

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Tuesday 19 May 2026

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak



**WITNESSES**

Ben Carroll MP, Minister for Education; and

Tony Bates, Secretary,

Andrea Del Monaco, Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services,

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

Stephen Fraser, Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support,

Joanne Wandel, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority, and

Andrew Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Department of Education.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the lands on which we are meeting, the lands of the Wurundjeri people. We pay our respects to them and their elders past, present and emerging, as well as elders from other communities who may be here with us today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, any comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and it is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. This broadcast includes automated captioning, so members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during the hearings and anything you say may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it very quietly.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

I welcome the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education the Honourable Ben Carroll as well as officials from the Department of Education. Deputy Premier, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time the committee will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present on the education portfolio. Can I also join you, Chair, and acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting here today. I always make the point as education minister to highlight that they were our first educators, our first students and our first teachers, and I deeply pay my respects to elders past and present and to any elders and First Nations people that are here today.

In 2015 Victoria made clear its intentions by calling itself the Education State. Our aim was to ensure every Victorian student, no matter where they lived, had access to world-class education in a government school. This was a bold ambition, but we backed it up with record investment, evidence-based programs and a strong commitment to fairness and inclusion.

## Visual presentation.

**Ben CARROLL:** More than a decade on, the cumulative results of our efforts are clear for everyone to see. In 2025 Victorian students achieved the best overall NAPLAN results in Australia, just as they did in 2024. Across reading, numeracy, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation we are either first or second in the country. We also have fewer students needing additional support. More students are completing their senior secondary education than ever before, and in 2025 our years 10 to 12 retention rates increased to the highest in eight years.

Our investment over the past 12 years has funded 126 new schools and more than 2400 upgrades. Our sustained investment in equity, inclusion and excellence means children are being supported to reach their full potential at school and in life. The Victorian budget 2026–27 builds on this legacy. It locks in our commitment to elevating our education system by investing \$4.9 billion in our students, teachers and schools. As I announced on Friday with the Premier, we have reached an in-principle agreement with the Australian Education Union: a new enterprise agreement which will see the best teachers in the nation become the best paid teachers in the nation, and education support staff will also be the best paid in the nation.

This budget invests more than \$2.1 billion over four years to help students with disability get the support that they need in a Victorian government school. Our new investment builds on and extends our nation-leading disability inclusion program. It includes continued funding and support for the existing outside school hours care service, high educator-to-child ratios at specialist schools, including free OSHC at 31 specialist schools, and funding to expand the transport assistance program for eligible students in government specialist schools. Our ongoing commitment to equity and inclusion ensures our schools are places that do support students of all abilities.

Financial hardship is a form of exclusion in education. This budget delivers \$59.4 million for the vital programs we know are giving families practical, tangible help at a time when cost-of-living pressures are having a big toll. Our investment is making sure the school breakfast club program is available to every single government school that wants to take part. The Glasses for Kids program is expanding to run free onsite screening for more prep to grade 3 students and to provide free glasses if they need them. The affordable school uniforms program has made sure that students who need extra support have been able to access free uniforms, schoolbags and shoes, providing more than 500,000 free items since the beginning of 2024. From next year government primary schools will also provide access to tablets and laptops for their students to use at school so families do not need to buy these expensive devices. These are important ways we are supporting families at a time when every dollar really does matter, as well as making sure our students are fully able to engage in their learning in the classroom.

Our updated Victorian teaching and learning model VTLM 2.0 and Victorian lesson plans are easing teacher workload and strengthening consistent use of evidence-based teaching right across our state in every classroom. As we bring evidence-based practices to life in our classrooms we are seeing these efforts bear fruit through our outstanding NAPLAN results, through positive feedback from teachers and through high levels of engagement both with the VTLM and with our lesson plans. High-ability students will continue to be supported, extended and challenged with \$75.1 million to extend the Victorian high-ability program and the Victorian Challenge and Enrichment Series. This budget delivers a further \$23.6 million to support delivery of the year 1 phonics check and for boosting literacy and numeracy for primary school kids through small-group tutoring. Funding will also support continued delivery of the abilities-based learning and education support, which is helping teachers develop learning goals and teaching and learning strategies for students with disability. Through this budget we are also continuing to support the teaching of First Nations histories, cultures and perspectives – a critical, crucial part of the curriculum – and we will continue to deliver prep bags to our new students as they start their education journeys.

Our senior secondary reforms continue to elevate the status of applied learning in the final years of school. Our reforms of senior secondary have been so successful that we are investing \$144.7 million to keep up with demand. Schools will get more support for the administration of vocational education and training, VET, subjects. Regional and rural students will receive help to transport them to VET placements. The funding will also cover continued support for students enrolled in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, career advice and making sure we pull every lever to expose students to try in-demand trades and different sectors of the economy.

Every student deserves to feel safe and engaged in their learning, regardless of their background or circumstances. Helping schools to make sure all students of all backgrounds feel safe, respected and supported is important today more than ever, and we understand that different school communities need different supports delivered to them in ways that are informed by their own contexts. That is why we are funding a range of initiatives that are the right fit for their communities, such as supporting homework clubs for refugee children and students through Learning Beyond the Bell. The Courage to Care Upstander program will continue to provide students with the skills they need to stand up against racism and discrimination, something we will not tolerate in our schools. We are also committed to working with schools and communities to put the right supports in place to keep students engaged and connected – those students that particularly are at risk of being disengaged from education. Data demonstrates that staying in school and having positive peer relationships is a positive factor for at-risk children that helps them to stay on track.

We reviewed the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority to ensure our VCE students could sit their final exams with confidence. This budget invests \$222.2 million to ensure the VCAA continues to deliver high-quality curriculum assessment and reporting and can progress all recommendations of the Yehudi Blacher review, including delivering new IT infrastructure to schools, teachers and students. The Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership has been provided \$49.2 million to continue delivering professional educational enhancements for our teachers and school leaders. \$21.5 million has also been provided for paid placements and placement support for preservice teachers.

Cybersecurity incidents are becoming an increasingly serious operational issue for schools, placing not only students but families of students and families at harm. Obviously, any family or student caught up in one of these incidents experiences a lot of stress and concern. The World Economic Forum in its most recent global cybersecurity outlook notes a significant global rise in malicious cyber activity targeting governments, and this is being accelerated by artificial intelligence. Sadly, Victoria is not immune to this trend. That is why this budget is investing in ways to ensure students' and families' data is protected. This includes \$30.4 million to enhance cybersecurity by centralising technology platforms for more government schools and \$17.9 million to support the migration of IT infrastructure to a cloud-based secure system.

Half of all new schools built in Australia in the past decade have been built right here in Victoria. This budget provides further investment to ensure growing communities across the state have the world-class schools that every Victorian child deserves. More than \$440 million will continue Victoria's pipeline of new schools, including three opening in 2028, a new South Melbourne Primary School campus opening in 2029 and additional stages at three recently opened schools. The funding will also support planning, design and early works at three more schools and campuses opening in 2029 and 2030, plus planning for future schools in later years. Looking to the horizon, the budget provides \$104 million to buy land for new schools and campuses.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Deputy Premier. We are going to go to the Deputy Chair.

**John PESUTTO:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and senior officials. Minister, I just want to go to the teachers EBA, which you have recently made comments on, including today. The offer that has been reported or the settlement that has been reported in the media talks of 32.5 per cent over four years, which is significantly more than an offer you put just the other week. I want to ask you: if this is agreed, what will the cost of this new EBA be, and was it provisioned in the budget, which took things up to 23 April?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Pesutto. The total cost of the agreement, to go to your exact points, is \$4.63 billion. I think you also asked: is it provided for in the budget? It is provided for in the budget.

**John PESUTTO:** So when your offer of a much lower amount was tabled, you had already provisioned for the higher amount.

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes.

**John PESUTTO:** Right. Okay. Minister, you said that this would make Victorian teachers the best paid in the country, if I understood you correctly. Can I just clarify for the record: does that mean, on base salary, all teachers covered by this EBA will be the best paid in the country?

**Ben CARROLL:** Essentially, all teachers and education support staff come October, right across the board – everyone in our education system is essentially getting a third of a pay rise. It is the biggest substantial

investment in our government teachers. They will all go up, and then over the next four years we will see our teachers remain in front of jurisdictions like New South Wales. We are very committed to making sure the best teachers in the nation become the best paid in the nation.

**John PESUTTO:** Throughout the life of the EBA?

**Ben CARROLL:** That is our intention. We want it to reflect the work that they do. We know our teachers are the single most powerful people in the classroom – but not only the teachers, the education support staff. I am really proud that we are boosting them, because they are not just supporting teachers, they are helping some of the most vulnerable kids in our schools. They are making sure kids get the online learning that they need. They are making sure that the kids that are performing well get stretched beyond their measures as well.

**John PESUTTO:** Sure. Minister, can I just run through some other entitlements. On annual leave, will all teachers be the best paid in the country in terms of that entitlement throughout the life of the EBA?

**Ben CARROLL:** Well, the annual leave provisions are pretty much national, Mr Pesutto, but we have matched New South Wales.

**John PESUTTO:** They can vary from EBA to EBA of course, subject to the –

**Ben CARROLL:** We have, though, matched New South Wales in terms of pupil-free days. But we have been very clear with the pupil-free days, which I think are eight, that they are really for accessing – we are the only state that has a Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership – more science of learning, phonics, making sure we do everything we can.

**John PESUTTO:** Sorry, in terms of annual leave, though, across the board, across all classifications covered by the EBA, Victorian teachers will be the best paid in terms of leave entitlements across the country?

**Ben CARROLL:** I can get my Secretary to supplement –

**John PESUTTO:** You can come back to me if you do not have it.

**Ben CARROLL:** But just on that, because you do raise the right point about conditions, Mr Pesutto, there is the salary. We already were the best in conditions: the lowest student-to-teacher ratios, less face-to-face time teaching, making sure we had the time in lieu provisions. There has been a lot of talk too – we are doing a national sort of trial – on making sure in what is a very feminised workforce that gender equity is at the heart of what we are doing, supporting teachers that have family commitments as well.

**John PESUTTO:** Rather than go through each term and condition, on all allowances and other entitlements, can we take it from your comments that Victorian teachers will be the best paid in each year of the EBA across the country?

**Ben CARROLL:** Well, I know our allowances, and we did make some reform around this, because you would be aware, Mr Pesutto, there were some issues with time in lieu and kids not being able to participate in camp. So we have reformed that and now do have a new allowance. As a teacher said to me on the weekend, ‘You might go, Ben, from having teachers not wanting to participate in camp to every teacher wanting to participate in camp.’ But we think that is a good thing for the extracurricular activities for our kids and our students.

