr MORRIS — A hundred and fifty-one point one million last year; 64.1 million this year. How does that equate to an increase?

Mr MERLINO — I will give you a further statistic, Mr Morris and Mr Smith, for you to ponder.

Members interjecting.

Mr MERLINO — Labor’s investment in regional school upgrades is unprecedented.

Mr MORRIS — It is a 60 per cent unprecedented cut.

Mr MERLINO — The average regional and rural school infrastructure funding under the former government was 90 million average per budget. Under this government, 170 million average per budget.

Mr MORRIS — So this year it is \$30 million below average.

Mr MERLINO — So there is no comparison, Mr Morris and Mr Smith, to the investment in schools in rural and regional Victoria, in infrastructure —

Mr T. SMITH — It is a \$64 million cut.

Mr MERLINO — in IT, in needs-based funding — the investment that this government delivers pales into insignificance.

Mr T. SMITH — My question stands as put: Why did you defy Ms Shing with regard to funding for Wonthaggi Secondary College?

Members interjecting.

Ms SHING — On a point of order, Chair, it is unfortunate then when he was brandishing his funny little prop around, being an article from the *Sentinel-Times* in relation to Wonthaggi Secondary College’s funding, that he did not in fact turn the page, because what that article then clearly goes on to say is that this school was not funded under the Napthine Liberal government and has become a political football.

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR — Order!

Mr T. SMITH — You are a blowhard and a failure.

Ms SHING — On a point of order, Chair, I have just been referred to as — what was that, Mr Smith?

Mr T. SMITH — A blowhard.

Ms SHING — I would invite you to withdraw that.

Mr T. SMITH — I invited you to withdraw comments before that you chose not to do.

Ms SHING — No, you have just referred to me as a blowhard. Please withdraw.

Mr T. SMITH — No, I am not withdrawing my comments.

Ms SHING — Chair.

The CHAIR — Mr Smith, the convention is if a member takes exception and they ask you to withdraw, you withdraw.

Ms SHING — I take offence at that, Mr Smith.

Mr T. SMITH — Well, I took offence before — —

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR — Order! You did not ask Ms Shing to withdraw, nor did you raise it with me. Now, the conventions of the committee are the same as the conventions of the house — —

Mr T. SMITH — I think Ms Shing cries wolf.

The CHAIR — Mr Smith, Ms Shing has asked you to withdraw. Mr Smith, I am asking you to withdraw.

Mr T. SMITH — I am not withdrawing.

The CHAIR — Mr Smith, I am — —

Mr T. SMITH — There were offensive remarks, Chair, about me before —

Ms WARD — You did not ask her to withdraw.

The CHAIR — Mr Smith, the conventions of the committee are the same as the house.

Mr Smith interjected.

The CHAIR — No, the conventions of the committee — —

Ms SHING — You should withdraw. Take Mr Morris's advice.

The CHAIR — I am Chair of this committee — —

Mr T. SMITH — No, we are running out of time.

Ms SHING — So you withdraw?

Mr T. SMITH — I withdraw.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Smith.

Ms SHING — You should take Mr Morris's advice more often, Mr Smith.

Mr T. SMITH — We do not need commentary from you.

The CHAIR — Order! Mr Smith, is there a question?

Ms SHING — What was that?

Mr T. SMITH — We do not need little needling comments from you, thank you, Ms Shing. You do it with your colleagues all day every day and they do not care for it.

The CHAIR — Through the Chair.

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR — Mr Smith, is there a question?

Mr T. SMITH — We are moving on, Chair. We are moving on. With reference to budget paper 3, page 279, and the line item referring to clients participating in community reintegration activities, I refer the secretary to comments by Mr Brendan Murray, former executive principal at Parkville College, who in interviews with the *Age* and the ABC 7.30 program claims he was pressured by education department staff on what to say before a Supreme Court hearing. Mr Murray is reported saying:

I was told what the department would like the Supreme Court to hear and what the department wouldn't like the Supreme Court to hear.

