

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Friday 17 May 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Ben Carroll MP, Minister for Education; and

Jenny Atta, Secretary,

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

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

Tom Kirkland, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority,

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

Andrea Del Monaco, Deputy Secretary, Schools Workforce, 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 land on which we are meeting, and we pay our respects to them, 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 2024–25 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, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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 today 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. Minister, I am going to ask you to make a short presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time committee members will start asking their questions. Your time starts now.

Ben CARROLL: Thank you, Chair and Deputy Chair and committee members. I also want to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people, the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered, and pay my respects to elders past and present, and also acknowledge that they are the world's oldest living continuous culture and the world's oldest living intellectual traditions, in our great nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to present here to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

Visual presentation.

Ben CARROLL: We are providing strong investment in school education, as you can see by the graph. Our budget builds on the work to transform Victoria's schools and boost outcomes for students by investing a further \$3.1 billion in education. Thanks to this further investment, we have increased total output funding by almost \$1.1 billion in the last financial year. That is a 7.4 per cent increase. We have huge growth in funding for students. We have increased the funding per student more than any other state or territory. This is making a real difference to young Victorians, with consistently strong NAPLAN results and the lowest student-to-teacher ratios and best attendance rates, and Victorian students are reporting high engagement in their learning and connection to their schools.

We are supporting First Nations children. This government is proud of its work to progress treaty and truth-telling. In our schools the Marrung Aboriginal education plan is working to ensure that every Koori person achieves their true potential and feels strong in their cultural identity. This budget continues that work and makes a significant new \$51 million investment to improve education and wellbeing outcomes for Victoria's First Nations students. It includes almost \$32 million to increase the capacity for Aboriginal controlled community organisations to support education outcomes for First Nations students.

We are easing the cost-of-living pressures for families. We know many Victorian families are doing it tough. That is why we are providing the one-off \$280.1 million school saving bonus. At the start of the next school year families will receive a \$400 boost for each government and eligible non-government school child. This will help families with the cost of activities where they need it most. The budget provides further support for families by expanding access to the school breakfast club program to every Victorian government school that wants to take part. We will expand the glasses for kids program, which provides free vision screening and prescription glasses to prep to year 3 students. Outside school hours care programs ensure parents can better access work and financially support their families. We are directly supporting these programs also in small and regional schools throughout our state.

We are supporting student health and wellbeing. Kids cannot be at their best if they do not feel their best. This budget delivers critical health and wellbeing services to schools, including for Student Support Services, the primary school nursing program and mental health support in schools. Respectful Relationships will continue supporting educators to embed respect and gender equality in their schools.

We are keeping students active. It is so important to keep kids active for their physical and mental health, as well as their learning, so we are continuing the active schools scheme. We are also investing in swimming and water safety education so students gain the skills to be confident and safe in the water.

We are delivering world-class education. Over the past year we have delivered the best NAPLAN performances in the nation. Last year Victorian students achieved first or second place in 16 out of 20 assessments, including the best grade 3 results in the country. We know how important early years education is. This is testament to the hard work of our students and their teachers, alongside the reforms we have put in place. However, we know we need to do more to support the students who are struggling and support extensions to those and other options for those to provide a tailored learning environment.

We want every child to reach their full potential. This budget continues the student excellence program, supporting and extending high-achieving students. To boost literacy outcomes, the budget invests in early years literacy assessment, including phonics for our youngest learners. We are expanding curriculum access for rural and regional students and investing in locally driven education and wellbeing programs, and we are continuing to give funding for our tech schools that need to promote STEM learning, particularly the science, technology, engineering and maths careers of the future.

We are also supporting our culturally and linguistically diverse students and migrant communities. We know how important it is to support migrant communities. That is why we are funding the English as an additional language program and the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*. Community language schools are also important to Victoria's rich multicultural and linguistic diversity. This budget provides \$10.5 million to continue that great work.

We are also supporting disadvantaged students and students at risk. We know that many students need targeted support to stay engaged and to stay learning. That is why we are continuing to invest in the education and justice initiative, to help students involved with or at risk of involvement with the justice system to stay engaged in education. We are expanding education supports for children in out-of-home care and boosting the Lookout program, enabling better coordination between education, justice and care services.

Senior secondary pathways reform is an important landmark reform built on the work of Professor John Firth from Victoria University. This is a landmark reform to senior secondary education. We have provided the new VCE vocational major so more students can choose a VCE tailored to their needs, their talents and their passions. This budget invests almost \$110 million so students can fully benefit from these reforms we are making to senior secondary pathways. It includes support for our most vulnerable young people to stay in education, to finish year 12 and to secure a post-secondary education whether it is at university or whether it is

at TAFE. We have got a pilot program where we are immersing 6000 year 10 and year 9 students in vocational places, giving them a short experience of what a vocational learning experience can be.

We know our workforce is the backbone of our education system. This budget builds on the significant workforce initiatives in 2022 and 2023 to attract, retain and support staff thanks to an additional \$139 million investment. It includes funds to attract teachers from overseas and gives schoolteachers greater work flexibility, including job-sharing. We are continuing the primary mathematics and specialist science program and training an additional 100 teachers as mathematics specialists. \$10.7 million will further reduce the administrative burden on principals, including expanding the existing principal advisory service and the school administration support hub, while teachers will receive additional curriculum planning and assessment support. We are also investing in the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership as it continues its work delivering excellence in teaching practice and leadership in our schools. And it was great to take all the other ministers from around the nation to see that the academy in action.

Chair and committee members, teaching is a wonderful and rewarding career. However, we recognise that it also can be complex and you are dealing with many different problems that society faces more broadly. That is why this budget invests \$63.8 million for improved mental health and wellbeing support, because we know our schools should be safe places, and we know that the evidence-backed schoolwide positive behaviour support initiative is providing coaching, professional learning and resources to reinforce positive behaviours in the school and effective classroom management. That is being expanded to 450 Victorian schools each year. We know some schools do face greater challenges than others. That is why this budget will help to establish an intensive school support team to assist schools facing complex circumstances.

We are investing in school infrastructure. We continue to invest heavily in our state's biggest ever school building and investment program since free education was delivered back in the 18th century. Thanks to a further investment of \$1.9 billion, we now have invested \$16.9 billion in the past decade in more than 2000 school upgrade projects, which are supporting almost 26,000 jobs in construction and associated industries. To put this in perspective, 50 per cent of the schools that have been built across the whole of Australia in the past 10 years have been built right here in Victoria by our Allan Labor government.

We are delivering 100 new schools by 2026. This budget delivers on our commitment to build 100 new schools. The budget funds 16 of these new schools across Melbourne's growth areas, including Greater Geelong and Wodonga, but we are not stopping there, with funding to start work on even more schools and expansions through land purchases and detailed planning. The budget also continuously invests in upgrading and modernising existing schools. It includes funds to upgrade 25 schools and \$150 million for planned maintenance and accessible building upgrades as well as a capital works fund.

In conclusion, Chair, Deputy Chair and committee members, over the past 10 years this government has invested over \$35 billion in education. Thanks to this record investment we are seeing real improvements in the educational outcomes of Victorian students. This budget continues our work to ensure that no matter what your background, circumstances or postcode, if you are a child in Victoria, you will have access to a world-class free education and every support you need to live your dreams and live a life of purpose. On that note, Chair, Deputy Chair and committee members, I am happy to take questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Deputy Premier. The first 10 minutes of questions is going to go to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and team. Secretary, can I start with you? On what date was the department first made aware of the \$400 school saving bonus?

Jenny ATTA: I cannot give you an exact date, Mr O'Brien. Just prior to budget announcements – obviously government works through its decision-making and then we have visibility of decisions so that we are assisting with the preparation of budget papers et cetera.

Danny O'BRIEN: So I take it did not come from the department?

Jenny ATTA: I beg your pardon?

Danny O'BRIEN: I take it the policy did not come from within the department?

Jenny ATTA: Well, the department provided a wide range of advice into the budget process, including on cost-of-living measures, which we know and our schools know from talking to families is a really significant issue. We provide a wide range of advice; obviously there is other advice that is part of that cabinet decision-making.