**John PESUTTO:** Just finally on this particular topic, Minister, you said the cost was, I think, \$4.6 billion. Is that across the operation of the enterprise agreement?

**Ben CARROLL:** That is my understanding. Secretary, do you want to supplement me – that is, the \$4.63 billion is –

**John PESUTTO:** Are there no cumulative costs in there or anything?

**Tony BATES:** Deputy Chair, it is \$4.6 billion on top of indexation that we have already got in the forward estimates. That is the cost to the budget, but as the minister said, that was out of provisions that Treasury had set aside within the fiscal aggregates.

**John PESUTTO:** For the sake of this committee, can I take it that that \$4.6 billion will come out of the output contingencies in the budget? Would that be correct?

**Tony BATES:** That is one you will have to check with the Treasury Secretary, but yes.

**John PESUTTO:** Okay. Minister, given that the government has promoted time in lieu arrangements as part of its efforts to address teacher workload pressures, does the government believe that these measures will work to address time in lieu disputes and issues?

**Ben CARROLL:** Look, we are confident they will work. We did do reform of time in lieu. The biggest impact on time in lieu was on camps and a shortage of teachers being able to participate in camps. Now that we have reformed time in lieu and there will be an allowance for teachers to participate in camps, we believe we have really addressed that issue and done the reform that was called for.

**John PESUTTO:** Minister, if the agreement does not go through, is there a plan B?

**Ben CARROLL:** If you look at the Secretary and if you look at the show of hands in the room, we are confident that the agreement will go through. It is an agreement that –

**John PESUTTO:** Sorry to interrupt, Minister. One of the reasons I ask is that I understand there is a contingent of the workforce that is now campaigning openly against the union leadership supported position.

**Ben CARROLL:** I reject the premise of that question.

**John PESUTTO:** I am putting it to you, asking whether it is true.

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes, but I reject the premise because it is overwhelmingly – and I saw the show of hands in the room. So from here it was voted on strongly. The union now go out to their 29 regions, and they will do all the due diligence that they will do. If it passes, there will be a vote at all our schools, and then it will go to the Fair Work Commission to go before a single commissioner. It will be put up in plain English for everyone to see, and it will, I suspect, be voted through. This takes us from the lowest paid to the highest paid in one agreement, and this is an outstanding offer that sells itself.

**John PESUTTO:** Minister, going back to the question I asked about your previous offer before you had reached this in-principle agreement, I asked you specifically if when you made that offer you had provisioned for the higher amount for this offer. Can I put it to you that had you put your best position then, you would have spared Victorian government schools, Victorian government students, Victorian government school parents and the broader community all the anguish and inconvenience of the industrial action that has ensued. Isn't that correct?

**Ben CARROLL:** You would appreciate that we have to put in place – and as the secretary of the union himself said, a negotiation is a negotiation, and you have to get to an outcome.

**John PESUTTO:** But didn't it come at the cost to families, to students and to teachers of all of the anguish and stress that comes with not knowing about your own circumstances? Had the Premier sat down with the union or yourself and said, 'Look, this is the maximum. This is what we're prepared to do. Let's do this deal. It will make teachers the best paid on every entitlement.' Why didn't you do that then? Because you would have saved –

*Members interjecting.*

**John PESUTTO:** I will take up the objection.

**The CHAIR:** Cease the interjecting, please.

**John PESUTTO:** I think you would agree, Minister, this has been a long-running dispute.

**Ben CARROLL:** It has actually, Mr Pesutto, been one of the shortest disputes.

**John PESUTTO:** You are happy with how long it took?

**Ben CARROLL:** No, we always want these to be –

**John PESUTTO:** Okay. That is the main question, though, and the question is: couldn't you have spared schools, parents and the broader community all of the anguish and inconvenience of industrial action if, on your own evidence to this committee this morning, you could have settled this months ago?

**Ben CARROLL:** To give you the respect of an answer, Mr Pesutto, you would appreciate that the union came in seeking 35 per cent, and there was a little bit of disquiet about their previous agreement; they felt they did well on conditions but not in salary. We did put an offer of 18.5 per cent, and we thought that was a fair and reasonable offer. But I also considered the nurses, police. I was always a realist. But we have had a fruitful discussion. I have been in contact with the head of the union.

**John PESUTTO:** No, we understand that you have reached an in-principle. We do understand that, Minister. But can you understand the broader point I am making on behalf of the Victorian people that at the time you made the 18.5 per cent offer you already knew in the back of your mind – you have just told this committee earlier – that you were prepared to pay nearly double that in terms of the increase?

**Ben CARROLL:** No. There was a –

**John PESUTTO:** Couldn't you have spared everybody the trouble?

**Ben CARROLL:** There was a full negotiation that needed to occur, Mr Pesutto.

**John PESUTTO:** But it did not need to occur, on your own admission.

**Ben CARROLL:** It did need to occur, because outside of salary there are conditions. There is time in lieu. There are a range of meetings and factors.

**John PESUTTO:** Which we just went through. We walked through all of that earlier. We walked through all of that earlier, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Deputy Chair. Afford the minister the opportunity to respond. He is responding to all of your questions quite frankly.

**Ben CARROLL:** We are very proud of this agreement. We are confident it will proceed. I thank the union for their constructive engagement. We have a very strong education system. In addition to the EBA, we are a government that is investing \$1.9 billion in growing the teacher workforce through our Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow programs for our pre-service teachers, making sure our students in specialist schools in hard-to-reach places like rural and regional Victoria have access to education. We are very confident that this agreement sells itself. But our teachers deserve to be the best paid. I highlighted the NAPLAN results, and I give full credit to our teachers for that.

**John PESUTTO:** Thank you, Minister. In light of that answer, can I ask about the government's Gonski commitment and the deferral of the \$2.4 billion. Are you prepared to tell this committee if your government will meet that commitment by 2034?

**Ben CARROLL:** We have certainly led the way in negotiating with the Commonwealth to increase –

**John PESUTTO:** Sorry to stop you there. We are the only state that has not done a deal on Gonski, am I correct?

**Ben CARROLL:** We have done a bilateral agreement, and that is up for negotiation and conclusion.

**John PESUTTO:** But we have not yet sorted out the main game, which is when the dollars will flow to meet our commitment under the Gonski terms.

**Ben CARROLL:** Dollars flow every year under Gonski. This teachers' EBA was an important step in that, Mr Pesutto.

**John PESUTTO:** How much of it does it acquit?

**Ben CARROLL:** It acquits obviously a substantial part, but I will not go into the negotiations through this committee, except to say this will be a matter for myself and the Premier, with the Prime Minister and the federal education minister. We are very proud of the advocacy we led in getting the Commonwealth to increase its share of Gonski. We have always said, and we have always advocated, as David Gonski himself said, that our investment in school infrastructure is not included in any of the Gonski equations. So when you look at –

**John PESUTTO:** But why should it be? Isn't Gonski about the quality of the teaching in schools? Buildings do play a part in that, but isn't Gonski about properly resourcing to the SRS level required so students are getting that education in the classroom? That was the whole debate, wasn't it?

**Ben CARROLL:** Mr Pesutto, you just answered your own question by saying school infrastructure is an important part of students reaching their –

**John PESUTTO:** But you are using that to hide behind the fact – and I put this to you – your government is not meeting its full Gonski commitment, because you do not have the money to meet the Gonski commitment.

**The CHAIR:** Deputy Chair, your job is to ask the questions, not answer your own questions. Did you have a question for the minister?

**John PESUTTO:** I just put that to him.

**Ben CARROLL:** We have, Mr Pesutto, grown our per capita investment in education, per student, more than 30 per cent since we came to office. The results speak for themselves. If you pick up the *Age* newspaper today, where they look across the nation for NAPLAN results, they are calling out and singling out Victoria for its investment. In the science of learning and cost of learning –

**John PESUTTO:** The report on government services shows, Minister, that your government spends the least amount per student in a government school.

**Ben CARROLL:** I reject the premise of that question, because Victoria has significantly grown its per student expenditure in government schools, by 31.2 per cent since we came to office.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister, Secretary and officials. Thanks for joining us. Minister, I would like to start with something that you touched on in your presentation, but it is also referenced in budget paper 3, page 13, and that is providing all Victorian students with equality of access to education, specifically the output initiative 'Supporting families with the cost of education', which acquits just over \$59 million over the forward estimates for this purpose. Could you please talk to me about this initiative and what you seek to achieve?

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes, certainly, Mr Galea. As you touched on, families are doing it tough at the moment – the war in Iran, interest rate rises – and our Premier and our government, our Treasurer, we have made cost of living front and centre for relief in this budget for Victorian families. Through our initiatives, which are on table 1.8 – 'Supporting families with the cost of education' – we are investing \$59.4 million in three main initiatives to drive down costs for families and help students stay engaged in school.

One of the best ways we are doing that, Mr Galea, is through the Glasses for Kids program, with a \$6.6 million investment. We first introduced Glasses for Kids back in 2016. It is celebrating 10 years. We did this because we did see a very clear need to reduce the number of children suffering from poor vision. The evidence is clear: poor vision creates barriers in the classroom, limiting a student's ability to engage and learn. Previously we invested \$6.8 million in the program. I will never forget the day I was down at the college of the deaf on St Kilda Road. I met a young boy, with his mum, who was a beneficiary of the Glasses for Kids program. The feeling in the room – to see this family getting the support they need – and then the world of opportunity that education was going to provide this young boy, who wanted to become a police officer, is something I will always remember. I also know when it comes to pride, every child wants to have polished shoes, socks and a uniform, and the affordable school uniforms program – in this budget, we invest \$29.3 million. So we are very committed, Mr Galea, to cost of living. We will continue to do everything we can to make sure every family has access to a world-class education and is supported through it.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. Indeed it is particularly good to highlight the Glasses for Kids program. We spoke about that just a couple of days ago in earlier hearings in this inquiry too. If I can ask you as well about the school breakfast clubs, which, as you said, have now been offered to every government school. I know some in my electorate have taken it up and seen a great response out of it. Can you talk to me a little bit more about this initiative but also about the affordable uniforms program and the reforms you have made in terms of uniform requirements as well?

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes. Thanks, Mr Galea. A quick shout-out, first and foremost, to Dave McNamara and the whole team at Foodbank. When it comes to what we are doing in the school breakfast program, it is Victoria-wide. We have served up 65 million breakfasts for students in public schools. There are currently 1356 schools participating in this program, and all schools are invited to participate. This means in every corner of the state students are getting free meals under the program. My own electorate – everyone here, all members of this committee, will know of schools that are getting it. I know my Niddrie Primary School and Aberfeldie Primary are dishing up breakfast, and I have been there and seen it firsthand. What a time saver. It helps for parents. It is a nutritious breakfast. Kids cannot learn on empty stomachs.

