

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Wednesday 4 June 2025

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch

**WITNESSES**

Ben Carroll MP, Minister for Education; and

Tony Bates, Acting Secretary,

Andrea Del Monaco, Acting 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

David Robinson, Acting 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, the lands of the Wurundjeri people. We pay our respects to them, their elders past, present and emerging, as well as elders from other communities who may be with us today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2025–26 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 you make outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and anything you say may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it 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 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 invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Chair. Congratulations on getting day 1 done, and it is great to be here for day 2. Can I thank you for the opportunity to present on the education portfolio to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I do want to begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and – making that acknowledgement as education minister – recognise that our First Nations people were our first educators, our first teachers, our first students on this land. I want to extend that respect to any other elders and First Nations people that may be here with us today. As education minister I am very proud of the work we are doing with the Marrung education statement and putting self-determination at the heart of supporting our First Nations people to live their best lives.

Chair and committee members, over the past decade the Victorian government has put education front and centre. We have delivered and continue to deliver landmark reforms. We have built and upgraded more schools, here in Victoria, than any other place in Australia. We are elevating the teaching profession, building the workforce and supporting new teachers. We are removing barriers for students to participate in learning while we are also easing the cost-of-living pressures that exist on Victorian families.

Last year I launched the Victorian government's refreshed vision for the Education State, which outlines our commitment to deliver excellence in every classroom in every corner of the state. This year's budget carries through this commitment and vision by investing in our schools and our school communities. It builds on previous investment in school education over the past 11 years to bring the total funding to \$38.6 billion. This record investment has seen the government open or fund 123 state-of-the-art new schools in the heart of local communities. It has seen us deliver more than 2300 school upgrades right across our state, and it positions our government to continue critical work so that every student, no matter their location, no matter their circumstance, no matter their postcode, has access to a high quality education. This year's budget invests \$2.9 billion, including \$1.5 billion in infrastructure, to strengthen learning outcomes for students, support our outstanding teachers and fund vital programs and initiatives to uphold Victoria's position as the Education State. This year's budget not only delivers on the strong foundations that we have already laid; it shows that we are serious about supporting students, teachers and school leaders in the areas that matter most, where the evidence shows it will lead to the best outcomes.

We know learning does not happen just in the classroom; camps, sports and excursions help students gain valuable life skills from teamwork and problem solving to connecting with nature and getting creative, all while building confidence and resilience for our young students. But cost-of-living pressures have meant many families are having to make difficult decisions around prioritising their spending and this has led to some students missing out. That is why we are investing in this budget \$152.3 million to significantly boost the amount students receive through the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund. This investment will increase rates to \$400 for eligible primary and secondary students, up from \$154 and \$256, respectively. We are helping to ease the cost-of-living pressures through the affordable school uniforms program, and through recent changes, giving families more choice when purchasing uniforms. We continue to support student health and wellbeing through the Glasses for Kids program, the breakfast club program and Smile Squad.

Chair and members, Victorian students continue to perform well across a range of metrics. We are above the national average in all domains in all tested years for NAPLAN. Our students achieved first or second place in seven out of eight NAPLAN measures in reading and writing and top the nation for writing in years 5, 7 and 9, something we should all be proud about, but also mindful we can build on these successes and continue to focus where improvement is needed. At the centre of this budget is our investment in evidence-based teaching to strengthen learning outcomes, especially for numeracy, reading and writing. These investments will support students to meet our high expectations for learning in Victorian classrooms. This includes implementing the updated Victorian teaching and learning model, or as it is commonly known in the education sector, VTLM 2.0, which is supporting every school to deliver high-quality explicit instruction.

This is supported by practical curriculum-aligned lesson plans in English, maths, science and digital technologies, and our added supports in this budget will make sure every student develops core reading skills using the strongest evidence-based methods, including decoding and phonics. We are also investing in giving Victorian students the best mathematics education that they can get so they can develop numeracy skills they need so they can become more engaged, confident mathematics learners. Mathematics is for everyone. The budget provides funding to introduce a grade 1 numeracy check and to implement a progressive achievement test. These are key tools that enable teachers to check progress of all students and plan early interventions for any child not yet at the expected level. New mathematics camps will inspire almost 1000 students through real-world, team-based projects led by mathematics specialists.

We continue to support students to remain engaged in learning and to thrive at school. We all know education levels the playing field, and we are removing barriers to participating in education. We are funding four programs through locally driven education programs to provide more cost-of-living support, set students up for success with the skills they need and empower them to pick the career of their choice in the future. One of these programs is West Justice's school lawyer program that many of you will be aware of. We are investing \$1 million over three years to support their program in five schools across the western suburbs of Melbourne. This will help students to access the resources and information they need to understand their rights at work and keep them on the right track. We are also supporting the Smith Family's Learning for Life program with an investment of \$6 million over four years to continue the good work that they do in supporting disadvantaged communities and making sure that every student has the access to education they deserve.

This budget also funds the completion of our landmark disability inclusion rollout and continued support for students with disability. We are supporting students new to Victoria to learn English and boosting literacy and

numeracy for First Nations primary school students. We are also providing more support for students in out-of-home care so they can also be engaged and achieve at school. We are also funding vital programs and initiatives that will have a genuine impact on our schools. This includes significant investments to continue embedding our secondary school reforms pathways. The VCE vocational major is elevating the value of vocational education and setting students up for careers in skills that are in demand. Vocational pathways lead to better outcomes for many different students of different backgrounds. It is helping boost our overall year 12 completion rates, up from 91.7 per cent in 2021 to 97.5 per cent in 2024. We are also investing in continued support for disengaged young people to re-engage in education through the expanded Navigator program.

This budget has a strong focus on supporting our outstanding school workforce. Our investments build on successful workforce initiatives that have grown the number of teachers registered in Victoria by more than 12,000 since 2020. We have supported more than 1400 teaching degree students to work in schools while studying and have provided over 800 financial incentives to teachers relocating to work in hard-to-staff schools. We are continuing to invest in student supports as they train to be teachers and become new to the profession. We are taking important steps to make sure that all school staff feel safe at work and continue to support schoolteachers to take up flexible working arrangements.

We are continuing our record-breaking school program, delivering on our commitment to open 100 new schools by 2026. We are keeping up the momentum and planning for the future and funding new schools as well as land acquisitions and upgrades that will create more than 13,300 extra places for students in the Education State. This investment in this budget also meets our 2022 commitment to fund major upgrades at 96 schools. This means our schools are modern, welcoming and fit for purpose not only for staff and students but also vital hubs for communities in the 21st century.

In conclusion, Chair and committee members, the Victorian budget's investment of \$2.9 billion in education focuses on getting the fundamentals right, whether it is supporting schools to deliver Victoria's new reading position, lifting the maths capabilities of staff and students, or building new schools or planning for the future, the Education State continues to ensure students receive a world-class education. This budget also provides funding to ensure students are supported, to deliver a high-quality curriculum and have access to high-quality, professional learning, that we retain teachers and build the profession and make sure teachers feel safe at work. And this is setting the students up for success through the best quality education here in Victoria, the Education State.

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

**Nick McGOWAN:** Minister, thank you for that presentation. I am not sure whether you are aware, but there is a great deal of angst within the community over this \$2.4 billion cut by delaying the rollout of the Gonski reforms. In fact the education union labelled it, and I quote:

... a disaster for public school staff and students.

As a state school kid myself, I share their concerns. Budget paper 3, page 15, shows a significant reduction in spending on school enrolment-based funding over the forward estimates. And when I say significant, I mean massive, and that is compared to the 2024–25 budget, which is in budget paper 3, page 12. Why is there a reduction?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Deputy Chair. There have been no cuts to education funding. In fact the recent budget shows we have grown our funding by \$2.9 billion, including \$1.5 billion for schools. And if you look at the work of the Productivity Commission, if you look at all the data, since we came to office recurrent funding for our public school kids has grown by 34 per cent, the biggest increase in recurrent funding in the nation. We are proud of our investments. We are proud that with the Premier and the Prime Minister, Minister Clare and me, we got the Commonwealth to increase their share of funding for public school kids to 5 per cent. Many of you will be aware they were long campaigning for an increase of just 2.5 per cent, but we got that to 5 per cent, and we will reach full and fair funding over the life of this agreement. And I am committed that every child, no matter their background, no matter their circumstances, has access to a world-class education in a Victorian school, and I am committed to full and fair funding. We signed the Better and Fairer Schools funding agreement on 30 January. It will provide that we get to 100 per cent. It commits the Commonwealth to lift its share from 20 per cent to 25 per cent. We pushed really hard, the Premier and I. Indeed, Deputy Chair, I went and protested with the union up in Canberra to get –

**Nick McGOWAN:** They are not happy now, though, Minister.

**Ben CARROLL:** No, I spoke to the union over the weekend.

**Nick McGOWAN:** What do you make of their words?

**Ben CARROLL:** We are making very, very important strides, and you only have to look at the data that shows that when it comes to education, whether you are looking at the teaching and learning academy, whether you are looking at one in two schools built here in Victoria, and also remember, Deputy Chair, when it comes to Gonski, that significant investment we have made, none of that is calculated in Gonski, even though the original David Gonski formula said it should be included. If you look at the work we are doing around pedagogy and curriculum reform, none of that is really being counted as well. We are doing enormous inroads in building the Education State. We are very committed. I have been in contact with Minister Clare. I am looking forward to catching up with him on a range of reforms, including supporting our initial teacher education reforms in universities, the rollout of the year 1 numeracy and phonics check. We are going to see Victoria continue to move up the ladders, I am sure. While we are so competitive in Australia, we are setting our sights internationally. We want to be competitive with the US, UK, Singapore and China, and that is where we are setting our sights. That is where as the Education State we should set our sights, because we know in the 21st century it is human capital that will matter most, and that is what we are very committed to.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Minister, I appreciate that that is a very brave answer on what is a very dire situation. Labor, as you know, had pledged to fully fund schools by meeting the target of 75 per cent of SRS by 2028. If I look at the budget papers – that is, I compare them – the figures are stark and they speak for themselves. In the 2024–25 budget it was \$119 million. Now in the 2025–26 output initiatives we are down to \$41.9 million. Your choice of the word ‘cuts’ – you and I both know that over the life of this agreement Victorian schoolchildren are not seeing the money that they were promised just in last year’s budget. Was this decision made by yourself and your department, or was this decision to defer the Gonski reforms made by the budget and finance committee of cabinet?