Secretary, have you investigated claims that education department staff under your watch had attempted to influence a witness's statement before a court hearing?

Ms SHING — What happened to Wonthaggi Secondary College?

Ms WARD — I think we lost that.

Mr MERLINO — I was about to answer Wonthaggi and Warrnambool.

Ms SHING — Yes, that is right. He does not care. Mr Smith does not care about Wonthaggi, and neither does the coalition.

Mr T. SMITH — We moved on, Chair. It was clearly obvious.

Ms SHING — You pulled that question, did you — because you know you did nothing to fund it?

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Shing! The question in relation to Parkville stands.

Mr MERLINO — Perhaps, Mr Smith, I will make a few comments in terms of the staff at Parkville, and then I will ask Gill Callister — —

Mr T. SMITH — The question is to the secretary.

Mr MERLINO — I understand that, Mr Smith, and if you allow me, I will make a couple of comments — —

Mr MORRIS — No, you do not have the right, Minister.

Mr T. SMITH — The question was not directed to you, Minister.

Mr MORRIS — The question was to the secretary, not directed to you.

The CHAIR — Yes, if the question is to the secretary, the secretary is to respond. Ms Callister?

Ms CALLISTER — Thank you, Chair. I am aware of the comments, obviously, that Mr Murray made in the media. That is the only place that Mr Murray has made those comments. The department strongly refutes and disagrees with that, that any efforts were made to suggest how Mr Murray should give evidence in a Supreme Court hearing.

Mr MORRIS — He was lying. Is that what you are saying?

The CHAIR — I think the secretary has answered the question.

Ms CALLISTER — Mr Morris, I am saying that the department is absolutely clear that there was no pressure placed on Mr Murray about Supreme Court evidence.

Mr T. SMITH — Secretary, in light of his claims, how can we trust the integrity of your integrity reform agenda, especially following IBAC's two investigations into corruption in the education department?

Ms SHING — Again you are asking for an opinion here, Mr Smith.

Ms CALLISTER — Mr Smith, Mr Murray has made some comments in the media. He has resigned from the department and then made some media comments.

Mr T. SMITH — So he is lying?

Ms CALLISTER — I am saying the department has looked at those comments and done an assessment of those comments, and we are absolutely clear there was no pressure placed on Mr Murray.

Mr T. SMITH — So do you think he has been unfairly treated, being forced to step down from his position as an educational leader in the juvenile justice system?

Ms SHING — On a point of order, Chair, again asking for an opinion: 'Do you think he has been unfairly treated?'

Mr T. SMITH — Again, Chair, she might be able to tell people in Labor what to say and think, but she cannot do it here.

Ms WARD — Mr Smith, you really need to get over this.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Ward!

Ms SHING — Rephrase the question, Mr Smith.

The CHAIR — I do not think you can ask the secretary for an opinion on whether someone is telling the truth or not.

Mr MORRIS — The secretary is in charge of the department. Of course we can ask her whether he has been treated unfairly or not.

The CHAIR — The secretary may or may not have met this person.

Mr MERLINO — Rephrase the question, Mr Morris.

Mr MORRIS — Of course we can ask her.

Ms SHING — Just rephrase your questions, and you will be fine.

Mr T. SMITH — I am not going to be told what I can and cannot say. She might think she can do it in the Labor Party. She cannot do it here, Chair.

The CHAIR — Mr Smith, this is not being particularly helpful. There are 50 seconds — —

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR — Order!

Mr T. SMITH — It just happens to be true, though — as you know, Deputy Premier.

Ms CALLISTER — Mr Smith, Mr Murray resigned from the department.

Mr T. SMITH — But you pushed him out, did not you?

Ms CALLISTER — He resigned.

Mr T. SMITH — That is not what I am asking.

Ms WARD — It is the answer you are receiving.

Ms CALLISTER — He resigned from the department.

Mr T. SMITH — But do you think he was treated unfairly?

Ms SHING — On a point of order, Chair — again asking for an opinion.

Ms CALLISTER — No, I do not think he was treated unfairly, and he resigned.