There is also another story to the school breakfast program that I just did want to touch on too. I will come back to disadvantaged children, but it is a good win for our farmers and our food manufacturers – that whole circular economy flows through the school breakfast program. But it is not just about school breakfast, albeit that being the title – it is doing take-home meals, it is doing cooking classes, and it is doing lunches at some schools. It is really ensuring that families know food is medicine – healthy cooking – while helping them save money. We are doing everything we can to make it as clear as possible.

Mr Galea, you also touched on the affordable school uniforms program. Under this program, 500,000 items have been provided since 2024, and these are going to families that are financially disadvantaged with young children; more than that, an incredible 2.3 million items have been delivered to students in need since the program's inception in 2015. This is a special one because we are providing school uniforms, school bags, shoes and swimming items to students in need. I was recently with the State Schools' Relief CEO Andrew Cameron talking about the growth they are seeing in this program as more families come forward to seek help. It is really wonderful to see what we are doing here.

You would also be aware, Mr Galea – and we sort of led the nation on this – we made really important reform around school logos to make sure parents could purchase parts of uniforms at Kmart, Best&Less or Big W. That has been a game changer in terms of driving down costs and also giving freedom of choice and more purchasing power to parents when it comes to their school uniforms.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. We have already spoken to some degree about school camps and obviously about teachers being better resourced to now attend them, and we hope to see increased uptake amongst teachers, but certainly we want full uptake amongst students as well. That is where I refer to page 14 of the questionnaire, the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund. Could you talk to me about this initiative and again how it is supporting providing that equality of access?

**Ben CARROLL:** The Camps Sports and Excursions Fund, which has been outlined in our questionnaire, is really important in making sure every family gets to participate, particularly where their circumstances have been a barrier. The state budget does invest \$152.3 million in the camps, sports and excursions program to increase the payment to \$400 for all eligible families. As outlined in the questionnaire, this includes an uplift of \$38 million in 2025–26 and 2026–27. This is an additional investment, making sure that no student misses out. Also too parents or carers with a valid means-tested concession card are eligible to ensure that they participate in this program. Special consideration is given to families and also refugee families and asylum seeker families to make sure any students that are in out-of-home care get that wonderful opportunity to participate in a camp and all the learning that comes with it. The fund supports more than 190,000 eligible students each year to take part in those important school experiences; as you identified, Mr Galea, it is just one important component. I should say, as a father with a daughter going away on camp, Mum and Dad are both looking forward to going out to the movies or something like that tomorrow night without the little one at home, so it is a benefit for parents as well.

**Michael GALEA:** Indeed. Thank you, Deputy Premier. Another very important and indeed topical subject at the moment is additional supports for students with disabilities. I refer to the two output initiatives in budget

paper 3, page 13. Could you please talk to me about this, about the outputs for disability inclusion in schools but also the high-intensity outside school hours care?

**Ben CARROLL:** This is a program that is very close, I think, to our whole movement's heart. Indeed the Premier, me and the minister for children and disability began our budget day with families, with kids, that needed additional support, both inside the classroom and outside the classroom, and that speaks to our values. This is a game changer, what we are doing in disability inclusion, and as the federal government looks at Thriving Kids and reform of the NDIS, I can tell you all eyes are on Victoria on what to do successfully. This program that we are doing, disability inclusion in every government school, but also too we have upgraded every specialist school. There are therapy pools in our specialist schools.

The high-intensity outside school hours care initiative is a game changer for those kids and their families for a couple of reasons. First and foremost, the children with special needs do not need to go to another unfamiliar location or campus. All the outside intensive school hours care happens in the school environment, and they are getting those wraparound supports and those wraparound services they need. It is also a double dividend for the economy, because it is seeing predominantly women being able to get back into the workforce, take up additional training or go and just have a good break with their partner or do some recreation. When I move around the state and I hear from families, and we are providing this free of charge, it has been a game changer for those families that really need it. Our disability inclusion and our outside school hours care initiative – add to that the programs and support we are doing with the disability transport program in specialist schools. We are having a massive impact. In 2025 approximately 8950 students at 86 public specialist schools benefited from the reforms we are making, especially around our bus and taxi services. We always know we have got more work to do, Mr Galea, but we will not rest until every child gets the world of possibilities that education provides.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. And indeed another line item is the 'Locally driven education programs', and I see there are a number of particular programs highlighted in this initiative, including the Academy Movement program at the Narre South P-12 in my electorate. Minister, what are the benefits of this program?

**Ben CARROLL:** First and foremost, this really supports those amazing organisations, like in your electorate, Mr Galea, to support them in the great work they are doing. That is why we are supporting them to continue the great work they are doing in our schools. In this budget we are bringing local organisations together to harness their local knowledge to ensure students have all the best opportunities that are available. In the 2026-27 state budget, \$1.9 million over three years for locally driven education programs. This does include \$439,000 over two years to support the North Geelong school lawyer program to reach up to 11 schools. Now, you might say, 'Why do you need such a program?' Well, this program provides lawyers to work with schools to improve young people's access to legal services and to also deepen their understanding of their legal rights and responsibilities. It is a free service that would otherwise be unaffordable for schools and families.

Barwon Community Legal Service started this program in July 2018. They have also partnered with Western Heights College. In 2023 they partnered with another local organisation, Meli, and seven schools in the Geelong region to create Legal Link Up. We know out in the western suburbs, Mr Hilakari, Westjustice – a strong advocate for the school lawyer program. And this is where good reform comes. It often comes through government investing in initiatives like the school lawyer program but having the Department of Education work closely with legal providers out in the suburbs.

Then you get other groundbreaking policies coming through, like free public transport for students, ensuring kids get to school settled and ready to learn and they are not anxious on the bus because they do not have a ticket. These are really important initiatives. Other issues that students could get are free legal support, including workplace rights, intervention orders, police powers, individual rights, cyberbullying and employment law. One of the most important things, Mr Galea, is that these are local solutions that are tailored to some of the local areas of concern in these communities. But most important too, often as education minister you will hear different things come out of different schools. It can be seen where there is a case of one student whose father had passed away recently, and this family had serious financial issues relating to the will and the child did not understand their rights. When the school lawyer program got involved, this child saw their matter escalated and resolved with the legal support they needed right there at the school supporting them, Mr Galea.

We are really proud of the work we are doing. As I have also said – and this goes a bit to the enterprise bargaining agreement that Mr Pesutto touched on earlier and why we are supporting our education support staff – our schools are not just schools anymore; they are universal service centres. Often many different institutions in communities have sort of fallen away. The one strong single institution that brings families and communities together is the school. It is more than bricks and mortar; it is where people come together, it is where lives can be transformed and it is where we can make a big difference, whether it is breakfasts, the school lawyer program or Glasses for Kids. That is why this enterprise bargaining agreement, to go back, is so important as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to go to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Morning, Minister. Morning, officials. I want to talk about the VSBA this morning. Minister, could you provide the number of schools currently identified as being in poor or very poor condition under the department's asset condition assessments?

**Ben CARROLL:** Sure, Ms Benham. I do have the Chief Executive Officer of the VSBA here with me today, and I might get her to supplement my answer. But I want to say at the outset: not since free education was introduced in 1872 has there been a school building program on the scale that is happening right here in Victoria. We are not only modernising and building more schools, we are doing everything we can to get them completed ahead of schedule and on time. When we came to government, we did inherit an infrastructure capital works program for our schools that was a disaster – an absolute disaster – with only 14.1 per cent of school capital works being delivered on time. Under the Victorian School Building Authority – credit to the CEO and the team she leads – 91.9 per cent of projects are now delivered on time. That improvement, between two financial years, is 264 days. So we are upgrading schools on a scale that has never been seen before. Of the 1600 government schools, Ms Benham, that you raised, catering for some 665,000 students, since 2015 \$6.8 billion has been allocated to 2400 upgrades at 1250 government schools, and I know, as someone who represents a regional area, metropolitan schools have received 57 per cent of these upgrades at nearly 720 schools, totalling \$4.9 billion – that is 72 per cent; regional schools have received 43 per cent of these upgrades at over 530 schools for a cost of nearly \$1.9 billion.

**Jade BENHAM:** Well, can I just ask about that, Minister. There are still regional schools – and I know there is one example in Mildura West, who have had two master plans completed and only one building of that master plan completed, and some buildings are being held together by chipboard. So can I ask how regional schools and how funding might be prioritised and not funnelled through to where it was originally planned? Two master plans are, I would think, plenty of planning still not delivered.

**Ben CARROLL:** Ms Benham, we have delivered some \$65 million into schools in the electorate of Mildura across 29 public schools, including \$14 million at the Mildura Specialist School. We are really proud of the investment, in this budget, of \$500,000 at Cardross Primary School through the Capital Works Fund. We have always said we have got more work to do, but I might ask Ms Wandel if she wants to supplement my answer.

**Joanne WANDEL:** Thank you, Minister. And thanks, Ms Benham, for your question. The minister was talking about the rolling facilities evaluation process, which is the five-year assessment cycle that the Victorian School Building Authority undertakes to assess the condition of all schools. In answer to your question, it is a very difficult question to answer, because as soon as that condition assessment report is approved by the school, the Victorian School Building Authority then attends to remediating any defects that are addressed within that report, and those defects are identified within six to 12 months of that report.

**Jade BENHAM:** So how would a school get away with having some learning buildings held together by chipboard because of termite damage over the course of nearly 10 years?

**Joanne WANDEL:** The planned maintenance – what I would first say is that delivering new schools and upgrading existing ones is obviously a key priority, but these works do need to be staged. I am aware that you are talking about Mildura West, and we have had conversations with the principal there –

**Jade BENHAM:** I know.

**Joanne WANDEL:** and we are aware that there would be a preference to demolish the existing building and to deliver a new one. But the Victorian school buildings policy is that demolition of existing buildings is only an outcome when those facilities are set outside the scheduled area, so they are no longer required. In this instance, those learning areas are required, so more than \$600,000 has been invested through a planned maintenance program project to improve upgrades to that main building. We also invested I believe \$1.282 million in the 2024–25 financial year as part of an emergency maintenance program, working with the school to address electrical rewiring and termite damage to that building.

**Jade BENHAM:** Would it not be more cost-efficient and effective to just complete the master plan?

**Joanne WANDEL:** As I said, these upgrades at existing schools do need to be staged, and some of the factors that are taken into account are the disruption to the school. Obviously we are working within a live operating environment. I am looking at enrolment numbers, looking at capacity. The planned maintenance program is exactly there to identify and remedy defects within schools. As the minister said, we have 1600 schools across the state – 36,000 buildings – and the planned maintenance program is an appropriate program to remedy defects within schools.