**Ben CARROLL:** First and foremost, Deputy Chair, I again in the strongest terms rebut the question. We have not cut funding. We have put record funding into our education system, growing recurrent funding outside of capital by 34 per cent – that is what all the data shows – and building one in two schools here in Victoria. I will give you an example. I was at the Government Schools Principals Conference yesterday, and the principal of Bairnsdale Secondary College came up to me after my speech and said he had never seen so much resources put into his school – put into the education schools and government schools across this state. I said to him, ‘Can I quote you on that?’ –

**Nick McGOWAN:** I think perhaps we are talking at cross-purposes, though, Minister. I am appreciative of the money we put in there, but –

**Ben CARROLL:** They were his words. When you look at the mental health initiative, Smile Squad and the school breakfast program, it takes so much diligence and hard work, and we should be so proud. It is on our numberplates. It is an inherent value we have as a government, and as the Deputy Premier to have the education portfolio, I am so committed to making sure that every child gets their best chance to put their best foot forward. \$2.9 billion in this budget, including \$1.5 billion for school infrastructure – it shows the significance we are placing on education.

**Nick McGOWAN:** And yet Victoria’s delayed rollout of the Gonski reforms puts us three years behind Queensland and six years behind New South Wales. Did the Department of Education provide you, Minister, with a briefing paper in March 2024 setting out the financial impact of delaying the Gonski rollout from 2028 to 2031 and Victoria’s commitment to fund 75 per cent?

**Ben CARROLL:** Deputy Chair, as I said at the outset, we signed a heads of agreement with the Commonwealth. I think it was on 30 January, at the start of this year. That agreement becomes a bilateral agreement that I am now negotiating with Minister Clare. You would appreciate I will not do the negotiations through the PAEC hearing and I will not do them through the media, but it will provide that we get to full and fair funding for our schools. We have increased recurrent funding for schoolkids by 34 per cent since we came to office – more than any other state or territory. No other state or territory has increased funding at that level. When other ministers from around Australia come to Victoria, they are inspired by what they see in the

Education State. From our investments – our 100 new schools, building 50 new childcare centres, our emphasis on pre-prep, primary and secondary pathways – every person having a pathway in the Education State is what it is all about. We are very committed to making sure that we get to appropriate high-level funding for all of our schoolkids and that we have a sector-blind, needs-based education system.

**Nick McGOWAN:** And yet, Minister, when I look at the budget papers again – and I hate to refer back to them, but they are your budget papers – when I compare what you had anticipated in 2024–25 and the cuts that are now taking place in budget paper 3, and it is there for everyone to read on page 15, effectively what we have for the year 2024–25 is an \$80 million cut, effectively what we have for 2025–26 is a \$35 million cut and effectively what we have for 2026–27 is a \$40 million cut. They are cuts. Notwithstanding what you are saying to me is that you are growing a pie, but that pie is not as big as it ought to be given the commitments we made previously and what you told the Victorian people just 12 months ago. Why is that the case? Was this a decision of the cabinet subcommittee, or was this a decision of yourself and the department?

**Ben CARROLL:** Deputy Chair, just get your mind around \$38.6 billion invested in education since we came to office. You would have to go back – not since Federation, not since free education was introduced in the 1870s, has a government like the Allan Labor government invested in education. We are the Education State. It is inherent in our values. If you look at the trajectory, how we –

**Nick McGOWAN:** That is why I cannot understand who has made you do this cut, Minister.

**Ben CARROLL:** have moved up in all the NAPLAN scores, in every different measure we are above the national average. We are the best when it comes to vocational pathways. We have got the teacher workforce growing above the national average. We are very proud of our investments that we have made. But I will continue to say we are delivering significant investment right from pre-prep to primary, secondary and pathways going forward. It is just plain wrong to suggest there have been funding cuts. Go through our budget – \$2.9 billion, \$1.5 billion and we are continuing to make sure we will fund government schools at 75 per cent of the student resource standard –

**Nick McGOWAN:** By what year, Minister?

**Ben CARROLL:** delivering increased funding in stages throughout the life of this agreement.

**Nick McGOWAN:** But by what year, Minister?

**Ben CARROLL:** All states and territories have signed up through the life of this agreement. That is why it comes down to the bilateral agreement that I am now negotiating with Minister Clare. As part of that, too, we got rid of the 4 per cent charge, which was a depreciation measure that Mr Bates could even talk about, which was really valuable to Victoria. Because we had done record investment in infrastructure, that depreciation contributed significantly. So when it comes to meeting our agreements under Gonski, when it comes to rolling out the Victorian teaching and learning model, you will see the good work we are doing. Indeed you only have to go back a couple of weeks ago to look at –

**Nick McGOWAN:** So when will 75 per cent be reached, Minister?

**Ben CARROLL:** It will be reached – and I have said this publicly, Deputy Chair – through the life of the agreement. It was always going to be reached.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I am not sure what end date. When can we see 75 per cent?

**Ben CARROLL:** When we have finalised the bilateral, which I am working on with Minister Clare.

**Nick McGOWAN:** So you are still not sure?

**Ben CARROLL:** We are continuing to work very hard, and we are continuing –

**Nick McGOWAN:** You and I both know teachers and staff want to know when we will reach 75 per cent. That is not a hard question. I am sure you know, or perhaps the Acting Secretary can assist us.

**Ben CARROLL:** Acting Secretary, do you want to contribute?

**Tony BATES:** Mr McGowan, I might just go to your question about those numbers you were quoting from BP3.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Sure.

**Tony BATES:** What we are actually seeing is fluctuations in our year-on-year enrolment growth. The Victorian government system has the strongest enrolment growth across the country. We have grown enrolments by 21,500. So just on those lines you were quoting, I think our enrolment growth numbers have gone \$30 million, \$90 million, \$120 million per year. They are layering on top of each other, so each year you see that enrolment growth funding, it builds on top of the previous year. As I said, we have got the strongest enrolment growth in the country. We had about 1 per cent enrolment growth last year. The year before we had 1.7 per cent. That is why those numbers are moving up and down as the enrolments fluctuate up and down across the system. So back to your question, those numbers are not a cut, it is just a slower growth rate than the year before.

**Nick McGOWAN:** And the decision to delay the implementation of the Gonski reforms – was that made by the cabinet subcommittee or was that made by the department and the minister?

**Tony BATES:** I think, as the minister said, we are still in bilateral negotiations with the Commonwealth. We have not got a final date on the details of the funding under the agreement with the Commonwealth.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Do Victorians have any oversight or any transparency in terms of when we can reach the 75 per cent target?

**Tony BATES:** Again, I think the minister is still negotiating that with Minister Clare.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Right. But we have now delayed the implementation of that. Is that correct?

**Ben CARROLL:** No, we are getting on with doing everything that we are bound to do, and a heads of agreement, Deputy Chair –

**Nick McGOWAN:** But the agreement was to reach it by 2028, Minister, correct?

**Ben CARROLL:** No, there was a heads of agreement signed in January, and underneath that agreement – and we are not the only state; I should say WA are also negotiating a bilateral agreement, and they were one of the first to sign up to a heads of agreement. I am in discussions with Minister Clare. We have an education ministers meeting coming up in South Australia where we will continue these discussions. I am really proud that I can sit before this committee and show as a government, since we came to office, a 34 per cent increase in recurrent funding, and then there is the school infrastructure program. I mean, we could not open a school in 2016 because no planning had been done –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Minister, I am afraid I am going to have to interrupt, only because I have got very limited time. I do appreciate the question. I am just going to pivot for one moment.

**Ben CARROLL:** Deputy Chair, all I can say is we will fund government schools at 75 per cent of the student resource standard. We will deliver increased funding in stages during the term of the agreement. We are still negotiating the terms of the bilateral agreement with the Commonwealth, and that will enshrine the funding trajectories of both the Commonwealth and the state.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Before my time runs out –

**Ben CARROLL:** That is what we are committed to.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I appreciate that, Minister. Thank you, Minister. Before my time runs out, I spoke to Jenny Atta when she sat here last year – Marlborough Primary School, Ringwood Secondary College with their stadium, and Mullauna are short money to complete their project, as is Heathmont East, which has got stage 2 and 3 to happen. They are all local projects in the Ringwood electorate. If I can bring those to your attention because I know I am going to run out of time, hence why I have just said the four of them. I am happy to write to you separately on those matters.

**Ben CARROLL:** I am very happy that we have committed funding to Mullauna Secondary College.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Nick McGOWAN:** They are somewhat short, but I will share a letter with you that I shared with the Premier yesterday.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Deputy Chair. We are going to go straight to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Deputy Premier and officials. Deputy Premier, I will take you straight to page 15 of BP3. It sets out some initiatives there under the heading of 'Promoting equal access to education'. There is a specific initiative there around increasing the camps, schools and excursion fund. How are you seeing these initiatives helping families with the cost of living?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Ms Kathage, for your question. You are right to point out that the budget does provide \$152.3 million to increase the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund to \$400 for eligible families. I should say at the outset too we have also pooled this funding. Often a grade 6 versus a preppy or a year 7 versus a year 12 will have different expenses for different camps. We have now allowed more choice for the parents to pool that funding around if it is for the year 12 versus the grade 3 or the year 6. It is really important that we have done that.

I should say too that since we did come to office, since 2015, some \$351 million has been spent on this program, and it has supported more than 2 million students. We are really proud of this. It is across all sectors of the education portfolio. It is much-needed support. We want all students to participate. I mean, imagine if a student could not, heaven forbid, come and see question time here or could not see Phar Lap or could not go and see the Old Melbourne Gaol and learn about Ned Kelly and our different histories. These are really important things, and it is about making sure that all students feel supported and feel that they can participate. We know that extracurricular activities do not just happen inside the classroom. Camps, sports and excursions are so important for building resilience, for building teamwork and for building social networks amongst the students and their staff. I am really proud of what we are doing. I had a great visit to Maribyrnong secondary college with the Premier and the local member Katie Hall recently. The principal there – a very multicultural school – Michael Keenan said that it has been so significant, the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, for his kids. Some \$37,000 from the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund has supported almost 150 students. This investment is so important, and it will go a long way into the future.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. It is great to have that flexibility for different children within a family, because that reflects reality, so that is great. In your presentation you spoke about the supports around Glasses for Kids and the school breakfast program. I know Mr Fraser and I have discussed Glasses for Kids previously. In your role going around to schools and meeting with families, you must get a real insight into the impact of those programs.