Mr MORRIS — Was it a voluntary resignation?

Ms CALLISTER — Of course resignations are voluntary. That is the — —

Ms WARD — Nature of them.

Mr MORRIS — A resignation that is couched in the terms of ‘resign or be sacked’ is not voluntary.

Ms PENNICUIK — Thank you, Minister, and the secretary may want to help me with this question as well. It is in regard to forecasting enrolment demand. Budget paper 3, page 53 allocates \$46.5 million over the period 2016–21 for additional school enrolments, and we have been talking about this in various ways throughout the hearing this morning. We have even referred briefly to the VAGO report that was released just last week. On page 23 of that report I will just read out a few things because there is quite a lot of detail there. It says weaknesses remain in DET’s ability to plan for changes in enrolment and that:

DET does not know how reliable its forecasting of shortfalls in school places is over time, and it lacks guidance to inform its planning decisions ...

Further on, which I found quite surprising, although not surprising in some ways, is that the department:

... incorporates into the five-year pipeline the new schools that government has promised to build through election commitments ...

The report also goes on to talk about the tension between annual funding for new schools and land acquisitions, and the need for more long-term planning over five to 20 years. Also you mentioned before, Minister, that VAGO says 50 new schools will be needed in the next five years. In fact VAGO says the department says that. The Grattan Institute, for example, is saying 220 new schools in a decade. So it is very confusing for the public to make sense of this, and I just wondered if perhaps you, as the minister, and also the secretary have some comments on how this process can become more transparent. You realise I have been pushing for more transparency for this over a long period of time, and the auditor is saying that too.

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Ms Pennicuik, and this is a conversation we have had over a number of PAEC hearings. I might make some comments and then ask the CEO of VSBA to make some comments, because I think there have been some real improvements in terms of transparency.

As you say, there is the VAGO audit around managing school infrastructure. There is also Infrastructure Victoria's report around a 30-year strategy, making a number of recommendations. What we have talked about previously is that for the capital program we look at tackling growth pressures, and there is strong engagement between the VSBA and local government authorities, as well as the Victorian Planning Authority. So we have got pressure of tackling growth, upgrading schools in poor condition — and we inherited around 400 schools that were in very poor condition — and also rolling out those — —

Ms PENNICUIK — I could do a whole new question on that, but can we stick to this one?

Mr MERLINO — Indeed, rolling out regeneration projects. They are the three elements of every year's capital program. We have in the pipeline 56 new schools: 10 delivered this school year and schools delivered over next year and beyond. On the Victorian School Building Authority website we publish detailed information, including maps and project time lines. So there is a much greater level of community engagement and transparency in terms of the capital program to ensure families have as much information as possible, and we also work closely with the VPA and local government to identify future school sites, which are then formally identified in published precinct structure plans.

So there is the Infrastructure Victoria report. We will respond to that accordingly across government. We have also undertaken public-facing provision reviews, so engaging the community — for example, in the Docklands, in Preston, in Banyule. There is a much greater level of public conversation and transparency about need, what is required and when that provision will be required, so we have done a lot over the course of the last six to 12 months in this space. I might ask Chris to make a — —

Ms PENNICUIK — If I could, Minister, before you do, I think I am running out of time.

The CHAIR — Order! Mr Dimopoulos.

Ms PENNICUIK — I have run out of time.

The CHAIR — Take it on notice.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Minister, further to Ms Pennicuik's questions, I also want to ask you a question about the planning essentially for secondary schools and with the parochial interest obviously of my electorate, particularly around secondary schools. In your answer just then and also in your presentation you talked about planning for inner city growth as well, and I know this is going to sound parroted but it is not. Essentially when you have had a backlog generated by low investment over time all of a sudden you have so many pressures coming from everywhere — growth corridors, inner city. In that planning I want to get a bit of information from yourself or Mr Keating about how does the department or yourself update that planning regularly. So in my electorate, for example, at what point would there be a trigger for, yes, this is a time when we need to start looking at investment. So if you could give us the methodology around does it happen annually, monthly?