**Jade BENHAM:** So out of those 1600 schools, can you tell me how many have been identified as being in poor or very poor condition?

**Joanne WANDEL:** As I said, the rolling facilities evaluation is a five-year assessment cycle.

**Jade BENHAM:** As of today.

**Joanne WANDEL:** We undertake approximately 300 condition assessments on an annual basis. As soon as defects are identified, the planned maintenance program works to remedy those defects. So a school may have a particular score at a point in time, but as soon as those works are undertaken that score becomes irrelevant.

**Jade BENHAM:** So as of today, how many schools are in poor or very poor condition?

**Joanne WANDEL:** It is a fluid question. We would be conducting rolling facilities evaluations at schools today. All of those assessments would result in a condition assessment score that we then move forward to remedy.

**Jade BENHAM:** But we know that there is an answer to this. Let us take, for example, last week then – you would have the data there of condition scores.

**Joanne WANDEL:** But as we are continually doing maintenance, the condition scores are remedied.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Are you able to provide a list for the end of May – what day are we on? No, it will not be the end of May – for the end of April on what the assessments were?

**Ben CARROLL:** Ms Benham, in this budget \$551.6 million over five years is going – including \$130 million to ongoing essential maintenance.

**Jade BENHAM:** That is not the question, though. I am after –

**Ben CARROLL:** This means, though, from 2027 this is –

**Jade BENHAM:** Minister, with respect, I am after an idea on the number of schools. I am not worried about the investment. I am worried about the number of school buildings and schools that are in poor or very poor condition.

**Ben CARROLL:** When we receive our condition reports, the Department of Education works with the schools to identify any defects.

**Jade BENHAM:** I get that. Yes.

**Ben CARROLL:** We actually through our make-safe program every day and every week are working with schools to ensure they are the best conditions for the students and the teaching staff.

**Jade BENHAM:** Excellent. So as of today what is the number?

**Ben CARROLL:** We have got an investment happening every day, so the number always changes.

**Jade BENHAM:** No. What is the number of schools today that are in very poor or poor condition?

**Ben CARROLL:** Our schools are unrecognisable from the ones we inherited. It is a sixfold increase compared –

**Jade BENHAM:** Are you able to provide the list? It is such a simple question, Minister, for education – a very simple question: a list of schools in poor or very poor condition.

**Ben CARROLL:** We will take that on notice.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you so much.

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you.

**Jade BENHAM:** Can I ask the proportion of VSBA projects delivered over the past three years – you were talking about this earlier – that were completed on time and on budget?

**Ben CARROLL:** I think it is roughly 90 to –

**Joanne WANDEL:** It ranges between 90 and 94 per cent, Minister.

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes.

**Jade BENHAM:** Ninety-one to 94 per cent – okay. Great. Can I ask the number of VSBA projects that are currently behind schedule and the average length of delay across those projects?

**Ben CARROLL:** I think most of our schools are completed ahead of schedule by some eight months. The VSBA work very closely with our planning, local government, different water authorities and First Nations authorities. We always provision to ensure that we have no schools that are running behind, but where there are, we always seem to be able to ensure we can catch up, Ms Benham, and make sure the schools are open. Sometimes it has a bit of a staged opening, I will grant that. To open 100 schools – to open 19 in one year, as we did this year: that a lot of effort by the VSBA, the contractors and all involved.

**Jade BENHAM:** How many projects are on the go or are happening right now?

**Ben CARROLL:** As in new schools or just upgrades?

**Jade BENHAM:** Projects as a holistic number. The VSBA would have a list of projects that are happening right now.

**Ben CARROLL:** I can get the chief executive officer to answer that question.

**Joanne WANDEL:** Thanks, Minister. As at essentially the currency of this conversation, we have 187 active projects. We have got a significant portfolio. As the minister said, we have had a historical record of delivering the majority of our projects within 90 to 94 per cent of time since around 2018, when the Victorian School Building –

**Jade BENHAM:** How many are currently in progress?

**Joanne WANDEL:** 187.

**Jade BENHAM:** And how many of those are on time?

**Joanne WANDEL:** We have around 143 or so on time.

**Jade BENHAM:** Across the remaining projects what is the average length of delay?

**Joanne WANDEL:** We classify a delay of at least one or more months.

**Jade BENHAM:** But what is the average length of delay?

**Joanne WANDEL:** It can vary depending on the nature of the delay.

**Jade BENHAM:** I understand that, which is why I am asking for the average.

**Joanne WANDEL:** It is very hard to quantify because in some instances it could be a very small delay associated with working through a tender evaluation. In other instances we have market volatility, and in three of our schools that has resulted in contractor insolvency and that has required a number of processes to be worked through. It is very difficult to give you an average when you are considering the wide degree of examples as to why a project might be delayed.

**Jade BENHAM:** But if you took all of those delays and then divided it by the amount of projects, then you would find the average, wouldn't you? I am just looking for an average. It is okay. I will move on. As a percentage of the total project budget, what percentage is allocated to the VSBA project management costs?

**Ben CARROLL:** It is a global figure and the CEO can supplement me. We have invested \$20.1 billion in school infrastructure, and I think that does include project management costs.

**Jade BENHAM:** How much of that is project management costs?

**Richard RIORDAN:** How much cream comes off the top?

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes, how much of that goes into project management? We are just looking for the difference between the bricks and mortar and the outcome.

**Ben CARROLL:** We see school infrastructure as an important investment in our future.

**Jade BENHAM:** Exactly. So do we. We just want to know how much of that is going into the bricks and mortar.

**Ben CARROLL:** \$1.6 billion is going to the bricks and mortar of this.

**Jade BENHAM:** Out of that \$20 billion.

**Ben CARROLL:** No, \$1.6 billion in this budget alone.

**Jade BENHAM:** This budget alone is project management costs?

**Ben CARROLL:** No, no, no. This budget alone is infrastructure. Project management costs come when the full project scope and architect – do you want to supplement my answer?

**Joanne WANDEL:** Thanks, Minister. I am happy to take this answer. The Victorian School Building Authority does include project management costs naturally in the delivery. As the minister is saying, we have got a \$1.6 billion portfolio this year to deliver. We are no different to any other delivery agency or project management group.

**Jade BENHAM:** I understand that. I am just asking for a breakdown in how that budget is spent.

**Joanne WANDEL:** It would vary from 2.65 to 5 per cent.

**Jade BENHAM:** 3 to 5 per cent, so on average 4 per cent.

**Joanne WANDEL:** Which is normal for a project management fee, as I am sure you would be aware.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you for the answer. I just want to ask about the Victorian College for the Deaf, the estimated completion date. This is in the budget paper 3, page 44. The completion date was revised to quarter 2, 2026–27, according to the VSBA.

**John PESUTTO:** Point of order, Chair, in relation to an answer the CEO of the VSBA provided to my colleague Ms Benham. Ms Benham asked several times if the CEO could advise how many schools were rated poor or very poor. The CEO refused to answer that question, saying it is not possible, because it is a rolling –

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me.

**John PESUTTO:** I will come to it quickly. It is an important issue, and I wish to address it.

**The CHAIR:** No. You can wait to hear my response to that. That is a disrespectful thing to say. The minister answered your question.

**John PESUTTO:** No. Can I explain the point of order: moments later, when Ms Benham asked about school bills, the CEO was prepared to say, in the currency of this conversation, ‘I can tell you X.’ So can the minister provide an undertaking to provide the information Ms Benham asked for about the number of schools rated poor or very poor? Because the basis on which the question was not answered was actually contradicted only moments later, and we deserve the information.

**The CHAIR:** There is no point of order, and you had the opportunity during your time to ask the question. And I suggest to you: we will be sweeping back your way and you can re-ask it, Deputy Chair. We are going to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Looking at the list there on page 13 of BP3, we can see ‘Supporting best practice teaching and learning’. How is this investment in foundational literacy and numeracy ensuring that students achieve excellence? And I am particularly interested in the systemwide phonics, mathematics, use of NAPLAN data.

**Ben CARROLL:** Thanks, Ms Kathage. Victorian schools and Victorian students are performing better than at any other time in our history, and the NAPLAN data bears this out. I sometimes say the education revolution we had to have is happening inside all our classrooms, because when I go and I see the young graduates, when I see the teachers, how they are putting the science of learning at the heart of everything they do, how they are so focused on how the brain works, on cognitive development, cognitive load on our kids, and the small group tutoring that they do, I see how no child is being left behind. And this success, these NAPLAN results, did not happen overnight. We are now 18 out of 20, but not that long ago we were 11 out of 20 leading. This is the result of the hard work of our teachers and our schools, backed by a government that is focused on giving them everything they need. The result of the sustained focus is ensuring that we embed in every classroom across the state nation-leading reforms. That is why this budget includes \$1.823 million to support the continued delivery of the mandated year 1 phonics check, as well as \$10 million over two years to continue the literacy and numeracy early intervention program, providing additional support for students who need to build key foundational knowledge.

I am incredibly proud of what has been achieved in the Education State, and I do look forward to continuing to roll out these programs. We know the science of learning, the year 1 phonics check, the work we are doing through disability inclusion and the work that is quoted on the front page of the *Age* today by the Mitchell Institute out at Victoria University highlight what Victoria is doing is being a game changer in the national context.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. Minister, back in March my grade 1 daughter’s school contacted us to say she needed a bit of extra help in maths, and we were really pleasantly surprised that so early in the year they were recognising that and putting supports in place for her and support for us as a family to help her. Can you expand on how the government is supporting targeted literacy and numeracy early intervention through small group tutoring?

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes, I certainly can, and it does build on my previous answer, Ms Kathage. When it comes to maths, like your daughter, often there has been a perception of ‘I can’t do maths’, so we are rolling out mathematics ambassadors. We had recently the female astronaut from South Australia in Melbourne visiting some of our maths kids and STEM kids to say, ‘You know what, there’s no “I can’t do maths” – yes, you can.’ Maths is just like English. It all comes down to your diligence and your hard work that you put in to participate in it, so rolling out all of the things that we are doing is so critically important. And the data has shown 94 per cent of Victorian government schools are choosing to use some of the assessments that we are

doing, and we recognise the benefit. That is why, as I mentioned earlier, we are delivering an investment of \$1.823 million to support the continued delivery of our mandated science of learning year 1 phonics check. This will mean more students are assessed early to ensure they are meeting the reading and numeracy standards to provide students with all the options they need. You would appreciate, Ms Kathage, that if you do not get the learning of reading right, nothing else can flow. You must be able to know how to read to open up those world opportunities that education provides. So this has been really good. We have always been doing more to support the digital whiteboards in our schools and the prep bags and make sure that there are the textbooks that are phonics focused – all of that – to really make sure we do not just change it as a policy; we actually work with the schools across the state to make sure we help them. The announcement is one thing; the implementation is the bit that you must focus on, and that is what we are doing.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. Going on to some of that system infrastructure you have put in place and the Arc platform for the department content and resources, you spoke earlier about lesson plans in your presentation. I would like to hear more about the rollout of the lesson plans and how the investment supports their take-up in schools, because it is a way to help teachers and students.