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes. Look, Ms Kathage, to take Glasses for Kids first, often you would think that if you have got a young child, they would not have a vision impairment. But through the Glasses for Kids program we are picking up students that have a vision impairment, and it has been a real barrier to their learning. This is a really important initiative. We have tripled the size of the funding for Glasses for Kids, and that just goes to show where our values are. It is an inspiring program. It helps children in their early learning and development, coupled with the increase to Camps, Sports and Excursions, the School Breakfast Club program – that has been outstanding. Kids cannot learn on an empty stomach. All the evidence shows that without food in their tummy they do not have the concentration levels; they are often discombobulated. It helps settle the classroom. But the other thing with that program is it is a real win-win for our manufacturers and our farmers through the food bank. It is a whole supply chain coming into our schools. I had a lovely phone call with a young student from Ascot Vale West Primary School last night. Their canteen had burnt down. With a bit of support we could get a mobile canteen brought in, and that means that she can get her Vegemite on toast every morning before she goes into the class and be fit and ready to learn. These are really important programs. They also go to show that what is happening inside the classroom is so important. In the Education State we are about the wraparounds as well: Glasses for Kids, Smile Squad, the school breakfast program, supporting every student to concentrate and put their best foot forward in the classroom.



**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. In the department's response to the questionnaire, on question 1 they set out some information on the one-off school saving bonus initiative. Are you able to provide some further info on how that fits into the overall picture?

**Ben CARROLL:** I might even ask the Acting Secretary or Dr Howes if they want to supplement my answer, but this was a one-off targeted measure. The consultation with Parents Victoria and the Victorian Council of Social Service showed that school uniforms are a major barrier for parents. What we were able to do with that school saving bonus was ensure parents received it. But while that was occurring, we were also able to tweak our policy on school uniforms to make sure that parents had more choice about supplies and where they bought their uniforms, to make a real clear guideline that there did not need to be logos on shorts, on socks, on school pants. We wanted to make sure, particularly in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis – 13 interest rate rises in a row – that parents had choice and that they had all the support they needed when it came to that. Dr Howes or Acting Secretary, do you want to supplement anything on the school saving bonus?

**Tony BATES:** I will just say I think over \$170 million has been spent in government schools on the school saving bonus. As the minister said, we gave parents a choice, so they have been able to log into the portal and pick between uniforms, help with the cost of textbooks or funding activities. On top of the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, which is means tested, the school saving bonus can be used by parents to enable or support all sorts of children to participate in activities. As the minister said, we did that family pooling initiative so that parents could pool the money together. We have heard a lot of really positive stories, from talking to some of the uniform suppliers, that parents were buying Clarks school shoes. I am not trying to push a particular brand, but the reports we were getting were that parents were buying better quality shoes, which were lasting longer; they were buying multiple uniforms, like tops in one size and a bigger size up for next year. We have had a lot of really positive feedback about the program. Any funds that are not spent by 30 June will automatically drop to the child's activities account. We know not all parents have spent all of the money and a small number of parents have not interacted with the system, but that funding will automatically drop to the student's activity account and then be available to be carried over indefinitely until the student uses that money later this year or over coming years.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. Deputy Premier, you have emphasised that the budget reflects our values in terms of a Labor government. There is a section here on page 15 around the students with disabilities transport program. It seems like a very practical thing, but reflecting the values also, are you able to speak about that in terms of that practical cost-of-living angle there?

**Ben CARROLL:** Certainly, Ms Kathage. Families of students with disabilities benefit immensely from this transport program, providing free transport to eligible travellers; \$220.6 million for that program has been invested since we came to office, and it is really important, because this program came about through the disability royal commission. We continue to enhance inclusive education. You will have often seen me say in Parliament how proud I am of our values. Under our government every single one of our 84 specialist schools has been or is being upgraded. We have already rolled out high-intensity outside school hours care for parents at disability schools, and we are rolling that out to another 15 schools, I believe – it may take it up to 30. But in this budget, the students with disabilities transport program will provide free bus travel. It will ensure that we have new bus services coming on line too, as the state continues to grow, to support these students right across our growing areas.

Point Cook South specialist school we know will be opening there in 2026. This will have a new route for that, making sure that students can get to school who need that support. I have heard firsthand, Ms Kathage, from many families – indeed many parents, many students – how this program has supported their young ones. One thing about public transport – it is why it is just so important, too – is that social connectedness, that responsibility. It really means a lot. They thoroughly love public transport and the world it opens up to them. It is really important. If we can make life that little bit easier for Victorian families and their students, particularly with loved ones with a disability, that is what our government is about.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Good practice for independent living.

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** There is one here under promoting equal access that I have not heard about before – the locally driven education programs. Is that a cost-of-living one as well, for access?

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes, and this is really important. I was with the CEO of the Smith Family just recently with the Member for Dandenong, seeing their Learning for Life program firsthand. This is a \$6 million investment with the Smith Family in their Learning for Life program. They are helping some of our most marginalised families have access to education. It might be supporting them with English classes; it might be supporting them with textbooks. Many families are in community, public and social housing, and the Smith Family works very hard with them. It is that old mantra, isn't it, that education is your passport to success. It is your pathway to a bright future, and often, as the great Barry Jones would say, postcodes are that number one determinant. This investment with the Smith Family is really, really important. The school lawyer program – many of you would be aware of the great work that Westjustice do. They were great advocates of free public transport for students for a range of reasons, but the school lawyer program will also be delivered in five schools in Melbourne's west. These are localised grassroots initiatives that are good to test, work with schools and then look at a bigger rollout potentially when we get the data and the evidence back.

Our Safe Schools program is really making sure that our curriculum is aligned to support students around digital literacy and being safe online, making sure students, through our funding and support of the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, know online is a wonderful world when it wants to be – AI is here and it is here for the future, but make sure you are safe and make sure you are using it appropriately. So we are really proud.

One program I know the Premier and the Speaker of the chamber is very proud of is the Passions & Pathways program in Bendigo – additional funding for that, making sure, as the name suggests, that there is a pathway for everyone. That is why our locally driven education programs address many of those sorts of risk factors that are out there in the community, turn them into protective factors and make sure that students have access to education and have access to a good life.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. I think a common theme through what you are talking about is really the dignity of the student and the dignity of the family. In your travels around different schools what sorts of reflections do you hear from families who are maybe experiencing stronger cost of living – or maybe reflections from teachers on how it is impacting families?

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes. One of the things with the budget and the free public transport for under 18s is you would be surprised how many students out there in all parts of the state have often been travelling without purchasing their ticket for a range of measures – generally cost of living, cannot afford it – and how they have then been on the bus nervous that an inspector or someone is going to come on. If an inspector does come on, that then puts them on the criminal justice path, or often they will just end up at the school a bit discombobulated, not settled. This takes that element away from it, and it ensures that every child, no matter their circumstances, can get free public transport to school – the most important place they should be going outside the home.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to go straight to Mr Welch.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. My first couple of questions are just some factual ones for the Secretary, if I may, and I am happy for these to be on notice if need be. In relation to payroll tax on non-government schools, the budget does not provide a breakdown of how much revenue is being raised from the payroll tax on non-government schools. So could you provide to the committee a breakdown on how much has been paid in 2024–25; a total amount of projected revenue in the tax since its introduction over the forward estimates; a breakdown in this forecast to be paid by each liable school, including those that become liable across the forwards; and a breakdown of total government funding received by each individual school liable for the payroll tax for non-government schools for the same period?

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Welch. I am going to intervene here because I know it is your first time on the PAEC. The purpose of the public inquiry part of this inquiry is to ask a question and afford an opportunity for the minister or department officials to answer your question, not just agree to take everything on notice. I am going to ask you to ask one question at a time, and then we are going to see if there is an answer from the minister or the department officials. Do you want to start with your first question, please?

**Richard WELCH:** Well, yes, but I will just clarify that omissions in the budget are as much a relevant part of the budget scrutiny as what is in it. There are a lot of things that are omitted that should be scrutinised.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Welch, if you want to spend your time asking questions of me, I suggest you ask them to the witnesses that are before us today, one by one, and, like I said, afford them the opportunity to answer your question.

**Richard WELCH:** Certainly. Can I ask how much has been paid in payroll tax on non-government schools?

**Tony BATES:** Mr Welch, that is all being managed and collected by the State Revenue Office. We do not have any visibility on the actual tax collections, so that is probably a question for the Treasurer, who I know was here yesterday, or for the Minister for Finance.

**Richard WELCH:** So the schools themselves have not been advised. Have you had any discussions with schools about what their likely upcoming liabilities will be?

**Tony BATES:** No. We supported the schools that are liable for the payroll tax to work with the State Revenue Office. So again, I do not get any visibility on their actual payroll tax payments. It depends. As you can imagine, it fluctuates depending on their actual payroll, so it is really a question for the State Revenue Office. I probably can jump to your last question. We do know the schools that are paying payroll tax, and I can give you a list for all of them of the state funding that they receive.

**Richard WELCH:** Great. That is good. Thank you. And I imagine you would have looked at what funding schools are receiving versus the payroll tax they may be paying, because we are now in a situation where a number of schools are paying the state to educate because the net tax they are paying versus net funding they are receiving is in the negative. Have you done any analysis of that?

**Tony BATES:** I do not have access to the payroll tax collection data. As you can imagine, there is statutory confidentiality on that, so the State Revenue Office have that information. So I do not have any access to that. I will just say, Mr Welch, the state funding we put out, we have a model called the financial assistance model for non-government schools, so again, I can provide you some descriptions on how that works, but we do weight the state funding a lot to disadvantaged students. We put quite a weighting on our funding going to families who have healthcare cards and that sort of thing.

**Richard WELCH:** Have any schools indicated to you that they will be under financial duress because of the payroll impost?

**Tony BATES:** I have had a small number of principals say that it is an issue that they are having to manage.

**Richard WELCH:** How many?

**Tony BATES:** I would say probably two or three in the last year.

**Richard WELCH:** In the last year? Okay.

Moving back to the Gonski reforms, did you and the department provide any advice to the minister about the impact of delaying fully funding Victoria's SRS commitment by 2028?

**Tony BATES:** We provide the minister with all sorts of advice, Mr Welch, but I probably will not go into the details of advice we provide in relation to cabinet matters.

**Richard WELCH:** But did you provide advice?

**Tony BATES:** Yes, we provide all sorts of advice on all sorts of issues that the minister is considering.

**Richard WELCH:** Did you provide advice on the impact of delaying?

**Tony BATES:** Again, I will not go into the details of the cabinet advice that we provided.

**Richard WELCH:** I am not asking for the details, but it is a material question: did you provide advice on the impact of delaying the Gonski reforms?

**Tony BATES:** We have provided the minister with advice on a range of scenarios.

**Richard WELCH:** Including that?

**Tony BATES:** On all sorts of different scenarios.

**Richard WELCH:** No, no, you are here to answer questions on the budget.

**Michael GALEA:** On a point of order, Mr Welch, you are attempting to ask the secretary questions that would undermine executive privilege.

**Richard WELCH:** No, I am not.

**Michael GALEA:** You are.

**Richard WELCH:** I am asking whether –

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mr Welch. Mr Welch, I believe that Mr Bates has answered your question on numerous attempts. You may not like his answer to the question, but that does not mean he has not answered your question. Do you have another question?