Ms PENNICUIK — Good question. That is what I am wanting to get to.

Ms SHING — It is a shame the opposition is at the table.

Ms PENNICUIK — And comments on what VAGO says are still quite a lot of weaknesses there.

Mr MERLINO — It is an absolutely good question and particularly relevant, because there are parts of Melbourne that have not experienced this historic growth. We talked about South Melbourne before — this growth pressure that has not been there in previous decades, so it is a continual process. Every year there is direct engagement between the department, VSBA and local government, and we have got a really strong sense over the next five-year time line horizon, over 10 years, over 20 years where that growth is expected. But I might ask the CEO of VSBA to add some comments.

Mr KEATING — It is quite different in the outer growth areas compared to inner-city areas in terms of the mechanisms in play. In the outer growth areas we have about 120 schools that are identified and planned in precinct structure plans. Now the sequence of those changes year to year depending on development and speed and population density. Every year we take a state government forecast. We take all the local government data about every planning permit, about density of population, about speed of development. We feed that into a model, and we project the number of school-age people living in the area today and 30 years hence. When we look at that, we are also looking at the historical patterns and proportions of people that attend government and non-government schools. Now that could change. When we put a great new government school into an area, that can shift people's preferences, so trying to model for that can be challenging. In terms of the budget process, we very clearly provide advice. Every year we take all that input in and forecast in five years, 10 years, 20 years.

The other complication in the inner-city areas is it is not just a site identified on a map. Often the sites are small. Often we do not have the luxury of choosing between a range of sites. So often it comes down to a comparison of what is available, public transport routes, how can we actually work with local developers to have schools built as part of developments that they are planning. And sometimes it is seizing opportunities in terms of inner city — the land acquisition.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Just a quick comment — thanks very much, and Minister, thank you too — obviously there is local knowledge as well which impacts, which may not be picked up in exactly the same kind of tenor as the council data and all the other stuff. I know that I obviously have a very good relationship with my colleague the minister, and I could feed that back. I also ask you to think about how the public generally can feed that information back — it can obviously be through the local MP — how they can feed back to the department around what they feel the needs are that just adds to the nuances that your department collects. I am not asking a question — just a bit of advice, gratuitous or otherwise.

Mr MERLINO — I welcome the advice.

Ms SHING — Minister, I would like to take you back to school infrastructure. Just to quote Mr Smith from 2015 in the house:

... these sorts of distractions — frankly, such as the —

matter of public importance —

we have before us today with stuff about capital works budgets and the like — do not change student performance at all.

To this end, I would like to take you to your presentation in relation to school infrastructure and for you to talk to us about what that link is between student performance on the one hand, giving staff and teachers better facilities and changing the way in which segmented classrooms become more flexible, open spaces, and the correlation between that and performance as far as better attainment and better connectedness is concerned.

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Ms Shing. Those comments were made by Mr Smith. He discounted the importance of the capital program.

Mr T. SMITH — And you agree with me, Minister, that the number one import into improving student performance is teacher performance.

The CHAIR — Order!

Mr MERLINO — The single greatest driver in improving student outcomes is indeed the quality of the teaching.

Mr T. SMITH — Correct.

Ms SHING — Which is why an EBA is important then, I would suggest, Minister.

Mr MERLINO — Indeed. There is no doubt that a part of that is about improving the physical environment for teachers to teach in and students to learn in. When you look at a modern teaching and learning environment — flexible learning, open plan, the ability for students to learn in groups, for teachers to collaborate and then break out, to differentiate in their teaching — it is very hard to do that in a square room, four walls. It does not provide that ability for those teachers to collaborate and provide that flexible, open learning environment. Indeed in terms of the specialist activities as well, so whether it is drama or music or sport, providing modern facilities, fit for purpose, again delivers those opportunities for young people.