Danny O'BRIEN: But with this particular \$400 school saving bonus, was it, for example – the idea – generated from the Premier's private office rather than the department?

Jenny ATTA: While I will not go into the detail of advice that is provided into cabinet, we certainly provided advice on a wide range of options that would go to cost-of-living for families with school students.

Danny O'BRIEN: The budget papers say that the school saving bonus contributes to the department's 'promoting equal access to education' output. What is the rationale there for carving out low-income families who choose to send their children to low-fee Catholic or independent schools?

Jenny ATTA: Again, Mr O'Brien, the decision-making sits as part of the budget process, but clearly this is a one-off measure looking to assist families with cost-of-living pressure and looking to obviously build into that a recognition of levels of disadvantage, and there is clearly a higher weighting of disadvantage across government schools. That is my understanding of how the decision was arrived at.

Danny O'BRIEN: From what you are saying, though, it sounds like the department did not have much say in the design of the program. Is that correct?

Jenny ATTA: As I said, the department provided a wide range of advice and detail to support government's consideration of options.

Danny O'BRIEN: The Treasurer has indicated that it would be too costly and slow to means-test the school saving bonus, but as you are aware, the camps, schools and excursions fund helps low-income families with the costs of those activities and is available to low-income families in both government and non-government schools. Why is it too expensive to means-test the school saving bonus but not the camps, schools and excursions fund?

Jenny ATTA: I am not aware of those comments, but we are very conscious of the importance of the implementation strategy around this, so that it is timely relief and so that our implementation strategy is ready for term 3, as we have committed to, to advise schools, and we will be working through the details of that.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I go to some of the detail on that then? I understand the credit will be available to families' school accounts. What are the parameters the school can place around how the credit is directed?

Jenny ATTA: Well, some of that detail we will be finalising through the consultation we are already engaged with schools on, but clearly the measure is targeting those common items that can add to cost pressures for families in the current economic environment, and school uniforms, camps, sports, excursions, activities are –

Danny O'BRIEN: I guess boiling it down to the nub of it, will it be the department, the school or the parents who will get to decide how the money is used?

Jenny ATTA: Again, we are finalising all of the granular detail on that, but we are engaging in consultation around what we hope will be a level of consistency in the way that the measure is applied, because that is important in terms of the smooth implementation of it at the school level.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Is the department intending that there will be a voucher system for uniforms, for example – that you will be able to take a voucher to a nearby store to get uniforms?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, that is the initial thinking – that that will be applicable for uniforms.

Danny O'BRIEN: So on that basis the parents would get a \$400 voucher to take to a local store, for example. So then if they spend \$320 do they get cash back, does it go back to the school, does the school keep it?

Jenny ATTA: Yes, and as I said, our preliminary thinking is that a voucher approach for a certain amount for uniforms is the right way to go, but we are engaged in the work now around finalising that implementation so that it works smoothly for schools and it is responsive for parents.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. As part of that, will schools be able to charge an admin fee on dispensing the funding?

Jenny ATTA: That has not been part of our initial thinking.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. What sort of acquittal process is the department going to have in place?

Jenny ATTA: Again, we will be working through all of that detail, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. The Premier, for example, said she would likely donate her school's funding back to the school. How does that work? If a parent chooses not to or underspends the \$400, does the school get to keep it?

Jenny ATTA: Well, we see this funding going to the school system and to parents with kids at school, but again I do not want to pre-empt all the final detail of the implementation strategy but am very happy to take you through that once we are there.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can you advise whether the bonus will be counted towards the government's contribution to state school funding under the National School Reform Agreement, the full \$287 million?

Jenny ATTA: All expenditure that goes into the school system is relevant for that acquittal, but obviously there is a process through the National School Resourcing Board that goes through and verifies all of that acquittal process.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am always in trouble for putting words in people's mouths, but is the answer yes then?

Jenny ATTA: That is our understanding.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. It seems, Secretary, that this must have been sprung on the department fairly late in the budget process. You do not seem to know too much detail.

Jenny ATTA: Mr O'Brien, as I said, we prepared a wide range of advice on a whole lot of things going through the budget process but including to inform considerations around cost-of-living pressures for parents. Once the decision is made and we have got that final model and we have got a good understanding of the overall shape of it and the implementation strategy, there is a fair level of granular detail that we want to work through, and we are doing that with school principals, with business managers, with parent groups.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Can I move on, Secretary, and ask: how many school upgrades were committed to by the government prior to the last election and at what cost would it form part of the red book as they came in?

Jenny ATTA: I will have to find that number. 109 school – sorry, Mr O'Brien, not 109.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am sure the Deputy Premier is itching to get into the game, so perhaps I can ask him. Perhaps I could put it another way: the Labor Party –

Jenny ATTA: Ninety-six upgrades, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Ninety-six, was it? Okay. The Labor Party issued a media release prior to the election, Deputy Premier, indicating at least 89 primary and secondary schools at a cost of \$850 million. Is that still being delivered?

Ben CARROLL: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. We are committed to delivering all of the schools that we announced prior to the election. You would appreciate we have four budgets in a term of government. I can say every school that we have committed to is through some process of planning, and we look forward to delivering on all our commitments.

Danny O'BRIEN: 'Some process of planning' – I might come back to that. You were quoted in the *Herald Sun* on 21 April saying that all commitments would be honoured before the next election. What does that mean? Will every one of those schools have the full capital funding that was promised to them?

Ben CARROLL: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. What was the criteria used when deciding which school upgrades would be funded in last year's and this year's budgets, given that multiple schools have been left off the rung this time?

Ben CARROLL: Well, no, if you have a look at this budget, we have funded schools in Gippsland, we have funded schools in Mulgrave, we have funded schools in every –

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, not Leongatha Secondary College, which you committed to, for example.

Ben CARROLL: We have funded schools in every corner of our state.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr O'Brien, Minister. As much as I would like to keep going, and I know you would too, Mr O'Brien, I am going to hand straight to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Deputy Premier, Secretary and officials. Thanks for joining us. Deputy Premier, I am also going to go on to the school saving bonus, referencing budget paper 3, the output initiatives on page 12. Minister, can you outline for me what this program is designed to achieve and why it is so important?

Ben CARROLL: Yes. Thanks, Mr Galea. It is a \$308.1 million one-off targeted assistance to help families meet those cost-of-living pressures. Something that comes up regularly with me through round tables at schools, meeting with families, business managers themselves and principals is whatever we can do to ease the cost of living at the school goes a long way – one less thing for families to worry about. Indeed with the Chair I remember being out at Sunshine Heights Primary School with the Foodbank and the school breakfast program. These are real, tangible benefits that go to our schools, so we are really proud of this. If you look at the work of the Scanlon Foundation, you will see essentially economic inequality and cost of living is the number one issue facing particularly people aged 25 to 35, and that is why it is so important.

If I break down that \$308.1 million, we are also expanding, as I said, the school breakfast program and the glasses for kids program. We have spoken in detail about this school saving bonus, the uniform – and uniforms are more than just the uniform. Many of you will appreciate it is about that sense of belonging. It can be about self-esteem as well. So it is really, really important, Mr Galea, and we are really proud of the investment in the school saving bonus.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And in a similar vein of course the breakfast club program too will have a big impact for students. Can you talk to me about that program?

Ben CARROLL: I am really proud of the school breakfast program. This budget invests \$21.1 million over three years to expand it so every school across our state that wants to be part of it can be part of it. It builds on the \$141.2 million we have already invested. To think that we have already served some 40 million breakfasts through this program is incredible. What I try and get across too is that every breakfast is served is really a collaboration. Whether it is our farmers in regional Victoria, whether it is our manufacturers, whether it is our volunteers – Rotary, Lions, grandparents, parents – that are behind it, it is a real community initiative that is a real hit with our principals. We all know the evidence that, sadly, one in five children do arrive at school without having breakfast – and try and keep calmness in the classroom, try and get the kids ready to thrive and learn in the classroom if they have not got a tummy full of food. So it is really important. But beyond the breakfast club program, there are all sorts of innovations that have been springing off this program with the work of Foodbank. There are the take-home meals. There are some of the interactive cooking classes that we have been able to do with some of our parents. It is a real example of the role government can play in basically connecting and uniting community, and I am really proud of it. And everyone should be proud of it because it is nation leading, our school breakfast program, and that collaboration is just so important.