**Ben CARROLL:** Certainly. As I move around the state, often teachers will say to me – and credit to all of the public servants that are here from the Department of Education – that the *Victorian Teaching and Learning Model 2.0* is one of the best things that ever came out of DE, because lesson plans are not only giving the teachers the best resource to be doing their lessons, but it is a workload issue too, and it really helps ensure that we help teachers without them having to go in their own time and do all the research on a lesson; we are providing it to them. In this year's budget \$16.4 million was there to develop lesson plans in English, mathematics, science and technologies. Over 3500 lesson plans and 6500 supporting resources have now been delivered. This is to roll out the accessibility of the lesson plans through, as you highlighted, Ms Kathage, the Arc platform, and we are extremely encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive feedback we are getting on the rollout of these resources. Since we launched our lesson plans across phonics, mathematics, English and science, they have been accessed more than 1 million times by teachers. So the proof is in the pudding. These are high-quality lesson plans that teachers themselves are accessing and using. I have heard firsthand how they are now spending less time planning for classes and more time in the classroom working with students to achieve their potential. The successful rollout of Victoria's lessons plans has been a major contribution to ensuring excellence – excellence in standards, excellence in practice – in every classroom.

There are jurisdictions around the world that have looked at how we have been providing world's best practice inside the classroom, and that is something Victoria should be proud of, that we have led on this, and that is why this budget builds on that legacy with further funding to support the rollout of the Arc platform to ensure it hosts all of the Department of Education's content, including resources and lesson plans for teachers. We are really ensuring that every child, no matter where they are, where they live, what their postcode is, has the opportunity to get the quality resources to give them the very best opportunity to reach their full potential.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. You shared before the 2025 NAPLAN results. Do you take that as an indicator or a way to see the impact of all the things that you have just been talking about? At the same time, those NAPLAN results: how do they help you with setting strategy for future direction?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Ms Kathage. I can safely say that 30 July last year, when NAPLAN results dropped, was probably the best day I have had as education minister, closely followed by the in-principle agreement with our teachers recently, to be able to deliver that as a government. I often say it is not just a slogan on our number plates; it is a living, breathing motto for our state, the Education State. What does that mean in terms of the data? It means 72.1 per cent of students in Victoria are either strong or exceeding in reading and numeracy across all levels. When you compare that to the 2025 results, the previous year's, substantially more students are achieving their highest levels in years 7 and 9 for numeracy and in years 3, 5 and 7 for both grammar and punctuation. These achievements do reflect the ongoing efforts of everyone in government and the department and our teaching workforce to build a world-class education system, and it does reflect that consistent approach we have had through the lesson plans, through the VTLM 2.0, but also the targeted investments that we are making, like small group tutoring, like disability inclusion. This really ensures that hard work of our teachers, students and families – to go to the future, as you alluded to, Ms Kathage, we are not resting on our laurels. We know there is more to do. In some ways we are out in front; we want to stay there. Schools implementing these supports are seeing stronger learning growth among students who in the past have fallen behind, and this does demonstrate the value of combining rigorous data and monitoring with

evidence-based teaching. I do want to, if I can, just congratulate every Victorian student on the results they have achieved in NAPLAN. I look forward to seeing our continued success as the data rolls around in July this year. But I also, as I always do, give full credit to our teachers – the most important lever we have in the classroom.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. Of course there would be a small cohort who, through NAPLAN, need more support that is identified. What is being done to support those students, their attainment and their outcomes not just in NAPLAN but in their schooling generally and in their education?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Ms Kathage, for asking this question, because it is a very valid and important one, and it has been a dedicated effort to make sure that students can continue to attain but those students that do need the additional support get it. That is why we have rebuilt so much of the infrastructure that had been decaying, and that is why we have invested so much and why one in two schools built nationally are built right here in Victoria. I often say that it is difficult to inspire a student on the relevance and importance of education if the school building they are in is falling down around them. That is why our record investment in upgrades and new schools is delivering great success. Much of this has started with what is happening with the buildings and then what is happening inside those buildings, through the focus on explicit instruction and the rollout of the VTLM 2.0 – the phonics check, the lesson plans. We are seeing these reforms be particularly helpful to our most disadvantaged students. This really means that, no matter your postcode, your language spoken at home or your background, every student is getting the quality of access to the world's best education system right here in Victoria. These reforms are really lifting students and giving them every opportunity to support everyone. I often say explicit instruction hurts no-one but benefits everyone, and that is why we need to continue to support these practices and continue to make sure all of our kids get every access to living a life of purpose, living their best life, which we know the education system does provide.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. What are you hearing from parents and teachers about that phonics instruction?

**Ben CARROLL:** Overwhelming support. I hear strongly from the teachers themselves that the VTLM 2.0 has been one of the best things to ever happen out of the Department of Education.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister and Ms Kathage. The committee is going to take a short break before resuming this hearing at 9:45 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

The committee will now resume its consideration of the portfolio for education. We are going to go to Mr Riordan.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, education people. I want to just change topic and move to data breaches. It seems that 2026 has not been a good year for data management and IT systems in the education department: a massive breach – I think every system was affected – back in January and then a smaller one in May, just not so long ago. Now that the Department of Education has experienced multiple data breaches involving student information, what is the total cost and what is the projected total cost to manage this probably very unsatisfactory situation?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Riordan. That is why I highlighted this in my presentation, because cybersecurity incidents are becoming increasingly serious operational issues for schools and for organisations, and we are not immune to this threat. I do appreciate you asking this question. I equally appreciate the concerns of principals and parents on this issue. I will come to the cost in a minute, but we are working closely with schools to enhance schools' and the department's ability to detect, prevent, respond to and recover from cybersecurity incidents. This budget is investing \$30.4 million in security school IT and \$17.9 million in the whole-of-Victorian-government data centre exit. This builds on the \$9 million we invested in the previous state budget. We are, Mr Riordan, running a number of initiatives to protect schools, including 'cyber targeted' awareness programs for school staff and the business managers at these schools. We are doing everything we can to ensure we continue to do simulations across schools to raise awareness and to ensure procurement of 24/7 monitoring services to detect and respond to these threats. We are also continuing to centralise our cybersecurity infrastructure, moving away from the schools themselves managing locally managed Google and Microsoft environments. We will try to do everything we can essentially to make it harder for cybercriminals to inflict damage on our education system.

**Richard RIORDAN:** In the lead-up to these events this year, the department was written to by the eSafety Commissioner back in 2019 highlighting a vast array of flaws in the system. Was any action taken between 2019 and the flaws this year?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Riordan. I will ask the Secretary to answer that question, because action was taken, but he knows more of the specifics.

**Tony BATES:** Thanks, Mr Riordan. We had a very extensive campaign over that seven-year period of upgrading the cybersecurity and resilience of our schools. As the minister said, we are progressively taking over the management of the school networks, in primary schools in particular. That was part of the issues that the eSafety Commissioner was raising in that correspondence. It is a really complex environment. Primary school staff do not have the ability to manage cybersecurity on their network when they are being attacked by foreign state actors and other things, so we have taken control of several hundred schools, and a lot of the funding in this budget will continue that Securing Connected Learners program. As the minister said, we have got a whole range of interventions we have put in place in that time.

For schools that are still managing their own systems, from the centre we can now see their security settings, and if their security settings have been lowered, we contact the school and get them to put them back up to the safety standards that are required. I will not name the exact products, but we have deployed in that intervening time on every server in every government school software that watches the traffic in and out of the servers, so that if there are large amounts of data moving out overnight or on the weekend, we spot that and it clamps that down. We have deployed Zscaler child-safe filtering, so we are progressively, as the minister said, moving away from the data centre in East Burwood into the cloud. We have got on-the-fly, on-the-device –

**Richard RIORDAN:** Just to follow up on that, Minister, I think you said \$30.5 million for school data. How much of that \$30.5 million is related directly to this most recent data breach, particularly the one in January?

**Ben CARROLL:** The \$30.4 million is the investment in the budget to ensure we are doing everything we can to secure school IT initiatives.

**Richard RIORDAN:** But is that stuff that you were already spending before January or is that as a direct result of the most recent –

**Tony BATES:** That is further investment on a cybersecurity road map, so the road map addresses a whole lot of other threats that we are seeing. The issue over the summer was – and again, we apologise for the concern that this has caused to families and parents and carers –

Again, I will not name exactly who it was. The Australian Signals Directorate asked us not to.

**Richard RIORDAN:** But I am just trying to get this: for the actual event that happened in January, what was the cost to rectify it or put whatever management you had to put in place because of that – the direct cost?

**Tony BATES:** The cost on that one is relatively low. That was a particular school where they had not done the patching on their servers. Again, I will not go into the details of how they got in, but the investment –

**Richard RIORDAN:** So one school infected the whole system?

**Tony BATES:** Yes. The system is designed so that students can go to any school and log on, so what they managed to do was get the active directory. If you are familiar with login processes, they got the student active directory, which as the media reported, had first name, second name, email address, password and I think year level. They were the only details that the malicious actors got, but it is still –

**Richard RIORDAN:** So in January the malicious actors were able to access one school but then accessed all 1700.

**Tony BATES:** No, they got the login file. Again, a network is designed so that if a student goes to a different school, they can still log on, so it means from every school there is the full list of the network credentials for every student. What they got was that master login file. I will just say that the investment that is in this budget is part of that program we have got of continuing to strengthen protections for schools.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Just to wrap up, the actual event in January has not in itself been overly expensive to remedy?

**Tony BATES:** That is right.

**Richard RIORDAN:** You understand what it is and you work with it. The next question is: considering that cybersecurity was an issue identified to you back in 2019, it comes as a concern that when you did have it – and let us face it, all organisations have to be on a war footing for these; it is not just the education department –

**Tony BATES:** Yes. Absolutely.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Because you are dealing with such sensitive stakeholders, why was it the media that brought it to parents' attention and not the education department as a front-foot approach to dealing with something you do not want but have to plan for?

