

Submission to the Inquiry into the Development and Expansion of Waste-to-Energy Infrastructure in Victoria

From Al Siraat College, located 7.5 km from the Proposed Wollert Incinerator

We write as an Islamic school community located approximately 7.5 kilometres from the proposed MERC waste-to-energy incinerator in Wollert. We express our clear and firm opposition to this proposal based on its foreseeable and unacceptable impact on children, families and the broader school community.

Health Impact on Students

The primary concern for our school is the health and safety of students. Children are particularly vulnerable to environmental harm due to their developing lungs, immune systems and brains. Exposure to air pollution, even at levels considered legally compliant, can contribute to respiratory illness, reduced lung development, and long-term health complications.

This proposal introduces a continuous source of emissions into a growing community where children will spend extended periods of time over many years. The risk is not limited to short term exposure, but to cumulative, lifelong impacts. There is no safe level of exposure to fine particulate pollution, and any additional burden disproportionately affects children.

A school environment must prioritise clean air and physical wellbeing. Introducing a waste incinerator within reach of a school community directly conflicts with this fundamental requirement.

Educational Impact

Student health and learning are inseparable. Any decline in health, whether through respiratory issues, fatigue, or stress, directly affects attendance, concentration and engagement in learning.

Increased illness leads to more absences. Reduced concentration affects classroom participation. Over time, this results in diminished academic outcomes and widening educational disadvantage. For younger students especially, interruptions to consistent learning can have long term consequences.

A school cannot fulfil its educational purpose if the surrounding environment undermines students' ability to learn. This proposal risks doing exactly that.

Psychological and Community Impact

Schools rely on trust between families and the institution. Parents must feel confident that their children are safe at school. The presence of a large scale waste incinerator introduces ongoing uncertainty and anxiety for families.

This is not a temporary concern. The proposed facility would operate for decades, meaning that entire cohorts of students would grow up and complete their schooling under the shadow of this development.

The result is a sustained erosion of community confidence. Families may feel compelled to reconsider where they live or where their children attend school. This undermines stability within both the school and the wider community.

Ethical and Islamic-Based Responsibility

As an Islamic school, we are guided by principles of stewardship (*khilāfah*), justice and the protection of human life. We have a moral obligation to safeguard children and to prevent harm where it is foreseeable.

This responsibility is reflected in our college values. *Living Islam* calls us to uphold the protection of life and wellbeing in all that we do. *Respectful Relationships* requires us to care not only for one another, but for the broader community and those who are most vulnerable. *Responsible Citizenship*, which informs the way we walk the earth, obliges us to act in ways that minimise harm to the environment and safeguard it for future generations. *It Starts With Me* reinforces that we must take responsibility and speak out when a decision places others at risk.

The establishment of a large-scale waste incineration facility, one that depends on continuous waste burning, produces emissions and generates hazardous by-products, is inconsistent with these values. It does not reflect responsible care for the environment, nor does it prioritise the wellbeing of children and communities.

This proposal places children at potential risk for the purpose of managing waste generated across a broader metropolitan population. It concentrates environmental and health impacts within one community while distributing the benefits elsewhere.

This is fundamentally unjust. It is not ethically acceptable for children to bear the burden of a problem created by many.

Long Term and Irreversible Impact

The proposed facility is not temporary. It is intended to operate for decades, embedding a permanent industrial presence within a residential growth area.

Once established, its impacts, whether environmental, social or health-related, cannot easily be reversed. This means that current students, as well as future generations, will live with the consequences of this decision.

Planning decisions of this magnitude must prioritise long-term community wellbeing. This proposal fails to meet that standard.

Risk and Precaution

Risk must be assessed not only under normal operating conditions, but also in the context of potential failures, malfunctions or accidents. Industrial facilities are not risk free, and when failures occur, the consequences can be catastrophic.

In a community that includes schools, even low probability risks must be treated with seriousness due to their potential impact on children. A precautionary approach is essential. Where uncertainty exists particularly in relation to long term exposure and cumulative effects the responsible course of action is to avoid introducing the risk altogether.

Cultural and Linguistic Equity

The Epping, Wollert and surrounding areas are highly multicultural, and as a college we proudly celebrate and embrace this diversity as a core strength of our community. However, this diversity also highlights a serious inequity in the consultation process.

A significant proportion of families within our community speak languages other than English at home. Many parents and caregivers do not have full access to, or understanding of, the details of this proposal, not due to a lack of interest or concern, but because information has not been communicated in a way that is accessible to them.

This is a critical failure. A proposal of this scale, complexity and long-term impact requires genuine, informed community participation. That cannot occur where large segments of the community are effectively excluded due to language barriers.

As a result, many families whose children will be directly affected by this development have not been able to meaningfully engage, ask questions or express informed views. This undermines the legitimacy of the consultation process and raises serious concerns about procedural fairness.

It is not acceptable for a decision with lifelong consequences for children to proceed in circumstances where parts of the community have not been adequately informed or heard. True consultation must be inclusive, accessible and equitable. In this case, it has not been.

Conclusion

This proposal fails the most basic test of responsible decision making: it does not protect children.

It introduces a permanent source of pollution and environmental risk into a community built for families and schools. It places students, who are among the most vulnerable members of society, at the centre of a long term experiment in exposure and uncertainty.

No level of regulatory compliance can justify this. No planning framework can defend it. And no ethical standard can support placing children at risk for the purpose of managing waste generated elsewhere.

The impacts are not theoretical. They are real, cumulative and irreversible. They will affect students' health, their ability to learn, their sense of safety and the trust their families place in schools and institutions.

Worse still, this proposal proceeds in a context where parts of the community have not been fully informed due to language barriers. Families whose children will be directly affected have not been given a fair or equal opportunity to understand and respond. This is not just a planning failure, it is a failure of equity and justice.

We reject the notion that any school community should be expected to accept these risks.

The proposed Wollert incinerator is incompatible with the presence of schools. It undermines health, disrupts learning, erodes trust and imposes a burden that will last for generations.

The government must reject this proposal.

Children must not bear the cost of Melbourne's waste.