**Richard WELCH:** I do. I have several questions. Secretary, do you agree with the minister that this decision will harm Victoria's reputation as the Education State?

**Tony BATES:** There is continuing very significant increase in government school funding, Mr Welch, as the minister said.

**Richard WELCH:** Yes, but we are forgoing a lot of revenue, aren't we? We are forgoing \$2.2 billion of revenue. That is material, isn't it? I mean, that is –

**Tony BATES:** As I indicated earlier, the minister is still in negotiations with the Commonwealth on the exact trajectory. Until we have some certainty on those negotiations, we do not know the forward projection impacts.

**Richard WELCH:** And those negotiations will conclude by this financial year.

**Tony BATES:** I think we need to have a bilateral agreement in place before Christmas for next year's funding.

**Richard WELCH:** Okay, but schools are obviously doing budgets; they need to know what they are working with. When will they know?

**Tony BATES:** We provide detailed budgets to schools in the last week of term 3, so in September we will give them very detailed budgets for the coming year.

**Richard WELCH:** So it should be by then.

**Tony BATES:** Based on the decisions in the budget and other factors, and forecast enrolments, we will provide all schools with very detailed budgets, as I said, at the conclusion of term 3, then that gives them the certainty to start their recruitment and staffing processes for next year.

**Richard WELCH:** Right. And can we just clarify, and I am sorry if this question has already been asked, but what percentage of the SRS 75 per cent target will be reached by 2028?

**Tony BATES:** Again, that is subject to the outcome of the bilateral negotiations with the Commonwealth.

**Richard WELCH:** There is not a lot we can ask then about that, because there is no information.

Secretary, can I just then go on to the VCE Exams: have any appropriations been made in this budget to assist with the minister's work to make the VCE assessment authority much stronger and more accountable?

**Tony BATES:** There are no announcements in the budget. The funding for VCE is contained within the appropriation the department already received, so the VCE has the funds it needs to implement the recommendations from Dr Blacher's independent review, and I have also seconded several staff over to the VCE to help them improve their project management and other things. So yes, they are getting all the resources they need to successfully deliver this year's exams.

**Richard WELCH:** And I guess because of the history – there is a cost associated with the errors in the exams. Would you be able to provide the committee with the breakdown of the cost of reviews of the VCE errors in 2022, 2023 and 2024?

**Tony BATES:** I can take that on notice. I do not have that at hand. There is Dr Blacher's work, and we have got Margaret Crawford, who is the former Auditor-General of New South Wales, who was appointed this year as the independent monitor – they are still in place.

**Richard WELCH:** Will that review include an assessment of the cost of the mistakes?

**Tony BATES:** Again, I can provide some information on notice, Mr Welch. I mean, the direct cost was that the VCAA had to reprint a number of exams, and we know what those costs are, or I can find out.

**Richard WELCH:** Diversion of staff and other things.

**Tony BATES:** The staff at the VCAA, as Dr Blacher's review indicated, worked huge amounts of time on the weekends, so there was no extra salary.

**Richard WELCH:** Unpaid work?

**Tony BATES:** A lot of it was unpaid, and people were given time off in lieu.

**Richard WELCH:** Right. There was a cost then.

**Tony BATES:** There was a notional cost.

**Richard WELCH:** Yes.

**Tony BATES:** We can provide the cost of the reprinting of exam papers.

**Richard WELCH:** I think that would be good to understand the direct, indirect, tangible and intangible costs. That would be appropriate to understand, I think. I will actually cede the rest of my time if you want to proceed. I do not have anything else.

**Jade BENHAM:** Sure. You have not got anything else?

**Richard WELCH:** No.

**Jade BENHAM:** Sure. Just on the VCE debacle then, Minister, what date were you first made aware of the VCAA's errors in the 2024 VCE exams which led to the actions, including the sacking of the VCAA board?

**Ben CARROLL:** Well, the VCAA board was not sacked; there were resignations and it was reconstituted. That was a part of Dr Blacher's recommendations, as part of his review. We are leaving no stone unturned to make sure our VCE runs as it should. As I have often said, this is 13 years of schooling – it is like the AFL Grand Final for our year 12s. While I am here, I might just thank Dr David Howes on my left, who became the acting chief executive officer during a significant period. Just this week, Ms Benham, Andrew Smith, a former CEO of Education Services Australia, who in that previous role oversaw the running of NAPLAN, has started as the chief executive officer. He will pick up the work of Dr Howes. He also will be working with the independent monitor that has been put in place. As Mr Bates said, Margaret Crawford, an eminent former Auditor-General from New South Wales, has been put in place. I have been in several meetings this week where we have discussed at length the role of getting Dr Blacher's recommendations instituted. We have accepted all of his eight recommendations. With Margaret Crawford in place as well overseeing every single

aspect of the 2025 VCE examination process, we have made sure we have got all the robust systems in place to minimise the risk of human error.

**Jade BENHAM:** Minister, what date were you made aware?

**Ben CARROLL:** Well, I have gone to this previously.

**Jade BENHAM:** I just need a date, please, Minister.

**Ben CARROLL:** Well, as you would appreciate, I am always being briefed on our year 12 examinations. I am always focused on making sure that we get the right outcomes for them. I am really pleased to have received stage 1 of Dr Blacher's review. I have said this on many significant other occasions, Ms Benham, that I am ultimately accountable for the education portfolio, and what happens inside the education portfolio is the ultimate responsibility of the minister.

**Jade BENHAM:** So you do not recall?

**Ben CARROLL:** It is why I am here today fronting up to your questions.

**Jade BENHAM:** So you do not recall the date on which you were made aware, or are you refusing to answer which date?

**Ben CARROLL:** No. I was always working very diligently. We had another review, the Bennett review, on the implementations, and it is all publicly available. As Dr Blacher's report showed, there was a human error in the publishing and the production of exam material. It was unacceptable what occurred, and we have put in place the most robust systems, including an eminent independent monitor to oversee all the systems that are in place for the development and indeed the execution of the 2025 exams. I should say, I saw just recently over the weekend that Deakin University have had some issues with their examinations. This is a complex process, but we do need to get it right. It is so important for these young people.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We will go straight to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister. Good morning, officials. Thank you for joining us. Minister, I would like to talk about some educational outcomes. In particular, there are a number of output initiatives listed for the Department of Education in this budget specifically pertaining to excellence in various fields. It is a fairly significant financial investment as well. Can you talk to me about how this investment will lead to improved student outcomes?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Galea. Look, I am, as the minister, really committed to making best practice common practice in every classroom. I really do believe that explicit instruction hurts no-one and benefits everyone. This is why, through the work of the department, the VTLM 2.0, we are making sure that we have the highest education standards in our curriculum and inside our classrooms. I am really proud of the work, and indeed a principal said, from a secondary school, that he thought the VTLM 2.0 was one of the best things that has ever come out of the Department of Education. We have recently announced a new maths position that builds on the reading position that we instituted and mandated last year, embedding evidence-based practice. And this budget does build on those reforms in building the Education State. We will continue to make sure we have a multiyear reform agenda.

I will often say, and it is often known as a minister, it is easy to announce something, implementation is always the hard bit. And when you look at what we did with the reading position, then you look at the \$5 million investment we made for decodable textbooks, mini whiteboards, the work on the lesson plans, the VTLM 2.0, this will continue to see achievement and literacy improve. As Noel Pearson himself recently said, it really all begins in education with literacy and reading; it unlocks all the other parts of the curriculum. So I am really proud of that. The Phonics Plus lesson plans have got a lot of traction. The phonics check that we are doing, Mr Galea, you may be aware it used to be a little survey that occurred at our primary school levels. We are lessening the workload too, it should be reminded, for teachers by making sure all students are uplifted. It has a real benefit for teachers and their workload, and giving them – putting in their hands – the best practice is just sensational. So we will continue to make sure – whether it is the lesson plans, the maths ambassadors, the Koori

literacy and numeracy programs, building on our success in NAPLAN – that excellence is at the heart of everything we do in the Education State.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. And just on explicit instruction, you did touch on that there, specifically in relation to phonics, Mr Puglielli and I were both on the education inquiry about a year ago, and that was around the time we were hearing evidence about how important phonics is. And then – not that we knew at the time – shortly after, you made the very significant announcement of implementation of phonics statewide. Can you talk to me about how the investments in this budget will be supporting the rollout of phonics?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Galea. Look, we are putting phonics at the heart of how we do teach our children to read, and getting the teaching of reading right matters. There are some teachers that are very close by at the moment, former teachers, and if you cannot learn to read, you cannot read to learn, full stop. So getting that right is fundamental, and it is the foundation on which we build knowledge. So the mandating of systematic synthetic phonics has been really important. The structured synthetic phonics suite of reform, of investments – I touched on the decodable textbooks before, the instructional guides, the mini whiteboards, the lesson plans – are all designed to ensure all students get the strong foundation of reading skills right. All the evidence shows that kids that learn by the phonics method are two to three years ahead of their peers, and as a former youth justice minister I will often comment that I would see kids that had not been taught to read and see that trajectory in their life – their lack of self-esteem, their lack of learning capability – so getting this right will pay dividends for generations to come.

I am very proud of some of the schools I have got to see that are doing this outstanding work – you know, Reservoir Primary School, Morwell Park. These teachers are reporting, already, high degrees of confidence in their early readers and early learners. And at the Government Schools Principals Conference yesterday it came up again: ‘Thank you for the clear direction and the mandate.’ You know, it is often said that the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, and the second-best time is today. This is a really strong foundation for our young people going forward. I am really proud of it, and it follows really hard work by the department. As I said at the outset, as minister announcing something in some parts can sometimes be the easy bit. The hard bit is the implementation and continuing to follow through. That is what we are doing almost 12 months on from when we mandated the new reading position. That is what we will continue to do, Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. In a similar vein, you made a more recent announcement, on mathematics education. I can see, if my maths is correct, \$46.5 million over the forward estimates – it is not the sort of figure I want to get wrong. \$46.5 million over the forward estimates is a significant investment again in this area. Can you talk to me a bit more about maths education?

**Ben CARROLL:** After we announced the new reading position, most stakeholders – teachers, parents were saying, ‘Well, when are you are doing maths? Maths has got to be next around explicit instruction.’ That is what we have done just recently, and it was great to be with the Premier to make that announcement. We have to sometimes change the mindset. Often young people will just automatically say, ‘Oh, you’re not good at maths.’ I can tell my own experience: I was not good at maths, but I seemed to be pretty good at accounting. The harder you work, the luckier you are and the more diligent you are.