Ms SHING — And how does that fit within the science, technology, engineering and mathematics space? Because we have seen that the way in which classes are taught now — the subjects and the targets which are desired to be met and hopefully exceeded — have changed dramatically in the last 40 or 50 years in particular and that STEM is now a huge part of that. Can you tell us how the change to infrastructure along with programs — and then that might include tech schools, for example — is designed to capitalise on the way in which global markets and industry need jobs for the future?

Mr MERLINO — This is particularly important because 70 per cent of new jobs require skills in maths and science, so investment in STEM both at a program level in terms of teacher professional development but then in terms of facilities is incredibly important. The labs, the science wings, of today are very different to the school that I was in many, many years ago now. In addition to that there is the tech school, and this is a step further.

Ms SHING — And they are not the tech schools of the 80s, are they, Minister?

Mr MERLINO — No, absolutely not. These are high-tech precincts focused on science, technology, engineering and maths, providing learning spaces for schools in a particular region, focusing on industry strengths of a particular region and on equipment that individually schools cannot afford. These are tech schools that are based at a TAFE or a university, directly engaged with industry using equipment that is used in industry and, as I said, individually a school cannot afford.

Ms SHING — How are they tracking in relation to the development of those 10 tech schools as part of the pilot?

Mr MERLINO — We are well on track to delivering on our commitment. We made a commitment of 10 tech schools over our term in government. Yarra Ranges Tech School opened in April — a wonderful facility. We have got Monash, which will open in July, and then the other eight will open through the course of 2018.

Ms WARD — Just quickly, Minister, can I get you to have a look at budget paper 3, page 53. There is \$84 million there that has been provided for two digital IT initiatives. Can you please explain to us what that is going to be used for?

Mr MERLINO — Yes. This is just under \$68 million for IT infrastructure and the \$16.4 million that goes towards digital connectivity and making sure our schools are up to speed. To give you a sense of what that means, for the bigger program it will be lifting the level of all Victorian government primary schools' wi-fi technology to equal the provision in secondary schools. The digital initiatives will enable faster and more reliable access to online teaching and learning resources and administration services across the Education State; respond to the growing use of technological tools and software required in modern education; and renew the virtual conferencing infrastructure across the state, which will assist students, especially those in rural schools, to undertake subjects currently unavailable at their schools.

I will take this on notice, Ms Ward. I will provide the detail in terms of the doubling of internet speed for rural and regional schools.

Ms WARD — Thank you, Minister, that would be great.

Mr MORRIS — I refer to budget paper 3, page 167, which is the output summary again for DET. Minister, the 2014 ALP platform, which I understand you chaired and obviously are familiar with, included the words, ‘Be honest and transparent. Respect for the Victorian people starts with respect for our democracy’. But it appears that in government you have been anything but transparent. In particular the opposition has sought access to a range of documents through FOI. I have three here, all relatively straightforward. One relates to third-party consultants, that was refined down and refused; the seizure of harmful items — weapons, firearms — in line with departmental guidelines, again relatively straightforward; and one, and the subject was under discussion just a few moments ago in response to Mr Dimopoulos, was new school demand analysis. All of those things are applications that have been made for information in recent months, and each of them has been refused. I am just wondering why these relatively straightforward matters are not accessible?

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Mr Morris, for the question. You would be aware that these are not ministerial decisions. I do not, and neither should I, have a role in making decisions on FOI requests. I am happy for the secretary of the department to make some further comments. We had a discussion in terms of the transparency of how we go about our capital program. My preference is always to look at ways that we can improve transparency, greater engagement with the community. But in terms of FOI decisions, I do not make those. I will ask the secretary to make some comments.

Ms CALLISTER — Mr Morris, I am sorry. I could not hear all of the question about the specifics you were referring to.

Mr MORRIS — There were three examples that I gave, but there are others as well. Of course there are words in there that seek to validate the decision. I did not object to the minister referring to you, but really the question was to the minister in terms of his commitment, through the platform that he chaired, to transparency. Where I am bringing to your attention these issues where the department, of which you are the senior minister as Deputy Premier, has refused that access — —

Mr MERLINO — I appreciate the question, Mr Morris. As I said to you — —

The CHAIR — While I am happy to indulge the Deputy Chair in having a bit of a wideranging discussion about some of these matters, we are in the estimates hearings. It is about prospective expenditure across the forward estimates. So in relation to past determinations of an FOI application, you are talking more about the outcomes hearing. You asked a question of the minister, and the minister has answered the question.