The CHAIR: Some kids even learn to wash up. I have seen them washing up before.

Michael GALEA: Even better. Obviously we know how important it is for kids to start the day on a full stomach so they can give their full attention. I am sure the same could be said for PAEC members as well. The glasses for kids program is another initiative that is providing support to families – especially important when we have cost-of-living challenges. Can you talk to me about that?

Ben CARROLL: Yes. Thank you, Mr Galea. Look, the Allan Labor government is investing \$6.8 million over three years to expand the glasses for kids program. This brings our total investment to \$11.3 million. This investment will provide access for up to 470 additional government schools. It really does highlight again that one in five to one in six children have an undiagnosed vision impairment. It is an alarmingly high proportion of children that have poor vision, and we know this can interfere with not only their own reading and writing but eyesight on the interactive boards that are in the classroom – all the interaction that goes there. So it is really important. Since we introduced the glasses for kids program in 2016 it has reduced the number of children suffering poor vision. It is almost like essentially providing an optometrist in the school where they can have the testing, the provision and then the glasses – a real game changer for kids' learning and educational outcomes. We are very proud of the \$6.8 million – the 470 additional government schools that will be provided with it.

Can I say too on State Schools Relief I was with the Member for Dandenong recently, Minister Williams, visiting State Schools Relief seeing firsthand the work they do on supporting some of our most vulnerable families with school costs. What we saw there at Dandenong South – the interaction with families, with parents, with schools – we saw firsthand. I thank State Schools Relief. They have been a great partner from 2024, and they are going to continue to be a partner up to 2027. We will continue to target those students with vision impairment, and we will make sure that the glasses for kids program does continue to offer free screening for kids years prep to 3, where needed, and the provision of free glasses.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Deputy Premier. And I see \$32.8 million in the output initiatives for supporting students with disabilities – what will this funding go towards?

Ben CARROLL: Thanks, Mr Galea. This is really important. This follows the groundbreaking report of the disability royal commission, which does aim to enhance inclusive education practices across all our schools. The disability inclusion initiative, backed by our \$1.6 billion investment, will improve funding and support for students with disabilities both in mainstream and specialist school settings. Can I just say we are a government that has upgraded every specialist school across this state – something we should all be so proud of. But this particular initiative emphasises the importance of making inclusive education a standard practice in the classroom, enhancing student achievement, participation and wellbeing. We are very proud of the work we have done with the designated package Fighting for Students with Disability and their Families. This \$1.6 billion – it covers the high-intensity outside school hours care program, a game changer for parents wanting to take on additional work or study or even just have a bit of free time to themselves. You have got the NDIS navigators, another game changer that we are rolling out around the state, making it easier for families and parents to navigate the NDIS. We have got the TAFE disability transition officers, and we really are doing everything we can with scholarships and incentives as well.

There is a range of other supports that we are providing. One of the things I am most proud of when I go out as education minister is visiting our specialist schools. There is no doubt they warm the heart. I have visited a number of them in my short time as minister and seen firsthand the impacts these investments are having for students and their families. I remember vividly talking to a mother of one of these students, who told me how the high-intensity outside school hours care program basically enabled her to take on a national role at a big construction firm. This high-intensity outside school hours care, particularly in our disability schools, allows a specialist to come into the school and support the kids at the school in an environment they are familiar with. So we are really pleased to see what we are doing. There is a disability transport program – there is so much we are doing. I am hearing stories from all around the state, Mr Galea, about why we invest in education, why we invest in inclusive education and why we make sure that no child is left behind. As a government we know our responsibilities do not begin or end at the school gate. Working in collaboration with families, I often say that African proverb 'It takes a village', and it does. Our work with disabilities and our work with children is making a real difference.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Deputy Premier. Just going back to the school saving bonus for a minute, how many students do you expect to benefit from the program?

Ben CARROLL: We are expecting 700,000 students to benefit from it. I always like to put things in terms of AFL grand finals, so consider that as seven MCGs on grand final day of students literally watching the game

Danny O'BRIEN: The standard Victorian unit of measure.

Ben CARROLL: working it – and that is really important. Our business managers and our principals know their students and know their families. This is a really targeted program on the back of the roundtables I have done with the Smith Family, the Monash University Scanlon Foundation on social cohesion and VCOSS. It was great to see some of the comments as well from Parents Victoria, who have really endorsed this program. We know it is going to make a real difference and just ease that pressure. We know we do live in a high interest rate, high-inflation environment. It will go a long way to supporting families and children in their education needs.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Deputy Premier. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. We are going to throw to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, team over there. Secretary, what was the criteria used when deciding which school upgrades would be funded in the 2023–24 and 2024–25 budgets?

Jenny ATTA: Ms McArthur – and I can ask Mr Kirkland to supplement my answer – the advice that the department puts through is really around the condition of schools, so we are trying to uplift school conditions through those upgrades and improve learning environments. We are looking at levels of need. Sometimes there is an overlay around the capacity of the school or growing enrolments et cetera. There are a range of things that come into the advice, and then the decisions come out of the budget process.

Bev McARTHUR: Is Mr Kirkland adding to this?

Tom KIRKLAND: Just a little bit. As the Secretary indicated, it is really on the condition of the school that we have determined through the rolling facilities evaluation program. It is a program where we look at every school in the state every five years from a visual and infrastructure perspective. We look at the enrolment needs of the school, any pressures at the school or in their surrounding network as well as the status of the plans of the schools.

Bev McARTHUR: Mr Kirkland, why do you take a percentage off the top of every build?

Tom KIRKLAND: We do not. Every build requires a full-service solution. A successful project really focuses on its ability to deliver on time at a quality and cost that have been established, and that price is a function of who is carrying the risk to deliver the project. The VSBA engages architects and specialist engineers to provide advice. On larger scale projects we engage a probity adviser, a cost planner and an external PM to ensure that the project is set up for success.

Bev McARTHUR: Then why have 29 schools been left unfunded in the 2024–25 budget, Mr Kirkland?

Tom KIRKLAND: Decisions of funding allocation rest with government.

Bev McARTHUR: Maybe the Secretary might like to answer that.

Jenny ATTA: There is clearly a tranche of upgrades funded through each budget, and that is the number that government funded through this budget. Clearly they have commitments that can be delivered on through to further budgets.

Bev McARTHUR: Secretary, in my electorate, for example, Belmont High School, Colac West Primary School, Edenhope College, Kurunjang Secondary College, Lismore Primary School and Melton South Primary School were all promised in the last budget – all left off. They do not have need?

Jenny ATTA: There is need right across different parts of the system, Ms McArthur.

Ben CARROLL: We will deliver on every promise, Ms McArthur, that has been made. It is common practice in every jurisdiction to fund planning and to fund school upgrades across successive budgets.

Bev McARTHUR: Good. We look forward to them all being funded in the next year or two.

Can I take you now, Secretary, to the wellbeing supports for students output. I note there has been a reduction in funding to this output of some \$30 million. Can you explain why this output has received lower priority in this year's budget?

Jenny ATTA: I might ask Mr Bates to confirm, but it is about a transfer to another output, not about a reduction in service.

Anthony BATES: Thanks, Secretary. That is right, Mrs McArthur. We constantly review the outputs and where the programs are aligned. There are two programs that were transferred to a different output. One of them was the visiting teachers program, which has gone. It is really about supporting students with disability, so visiting teachers go into the classroom, particularly working with classes where there are children with hearing and sight impairments, so that program funding has been transferred into the supporting students with disabilities output. There were two programs that have been moved there. The early childhood intervention services have also been moved to another output. And then there was one-off program from the Commonwealth, a student health and wellbeing program, that came through that output, which has sunsetted from the Commonwealth funding. Those three – about \$25 million of that reduction is existing programs transferred to other outputs, and the balance is the end of that Commonwealth funding.