Essentially maths is for everybody. We want to encourage maths, we want to encourage STEM. That is what this big investment in mathematics is about. Often it has been overlooked, but it is critical to success. The amount of young kids I meet that want to go off into space one day and all of that – they are going to need to know mathematics plus science plus engineering as well. Getting it right in those foundational years will set them up for university and beyond. We are really making sure, Mr Galea, that this budget builds on those great reforms, that it provides the lesson plans, that it is also doing those mathematics camps. The Premier and I met some mathematics ambassadors recently. We are putting a really big emphasis on mathematics, because we just know it should be for everyone.

Updating the curriculum around mathematics, supported by helping teachers better meet diverse learning needs, is really important too. The international assessment, the PISA results, show that we need to continue to work very hard on improving our mathematics response and making sure it is a really key part of the curriculum. I am really proud of this, and I think it will be really good through our structured explicit instruction around mathematics.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Your presentation touched on NAPLAN results as well; for example, for year 3 we can see that in terms of reading and numeracy our students are at the head of the nation. Can you talk to me a little bit specifically about the explicit instruction – the phonics with maths – how this explicit instruction is going to support improvement of those results as well and how those things come together?

**Ben CARROLL:** What showed recently with the recent NAPLAN results was Victorian student participation in 2024 was the highest since NAPLAN was introduced in 2008. So while we are laying the trajectory, and it sort of goes to my opening remarks, the National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy is Australia-wide. But I think as the Education State we need to have higher ambition and make sure we are focused on those PISA results as well – how do we go internationally? On some of those benchmarks we do go quite well, but there is also room for improvement.

What we will see is the consistent delivery of explicit evidence-based instruction. The VTLM 2.0 and targeted interventions across the system I think will hurt nobody but uplift everybody. That should see really good results coming through. You may have seen recent commentary from Noel Pearson and Dr Ben Jensen – education experts. They have both said that education ministers, not just here in Victoria but indeed around Australia, that are focusing on explicit instruction, making sure that the work going on in our universities on supporting teachers to learn the best professional ways to teach, is going to have enormous benefits right throughout education systems. I am really proud of that. I think our target investment in areas of need is really important: making sure that our middle years are continuing to invest in interventions, but also too providing that really important feedback.

Often explicit instruction is looked upon as being sort of very clear-cut. It is actually a very sophisticated measure of how you teach students: how you sometimes break away – different students need additional support – but then, too, how you embed feedback and positive support for students that need that little bit of help. So it is evidence-based, it is world's best practice. I am really intent on the refreshed VTLM 2.0 – of making sure that we continue to do that, Michael Galea, right through our education system. I think it is a really important move, and I think it would be fair to say it generally has bipartisan support as well.

**Michael GALEA:** Indeed, which is very, very good. You touched on a few things already in terms of equity and how important it is for all students to have that opportunity – as you say, whether they want to be the next astronauts, or as we have one of the world's largest medical research hubs in this state as well, so whether it is those sorts of fields they want to go into. The Victorian High-Ability program supports a number of high-performing students, and there is further support for this in the budget. How will this investment support those students who are already high achievers to be the best that they can be?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Galea. Some years back we established the high-ability student excellence program with an initial \$60 million investment. This is really making sure that those students that demonstrate their high ability, whether it is at Victorian primary schools or indeed at Victorian secondary schools, are literally supported to thrive.

**Nick McGOWAN:** But only for one year, Minister.

**Ben CARROLL:** No, no.

**Nick McGOWAN:** There is still an issue.

**Ben CARROLL:** We have been funding this for five years.

**Nick McGOWAN:** No, the program is only available for one year.

**Ben CARROLL:** Past practice is a good indicator of future practice.

**Nick McGOWAN:** No, you can only do it for one year. You can only do it for about five or six, not both.

**Michael GALEA:** It is my time, thank you, Mr McGowan.

**Ben CARROLL:** We have been funding something for five years, and the previous government did not fund. That is why we have now invested a total of \$155.4 million in this program –



**Nick McGOWAN:** You misunderstand what I said, Minister.

**Ben CARROLL:** including \$24.6 million in this. This will support our high-ability practices, and it will make sure we continue to see student excellence rolled out across. I am really proud: I was with our Victorian teaching and leadership academy yesterday. More and more now we are seeing – Mr Galea, you mentioned our world-class medical research precinct – particularly young women with high ability in the area of STEM come through primary and secondary, go on to La Trobe University or Victoria University or indeed RMIT and then go on and be in demand overseas. We want to keep their talent here in Melbourne, Victoria. This makes sure that those high-ability practice leaders that are talented are essentially reaching for the stars, and we want to support them to do that. It builds on our work remodelling the VTLM 2.0, ensuring that we do have an evidence base in every classroom. I have always been big on ‘diligence trumps intelligence’, but there are very much gifted students out there that have natural abilities. They should be supported to thrive and be ambassadors for the Education State, to one day be either a principal or a maths teacher themselves, or indeed an education minister. We should see them thrive and continue to make sure that they are beacons and ambassadors for the Education State.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Galea. The committee is going to take a very short break before resuming its consideration of this portfolio. I declare this hearing adjourned.

The committee will now resume its consideration of the Department of Education. We are going to go straight to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, going back to the questions around the VCE debacle, can you confirm that, as was reported in the *Herald Sun* on 1 May, you were made aware of the scale of the error by the VCAA on 13 November?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Ms Benham. You would have to go back to a previous press conference, but I answered a range of questions and I have been very transparent on these matters. Indeed I could point you to all of my transcripts, which show when I was briefed and when I took decisive action. It is all there on the public record.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay, so considering it was 13 May, why then did the minister’s office sign off on a misleading statement from the then CEO Kylie White on the same day, a statement that significantly played down the extent of the exam breach and inaccurately described the material that had been leaked?

**Ben CARROLL:** Ms Benham, all of these questions have been raised and answered in detail, and I just refer you to all of the publicly available transcripts. I am now getting on and focusing on the 2025 examinations, working very closely with Margaret Crawford, who is the independent monitor, and working very closely with Dr Yehudi Blacher, having accepted his eight recommendations – getting on with it. Andrew Smith has started this week as the new chief executive officer. I have spoken with him, and I congratulated him on that appointment. We are leaving no stone unturned to make sure our VCE and our students have all the robust systems in place for when they undertake their exams.

**Jade BENHAM:** The reason for this questioning, though, Minister, is that it is not possible to see the cost implications of the errors that this debacle has caused in the budget papers. The public deserve to know how much these errors are going to cost and how much that cost has increased since 2022–23. There have been three consecutive years of errors now. What are the cost implications to the department’s budget?

**Ben CARROLL:** Ms Benham, there has been a root-and-branch review of the VCAA. We have been incredibly transparent. I have fronted up to every press conference. Mr Blacher’s report is publicly available; I have read it, and I urge everyone to read it. We have since reconstituted the board of the VCAA. We have a new skills matrix on the board with all the relevant expertise but also, I should say, representation from the government sector, the Catholic education sector with Elizabeth Labone and Independent Schools Victoria with Ms Holthouse. We have accepted all of Dr Blacher’s eight recommendations, and Andrew Smith started on Monday as the new chief executive officer, picking up the significant work that Dr David Howes did while he was down there. While we are on this subject, I might see if Dr Howes wants to add to my comments on the

VCAA, given he has worked very directly down there, relevantly, and has been doing a lot of the work leading up to the 2025 exams.

**David HOWES:** Thanks, Minister and the committee. Just to add to the minister's comments, it is true to say the VCAA staff are acutely aware of the impact of what has happened in the past and are working as hard as is humanly possible to ensure that those errors are addressed and that the recommendations of the reports are implemented, and it is of enormous benefit to have the oversight of Margaret Crawford assisting with that work.

**Jade BENHAM:** So returning to the question, which was a figure: do we have a figure? Do we know what the cost of these reviews are, or again are we refusing to answer that question?

**David HOWES:** I think the Secretary indicated we would take that on notice.

**Jade BENHAM:** You will take that on notice? Can you confirm that, please?

**Tony BATES:** Yes, we will take that on notice.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you very much. Going back to Gonski, and this one is directed to the Secretary: as part of your work to support the minister's negotiating position, I am sure you have modelled a number of different funding scenarios, so what is the difference in funding per student if the state reaches its 75 per cent target in 2028, 2029, 2030 or 2031?

**Tony BATES:** Again, Ms Benham, we have modelled – like, I have modelled so many scenarios, right, and particularly as we have been speaking with Commonwealth officials to support the minister's negotiations, but I do not have that at hand. I think, as I said earlier, I probably cannot go into the details of advice I am giving in relation to cabinet consideration matters, but each 1 per cent of SRS for Victorian government schools is worth about \$145 million. So if you do 5 per cent, then that is around about 925. I need to check my math, but yes.

**Jade BENHAM:** If we are talking about meeting the original goals and the work that is being done now, where exactly is it at? Where are we at at the moment?

**Tony BATES:** In terms of what is the current –

**Jade BENHAM:** There has been \$2.4 billion, if we will not say cut, being delayed until 2031 and reaching that target of 75 per cent that was supposed to be reached in 2028. There has been lots of dancing around the questions rather than answering them today and denying cuts. There are plans for the AEU Victorian branch – they have written to teachers calling on them to attend a protest, so it is clear that there are cuts being made. So I am just trying to reframe these questions to get an answer out of where we are at at the moment and have negotiations been had or who has decided to delay meeting the 75 per cent target until 2031.

**Tony BATES:** I am not entirely sure on the question, but what I can say, if it is helpful, is I can share the yet-to-be-finalised audit. But the total SRS funding or the SRS funding that we put into government schools last year across the system, as the minister said, including system supports like we do – we buy a couple hundred million dollars worth of IT services on behalf of schools; it is just more efficient and sensible for us to do it that way – so the total investment into the government school system last year was \$12.647 billion, and that number is still subject to audit processes. If we go back to 2023, the total investment was \$11.63 billion. We have grown a billion dollars in the last year, and that is 2023–24. We are continuing to grow very strongly. I will just say that the SRS funding model is a very complicated model, and it is very hard to discuss in simple terms.

**Jade BENHAM:** That is okay. When you mentioned you had done various different modelling scenarios, are you able to provide the committee with those?

**Tony BATES:** No, I do not think I can, because the advice I have provided to the minister is to support cabinet considerations.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Do you want to go to some capex questions?

**Richard WELCH:** I have got a further question. Clearly there is foregone revenue. If you are delaying it, you are forgoing revenue. A number of projects, particularly capital projects and other projects, have long lead

times, so clearly the delay has a material impact. I can ask you this, Minister: what will be the impact of the delay?