Mr MORRIS — It is also about the current year, as we identified last Friday. It is in there.

Ms SHING — You argued that exact point not an hour ago, Mr Morris.

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Shing!

Mr MORRIS — I simply say to the minister, by way of question of course: given the issues I have raised and given your stated commitment to transparency, whether you undertake to provide the information that was sought, which you as minister are able to do?

Mr MERLINO — Sure. I appreciate the question. So where we can deliver greater transparency, we do — for example, in the capital program. This public accounts and estimates hearing is a great illustration of the government’s and the Parliament’s commitment to transparency.

Mr MORRIS — I am happy to provide the applications.

Mr MERLINO — I will take the specific issues on notice, but I just want to reiterate the point that I do not have a decision-making role in FOI, and neither should I. But I am happy to take those issues — —

Mr MORRIS — No, but as the minister you are in a position to release the information that was sought, regardless.

Mr MERLINO — I am happy to take those particular specific examples on notice.

Mr MORRIS — All right. Just in the few minutes remaining, could I return to the asbestos issue. During the earlier exchange I did ask, but it probably got lost in the excitement: now that the asbestos audit of all

government schools is complete, how many schools have been identified as having asbestos present in their buildings and grounds, and are you able to provide a list of those schools to the committee?

Mr MERLINO — As I mentioned, with the statewide audit of 1712 schools, we found and removed high-risk asbestos at 497 schools. Over the next three years we will replace 100 school buildings and remove asbestos at more than 1200 schools. This is a fundamental shift in how we deal with asbestos, so going from reactive — when it is exposed, the department responding to it, but if not we just have a sticker on the wall. We are moving from that situation to a dedicated fund removing asbestos, both the high-risk asbestos and the medium-level-risk asbestos, what is called A1, A2 and A3.

Mr MORRIS — Given that the funding which is provided in this year's budget effectively runs out in mid-2019, does that mean that within that period, effectively in the next two years, all asbestos will be removed from buildings and grounds?

Mr MERLINO — There will be further investments required. So if you go back to the original commitment we made, it was removal of this asbestos by 2020. It is in the order, Mr Morris, of 240 million to 270 million, we estimate. We need to always take into account, and I have said this previously, that it is not just the dedicated asbestos removal fund, it is the whole of the \$2.5 billion capital program. So as you are upgrading schools you are dealing with the asbestos in those particular environments.

Mr MORRIS — On the same subject but in relation to school grounds, will the funding that is provided in this year's budget and indeed the 270 million potentially that you referred to deal with all asbestos in school grounds?

Mr MERLINO — No, it will not, and it was never the intention. I go back to the point I made earlier and 12 months ago. We are not going to be removing 30 000 buildings to address asbestos that may be in the foundations, that may be in a roof cavity. It is about removing the asbestos that is of high risk or medium risk for students where teachers teach and students learn. It was never a commitment to demolish 30 000 buildings. That was never the intention, and logic would make that quite clear. This is a commonsense — —

Mr MORRIS — How about playgrounds?

Mr MERLINO — In regard to outdoor spaces, we respond if and when that becomes an issue, and the response is immediate and that asbestos is removed. But we are not going to be ripping up school ovals, Mr Morris. We respond immediately where it occurs, so the focus is on the building fabric in terms of asbestos removal and immediate response if we become aware of it in playgrounds or school ovals.

Mr MORRIS — So would you say that asbestos buried in school grounds is an acceptable risk?

Mr MERLINO — Well, we are not going to be digging up 1500 schools. We are not going to be removing 30 000 buildings, and I made this quite clear 12 months ago. We are delivering in full on our election commitment.