Bev McARTHUR: I understand the school-wide positive behaviour support framework is funded under this output. How will the reduction in funding affect schools receiving support under this framework?

Anthony BATES: Those transfers and that sunsetting Commonwealth program have no impact on that particular program that you mentioned.

Bev McARTHUR: What services are funded under the student health and wellbeing program? How will they be impacted by the reduction in funding?

Anthony BATES: Again, Mrs McArthur, I will just have to check the details of the Commonwealth program that lapsed, and I can potentially come back with what that one was.

Bev McARTHUR: Take it on notice; that is fine.

Anthony BATES: The other –

Jenny ATTA: I think – sorry, Mr Bates – it is important to be clear that there is not a reduction in any state government-funded health and wellbeing programs for schools. They have transferred to another output. They are still being delivered. There is not a reduction – in fact on school-wide positive behaviours there is additional funding through this budget.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. Well, can you provide a list of all the specific initiatives within the student health and wellbeing program and how much is allocated to each of them across each year in the forward estimates? Happy to receive it on notice.

Jenny ATTA: Yes, we will look at what we can provide.

Bev McARTHUR: That is fantastic. Thank you. Let us go to the learning outcomes performance statement, page 12. I note that performance measures within this budget no longer provide, Secretary, a historical comparison on literacy and numeracy in Victorian schools following a federal Labor government decision to reset assessment methodology. As such, can I take you to the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report that was published last month into learning outcomes. Of particular concern are the learning outcomes of disadvantaged and Indigenous students, who are now failing to meet benchmark literacy and numeracy levels in increasing numbers since 2012. Do you have a specific plan of attack to close the gap in these outcomes?

Jenny ATTA: Yes. I might ask Dr Howes to talk to that. I will just make the comment on the performance statement that that is right, there is a break in series with the change of methodology that ACARA have introduced and so we will see those targets reset for next year.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Dr Howes?

David HOWES: Thank you for the question, Mrs McArthur. Overall, Victoria's performance has been very strong, especially in literacy. That is not quite the case in numeracy, and that is going to be a real focus. But we have achieved, as I think the Deputy Premier outlined in his presentation, the best results in the country. But we have got two areas of focus where we know that that improvement has not been universal or as widespread as we would like: one is disadvantage and the second is the performance of Koori students. One of the key initiatives for our disadvantaged students is the continuation of the tutor learning initiative. We know from all the evidence from schools, who up until this year have been responsible for selecting those students, that they have overwhelmingly identified those students who are disadvantaged to participate in that program. So that is a very important intervention that does provide additional support for those students. It is true that the gap between the performance of disadvantaged and relatively advantaged students has not closed as much as we would like, but that does not mean there has not been improvement in the performance of disadvantaged students.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, Dr Howes, that report also suggests that the performance measures of student outcomes are not a fair or transparent reflection of students' skills. Do you accept that criticism?

David HOWES: Thank you for that question. The reason the Auditor-General found that was because their view was that a definition of literacy should include both reading and writing. We had previously measured reading because it would be regarded – reading is the most foundational skill. Reading is essential not only for literacy development but for learning across the curriculum. In the early years we describe it as helping students learn to read and then they read to learn. So the Auditor-General has suggested that a more accurate and more comprehensive description of literacy attainment would be to include writing results as well.

Bev McARTHUR: Good. I hope you will take it up. So more generally there is an inquiry, as you know, in the upper house on this, and many witnesses have argued that Victoria lags behind in the adoption of evidence-based teaching and learning methods. What is your response to that?

David HOWES: Our results suggest that that is not the case. This is an area of research that is obviously of keen and fundamental interest to us. The curriculum is –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Dr Howes. Mrs McArthur, your time is up.

David HOWES: The curriculum is being revised, and we will look at the guidance that we provide to schools to be consistent with that revision of the curriculum.

The CHAIR: Going straight to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Deputy Premier, officials. Deputy Premier, in your presentation and also in budget paper 3 on page 12 it notes that Victoria ranks first or second in 16 of the 20 measures assessed by NAPLAN, and I can see that one of the schools in my local area, Dingley Primary School, last year was ranked very high in the NAPLAN results. You can see the joy and the pride that comes along with it. It is truly a remarkable achievement, and it is something that we do not celebrate nearly enough. What is it that Victoria is doing that puts us ahead of the pack?

Ben CARROLL: Thanks, Mr Tak, and it is good to hear the experience of your own school in your electorate. But, look, you can probably put it down to five things. All the experts will highlight these five things, from Hillary Clinton to everyone else who has written on child education and child support. But I think too, with my predecessors' leadership in this area, we are the Education State, and that has seen a record investment in programs and capital – our record investment in workforce, curriculum, evidence-based teaching, support for government schools. This has seen us literally become the leader in the nation when it comes to our NAPLAN results, as well as having the best school attendance rates in the country and the highest proportion of school leavers fully engaged in tertiary or work. We know every year of education post year 12, whether it is TAFE or university, adds between 6 and 12 per cent to your salary. So we are the Education State. We

reinforce it. We tell everyone – pre-birth, kinder, primary, secondary – what is between your ears is what is going to define us in the 21st century, and that is why we put such an emphasis on it. But also those investments in teacher workforce have seen the lowest student-to-teacher ratios of any state in the nation. We are seeing growth in enrolments, we are seeing an emphasis. We are really proud of the work that families and parents are doing in the home as well, Mr Tak, because how kids come to school, the behaviours that are adopted in school, the behaviours that are adopted at home, go hand in hand. As a government we believe health and education go hand in hand and that is how you uplift the whole system.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Deputy Premier. Following on from that, how has the shift in NAPLAN's testing time and format impacted the importance of the results, and what measures are in place to ensure accurate assessment and support for students across Victoria?

Ben CARROLL: Thank you, Mr Tak. The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy is really important because it does bring in the evidence and the achievement and it does speak volumes of education in Victoria. If I can use this platform to give a shout-out to our hardworking teachers and principals right across Victoria that do an incredible amount of work helping our young people to go on, fulfil their dreams and be who or whatever they want to be in life. NAPLAN does serve as an important benchmark for student achievement. We are very happy with Victoria's results from 2023. I think it really reaffirms that we are on track in our unwavering commitment to being the leader in the nation on education excellence. We are going to do everything we can. And to think that we rank either first or second in 16 out of the 20 NAPLAN rankings just shows you the dedication that is happening with our families and with our school communities.

What sets Victoria apart is those strategies that propel us to be at the forefront of education excellence, and we will continue to work really hard. I am advised, Mr Tak, that the 2024 NAPLAN test has seen meticulous planning and execution, and from the technical readiness conducted at the outset of term 1 to the recruitment of over 550 markers, every aspect has been carefully orchestrated to ensure seamless testing. I am really proud of that, and we will continue to make sure that our journey does not finish now with a celebration. It really means we reflect and we introspect on what else do we need to do to even go to that next level of excellence in education here in the Education State.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Deputy Premier. Tell us more about how the government's commitment to evidence-based teaching practice and the phonics focus in English online interviews, EOIs, impacts student outcomes.

Ben CARROLL: We are really keen, and I think our grade 1 English online interview – or EOI as it is more commonly known – there is no doubt has significantly influenced literacy outcomes for Victorian schools and students, particularly by explicitly emphasising phonics instruction and improving reading proficiency amongst students. I have had a little bit to say about this in the media, because the Grattan Institute – it is evidence based how we teach it. With phonics being a mandatory component of the curriculum, we believe we can really uplift all students and be a real greater good. But you also need to make sure it is not one size fits all, and whether it is students with disabilities or students that may have an intellectual impairment that we need to really support – and there are gifted students in the classroom too – they will need a tailored program. We are really proud of what we are doing. This emphasis on phonics has contributed to the remarkable results we are getting in the NAPLAN. We are ensuring very much an effective implementation. It is also really important, and I met with the dean of our education department just this week. What is going on with our teacher education at our universities is really world class. La Trobe University, which I am an alumnus of – the science of learning and reading out there is just doing incredible work. At the universities and with the dedication of the people sitting with me at the table today and the staff that support them at the Department of Education, evidence-based reading instruction is really, really important for our continued success.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. We know that NAPLAN is not the be-all and end-all. What other initiatives has government introduced to enhance educational outcomes beyond NAPLAN assessments?