**Ben CARROLL:** You are probably aware, Mr Welch, that capital is separate to the student resource standard. David Gonski came up with his formula, with key factors around postcode, parental income and Indigenous and non-English speaking backgrounds. As the Secretary said, it is quite a complicated formula to get to sector-blind, needs-based funding, separate to the student resource standard. We have long advocated – indeed I am not the only minister around Australia who would like capital included. I can show you reports from the World Bank – everybody – that show that the learning environment and the state of buildings have a direct impact on student health and wellbeing and student outcomes. So we have long advocated for capital to be included. It is not included –

**Richard WELCH:** Is that one of the impacts of this delay, that we will have less capital works?

**Ben CARROLL:** No, we have –

**Richard WELCH:** The question was: what are the impacts of the delay?

**Ben CARROLL:** Well, we have we have increased our funding by 34 per cent, so –

**Richard WELCH:** Excuse me, Minister, you are not seriously arguing that there is no impact. You are saying we are better off. Is your argument that we are better off with the delay?

**Ben CARROLL:** We are the majority funder of our government school system. The Commonwealth is the majority funder of the non-government school system. We are significantly better off with the Commonwealth increasing their share of funding to public school kids from 20 per cent to 25 per cent. We negotiated an extra \$2.5 billion from the Commonwealth, when originally their proposal was half that, 2.5 per cent – \$1.25 billion. So we are significantly better off over the life of this agreement. I will now, as I am negotiating with Minister Clare, sign the bilateral agreement, which will ensure that, based on our NAPLAN results, the supports that we are getting for our students and staff will continue to drive really important reform and really important outcomes in our education system.

**Richard WELCH:** I think that is Kafkaesque. I mean, there is \$2.4 billion of foregone revenue, and you are all standing there straight-faced, saying, ‘There’s no impact. We’re actually better off.’ Seriously?

**Ben CARROLL:** No. What we are saying is that, right across Australia, you only have to look at all the data. We have increased our recurrent funding for our public school students by 34 per cent.

**Richard WELCH:** And you have foregone \$2.4 billion.

**Ben CARROLL:** I have signed a heads of agreement, and now I am negotiating for a bilateral agreement, which will –

**Richard WELCH:** Now you are negotiating. Will that agreement get to 75 per cent in 2028?

**Ben CARROLL:** The bilateral agreement will show our full trajectories. We are focused, and yes, we will get to full and fair funding.

**Richard WELCH:** So will you get to 75 per cent by 2028 or not?

**Ben CARROLL:** I think we are above 70 per cent now. Yes, I will sign the bilateral agreement, and I look forward to continuing the negotiations with Minister Clare.

**Richard WELCH:** So you are refusing to answer that question?

**Ben CARROLL:** No. I have said it will be in the bilateral agreement, but I am not negotiating the bilateral agreement, Mr Welch, through the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, particularly when I have scheduled meetings upcoming with the federal minister to discuss this.

**Richard WELCH:** Well, if we are going to deal in semantics, is it your aim that we will get to 75 per cent by 2028?

**Ben CARROLL:** I want to get to 75 per cent as soon as possible. That is my aim. I want to support all of our public school students. I would not have gone and joined the protest up on the lawns of federal Parliament against the federal Labor government if I was not committed to our public school kids.

**Richard WELCH:** We can all be performative.

**Ben CARROLL:** Indeed I went on radio and called on the Prime Minister to increase the offer from 2.5 per cent to 5 per cent.

**Richard WELCH:** I have no doubt in your ability to talk the talk.

**Ben CARROLL:** It was a great moment for the Premier and me to be with Prime Minister Albanese and federal minister Jason Clare. This was hard fought. Remember other states signed up to 2.5 per cent, and we said, 'No. We're holding out.' We did hold out and we got 5 per cent.

**Richard WELCH:** And now we have got \$2.4 billion less.

**Ben CARROLL:** That is now the heads of agreement at 5 per cent, 75–25, and now we will continue to negotiate the bilateral agreement, which I am confident will be a positive outcome for our public school kids, our Education State, our public school teachers and parents.

**Richard WELCH:** Okay. Minister, I will take you to budget paper 4, page 11, regarding projects. According to the VSBA website, all but one of these 25 projects listed there have not progressed beyond planning or design phase to construction. Given this means there has been largely no progress since the 2024–25 budget, does the government guarantee their completion schedules will be met and delivered before the end of this term?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Welch. Your time is up. We are going to go straight to Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair, Deputy Premier, Secretary and officials. Capital investment in Victorian schools is my interest in my part. Deputy Premier, in your presentation you talked about the investment into our schools. No matter where students come from, whichever postcode, they will have access to a great school. I refer to budget paper 3 on page 24, on table 1.8. Deputy Premier, how are these asset initiatives addressing enrolment demand in our growth suburbs?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Tak, for that question. It is a very good question that goes to growth suburbs, population growth, and we do know that our schools across our growth corridors are experiencing demand, and that is why this investment will actually relieve demand pressure. Having said that, you have got the current investments underway, but you have also got what we are doing through land acquisition and planning for the future. I said that the previous government did not do the work that was required, so we could not open up any new schools in 2016. We are about to open up 100 new schools in 2026.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Are you attacking Bracks and Brumby?

**Ben CARROLL:** This budget includes \$237.4 million for strategic land purchases, and you will see in our budget papers land purchases, Mr Tak, to your very question about growth areas in Casey, Darebin, Melton and Melbourne. Having said that, though, we also know the inner city is not immune, and while they are landlocked – we are having to build vertical schools, and we have done a few of those – we are purchasing land for secondary schools to service the Arden precinct, where we know, with the opening of the Metro Tunnel, more and more people want to live in the Arden precinct. As a North Melbourne supporter, I hope they join the North Melbourne Football Club too. But we know the inner city will have thousands and thousands of more residents living there. So we have got \$1 million in the Precincts and Activity Centres Planning Fund to support long-term planning to create vibrant, connected communities. These initiatives just do demonstrate, though – and we have got Ms Wandel here from the Victorian School Building Authority – our comprehensive, proactive approach to ensure Victoria continues to lead the nation, and we are doing everything we can. I might even ask, Ms Wandel, did you want to supplement any of my comments on the work that the VSBA is doing in the growth corridors?

**Joanne WANDEL:** Yes, thank you, Deputy Premier, and thank you for the question. The 2025–26 budget includes \$237 million to acquire land for future new schools and campuses. As we know, this investment will

support future secondary school provision for students in the Arden precinct. That funding will support students from Docklands, North Melbourne, Parkville and the broader Arden precinct as it develops. The department is also continuing to progress planning for additional school infrastructure in the inner-city area. So, thank you, Deputy Premier.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you. Deputy Premier, on budget paper 3, page 27, it states that the school upgrades in this budget deliver on the government's election commitments, delivering great local schools as published in Labor's financial statement in 2022. Deputy Premier, can you elaborate on this and the progress that it has made so far?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Tak. We have committed publicly and we are working very hard to delivering on that, our 100 new schools, and it will be an incredible milestone for our state government opening up 100 new schools. Going back to when free education was introduced in the 1870s, what a milestone it will be for a state that has Education State on its numberplates.

I am proud to say in this budget we have funded all of our commitments we made to Victorian families, students, schools and staff. This includes \$850 million to fund upgrades at 96 existing schools that we committed to; 29 of these schools will receive funding in this year's budget for upgrades and modernisation, 25 of these schools received funding in last year's budget and 42 schools were funded in the previous budget before that, in 2023–24. This means that 96 school upgrades have now been funded for construction as part of our election commitments. These commitments were aptly titled 'Delivering great local schools', and we are just doing that. Whether it be Broadford in Euroa, a really important investment; Gardenvale Primary School in Brighton; or Mordialloc College, where I was out with Mr Richardson recently, or with Mr Berger recently at Hampton Primary School in Brighton, we are making sure that all of our schools get the funding they deserve. I am really proud of that work. I know it will continue to transform these local schools that are at the heart of communities. This is about making sure, again no matter the postcode, everyone has good access to a great local school in the heart of their community.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. On increasing shared use by community of school facilities, page 20 of budget paper 3 states that funding is provided to increase community use of school facilities. Can you explain the support the government will be providing to schools and how this will benefit the broader community, such as my electorate?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thanks, Mr Tak. I know you are probably not meant to have a favourite budget item, but this is one of my favourites. It has not had a lot of the publicity that it deserves, but when you consider the record investment in school infrastructure – and Mr Hilakari and I have had several conversations –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** He stole my question. I cannot believe it. I was waiting to ask precisely this.

**Ben CARROLL:** We have had several conversations on this. I meet with experts from around the world, most recently the UK. Our schools are really important hubs for learning, but they are the central hubs in their community, and we need to, following our investment, be opening them up more widely for community use – basketball courts, libraries, the art centres and the auditoriums. In this budget we have an investment where we are going to pilot with some 41 recently opened schools, predominantly in Melbourne's west, where as a department we are going to reach out and support them to open up, to take a fair bit of that admin responsibility away from the business managers and the school principals. How can we support them to assist this, to get our schools opening up for community use?

I just think it is the morally right thing to do; it is the right thing to do more broadly. We know, through a population boom, basketball courts, football ovals, soccer pitches – we have done a record investment in our school infrastructure, but it is paid for by the taxpayers. It is community infrastructure, and we want to make sure that we do everything we can to make sure that we broker the community use agreements and the licence and hire agreements. We will have a dispute resolution process in place. We are doing everything we can to make sure we can build strong community connectedness by making sure that we have our schools open for community use, and we are really committed to it.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. I will just see if Mr Hilakari has a supplementary.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** No. I am just so excited about this, and particularly in Melbourne's west. Mr McGowan would know, because he has got a great advocacy for Ringwood and a basketball stadium there, that if we can open up these basketball facilities, these libraries –

**Nick McGOWAN:** I want more facilities.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** For once we are on the same page, me and Mr McGowan. It is wonderful to see.

**Ben CARROLL:** That is exactly right. And one of the things – and you would appreciate it, Mr McGowan – is that because we actually fund planning first, we can now get on and move quickly to our builds, and that is what it is about. I want to commend Ms Wandel and the team at the Victorian School Building Authority for the work they do. I am amazed: I will often go out and do a sod turning and be back there 18 months later, opening up the new school. I am really committed. It is wonderful, and we have got much more work to do, Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. Moving on to budget paper 4, on page 46, under 'New schools construction 2024–25', it states that the 2026 new schools are on track for a day one, term 1 opening. Can you provide an update on these projects?

**Ben CARROLL:** I can, Mr Tak. Quite amazingly, we have got 19 brand new school principals starting next year at our 19 new schools. I met the principals just recently. We had a wonderful function. They are excited and raring to go. I want to give a shout-out. We did the acknowledgement of country earlier today, but the work of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, in particular Lionel Bamblett, and the work that goes on with our Indigenous leaders in Victoria for the opening of the new schools should make us all proud. The naming and the welcome to country is done by Indigenous leaders on the day, and the young students learn about the background to the school, the first educators, the teachers that were on their land and then the medicinal purposes of gum leaves and all these things.