**Tony BATES:** The event over the –

**Richard RIORDAN:** The January event, yes.

**Tony BATES:** I think it was actually us that did bring it to parents' attention. We had the issue, Mr Riordan, that school staff were on holidays and students were on holidays. The other thing I will say is that, again, we are working very closely with the Department of Government Services and the Australian Signals Directorate. We wanted to make sure that we absolutely knew exactly where they had got to and what they had got before we went public. The very clear advice from ASD and others is there is a balance here between how quickly you talk to families and how much you know, so we wanted to make sure that we knew exactly where they had got. We wanted to make sure we had completely locked them out of the system before we –

**Richard RIORDAN:** Is it your view to this committee that the education department now has the processes in place to protect this data again now, until the next iteration of technology?

**Tony BATES:** I will just say, Mr Riordan, that we have spent approximately a quarter of a billion dollars over the last five years on strengthening our cybersecurity. I have got a team of about 30 full-time people. The only thing they do is protect the school network. As they say, there are two types of people in this world: those who have been hacked and those who think they have not. It is a constant challenge. As the minister said, the rise of AI is making this more and more challenging all the time, but we put very substantial resources into this, and the budget continues that investment. Can I just repeat: it is unrealistic to expect school principals to be able to do this on their own. They just cannot when they are up against malicious actors from overseas.

**Richard RIORDAN:** They are expecting the department to do it, I guess. I agree with you. They are busy places, schools, with lots of entry points.

**Tony BATES:** Yes.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Changing topic again, to teacher workforce shortages. In the *Victorian Teacher Workforce Snapshot 2024* the government forecast Victoria will face a shortage of more than 2000 teachers by 2030, including a deficit of some 1675 secondary teachers and more than 400 primary teachers. How many vacancies are there for primary and secondary school teachers in Victoria currently?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Riordan. Firstly, can I thank our school staff, who get up every day and do not just teach our kids but believe in them, uplift them and shape their futures. We are continuing to attract some of the brightest into our teaching workforce. Since 2019 the Allan Labor government has invested over \$1.9 billion. There are over 14,000 more registered teachers in Victoria in 2025–26 compared to what there were in 2020. More than 4700 school staff are employed in the Victorian public service.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Minister, how many vacancies are there?

**Ben CARROLL:** I will come to that. I just need to also talk about – the way you address the vacancies is what we have done with our enterprise bargaining agreement. But outside of that, there is about \$1.9 billion I think we have invested in paid placements and placement supports in addition to the work we are doing around

the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership. We are doing everything we can and opened up 19 new schools at the start of this year.

**Richard RIORDAN:** And the vacancy figure?

**Ben CARROLL:** There were no vacancies when I –

**Richard RIORDAN:** So there are no secondary vacancies and no primary vacancies at this time?

**Ben CARROLL:** We are always continuing to recruit. We are always seeing steady improvement in more people wanting to be teachers. You look at the university enrolments that are occurring for –

**Richard RIORDAN:** So your evidence is there are no secondary vacancies and no primary school vacancies?

**Ben CARROLL:** No. There will be some vacancies.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Do you have the figure?

**Ben CARROLL:** I do not have the exact figure on me at the moment.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Could you provide it on notice, perhaps?

**Ben CARROLL:** We could look at that. We are very proud of our teacher workforce. Andrea?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** Thanks for your question. I looked at the data last night. There is always a turnover of people applying for different jobs. Job postings: when we compare 2024, 2025, 2026, there is significant improvement year on year between those three years. Applications and the number of people applying for jobs have significantly improved.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Could you provide that to the –

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** At the moment they are ticks in terms of growth, but I can see what I can provide as supplementary information. And then in terms of the number of positions that get advertised, that is significantly down on previous years. And the number of unique applicants that we have is growing.

**Richard RIORDAN:** You do not just have a straight figure for those, do you?

**Andrea DEL MONACO:** No. We use multiple pieces of data to bring that information together, and they are all signalling an improvement from 2023, which was our most challenging period, and continued improvement right through to 2025. And indications are 2026 is continuing.

**Richard RIORDAN:** So you will supply on notice those actual figures?

**Ben CARROLL:** We will have a look at it, Mr Riordan. What we do know, what the figures probably can supply, is if we have a look at what is being advertised at the moment in terms of vacancies, that will then give you the figures that you are after.

**Richard RIORDAN:** Okay. In the time we have got, on this related issue about vacancies, it is about principals. How many acting principals and acting assistant principals are currently in the system? And the reason I ask that – I speak particularly of my own electorate – is I never have the same principal at the same school. They move like yo-yos. The principal is at this school and then is at this one and then that one – they are all over the place, and they are all acting. What is the current level of acting principals and assistant principals in the system today?

**Ben CARROLL:** I might pass to the Deputy Secretary Dr Howes to answer that.

**David HOWES:** I do not have that exact data as of today at hand, but one of the one of the interesting things that we are seeing, Mr Riordan, is the number of applications for principal roles for each vacancy is going up, and that does run –

**Richard RIORDAN:** That is good. I am glad people are applying, but I just want to know, because certainly delivering outcomes to schools, particularly in regional communities, when the same principal is not there for very long, is a real drawback for the school. What are those figures and can you supply them to the committee?

**Ben CARROLL:** Mr Riordan, there are less advertisements for education, staff and principals –

**Richard RIORDAN:** Do we know a figure?

**Ben CARROLL:** We will –

**Richard RIORDAN:** Provide that on notice?

**Ben CARROLL:** No, we will go away and see what the vacancy rates are and see if we can have a look at that and see if that can help you with the answer you are looking for.

**Richard RIORDAN:** And you can provide that?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Mr Riordan, your time is up. We are going to go to Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair and Deputy Premier. I refer to budget paper 3, page 21, ‘Capital investment’. Deputy Premier, could you please explain how the Victorian Labor government’s investment in education infrastructure will address enrolment demand across our state?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you very much, Mr Tak, for your question, because in this budget one of the biggest items for education is the \$1.6 billion being invested in education infrastructure. This is part of a cumulative total since we came to office of \$20.1 billion in upgrading, modernising and building new schools. These projects, funded in the 2026–27 state budget, will accommodate more than 12,750 extra students. That is a really important figure to consider what we are doing for a state that has got a growing population and more families wanting to choose a good local public school in their community.

Building new schools in the growing suburbs is really important. Five new schools are set to open in 2027 and 2028. This does build, Mr Tak, on that record of 19 new schools we opened up this year, delivering on our commitment to build 100 new schools, which we were very proud to tick off. We are doing significant investments in public education. And I see it firsthand whether it is at Iramoo Primary School, the first school the Premier and I opened this year in South Barwon, or Wiyal Primary School where the Premier and I met the new preppies on their first day at the new school, with the Member for Sydenham. There is the great Kolorer College in Cobblebank, which I often say rivals some of the best colleges I have ever seen. This is in the heart of Melton. It is a wonderful school, a wonderful principal, and this is what the vision for education is about: delivering record funding in growth suburbs, record funding in new schools in Clyde North, Rockbank, Wyndham Vale. These are all on the horizon, Mr Tak, and we could not be more proud of our investments in infrastructure.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. You also mentioned that further funding has been delivered to continue the delivery of new schools for growing communities across Victoria, including in the south-east. I know that budget paper 4, on page 35, outlines the funding for new schools. Can you please provide more details on the impact of this investment?

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes, certainly can, Mr Tak. This year’s budget is delivering \$391.8 million for new school construction, as well as additional stages at schools. This will provide over 4100 spaces for Victorian students. The breakdown of that is three new schools opening in 2028, one new school campus to open in 2029, three additional stages of new schools, planning and design of two complex new schools and one new vertical school campus. This does build, Mr Tak, on that record 19 new schools opened this year by our government, fulfilling that commitment we made to build 100 by 2026. Under the Allan Labor government, more schools are being built more quickly in places that need them right here, right now so every child can access a world-class education.

When you go back, as I said at the outset of my presentation, we made a bold commitment to be the Education State. Since 2015 our government has funded more than 97,000 additional places in Victorian government schools. This budget continues on that legacy, with our Labor government investing \$691.1 million in capital funding to accommodate enrolment growth across the state, but also too to plan for future growth. This includes

\$391.8 million for new school construction and additional stages. Two new schools are set to open in 2027, and these are the interim names, but Aintree North Primary School in Aintree, Officer Brunt Road Specialist School in Officer and another three new schools which have been funded to open in 2028: Rockbank Toolern Road Primary School in Rockbank; Thompsons East Primary School, including the co-located specialist campus, in Clyde North; and Wollahra Secondary School, including the specialist campus in Wyndham Vale.

This builds on the 19 new schools and builds on our commitment to opening 100 new schools. This is a record uplift for growing communities right across our state. Something that the VSBA and I are proud of is that these schools are being built eight months faster than average. In fact roughly 50 per cent of the schools built across Australia have been built right here by our Allan Labor government. Labor will always be the party of education and will always invest in the future of our state, and that means investing in our schools.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. That is not only for new schools. I also note that in your presentation, Deputy Premier, you made reference to funding for upgrades to existing schools across Victoria. Could you please outline what school upgrades will be delivered through this budget and how they build on the government's existing investments?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you. Mr Tak. It is a very important question, because we have delivered, in addition to the opening of new schools, 2400 school upgrades and modernisation projects. This is across some 1250 government schools, which I know every member is proud of, including all 90 school upgrade projects committed to by Labor in the 2022 election campaign. We have fulfilled and we have delivered, because we understand schools are not just places of learning. The conditions of schools shape a student's entire educational journey, and that then in turn shapes their future and their life. We are very committed with the \$1.6 billion we have done for infrastructure in this budget, including \$294.8 million to upgrade and modernise 31 existing schools. The budget also includes \$1 million to plan for future school upgrades at one metropolitan school and one regional school. This budget also provides \$25.4 million for the Capital Works Fund. This will deliver 24 high-priority projects from the previous round of the program, as well as a new competitive round to open in 2026. The new round is expected to fund at least 43 projects. The newest allocation brings the overall investment in the Capital Works Fund to \$217.2 million.