Ben CARROLL: If I can, Mr Tak, yes, you are exactly right; NAPLAN is not everything. And if I take that African proverb again that I talk about all the time, it takes a village. If we go to the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan* – a \$12 million investment from our government to make sure that our rich, vibrant African communities that are in our growing suburbs, that are in all parts of our state, our regional and rural areas – it will promote educational engagement and inclusive, anti-racism cultural safety while improving the

academic performance among our African-heritage students. We want to make sure that no matter your background, no matter which part of the world you come from, when you come to Victoria there is an opportunity for you to succeed and be who and what you want to be.

So we work with our schools. Whether it is the homework clubs, whether it is the community liaison officers, we are making sure that our big investment – and we are a multicultural state – in the Victorian African communities will ensure some 30 schools will be supported to employ a school community liaison officer, and up to 14 community organisations will be funded to deliver homework clubs in Victorian schools. We are really proud of this initiative. We know it builds on tuition, we know it helps close the gap in some of our migrant communities and we know the work we are doing right across the board on embedding it. Whether it is gender equality or whether it is our anti-racism strategies in our schools, we want to promote inclusive education, promote educational engagement and do everything we can to support them. In this budget alone, another \$12 million is part of a broader range of initiatives, but it really will ensure our vibrant African communities add to our multicultural society but also go on, finish year 12, go on to university or TAFE and go on and contribute in many ways and do themselves and their families proud and their heritage proud.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Tak, your time is up. We will go to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you very much. Thank you, Deputy Premier and secretaries. Secretary, I might just start with you, then I am very keen to get to the minister, so I will try to go through this in a workmanlike way. In respect to the contingency for school upgrades retendering line item in the budget, there is \$20 million there. Are you able to detail for us or give us a list perhaps of the projects that were required to be retendered because of the insolvencies in the construction sector?

Jenny ATTA: I might just go to Mr Kirkland to see if he can assist or follow up.

Tom KIRKLAND: Yes, we should be able to provide a list of the schools. Is that what you were after, Deputy Chair?

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, if you can.

Tom KIRKLAND: For retender.

Nick McGOWAN: Perhaps while you are looking for that, Secretary, can I just ask also in respect to the tutor learning initiative, are we able to get a copy of the Deloitte evaluation?

Jenny ATTA: I will have to see what we can provide, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: Can I take that as a yes?

Jenny ATTA: I will go away and see what is possible. It is advice provided into cabinet, but I am happy to look and see what of that we can make available.

Nick McGOWAN: Sure, what you can of that advice. Thank you, Secretary, that would be appreciated. Also in respect to that, if you are able to provide a breakdown by year of how much funding from the initiative has been directly paid for the wages of school tutors, that would be much appreciated.

Jenny ATTA: Of the initiative? Well, yes, it effectively all goes to pay for tutors.

Nick McGOWAN: Any breakdown you can provide in respect of the funding for that would be great. Secretary, while I am speaking with you and we are just waiting for the answer there, is it also possible to get a list of the specific initiatives that the department takes in regard to teacher shortages and the initiatives that aim to increase the number of teachers in Victoria?

Ben CARROLL: It is about, what is it, \$1.6 billion? There are a lot of initiatives and they cover all over the state.

Nick McGOWAN: Perhaps if it assists –

Jenny ATTA: That is right. There is a comprehensive strategy, five pillars. I think that information is readily available, and we can provide the link to that.

Ben CARROLL: Yes, \$1.6 billion.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Secretary. If you could provide the link to that, that would be appreciated. One of the issues I hear about from schools frequently – and perhaps I will ask the minister this too because it is a broader policy question – is around CRTs in particular. Sometimes there is a bidding war. It is very hard to secure CRTs. I am sure you are familiar with these issues. Schools will outbid each other, literally. They will pre-book a year in advance. It is becoming harder and harder. As a consequence, we have got principals who are themselves taking classes. Deputy principals, assistant principals, they are all taking classes because they just cannot get – do you have a particular strategy or something in mind going forward that is either in this budget or that you are working on?

Ben CARROLL: Look, there is a lot we are doing, Mr McGowan. As I said before, there is \$1.6 billion in workforce initiatives, from our secondary teaching scholarships to our targeted financial incentives program to our preteacher placement, but I might ask Dr David Howes, who I know wants to contribute on this, to say a few words if I can.

David HOWES: Acknowledging, Mr McGowan, we have got workforce pressures – we are not alone in that; that is true across Australia. But I think one of the key initiatives that we have taken in addition to the funding that has been supplied to schools has been to establish a schools workforce group that is headed up by my colleague at the end of the table. That was a group established by the Secretary with the sole purpose of supporting schools, not only with CRTs but in finding ongoing teachers as well. My colleague spends her sleeping and waking hours just thinking about how to provide that support. That has had the effect of providing a much more centralised support for schools so they do not have to go out and do all that hard work themselves. There is a lot of work, for example, going on with the Commonwealth as well to look at immigration visas for people to come in. We are acutely aware of the pressure that schools are under, and I think it is true that we are doing – there is no silver bullet to this, but there are a lot of initiatives in place and a lot of time and effort being put into support schools so they do not have to carry that burden themselves.

Nick McGOWAN: Dr Howes, something that has been put to me is that there is a difficulty in trying to convince the universities to relinquish their students perhaps earlier so they could do internships effectively at a lower cost and get on-the-ground experience with those schools, but of course the universities are much more interested in keeping and retaining the students for the purposes of their degrees and the tuition fees et cetera. Is that something that you have considered, Secretary?

Jenny ATTA: I might ask Andrea to comment on that. We do an enormous amount of work with the deans of education, as the minister has said, and have the most innovative employment-based pathways delivering new teachers into schools. Andrea, can you supplement that?

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes. I mean, it is just finding the right balance between focusing on giving enough time for our students to complete their university training. So what we have done is we have developed a memorandum of understanding with universities that seeks to find the right balance there between providing support to our schools for their workforce needs and providing what universities need, which is the attention of our students to their work. That has been in place for about 12 months, and I think that tries to set that balance. In all of the things we are doing here there are trade-offs everywhere you go, and we are often looking to find that middle balance.

On your previous question, teacher financial incentives, international recruitment and the like are really there to find those very critical roles, but what we find is schools do not – it is not one initiative on its own that harvests benefit. What you find if you look at some of the schools that have challenges is they have one teacher from here, one teacher through partnerships with universities bringing in employment-based pathways, one teacher through TFI, one teacher through international recruitment and some support from extended relief teachers. The importance of that multipronged approach is critical in how we help support our schools.

Nick McGOWAN: Are you able to give me any visibility over principals being permitted to make a special payment not exceeding, I think, \$9000 per annum in terms of essentially attracting and retaining? Is there anyone who can give us visibility over what that means for the last budget and going forward to this budget?

Andrea DEL MONACO: There are a number of things in terms of incentives. Schools are able to provide teacher financial incentives if they have got that. Within a school they have always had the ability to be able to provide supplementary payments up to \$10,000.

Nick McGOWAN: I suppose what I am asking is: can you provide a breakdown to us of what actually has been expended?

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes, they are provided for lots of multiple different reasons. It might be because they are provided with some additional duties within school or the like, so it does not provide you with a strong correlation between that and the workforce supply challenges, but we are encouraging schools if they have that tool to be able to use it for things like supporting –

Nick McGOWAN: I suppose what I am trying to understand is: what is the take-up of that? Are you able to share that with us or give us some information that does that?

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes. It is not as high as you may expect. I can get the details. I have not got them in front of me, but it is not probably being used as much as – you do hear examples of it, but the data is not supporting widespread use of that, is what I would say.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. I would welcome that detail. Minister, sorry to move so quickly through things. Thank you to you and your staff for their assistance. I know you share the passion locally of different electorates, and my electorate of Ringwood is one I share very passionately. Ringwood Secondary College in particular are very keen for a stadium. They qualify under the guidelines given the vast number of students they have there. If we could have an update in terms of whether that is something the department is looking to advance with them. And while I am talking about that, if you are able, Secretary, to look at Mullauna secondary college and Heathmont East in terms of their next stages of funding.