I cannot wait. I will be looking for some support. It is going to be hard for me as the minister to get to 19 schools, so I think it will be me, the Premier and the parliamentary secretary – all hands on deck – for what will be the opening of 19 new schools next year, really capping off that momentous commitment to make 100 new schools. I am very excited by it, Mr Tak. All the work has been done, and the funding is in the budget. Ms Wandel, do you want to just supplement my comments at all on that?

**Joanne WANDEL:** Yes. Thank you, Deputy Premier. It is certainly a very exciting year for us at the Victorian School Building Authority, fully acquitting the government's commitment to build 100 new schools in a little over a decade. We are very pleased to report, Deputy Premier, as you well know, that all of those schools are on track for a day one, term 1 2026 opening.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. There are the new school builds, and now we would like to take your attention to school maintenance. Can you please explain how this budget supports school communities to maintain their schools?

**Ben CARROLL:** That is exactly right, Mr Tak. Often the headline is around the 100 brand new schools, but since we came to office 2300 school upgrades have transformed these learning environments into 21st century places of excellence. I will often say, for our school students, if you want to inspire them on the relevance and importance of learning, a big reflection on that is the school building that they are learning in – the library, the STEM centre – and what the parents see when they come through the school gates. Thanks to our Labor government we have seen 2300 school upgrades, with many more school upgrades funded in this budget, which will be literally transformational for these school communities and for these schools. Again, it will see that we have an investment that is not just about building new schools as a Labor government but about maintaining and upgrading new schools, and we are very committed to that.

The 2025–26 budget builds on our record investment – \$1.5 billion invested. It is really important, our \$771 million investment in capital funding to accommodate enrolment growth. We are talking about areas like Aintree, Tarneit, Truganina, Werribee and South Melbourne – as I said before, places where we know there is incredible, important growth. I meet with the parents out in these communities, and to be frank, their kids' education is everything to them. They want their children to have, often, what they did not have or to go on and

just be whatever they want in life. They are so proud of the work our Labor government is doing on capital and then what it is doing inside the classroom as well with the Victorian teaching and learning model.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you.

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

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Minister, I will start with your role in overseeing the department in its regulatory authority capacity when it comes to child care. Genius Childcare is now in the hands of administrators. It ran seven centres in Melbourne. One in Altona has already closed, and the fate of the rest is still up in the air as administrators try to sell them. Minister, why was Genius and its owner, Darren Misquitta, allowed to continue trading amid widespread complaints that staff were not getting paid and legal action by the company's creditors over millions of dollars?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thanks, Mr Puglielli. I am going to ask Mr Bates to supplement my answer, but can I just say at the outset that when it comes to the Education State – and the minister for early childhood knows this as well – the science shows us that 90 per cent of a child's brain is developed before prep. So we have a major, major rollout – and I know you will talk about this with the relevant minister – of free kinder. Having said that, though, when they get to primary and secondary it is my focus and post compulsory education is Minister Tierney's focus. But in relation to the specifics around your question, I might, if that is okay, ask the Acting Secretary if he could provide some comment.

**Tony BATES:** Mr Puglielli, I think these are really questions for the Minister for Children. I have got my briefing folder for her, which has a whole lot of stuff about Genius in it, so I do not have that material with me today, but I will just say there are limits in terms of what we can do under the national law. A lot of the regulation for long day care services in terms of the questions you are asking sit with the Commonwealth. But we are really alive to if an operator is in distress, then there is an increasing chance that they are not doing what they should be in terms of child safety and food and support, and so we really do up our inspection tempo on those organisations. The department does have limits in terms of what it can do in terms of financial viability. But again, I think they are questions for the Minister for Children.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. And you mentioned briefing materials, so when I raise this at the next opportunity you will have those to hand?

**Tony BATES:** Yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Wonderful. Thank you. Can I ask why the department's webpage listing enforcement action in child care has not been updated since the end of 2024? Has there really been no enforcement action in the past five months?

**Tony BATES:** There has been enforcement action, but again, I do not have those materials with me at the moment.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Can I ask: APRA and ASIC publish the full enforceable undertakings that they enter into with their regulated populations. Why doesn't the department?

**Tony BATES:** Again, in relation to the early childhood regulator, I will probably answer those ones next week.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Sure. Thank you. Moving on – and we touched on this, I think, earlier – the budget outlines \$237 million to acquire land for future new schools and new campuses of existing schools in various municipalities, one of which being Melbourne. Can I just get a confirmation of how much of that \$237 million is allocated to purchase land in Melbourne?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thank you, Mr Puglielli. We are very conscious of enrolment growth in the inner city, as we are with suburban Melbourne. But I might ask Ms Wandel if she can supplement that.

**Joanne WANDEL:** Yes. Thanks, Deputy Premier. Thank you for your question. \$237 million is available for new land acquisitions. That funding is to be allocated across Melbourne, Darebin, Casey and one other area, which I can come back to. But what I will say is that actually articulating the individual funding that is available

for particular areas erodes our competitive advantage when we go to purchase those sites, so we do not actually make that specifically available, as you can appreciate.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** But we can expect potentially that it would be used to purchase land in Melbourne?

**Joanne WANDEL:** Yes, you can.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Can I ask: would that land be used to build a new primary school or a new secondary school or to develop an additional campus for an existing school?

**Joanne WANDEL:** Through you, Deputy Premier, in the budget papers I think you can see that it is allocated towards a new secondary school within the Melbourne local area. And as I articulated earlier, that is to give consideration to the growth that is obviously occurring in the Parkville, Arden and inner Melbourne areas.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Can I ask what the anticipated capacity would be of that new high school?

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

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. That would be great. I ask because Arden is expected to be home to 30,000 people. Really, are one primary school and one high school enough for 30,000 people, is the question. But if you can take that on notice that would be great. Is there any timeline for expected acquisition of land in Melbourne?

**Ben CARROLL:** Mr Puglielli, we are conscious of Metro Tunnel opening at the end of this year. For the Arden precinct, we are very conscious that it will be home to thousands of additional inner-city residents. To then cater for that growth, we will build a new secondary school to service the Arden precinct. We have had the funding confirmed, as Ms Wandel said, with \$237 million received for the department to go towards our land acquisitions. We will continue to work, and we work very closely, I should say, with South Melbourne Primary and South Melbourne Park Primary, whose principal I saw yesterday. With all of our inner-city schools we work very collaboratively. You would be aware that Docklands is a very high performing school around explicit instruction and literacy, and there is North Melbourne Primary School. We will continue to work with all those schools on a regional basis to make sure of the planning. I have also met with Ms Shing, who is the precincts minister, and advocated very strongly for the education needs in the Arden precinct.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Just to follow on from my previous questions on land acquisition, can I get a confirmation that there is no money allocated in this budget to acquire land for a second campus for University High School in Parkville?

**Ben CARROLL:** I am constantly working with, and I have met with, different members of University High as well. We are constantly focused on our enrolment growth in the inner city. The money we have – I think it was \$237.4 million in funding – is around the inner city, but we will continue to work with schools, all schools for that matter, on their future needs. You would be aware that we have made some accommodation and support requests for University High more recently. The VSBA and the department worked very hard on that to get a positive outcome, and we will continue to work with all schools in the inner city to support their needs.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I might move on to quite a specific matter: Spensley Street Primary School in Clifton Hill. The toilets at this school, I am told, are in desperate need of renovation. Parents describe them as old, smelly and now functionally impossible to clean properly. Parents at this school have donated and fundraised reportedly over \$1 million for basic maintenance at this public school, including regularly fixing these toilets. I think we can expect these facilities should be safe and appropriate for students. Is the department aware of these issues, and is there a plan to fix them?

**Ben CARROLL:** I could probably answer that, and I might ask Ms Wandel if she wants to supplement my answer. But we are aware, and you may be aware, Mr Puglielli, as your colleague asked me this question in Parliament just a week or two ago. We have given funding to Spensley Primary School in previous years – about half a million dollars. This budget does put a lot of funding and a lot of support through our Capital Works Fund for toilets and upgrades. I concur with you that hygiene and toilets do need to be the best they can be for a range of health and safety reasons. We will have more funding available for schools like Spensley



Street to apply for later in this year. To go to your specifics around that school, I might ask Ms Wandel if she has had any further conversations concerning the school. But we are mindful of it, and I got a question in Parliament on it only a week or so ago.

**Joanne WANDEL:** Thank you, Deputy Premier. No further conversations have occurred specifically in recent times with the school. But what I can say, just to elaborate on the Deputy Premier's comments, is that there is \$25 million in the budget for the Capital Works Fund, so the school can work with the region and the Victorian School Building Authority to submit an application to that Capital Works Fund for exactly things like toilet repairs and upgrades. Obviously, safe, hygienic, clean toilets are of critical importance. There are also a range of other routine maintenance options that the school can look to. We have a make-safe program, should they have a requirement for urgent repairs, and an emergency management program as well, so we are very happy to work with the school and the region to consider a range of maintenance program options for them.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Just on to another matter, I have heard from a number of public school staff that while they very much welcome and support disability and neurodivergence support measures like student support groups and individual education plans, some teachers are saying they are not adequately resourced to ensure that these initiatives are working well for students. And I understand in many cases these students are not funded under the disability inclusion model of school funding for additional needs. Has the department provided briefings to government on reviewing the numbers and the complexity of SSGs in public schools to feed into equity funding formula processes?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thanks, Mr Puglielli. I might ask the Acting Secretary to answer that, because he also wants to come back to an earlier question around funding as well. Is that okay, Acting Secretary, if I just get you to answer that?

**Tony BATES:** Yes. Thanks, Minister. Just quickly, Mr Welch, I have just checked. As I mentioned, there are statutory secrecy provisions around taxation collection, so if the committee wants to know about the payroll tax, they will need to ask the Treasurer.

**Richard WELCH:** Yes. And I would be very happy if you could do so. That would be great. Thank you.

**Tony BATES:** So just to the question, I will just mention that this budget does have the very significant investment of around \$320 million over the next four years to complete the statewide rollout of disability inclusion funding. We have a number of different tiers of funding, so I might just ask Mr Fraser to talk about tier 2 funding. There is an amount of funding that goes into every school that provides capacity to do extra supports for the children that are not on individual funding plans, but also this budget means that we do complete the statewide rollout of the individual plans for those really complex-needs students. But I might just ask Mr Fraser to talk a little bit about those supports.