Importantly, the benefits of our investment in school infrastructure do not stop at the school gate. Since we came to government we have supported 34,000 jobs in construction and associated industries. I always make sure when we are out doing the school build or the upgrade that special mention goes to the VSBA and the architects, the planners, the business managers, the builders. I know when I meet with those tradies they love working on our school builds. They see that as an investment for their future kids and their children as well. We have made these investments because we know it is the single most important investment in our future, Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Minister. I note budget paper 3, page 13, and also budget paper 4, pages 37 to 44, also refer to funding for school maintenance. Could you please elaborate on the impact of this funding?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Tak. One of the things that is in our DNA as Labor members of a Labor government is that part of improving educational outcomes is investing in school facilities. We know what we inherited, and we know what we had to do to turn it around. That is why the 2026–27 budget continues to allocate funding where it matters most: \$551.6 million over five years and \$130.5 million for ongoing maintenance and compliance. This investment means that from 2027 the annual budget for school maintenance and compliance is now over \$650 million. That, Mr Tak, is a sevenfold increase compared to what we inherited, and that is why we will never underinvest in school infrastructure and maintenance of our public schools. We are making sure every public school is a welcoming and safe place not only to learn but to thrive, and this budget also includes \$350 million to be delivered directly to all government schools as part of the annual student resource package allocations.

As well as maintenance programs, we are also responding to specific needs: \$28.8 million for the accessible building program, \$446.5 million over four years, \$115.5 million for ongoing planned maintenance and \$52.5 million over four years for the student resource package annual contracts funding, as well as \$23.8 million for the make-safe program, which the Chief Executive Officer touched on briefly. This investment is in essential maintenance and compliance, and, most importantly too, it will support jobs – jobs, jobs, jobs: 930 jobs in construction and associated industries, 540 jobs in metropolitan areas and 390 jobs in

regional Victoria. Under our government every student will be able to go to the school facilities they need to achieve their full potential, no matter what their postcode is, Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. With regard to this government's investment in growing suburbs, Deputy Premier, could you please elaborate on how this budget is investing in suburbs that are set to experience growth as a result of, again, this government's investment in transformational infrastructure projects like the Metro and West Gate tunnels?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you very much, Mr Tak. One of the things that sets our government apart from previous governments is the way we have planned for the future when it comes to education. We are planning for a future by ensuring that schools are there where families need them. I have been out regularly with local members of Parliament on both sides to see the new school builds that are happening in our growing suburbs, but also some of the vertical school builds we are doing in the inner city, making sure that we continue to invest. We know, through the reforms we are doing in planning and housing, more people are choosing places like North Melbourne, Arden and the inner city to live. That is why we have got the inner city planning fund, which has supported the Department of Education to identify local areas of demand in the inner north and west of Melbourne. We are doing detailed demographic forecasting and also site identification for new school provision. This work is supported by the department in addressing demand in some of those inner-city areas, whether it be Arden, the Melbourne CBD or Docklands. As a result of our work, we are investing \$391.8 million in this budget to build new schools and campuses for schools that need them. We are always focused on the future. You are always building for the future, you are extending for the future and you are renovating and modernising for the future. There is \$104 million to acquire land for new schools and campuses at existing schools or near to existing schools. A share of this investment will allow the department to acquire land to develop additional permanent primary school infrastructure in growth suburbs near the city as well. All of this is part of our government's long-term planning for the future to ensure families across our state have access to world-class schools close to home. We are really proud of this, Mr Tak. With the work we are doing with the accessible building program as well, we are seeing applications for modifying infrastructure and accessibility – very, very important – and we are continuing to invest right across our state.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Minister, you would be very pleased to know that the Clayton South Primary School upgrade is going to be on time and on budget, and I would love to welcome you to my electorate once again to cut another ribbon in Clarinda.

**Ben CARROLL:** I certainly look forward to joining you there, Mr Tak. That would be wonderful.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Again, Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and officials. There are several new listed metro school upgrades in the budget; we have been speaking about some of those today. Kensington Primary School has not been listed within those, but no doubt it will need upgrades over the forward estimates to deal with capacity issues. My question really is for the department Secretary. One of the challenges that is often raised about Kensington and other inner-city schools is that they are land constrained. There is a church hall and park area right next to the primary school that has just recently been put up for sale. Can I ask: why hasn't the department purchased this site? This is something you are able to do, correct?

**Tony BATES:** Sorry, which site was that, Mr Puglielli?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** This is the site next to Kensington Primary School – the church hall and park area.

**Tony BATES:** I might just ask the CEO of the VSBA if we can just talk a little bit about that one. I think we have talked about that inner north-west before. We have got new schools that will be built down at Arden. There is capacity at some of the other schools around Kensington. But I might just ask if you can expand a bit on that.

**Joanne WANDEL:** Thanks, Secretary. Part of the work that the department does is looking at population projections, Victoria in future, enrolment numbers, capacity at particular schools and then surrounding schools as well, and we undertake this analysis on a regular basis to understand trends and forecasts in local service provisioning for schools. The current analysis of the population forecasts in that area around Kensington Primary School indicates that it has sufficient capacity to meet the current and future anticipated demand and so

do the schools within the surrounding network. Purchasing land is a significant investment, and as the minister has said, there is \$104 million in this budget to acquire sites for six new schools. But it does require careful consideration to ensure that we are allocating public funds appropriately. We are always monitoring that demand forecast. It is something that we do on a very regular basis, but at this stage the existing forecast demonstrates that that land is not required.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Can I clarify that response a little bit. When we are talking about forecasting, that is as at now, that capacity condition?

**Joanne WANDEL:** The forecast would be looking probably within the next five-plus years, so it would be a long-range forecast.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Oh, the department does not foresee a need for more capacity to be added at Kensington?

**Joanne WANDEL:** Not at this point in time, based on that forecast.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Can I ask, in terms of the process around land sale like this, this type of scenario: what conditions do need to be met for a purchase to happen at that type of scale, to buy a site like the one we are talking about?

**Joanne WANDEL:** The considerations that we would take into account when we are looking to acquire a site for a new school or an upgrade adjacent to an existing school are those matters that I ran through. We would be looking at the capacity of the existing school and its forecast in terms of enrolment growth. But we would be looking at the broader network and other schools and the flow-on impact of introducing new service provision in those areas as well.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Can I ask, from the forecasting you referred to: how close is Kensington to reaching that capacity? If you are saying they are not at capacity yet, how close are they?

**Joanne WANDEL:** We might need to take that question on notice.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** That would be appreciated. Thank you. I might move on to budget paper 4, page 39, looking at Collingwood College. They have been waiting for urgent building repairs, and I understand they have had some preliminary assessments done. Can we understand when that school will be informed of the scope of works and any related budget for those works to be undertaken?

**Tony BATES:** Thank you. Minister, if it is all right, I might pass this to the VSBA. We have been doing a lot of work over the last months at Collingwood College, if you could just expand on that one. I know there is that issue with the concrete. There have been years of water egress into that slab floor, so there is clearly some level of concrete cancer in that structure. But we are, I think, putting some relocatable classrooms onsite at the moment.

**Joanne WANDEL:** Thanks, Secretary. There are a number of works that we are doing at Collingwood College, so I will just run through a few of those and I will come to the current ones. Collingwood College has been allocated \$6.89 million in the 2025–26 budget for an upgrade to its performing arts building. That project, I can pleasingly say, is in construction, and that has a forecast completion date of January 2027. I can also say that we are delivering a planned maintenance program project at the college. As I have explained, every school has an assessment of its buildings on a rolling five-year basis, and so as a result of that planned maintenance program, we are working with the school to upgrade repairs to its roof to address some leaks to the main building. There is more than \$3 million being invested as part of that PMP project.

You will also perhaps be aware that we have isolated off level 2 of the college's main building, and that is a safety precaution because we do not put students and staff safety at risk. We had an incident as part of the planned maintenance program where small pieces of concrete did fall through in January this year onto the floor below. Our contractors were there working, delivering the PMP project. Obviously in January there are no school students or staff around, so this was detected by our contractors and reported. We have undertaken a structural engineering review of the defects. Pleasingly, what I can say is that it has been identified that the concrete slab is structurally stable. However, we will be required to do works to address it. What we understand at this stage is that it is a result of almost decades-long water ingress through some of the planters that are on

top of that level 2 roof. Following the conclusion of the structural engineering report, which I am advised will be later this month, we will be broadening the planned maintenance project works there to incorporate those roof remediation works. But we have worked really closely with the college. As soon as we became aware of this, given it was very close to the start of the school year, we worked with Wurun secondary college, which is the senior campus of Collingwood College, to ensure that year 10 science students could start their year using their facilities, and we very recently, in the last week or so, delivered a modular building to site as well so that the year 7 and 9 science students do not have interrupted learnings.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Can I ask: that roof replacement – when would that be completed? Do you have an estimation?

**Joanne WANDEL:** I think it was on track to be completed later this month, but obviously we will be looking at what the outcomes of the structural engineering report are in respect of the additional maintenance issue that we will need to address and incorporate. But I can say that the original planned maintenance program was to be completed this month.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** But you are putting a caveat; there could be potential liquid extending beyond –

**Joanne WANDEL:** We will need to do remediation works to address the issues on level 2, and we are moving forward to do that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I might move onto another matter. There is \$391 million for new school construction statewide under which Arden secondary school is provisionally named – budget paper 4, page 35. Will that be a standalone school, or is that a second campus for University High?

**Tony BATES:** It will be a standalone school. We have identified the site there on Arden Street just near the new station arch, if you have been there. Just with the projected number of tenements that will go into that Arden area, we need a whole new independent school there to cope with the population growth we see over the next 5 to 10 years.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** In the meantime I understand that year 9 students are relocated to a leased office building in the CBD. Is that expected to continue beyond the estimates?

**Tony BATES:** We expect that when we complete and open the new school at Arden that will take some of the current University High enrolment zones. We expect we should be able to bring all students at University High back onto the main campus. But that depends on population growth in the CBD and again, I am sure as you know, all those apartments down in Docklands at the western end of the city. I never thought that we would have families in there with secondary school students, but we clearly do. But the expectation is that that year 9 campus would be a temporary arrangement.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** In terms of an end date for those arrangements, do you have anything you could provide?

**Tony BATES:** Not at the moment. But again, it will partly depend on how quickly we can get onto the site in Arden.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I will move on. Spensley Street Primary School is finally getting its broken toilets fixed, which is absolutely a relief to see. With that said, the school has also long been advocating for funding for significant structural and acoustic upgrades to learning, first aid and administration spaces. Can I ask: has there been any assessment of the condition and suitability of those learning, first aid and administration spaces at Spensley Street?

**Ben CARROLL:** I will ask if you could please, CEO.

**Joanne WANDEL:** Thank you, Minister. Spensley Street Primary School has been allocated \$1.038 million as part of the \$294.8 million allocated to upgrades. We will be working with that school to upgrade their ground floor toilets in block B. It is one of 31 projects to be funded through this budget.