Mr MORRIS — I think we will have to disagree on that.

Ms PATTEN — In some ways I suppose this is following on from my colleagues across the table, but if I could I take the minister to budget paper 3, page 253, which talks about the new performance indicator on sexually abusive behaviour treatment services. While I see this as part of the family violence initiatives and I do agree it is a very good one, again to me it is still reactive. So it is early intervention, agreed, but it is still as a response to a child displaying behaviour or being listed as having featured in family violence or sexually abusive behaviour. I am wondering, rather than being reactive, have you considered providing funds for a more holistic, age-appropriate sex education program in schools?

Mr MERLINO — On the first part of your question, Ms Patten, that is a DHHS output, so we will take it on notice and engage with DHHS and come back to you — —

Ms PATTEN — Thank you. But it is being picked up through the schools, is it not?

Ms HAIRE — Ms Patten, it is a program that is run by Health and Human Services for young people who are of school age, but it will not be delivered through schools.

Ms PATTEN — Okay. It will not be picked up in the schools?

Ms HAIRE — Will not be delivered through schools.

Ms PATTEN — But will be picked up in the schools?

Ms HAIRE — It is not part of the curriculum.

Ms PATTEN — No, I appreciate that.

Ms HAIRE — It is a Human Services support for very vulnerable kids.

Ms PATTEN — But will schools be, I guess, one of the notifiers for this?

Ms HAIRE — Yes, schools could well be a notifier.

Ms PATTEN — Could be, yes, thank you. And then, looking at a more — —

Mr MERLINO — Thank you, Ms Patten. I might ask the deputy secretary, Katy Haire, to talk about sex education.

Ms HAIRE — Ms Patten, there are resources and support provided by the department to support those elements of the curriculum in health and physical education. They are available on our website — they are called *Catching on Early* and *Catching on Later* — and they are used by schools as they see fit. The resources themselves have been around for about 10 years but were refreshed about five or six years ago, and that is about supporting schools in the appropriate education of children for healthy sex education.

Ms SHING — What a shame the coalition members have left the room and are not here to hear this.

Mr MERLINO — Yes, indeed.

Ms PATTEN — Thank you for that. So that means there are no plans to expand that. Certainly with respectful relationships, with the fact that schools are going to be working with DHHS on those early intervention measures for children — we have a decade-old, scattered approach to sex education in our schools in Victoria, and then, I guess, looking at eSmart as well, which is keeping kids safe, one would have thought that a holistic approach to this that was proactive rather than reactive would be helpful in bringing all of those elements together.

Mr MERLINO — There is certainly a high level of collaboration between the Department of Education and Training and DHHS.

Ms PATTEN — Okay.

Ms HAIRE — And, Ms Patten, as part of the regional learning places we now have multidisciplinary teams who support schools right across health and wellbeing curriculum teaching and learning. Each school creates its own integrated approach to the curriculum, which includes health and physical education. The respectful relationships curriculum, which the minister outlined the foundation level of earlier, follows those same eight themes all the way through up to year 12, and so you can see how those themes that we referred to earlier can integrate very well into both antibullying and also into sex education. So there is a link in that way across the curriculum, which each school then is supported to develop their own approach to.

Ms PATTEN — Is that actively recognised in your respectful relationships information that you provide for the schools? I guess actively recognising that sex education and that part of the curriculum would be joined?

Ms HAIRE — Yes, Ms Patten, there is a link in the respectful relationships resources to the department's sex education resources to create that integration.

Mr MERLINO — I am happy to have a further conversation with you, Ms Patten, outside of the formal process of PAEC on those issues.

Ms PATTEN — Yes, I would appreciate that. Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR — I would like to thank the witnesses for their attendance: the Minister for Education, the Honourable James Merlino; Ms Callister, Ms Haire, Ms Atta, Mr Keating and Ms Whetton.

There were 12 questions taken on notice including the last question from Ms Pennicuik. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing. The response, answering the questions in full, should be provided in writing within 10 working days of the committee's request.

Witnesses withdrew.