**Stephen FRASER:** Thanks, Acting Secretary. It is important to recognise where Victoria is in the implementation of disability inclusion. Five years ago now the Victorian government invested in disability inclusion with an initial \$1.6 billion. As the Acting Secretary said, that investment has been topped up in the most recent budget with an additional \$320 million. That is to support the schools in the fifth year of implementation. So we are now in a position where we can say that every government school in the state has been supported to implement disability inclusion. As you say, that involves intensive support for students with high and complex needs, which involves not a student support group but a disability inclusion profile meeting, which involves the young person – the student – their family, the carers and everyone involved in supporting the educational outcomes of that student. It is a very intensive piece of work. It involves 10 weeks of adjustments being put in place to ensure that we are diligently taking account of the cost of those adjustments to support that young person's education. So it is an intensive process, but we think it is absolutely worth the investment to ensure that we have got not only those adjustments in place but the funding in place to support those adjustments. That then flows through as individualised funding at what we call the tier 3 level. Tier 3 is individualised support.

We also have tier 2 support that the Acting Secretary mentioned, which is new funding under disability inclusion, which allows the school to make adjustments that are not covered by that individualised funding. All of that is part of what is known as a multitiered system of support for students, which is really strongly evidence based. The Australian Education Research Organisation talks in depth about the evidence base behind MTSS

models, and disability inclusion follows that model, just as our VTLM does, in supporting not only best practice universal classroom teaching and learning but that tier 2 small group work and then tier 3 individualised one-on-one support for those students that need it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Fraser. We are going to go straight to Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Minister. And thank you, officials, for your attendance this morning. I think there have been lots of great insights that we have picked up already. I am hoping to take us to the workforce. You know, great schools have great teachers and start with great leaders. The most important thing, I think, in schools is the workforce, the teachers – even more important than the buildings, you would not believe. I know you would, actually. I will take us to budget paper 3, pages 16 and 22. I am just hoping we can talk about some of those pieces in the budget that speak to how we are supporting our teacher profession, particularly because we know it has been raised before – challenges around shortages across the nation.

**Ben CARROLL:** Thanks, Mr Hilakari, and I concur: our teachers do the most important role in the community, investing in that future resource. I reflect that often teachers do not get the ability to work from home. They do spend their time during the school holiday period preparing lesson plans and thinking of their students. They do an incredible, difficult job, and as a government we are there to support them. We essentially have a five-pronged strategy when it comes to supporting our teachers. First and foremost, we want to attract them – attract people going into the profession. That goes a long way to the investments we are making, and I must say we are seeing more and more people come into initial teacher education, significantly, in Victoria. It is now starting to creep around Australia, which is good, but that has not been by accident. That has been from investments like free teaching degrees, the Victorian teaching and learning module and really putting an emphasis on education and its importance as a government. So there is the attraction, there is the recruitment.

We want to support our early teachers, because often it is a very difficult job when you come in to teach, so mentor programs, linking them all up with the Victorian teaching and learning academy, because it is one of a kind in Australia. Marcia Devlin, who heads it up, just does excellent work promoting teachers, offering micro-credentialling, master's courses – all of those things. Attraction, recruitment, support, retention and career development – it is an approach that is providing dividends, so we have got more money to make sure that we continue to have a positive investment with our teacher workforce. It is incredible that there are now 12,000 more teachers registered in Victoria in 2024 compared to 2020. Our government teaching, full-service, full-time workforce is still predicted to grow. With Mr Tak's questions, we spoke about the growth, the 19 new schools. We are going to want to fill them up with schoolteachers, so we will continue to invest in them, continue to make sure our student-to-teacher ratios are the best in the nation and continue to make sure that we shape future lives and that our teaching workforce feels supported.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I am keen to hear any further detail that you have on some of these programs before I then move – and you would probably expect this is where I am going to move next – to workload of teachers, and principals as well. But I am keen to hear if you have got any more detail on how those programs work and how they engage teachers into the workforce.

**Ben CARROLL:** Thanks, Mr Hilakari. We have got a range of programs and initiatives that we support. One of the most commonly well-known ones is the Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow program. It has seen an additional investment of \$10.6 million to really support paid placements and also support programs to really support our teachers. The initial teacher education is really important support, and I work very closely with Minister Clare on making sure all of our schools of education across our universities are applying best knowledge, the latest evidence and what is world's best practice for teaching in the classroom. Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow – the \$29 million for that will see some 1200 more places in that program going forward. We are really proud of that.

Our pre-service teaching placement grants initiative has supported more than 6000 placements in rural, regional and specialist schools. Rural, regional and specialist schools have often been the most difficult areas to staff. That is why our pre-service teacher placements grants initiative that we have had for some years has seen targeted investments to support those people – it might be relocation expenses, cost-of-living expenses. It has been a real change, and it is not by accident that we have been able to recruit so many teachers through our financial incentives. I should say, too, we are very committed to supporting First Nations teachers as well. We are very committed to the role of First Nations education in the curriculum and supporting young First

Australians go on to get their year 12 completion rates and go on to further studies. So, yes, there is a lot going on. I am really, really proud of Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow, the prepaid placements, the initial teacher education reforms and the reforms around encouraging more First Nations Victorians to consider taking up teaching as well.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Fantastic. I want to go to workload now. You mentioned some support from the department around community facilities and support for those 41 schools, but what other initiatives are in place? Because that is a real challenge for principals and teachers. We know that. We hear it as we get across the community and speak to teachers and principals.

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes, it is a good question, Mr Hilakari, and it goes to the heart of what the Victorian teaching and learning model 2.0 is all about. Often we think about explicit instruction – how we teach our kids learning – but it is actually also a game changer for the workload of teachers, when you have got the best practice going in in terms of how you are teaching our kids. It uplifts everyone and hurts no-one, but then it allows the teacher to focus in on some of those smaller cohorts and, through our investment in the tutor learning initiative, some of those other cohorts that will need support. Our lesson plans in mathematics and phonics have been released. These are taking the workload off teachers of having to write lessons – 4000 lessons to be published by the end of this year. I got feedback yesterday about how important these lesson plans are for teachers in terms of supporting them with the evidence and reducing their workload.

This budget builds on the \$36.9 billion we invested in the 2023–24 budget to continue revising the curriculum, putting world's best practice at the heart of everything we do. Just on that too, you may be aware, Mr Hilakari, we did do a review recently into administration compliance activities, and we are really proud of that report and that work to really make sure that we support our principals and our teachers. It has been 50 years of the business managers conference, and as the son of a business manager from Glenroy West Primary School – a plug to Glenroy West – I know the workload is more and more on our principals, teachers and business managers. I am there to help them and support them, and I tried to get that message across as much as I could yesterday at the government principals conference. It was great to get approached by the principal of Bairnsdale Secondary to say, 'Thank you for your speech, but just so you know, we've got more resources than we've ever had before.'

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Great. And that personal experience, I am sure, keeps you very sharp in this area of administration. Another area which is really important to teachers and the teaching community is the wellbeing of teachers and the support that the government can provide teachers to make sure that they have a great time in the profession and continue in the profession for many years ahead. I am just wondering if you could speak to some of those elements.

**Ben CARROLL:** Yes. Thank you, Mr Hilakari. The wellbeing of our teachers and our teaching workforce is of the utmost importance. The safety of students, staff and the broader school community is paramount, and this budget invests \$9.3 billion to support schools to implement the safety measures where school staff are at risk from work-related violence. I work very closely with the Australian Education Union on these matters. I am also, I should say – and we will get on to this later as the minister for WorkSafe – very mindful of making sure our school communities are beacons of workplace safety, that the culture is right and that we have all the early interventions and the prevention programs as well. We are really committed to rolling out more psychological health regulations in my WorkSafe portfolio, making sure there is a real focus on prevention. We are really wanting to promote school wellbeing. Many of you have been principal for a day and spent some time, no doubt, in the staffroom at our schools, and they have a wonderful culture. There is no doubt a bit of that will come into the EBA negotiations as well when it comes to supporting our teaching workforce.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Particularly important, in my mind, are early career teachers. Recruiting is really important, but retention, particularly at that early career point in time, is just so important – at the start of a teacher's career. What do we have within the budget that can further develop the skills and keep teachers in the profession?

**Ben CARROLL:** Thanks, Mr Hilakari. We do have a Career Start initiative, which really focuses on those early teachers, and it really makes sure that we set them up with a foundation for success. We are expanding that program to put more teachers at more schools right throughout Victoria. This means more graduate teachers will be getting the support they need and will make sure that we are supporting so many teachers. This

program – its funding and its support – does run on a timeline when students finish their teaching qualifications and teaching degrees. Basically, it makes sure that when graduates go into our schools they get essentially 2 hours of time release per week – 2 hours at the primary school level, I think it is about 1½ hours at the secondary level – where they are then, as I spoke earlier about, getting that mentorship and that support, developing all of their soft skills as well as their teaching skills, because we want them to be high-quality teachers. We want to continue to develop our graduate teacher workforce, and we want to make sure that they feel they are getting job satisfaction. Teaching is not an easy gig. I get to meet with them all the time, and they need to have some resilience. That is why these supports will help them with workload but also build up their capacity to have a long, rewarding career in the teaching profession – really proud of it.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** It is not an easy thing always to get up in front of a room full of people on your first day out of your degree. That is really great to hear. I know there are some challenges around particular schools, through location or otherwise, in gaining teachers. There is a program called the targeted financial incentives program. I am just keen to understand: how is this specifically going to support teachers into those hard-to-fill roles?

**Ben CARROLL:** Good question, Mr Hilakari. The targeted financial incentives program will provide targeted assistance to attract suitably qualified teachers to relocate to hard-to-staff positions – rural and regional Victoria; sometimes it might be a specialist school – and it does help with those living expenses and relocation costs, particularly in rural and regional Victoria. It is a really important program that we have funded for some years. It has seen quality teachers placed into roles where they have had that financial incentive that they have wanted the change. They might have wanted the tree change; they might have wanted to go live in rural and regional Victoria, and it has been timely. Sometimes those country school communities are where the teacher, on their journey in the Education State, wants to go. I must say too, some of the evidence we are getting from the relocation of these teachers is that it is helping support the teachers, but it has actually been shown to be improving some of the educational outcomes for rural and regional students as well as helping to fill the employment gaps we have in some of our schools around the state. But yes, it has been a really important initiative. That teacher recruitment has not happened by accident. It has been through targeted financial assistance and really promoting the Education State.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** In the 6 seconds I have got left, a big shout-out to Elaine and Sadia, who are new principals starting next year in the community that I represent. Fantastic.

**Ben CARROLL:** I met Elaine. Thank you for coming out, Mr Hilakari.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Deputy Premier and 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 is going to take a very, very short break before beginning its consideration of the WorkSafe and TAC portfolio at 10:50 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**