Jenny ATTA: Which college?

Nick McGOWAN: That is Heathmont East Primary School and Mullauna.

Jenny ATTA: Heathmont?

Nick McGOWAN: Heathmont East and Mullauna – they are due for second stages. Sorry, Minister.

Ben CARROLL: Just on Ringwood, I might ask the head of the Victorian School Building Authority Tom Kirkland just to address that, if I can.

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, of course.

Tom KIRKLAND: Thank you, Deputy Premier. Before I do, just going back to your earlier question, Deputy Chair, eight schools were retendered – Bell Primary School in Preston, Heatherwood School in Donvale, Hoppers Crossing Secondary College in Hoppers Crossing, Kangaroo Ground Primary School in Kangaroo Ground, Nepean Special School in Seaford, Taylors Lakes Primary School in Taylors Lakes, Vermont Secondary College in Vermont and Yarra Ranges Special Developmental School in Mount Evelyn – and then we had three others that were novated across as the result of Lloyd Group going into insolvency.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you very much. Minister, perhaps we are going to run out of time, but Secretary, if you do not mind coming back to Mullauna and Heathmont East, that would be wonderful – just in terms of their stages. Thank you very much.

Jenny ATTA: We will see what information we can –

Tom KIRKLAND: In terms of Ringwood, I know that Maroondah council is in active engagement. They have engaged a consultant. And Ringwood Secondary College is part of the stakeholder consultation group with the local basketball clubs about a proposed stadium at Ringwood Secondary College. But I understand, given –

Nick McGOWAN: I suppose what we need is the money, really – just to get to the point.

Tom KIRKLAND: Yes. The feasibility – we will continue to develop that –

Nick McGOWAN: They have done a feasibility study already.

Tom KIRKLAND: I have not seen it, Deputy Chair. I do not know.

Nick McGOWAN: I am happy to show that to you.

Tom KIRKLAND: As part of the Maroondah education plan in 2018 we delivered a single-court, competition-grade gym at Norwood Secondary College as part of the –

Nick McGOWAN: Yes. We are thankful for that. We just want one at Ringwood as well, if that would be okay – preferably two courts. Marlborough Primary School also is a school I am particularly passionate about. It is probably one of the least – perhaps I will put another way. It is one of the oldest schools we have, and it certainly is in need of some upgrades – so anything you can do on that front.

Last but not least, Minister – I am going to run out of time – I get lots of feedback from principals about the Victorian School Building Authority. Tom, I know you are here, but the feedback overwhelmingly is that it costs a lot and that what the principals could do for the same amount of money themselves is inordinately a lot more. I will leave you with that, because I do not have more time. But I am sure the minister is aware of this in any case, and we spoke to the Premier yesterday about the same issue.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr McGowan. We will go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Deputy Premier and officials. I guess there is some interest from this committee – as representatives of growth suburbs, we see on the ground what you are doing in our patch to meet enrolment demand. But in reference to BP3, page 20, those asset initiatives there, Minister, are you able to talk about that more broadly across the state – how we are meeting enrolment demand in our growth suburbs?

Ben CARROLL: Yes. Thank you, Ms Kathage. I certainly can. You know, this government is committed to ensuring that every local community has access to a great school. This budget is continuing that transformation of our schools with an investment of \$1.9 billion for school infrastructure. This budget is delivering on our 2019 commitment to open 100 new schools by 2026, and we are also planning for the years beyond that.

We are aware of enrolment growth pressures in communities like your own, but they are also being felt across a range of communities. That is why the Allan Labor government is investing \$947.7 million for new school construction in this budget. It is funding our 100 new schools by 2026. We have opened up, Ms Kathage, 75 schools since we made that commitment in 2019, with five new schools opening next year in Clyde North, Pakenham, Tarneit and Wollert, so 19 schools are now fully funded to open for families in Cranbourne North, Clyde North, Clyde, Craigieburn, Armstrong Creek, Wollert, Fraser Rise, Kalkallo, Cobblebank, Fishermans Bend and Point Cook for 2026. This will comprise 18 new primary schools, four new high schools, a P-9 in Point Cook and two specialist schools. Again, I go back to this stat a lot, but it would be remiss if I did not mention this: 50 per cent of schools built across this nation over the past decade were built by the Labor government in the state of Victoria.

In addition to new school funding, we are also doing additional stages of our school builds. Mickleham Secondary College, Wollert Secondary College – we are expanding Mickleham to deliver stage 2, which will support an additional 675 spaces for local students to support growth in Mickleham and surrounding areas. There is Wollert Secondary facing similar pressures to Mickleham – enrolment pressures. We have funded stage 2 there. \$46.38 million is also provided for a further two school expansions in growth areas – so we are doing everything we can. Since coming to government we have invested \$16.9 billion in school infrastructure alone. This created 89,000 additional places for students in Victoria's public education system, funding 66 expansions and 121 new schools, 96 of which have already opened, Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: It is great to hear we are on track for the 100 schools and especially pleasing to hear those specialist schools are coming on line. With reference to the same table, what about existing schools? How are these asset initiatives supporting existing schools?

Ben CARROLL: Yes, certainly, Ms Kathage. Twenty-five existing schools have been funded in this budget for upgrades and modernisation. Those 25 are sharing in about \$226 million. That is upgrades for schools like Beechworth Secondary, Seaford North Primary, James Cook Primary School and Whittlesea Secondary College – that is just a few of that 25. We did make, as you would be aware, an \$850 million election commitment in 2022 to fund or upgrade 96 existing schools. Sixty-seven of those 96 upgrades have now been funded for construction. The budget also provides a further \$25 million for a capital works fund to improve learning spaces as well as the condition and character of our schools. Our overall investment in the fund since its inception in 2022–23 now stands at \$166.8 million. As of April this year the program has received over 2180 applications and supported more than 500 projects across metropolitan and regional areas.

I should also say we have an accessible buildings program where \$15 million is allocated, which is an application-based program to provide reasonable adjustments to infrastructure to ensure school students with disability have access to education in line with their peers. Since our government introduced this program more than 2600 projects have been funded and completed. Our inclusive education agenda is focused on improving outcomes for all students across Victoria, allowing them to thrive in education and allowing them to thrive in the Education State. We are modernising and building schools on a scale not seen since free education was introduced in 1872. I am proud that this budget is delivering on that transformation.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Deputy Premier. We do love upgrades, but sometimes when we visit schools the principals are quite focused on maintenance issues and how they can make sure the school environment is safe and supports learning. Have we built that into this budget?

Ben CARROLL: We certainly have, Ms Kathage. Our total allocation of essential maintenance comes in at \$560.81 million for the 2025 school year. That is an increase from this year's allocation of about \$465 million. So we are making sure that our annual budget for school maintenance and compliance continues to be strong. That is around half a billion dollars just on school maintenance and compliance. If I can thank Tom and the team at the Victorian School Building Authority, they get onto issues very quickly and work very collaboratively with our schools. This is a fourfold increase on what we have done previously. This does assist schools respond to maintenance issues. Through our rolling facilities evaluation, our continuous work across the school system provides funding for routine tasks such as cleaning gutters, fixing skylights, repairing broken windows or replacing carpets. The way we maintain our schools is very different to how it used to be done. We now rely on recurring evidence-based condition assessments that allow us to better maintain our schools for Victorian students and staff. I always say if you want to tell students about the importance and relevance of their education, it goes to how their school building is presented as well as what the teachers are doing inside the classroom. They do go hand in hand, Ms Kathage. Our maintenance, at around half a billion dollars a year, is a really important part of building the Education State.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Deputy Premier. The list there on page 21 for the new schools to open by 2026 includes Wallan East primary school in my electorate. I have had the joy of going out to the site, but to get to the site there are not even any roads there. It is purely dirt and mud because the houses and the streets have not been built around there yet. I feel like we are well ahead of the population for that school coming online, which is very exciting. So that is due to open in 2026, but I imagine we are not going to stop building schools for 2026. We have got population growth continuing.