In respect to other works that might be occurring at Spensley, we take into account a range of considerations when considering schools for broader upgrade projects. Some of those are whether we do need to add additional capacity and the forecasts that we have previously spoken about. We understand that upgrades are

always a priority for schools, but as I have already explained, they do need to be staged. What I can say is that there is a range of other programs that are available for schools like Spensley. We have spoken about the capital works program as well. The minister has advised that \$25.4 million is available in this year's capital works fund, and we would certainly be encouraging the school to apply through that fund for any works. We have also spoken about the planned maintenance program.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Specifically on assessments, though: learning spaces, first aid and administration spaces at Spensley Street. Have these been assessed by the department, and how recent were those assessments?

**Joanne WANDEL:** They would have been assessed as part of the rolling facilities evaluation process for Spensley. I do not have available at this point in time when they undertook their rolling facilities evaluation.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Can you come back to us on that?

**Joanne WANDEL:** I would be very happy to come back on that answer.

**Ben CARROLL:** I did go out there and look at the school; the local member asked if I would. I sat down with the principal. I sat down with the head of the school council. I also sat down with the union while I was there as well. It is a wonderful school and a very sort of unique school as well, through its buildings and its history. That was why, as the Chief Executive Officer said, we have funded that urgent need around the toilets, but we will also continue to invest in school infrastructure, and I look forward to doing more there as well.

**Joanne WANDEL:** Actually, through you, Minister, I do actually have an answer for Mr Puglielli. We last conducted the rolling facilities evaluation in November 2023. As a result of that the school was allocated \$439,000 in funding to identify any defects that arose through that process. I think that we also allocated some additional funding to enable some of those higher priorities. An additional \$370,000 was allocated to the school while we were onsite to address some additional defects that were identified.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay, with 6 seconds left, I am going to end my questioning there, thank you. Thank you. Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Perfect, Mr Puglielli.

**Ben CARROLL:** Chair, can I correct something if that is okay?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, we are going to go to Mr Hilakari and you can correct it in his time.

**Ben CARROLL:** Just very quickly, Mr Hilakari. When speaking about school upgrades, I should have said approximately 76 per cent of students attend a metro school and 24 per cent attend a regional school. Seventy-two per cent of funding went to metro schools and 28 per cent of funding went to regional schools. When referring to funding for locally driven programs, including Academy Movement, I said \$1.9 billion and that should have been million.

**The CHAIR:** Perfect, that saves Hansard being corrected. Thank you. Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. I noticed in the presentation \$2.1 billion for disability inclusion, which I think was one of the great announcements and particularly a great way to lead into budget day. What does this mean for students with disability?

**Ben CARROLL:** That is correct, Mr Hilakari. Look, this means so much for the students and for the families and also the teaching staff. \$2.14 billion, to be exact, in this budget will be invested over five years to build on the disability inclusion reforms we have completed. This will continue to meet our forecast for individualised funding for students with disability in our schools. Funding in the budget brings the total investment of government to \$4.37 billion since the 2020–21 budget when this reform began. We are really proud of this statewide rollout of disability inclusion. It meets growing demand from students with disabilities, and it will mean we are completing a reform we set out to do five years ago.

This is a new tiered funding and support model, which includes what is called the disability inclusion profile. We have gone from a deficit-based to a strength-based system that identifies the adjustments that are needed for students to participate but also to then build that workforce capability to invest in training systems as well.

Students with a disability will have more choice in where they attend school because they know they can be supported. The impacts of this reform and subsequent investment cannot be understated. I am very proud as the minister overseeing this reform and the sustained investment. As you said, Mr Hilakari, to start our budget day with these families and with these students is everything you need to know about our government and our Premier's ambition for all kids, because student outcomes do depend on building inclusive school cultures and practices, which is a key focus of this reform. This includes schools like Kolorer College that opened to students in Cobblebank as one of 17 supported inclusion schools. Parents and guardians are looking to schools like this to enrol their children because they know they will get all the supports they need, and they know their children will be equipped with every resource, that they will have teachers that are informed and they will have the best practice as well.

We have designed supported inclusion schools to meet the learning, wellbeing and support of schools. We are making sure schools have greater access. Research has shown, Mr Hilakari, that increases social acceptance and learning outcomes for all, which is such a wonderful thing. This initiative ensures our students continue to build the Education State and that we are continuing to build it, and as I have always said, with the Education State, there must be a pathway for everybody. Our most important resource is in the classroom, and that is in all our classrooms, so we are really proud of this. We want students to feel safe, supported and welcomed in all our schools, and this disability inclusion funding, this program, ensures that that happens.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** It is a substantial investment in our schools and our school community and young people. How many young people do you think this is going to be rolled out to across Victoria?

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes, thank you very much, Mr Hilakari. All Victorian government schools have now transitioned to disability inclusion. This has been a staged rollout over the past four to five years. All government schools statewide now receive an annual allocation of disability inclusion tier 2 funding. This new and additional funding is strengthening the school-wide capacity and capability to deliver the adjustments that these individual students need. Students are using disability inclusions here to school-level funding to recruit and train staff. We also have disability inclusion tier 3 funding, which supports schools delivering adjustments for students with complex and high needs.

Implementation has progressed. To get to the figures, Mr Hilakari, in the last school year 193,609 full-time equivalent students of Victorian government schools – 29.1 per cent of the school population – were recorded as receiving adjustments to support their participation in education. I mean, that is two AFL grand finals of full-time equivalent students receiving adjustments to support their participation in education due to disability. I know this gives such great comfort to their parents and to their family members, and the high percentages of school staff that are responding to our surveys have expressed to us directly that this reform has led to practical change and cultural change in their school. This is occurring across a wide variety of elements, and we are very proud of this reform, very proud in the Education State that includes inclusive education.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** We are very lucky. We both attend local schools to get that really direct feedback from teachers and parents all the time. What feedback are you getting as you make your way around the state, whether it is directly or through surveys or otherwise, on this rollout?

**Ben CARROLL:** The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Our teachers say to me as well they are becoming more skilful educators and better understanding the skills that they need for differentiated instruction, to have it more tailored, to understand the cognitive load and to do all of those things. So this has really enriched and enhanced our understanding of student needs, and all the readily documented support we have for our teachers is really, really important to make sure we are helping them with the specialist expertise, with the coaching and the resources to build capability and capacity. We are also funding a range of workforce and training system initiatives, helping teachers and staff access that specialist expertise that we know they want to help some of their most vulnerable kids.

The evidence is clear that inclusive education leads to better educational outcomes and more inclusive communities and societies where people with disabilities can truly thrive. That is why when I caught up with Dylan Alcott just the other day – one of the big game changers for economic growth and contribution will be having more people with disabilities in the workforce. And where does that begin? That begins at school, getting trained up, educated and ready to make a contribution, whether it is doing the timetabling for our Metro systems or working back of house in our banking. We know these young people that are often on the spectrum

are incredibly gifted. We spoke about mathematics earlier. They are getting A-pluses in mathematics. They have talents that we need to harness, supported by an inclusive education system, but then finding the right spot for them in employment and in the economy as well.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** In the same part of your presentation earlier it spoke to outside school hours care for people with disability and also disability transport programs. If you cannot get to school, you cannot participate at all. If your parents are really struggling to pick you up or for you to participate in that, it is another real challenge that is presented to parents. Tell me, how is this including students in better education?

**Ben CARROLL:** A really important game changer has been our investment in outside school hours care. I think it is 31 schools now – we are providing it at our specialist schools. Again, the support that it gives to parents to either take additional hours of work or get back into the workplace or just have some respite and care for one another while we look after their most precious person in their house, their child, at the specialist school has been a game changer. It is one of those investments that really pays for itself in terms of return on investment into the economy, making sure that we really support kids with special needs but also our parents as well. We are really proud of our free, and I should emphasise high-quality, outside intensive care, because it is not just babysitting; it is wraparounds. It is often using hydrotherapy pools. It is giving the kids the confidence they need. When they go home they are settled, they are ready to re-engage and they have had a wonderful day. But also it means that parents have had a wonderful day too, because we have focused on their child, and equally part of that has been a focus on them for them to do what they need to do.

Mr Hilakari, you also mentioned the work we are doing in accessible transport to make sure our children can get to school. That is why we are making sure that existing transport services continue to be funded and operated. But more than that – and as you appreciate, we have been out in your electorate and opened schools and disability schools – we need to make sure more bus services come online to these new specialist schools. One of the things I get when I speak to parents is they want their kids on the buses. They want that social interaction. As you appreciate more than anyone, the taxi vouchers are one thing, but it is being part of the community – walking to the bus stop, getting on the bus, being with their friends – which really is an important part of their education. That is why we are really proud that that \$39 million will make sure that we are maintaining existing services but also make sure that we are ready for new bus services to come online for the 2027 school year.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Certainly that has been one of the things at Ngurruga School, which we just opened this year, servicing the Werribee South community. At Warringa, another school for people with disability, they spoke to me about the importance of the senior students there using bus services, the mainstream bus services, as part of building up their skills for life. All of this is such a fantastic thing for our young people.

**Ben CARROLL:** As a former public transport minister, I think the return on investment for buses is that for every dollar invested it is a return of \$10. I think now with the zero-emissions free buses that are supporting our kids get to school and be part of the economy and supporting the parents, that return on investment is just unquantifiable, what it is delivering. It is a pretty small investment, but jeez, it goes a long way to supporting families and kids.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I will take that advocacy on to the public transport minister as well. Thank you for that evidence for this committee. Vocational education, Deputy Premier, I would hope to take you to, which is in budget paper 3, page 13. It looks like about just over \$140 million in funding to support vocational education and in-demand careers. What does this actually look like for students who are using these vocational education pathways?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. It means a great deal – for those students, for their future but also the future of the state. They can shape their own future and then probably land in a job and a position that will help build the infrastructure for our state going forward too, whether it is building a hospital, building the new train system or building more schools. This really helps them get what is fit for purpose for them in terms of their education but also what is the best fit for them to complete year 12.

We are really proud of the vocational major and the secondary pathway reform. It has seen our year 12 completion rates rise, and it has also seen that real focus on STEM. We recently had a session down at the Docklands. We were advertising the great different pathways you have through VET in the vocational major

VCE, and it is seeing more and more people want to get into those jobs of electrical engineering, science, technology, engineering. If you want to get into space, there is no better way than starting in STEM and some of those secondary pathway reforms. And we know these are getting people equipped for the jobs of the future, the jobs that are not even designed yet. We speak about artificial intelligence. There is nothing more important now as a young person in a school than learning what will be the game changer that is AI, whether it is for the health sector, the transport sector or the education sector. Every student needs to be participating in digital literacy, and I know out in the western suburbs there is big advocacy of that through VU. That is what we are focused on as well.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Deputy Premier, officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee will take a short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for WorkSafe and the TAC at 11 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**