Ben CARROLL: You are exactly right, Ms Kathage. Victoria has been going through for some time now essentially the biggest population growth actually since the gold rush, and that has seen enrolment pressures – you would know it; many of the members of this committee would be seeing it in their electorates. We are planning for the years ahead. We are planning for growth and maximising the use of existing infrastructure to ensure all students have access to a great local school. This budget is investing \$68.9 million for future school sites in our fastest growing communities: Melton, Port Phillip, Whittlesea and Wyndham. We are doing everything we can to make sure we manage growth in growth areas but also in the inner-city as well. That is why we are continuing to invest. This budget has \$1 million in planning funding for expansions in the inner north and west of Melbourne to support enrolment growth. We know places like Parkville, Flemington, Arden and Docklands as well as growth areas are going through rapid employment growth in established areas. We are planning ahead, because we have learned from the mistakes of previous governments that did not plan ahead, that did not plan for a single new school. You need to look at the employment growth numbers, you need to look at where communities are moving. We need to work hand in hand – with me, with the planning

minister, with the precincts minister – to make sure that we are managing growth and that every community has access to a great local school.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Deputy Premier. You have mentioned the \$16.9 billion figure a couple of times as the investment over time that the government has made. What about the federal government? What is their involvement in school infrastructure?

Ben CARROLL: Look, the Commonwealth government did provide just under \$60 million to Victoria through the Schools Upgrade Fund to support capital projects in government schools in their 2023–24 budget. Can I say this funding is welcome. However, it would be remiss of me if I did not say that we would like to see increased support from the Commonwealth, that Victoria cannot keep going it alone. We are the Education State; we can be the education nation as well. This is really important that we continue investing and continue advocating to the Commonwealth to step up to the plate as well.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Deputy Premier.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. I might just start with a technical question for the department if I may. Up to 4 per cent of the state school resource standard share each year is made up of costs contributing to the provision of education in schools. I would just like to ask: what is the current estimate of the total cost of that 4 per cent and regulatory costs in each year from 2024 to 2028, and what proportion of that is capital depreciation and what proportion is school transport costs?

Jenny ATTA: My apologies again. I might see if Mr Bates can assist.

Anthony BATES: I do not have the forward estimates projections at hand.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: You are welcome to take it on notice.

Anthony BATES: It is in the order of \$500 million for the 4 per cent, and because of the very significant capital program that the minister has been referring to, our depreciation expense has been growing quite rapidly. So just about the entire amount will be taken up by the depreciation. I have got some figures from 2022, which I can pull up in a moment if that is helpful.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That would be useful, maybe at the end if that is possible.

Anthony BATES: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I might just move on. For the further projections – I know you do not have them to hand – could they be provided on notice?

Anthony BATES: Yes, we can do the 4 per cent across the forward estimates.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you so much. Just moving ahead, something that has been raised quite a bit with my office is concern or quite extreme concern from parents and teachers hearing that weapons manufacturers may have snuck their way into our schools through STEM programs, so talking about things like Cyber Taipan, Code Quest and many more. I understand that there are teachers currently calling for a ban on programs supported by the likes of BAE Systems, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin and RTX, formerly Raytheon. Could you just reassure, Minister, this committee that none of these companies and their supported programs currently run in our public schools?

Ben CARROLL: Thanks, Mr Puglielli. At the moment we have got Education Week, and it is a spotlight on STEM. Using the words of the Prime Minister, he said the defence industry is our new auto sector. There is a role for engineering, science and technology in our schools, and we are very proud that we have a focus on STEM at the moment. I know I am doing my other portfolio later. When I walk through medical research institutes I see how STEM learning is doing everything it can to ensure young people can do whatever area they want to do. But to take the defence industry and STEM, if you look at the Premier's electorate in Bendigo, the Bushmaster, and you look at work that is going on by Hanwha down at Avalon, defence manufacturing is

really, really important. We want to improve productivity and economic growth. To the nub of your question, I am unaware of some of the things that you have said but happy to take that on notice and have a look at it.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That would be much appreciated. I just want to clarify a comment you have just made, though. STEM is great; I think we all agree on that. Are you honestly saying that there is a role for weapons manufacturers or those companies in our schools?

Ben CARROLL: No. I am saying there is a role for manufacturing; there is a role for science, technology and engineering; and there is a role – more so at the TAFE level – for companies like Hanwha, Boeing and Airbus to be talking and working with the state. Look, we are a manufacturing state, so about 30 per cent I think of the nation's manufacturing is located here, so we do need to promote STEM, we do need to make sure that we have pathways and ensure that anyone who wants to go in and work in defence –

You know, we have the air show. I am pretty sure schools would participate in that, because we know it is such a big growth engine of our economy. Secretary?

Jenny ATTA: Minister, if it gives the committee a bit more clarity, in terms of any direct sponsorship or partnership arrangements with companies involved in the sale or the promotion of firearms, our policies do not allow that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, and that is the understanding shared with me by the teachers who have raised this, but nonetheless there is the concern that these programs have run in the past, and that is why my question is to rule out if they are going to be running in our public schools in the present. Just further, at the departmental level what steps have you taken to communicate to schools that they must not use teaching and learning resources created by inappropriate organisations for classroom use and that inappropriate organisations, as you have noted, include companies involved in the sale or promotion of weapons?

Jenny ATTA: In relation to curriculum resources, perhaps Dr Howes –

David HOWES: Those policies are up on the policy and advisory library, which is available to all teachers.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, but then on what basis have these other programs been able to run given that those policies exist?

David HOWES: We have not been able to identify any programs that are in conflict with those policies, but we are keen to look at, very happy to have a look at specific examples.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: For example, if you have STEM Camp, which I understand has run in the past in our schools, and if that is sponsored by a weapons manufacturer or there are weapons manufacturers involved in the delivery of that program, how has that not violated the policy?

David HOWES: I am not aware of that particular program. I am happy to take that one and have a look at that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I will just pull that one up. STEM Camp has implications with Northrop Grumman, which is the company that supplies the Israeli Air Force with Longbow missile delivery systems for its Apache attack helicopters. Is that not a clear violation of that policy?

David HOWES: I would have to have a look at the details of that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. I am happy to provide those to you on notice. Thank you. Just moving to the precinct of Arden, now that the two hospitals in that area are no longer going to be built, we have seen on budget paper 4, page 9, the government said that there is going to be room for more people to live there. At the last PAEC we heard about how it is possible that a suburb of 20,000 people will only have one primary school and no high school. Can I just clarify: now that more people will be living there, how many schools is this government going to build in Arden?

Ben CARROLL: Mr Puglielli, I could probably answer that. Our government has funded eight new schools and campuses in Melbourne's inner city, which have provided some 4875 additional spaces for inner-city families. This is an investment of \$615 million for 15 infrastructure projects. So if I take the inner city, we have

got Ascot Vale West Primary School, Carlton Gardens Primary, Collingwood College, Fitzroy High, Docklands Primary School and Fishermans Bend, which is the interim name, I should stress. There is North Melbourne Primary, Footscray Primary, Port Melbourne, Prahran, Richmond High, Richmond Primary School, South Melbourne Park Primary School, South Melbourne Primary School and Windsor Primary. We know there is going to be population growth, and demographics are changing. That is why we have invested \$1 million in funding to look at expansions in the inner north and west of Melbourne to support Parkville, Flemington, Arden and Docklands. While we do know and appreciate population growth is seeing rapid enrolment growth in established areas, we are looking – and Tom can supplement me here – at more land in the Port Phillip LGA, so we are on track to open a new primary school in Fishermans Bend by 2026. But we need the department to get on and do its job, which they do, following stringent guidelines. Tom, did you want to supplement anything I have said there specifically?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I appreciate the response you have given. In your view, does that assuage the concerns of locals in Arden who need access to a high school?

Ben CARROLL: We are looking and working with the City of Port Phillip. We did put aside in this budget \$68.9 million to acquire land; this is across a range of growth areas. But our growth areas do include the inner city, so I am conscious of that. The local member is a strong advocate. I work very closely as well with my parliamentary colleagues.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: On that area, I might just move to a different school if that is okay. We have heard that University High School, for example, in Parkville is quite overcrowded. I understand the school has been in discussion with the department about the possibility of a temporary second campus, but this has not been funded in the budget. Is there any funding in the budget allocated for capital works at Uni High to address the serious overcrowding they are experiencing in the longer term?

Ben CARROLL: I agree with you, Mr Puglielli, that there are immediate enrolment pressures at University High, but we have put in a temporary relocation of year 9 classes to North Melbourne Primary School, which you would appreciate is the Errol Street campus. I do stress this is a short-term strategy to address enrolment pressures at the school, and it is consistent with previous interventions we have made at Carlton Primary School. The arrangement was determined in close consultation with the schools, and we recognise the strong relationship that we have, transitioning from North Melbourne Primary to University High. To support University High with enrolment growth, we are doing everything we can. The department is working very closely with the school to identify the most effective long-term solution and considering options such as other facilities, relocatables and lease facilities as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Premier. We will go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Deputy Premier, Secretary and officials. I appreciate your time this morning. Certainly the Premier indicated that there were workforce shortages both here and across the nation. It looks like there is some significant effort going on in this space, and I would draw your attention to budget paper 3, page 13. I just would like you to expand on – you answered some of this this morning – what efforts are being made to address these challenges? And I will keep going for just two more seconds – no, we have got it.

Ben CARROLL: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. The Victorian government has invested over \$1.8 billion since coming to office. This is supporting, boosting and upskilling the teaching workforce. In 2023 over \$400 million was allocated to address teacher supply constraints and outcomes. This budget further invests focus on attracting the best teachers to the workforce and providing support throughout their careers, because there is the attraction and the retention piece as well. We are doing everything we can to support our teachers. We are doing everything we can to make sure as a government that we are dealing with the workforce challenges that are happening, I think as Mr Howes identified, not just here in Victoria but right across Australia.

Out of \$1.8 billion, \$17.9 million in funding to boost our workforce, attracting more teachers from overseas through our international teacher recruitment initiative. This funding will boost and enable schoolteachers and our workforce to work more flexibly around their lives and needs outside the classroom. Building the government schools teaching workforce provides funding for international teacher recruitment initiatives to support flexible job-sharing arrangements for school leaders in government schools. We know the dedication

and commitment of our brilliant school workforce. The overwhelming majority of government schools are fully staffed, and the delivery of our school programs is continuing as normal. We are focused on those five priorities, Mr Hilakari, of attraction, recruitment, supporting early career teachers – essentially out of university, giving them some more wraparound scaffolding when they are inside the classroom – then the retention and career development. This will provide a comprehensive and long-term approach to growing then supporting and developing our teacher workforce.

Mathew HILAKARI: I really appreciate that you talked about retention. I was speaking to a teacher locally who said during the Kennett years, when really education was torn apart, she got so disheartened by the sector that she left. Later on she came back, and she has been a great teacher and a very senior teacher and educator in our community. I just want to draw you to ‘Building the government schools’ teaching workforce’, a \$17.9 million investment. How is this going to attract but also keep teachers in the profession?

Ben CARROLL: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. So \$17.9 million is invested to support our teaching workforce. \$7.3 million of this will allow international teacher recruitment to continue, which supports schools to attract teachers from around the world. The international teacher recruitment initiative focuses on attracting the best teachers from overseas to come and teach in Victoria. We have seen, pleasingly, 8000 more registered teachers in 2023 compared to 2020. We need to continue to invest in recruiting the very best teachers to the workforce because, as we know, the number of teachers in Victoria has grown at twice the national average, and that is no accident. To be honest to even the federal minister Jason Clare we are at nearly 10 per cent student enrolments in university for teaching degrees. He has even said too, ‘What you’re doing in Victoria is quite an outlier.’ So again, by no accident, it means our big, strong investment, our flexible work for school leaders initiative – we have got a strong, sustainable workforce that is critical to the success of our education system. And I underline again and thank all of our teachers in the workforce for doing the work they do. I met with a number of principals and teachers, and having all the ministers, as I said in my presentation, from around Australia to see our Victorian academy of teaching and learning, which Minister Merlino established following a visit to Singapore, gives me just the privilege to be the education minister and show them what we have here in this state.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is fantastic, and I have certainly met a number of teachers from different overseas countries. New Zealand and Canada have been a strong feature of teachers locally, and they are doing a great job. But this investment itself, how does it tie in with the previous investments that we made, particularly preservice teacher placement grants? Again, going into that really big retention piece, keeping teachers in place and in the profession is just incredibly important.

Ben CARROLL: You are exactly right, Mr Hilakari, because despite our best efforts sometimes incidents still occur and sometimes our pilots demonstrate that we actually need to support our school staff. That is why we are investing \$63.8 million over four years for early intervention to address the severity and prevent mental injury to school staff. That is why, as I sort of said in my presentation, health and education are going hand in hand. So we have early response to support staff and early intervention and improved capacity to manage early onset of health and wellbeing risk indicators and prevent them from escalating. This along with our OH&S mental health advisory program and the peer supervision groups provides wraparound support to our teaching workforce. These programs and investments are a real collaboration that we have been working on since coming to school. We are supporting school staff in regional and remote areas and our specialist school areas. The preservice teacher placement grant program that you alluded to, Mr Hilakari, is a unique learning experience, and it really is ensuring that practical, personal and educational skills continue to benefit, really helping teachers, particularly those new graduates that are out in rural and regional Victoria, to make sure that they have a relationship with their school community and to feel part of the community.

So our 2023–24 budget delivered over \$204 million in funding to support teacher attraction and retention, and this does include the preservice teacher placement initiatives. We are continuing to do what we can to support our teachers, working collaboratively. Our special development schools are just so wonderful. With the Premier I got to go out to the Monash Special Developmental School. I met Alyssa Marshall undertaking her preservice placement there. She knows what a difference the allowance has been able to make to her, and that is what it is all about – making sure we provide as much support to our teachers, who will also become future leaders in our schools.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is spot on. The way that they become future leaders is developing their skills both inside and outside the classroom and giving them that sort of support. Particularly for early career teachers, what supports are available?

Ben CARROLL: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. The early career teachers are a really important area of focus. As of April 2024 we have had the Career Start initiative, which has supported over 950 graduates and some 700 mentors across our five department areas, with an expansion to 13 areas this year. Essentially, after a successful pilot, we are expanding Career Start to support more teachers at more schools throughout Victoria, more graduate teachers getting the support they need, ensuring they have all the opportunities to regularly meet, have an allocated mentor, professional learning and workshops. The Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership provides a number of professional development programs.

As the Minister for Education, in February this year, with the academy, I hosted all the ministers from around Australia here. What we are doing through the academy and teacher support is really, really important. We are also trying to work with the Commonwealth. You may have seen the media campaign Be That Teacher, really highlighting how it does change lives. You have got teachers out there in the community getting the tap on the shoulder: 'Remember me? You helped me become a jewellery maker,' or 'You helped me become the pianist that I wanted to be,' or 'You helped me become an electrician and then start my own business.' So it is really important that we continue to promote our teachers and the great role they do in our community.

Mathew HILAKARI: I think all of us on the committee can remember a teacher who really inspired us and set us on a great education journey. Mr Overberg, I will give a shout-out to him right now – a great history teacher.

Ben CARROLL: Very proud of you, I think. You are making history.

Mathew HILAKARI: I hope so. Deputy Premier, I am just hoping I can draw you to any figures on uptake of the secondary teaching scholarships initiative?

Ben CARROLL: Yes.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is an important program.

Ben CARROLL: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Look, these scholarships are expected to support some 4000 future teachers each year in 2024, this year, and 2025, which has led to a 9 per cent increase in university offers for teaching courses in Victoria this year. The secondary teaching scholarships provide scholarship support for students enrolling in a secondary teaching degree in 2024 and 2025. These scholarships have no doubt helped shift and incentivise our future teachers, and we are really proud of them.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Premier, officials. Our time has come to an end for this session this morning.

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 is going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the medical research portfolio at 10:15 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.