

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes

Melbourne – Monday 24 November 2025

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Roma Britnell – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Tony Bates, Secretary,

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

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

Bronwen FitzGerald, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

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

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

Angela Singh, Deputy Secretary, First Nations Strategy, Policy and Programs, 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. On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes. Its aim is to gauge what the government achieved in 2024–25 compared to what the government planned to achieve.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

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

I welcome the Secretary of the Department of Education, Mr Tony Bates. You are welcome, as well as other officials who are appearing here with you today. Secretary, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Tony BATES: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for the chance to appear this afternoon. Can I start by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of the land we are on, and I pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

Visual presentation.

Tony BATES: The Department of Education is one of the state's largest and most complex organisations and one of the largest employers in the state. We provide services to almost every community in the state, and we strive to deliver a great education for every child and young person so that they can thrive now and into the future for a fairer, smarter and more prosperous state. This vision guides all of our work, our policies and our priorities, and it tries to connect everything we do from early learning to school education and beyond.

I just thought it would be worth sharing with the committee some of the portfolio entities that are also within the department's purview. We can see just a quick summary there of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority; the quality assessment regulation division; the VRQA, the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority; and the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

We support more than 1 million children in over 2300 schools and almost 150,000 children across the state in the early childhood education and care sector. The scale of this activity is reflected in the department's total budget of over \$17 billion in 2024–25, and this supports a full range of services, including reform programs, operations of schools and other services, workforce development, wellbeing supports, and in addition to that amount, a major infrastructure program. Recent investment has supported students and staff to lift their attainment, maintain essential services and provide schools and early childhood settings with resources to deliver better educational outcomes.

In the early childhood space, the Best Start, Best Life reforms are continuing to embed a major reform throughout the state. A key part of these reforms is supporting the sector to provide more hours of teacher-led kindergarten programs, giving more children the opportunity to learn and develop. In 2025 we launched pre-prep, providing more hours of play-based learning in the year before school. Three-year-old kindergarten participation and uptake from the sector remains strong, positioning us to deliver the full 15 hours per week of programs across the state in 2029. In the 2024 year, which is the last full year for which we have data, four-year-old kindergarten participation increased to 96 per cent, reflecting the success of removing cost barriers for families under the department's free kindergarten program.

Another critical area is childhood education and regulation, which is undertaken by the regulatory authority QARD. Last year the regulatory authority undertook 4729 compliance monitoring, assessment and rating visits to keep children safe and support providers to continuously improve the quality of their education services. This is almost 20 per cent above the BP3 target of 4000 inspections. In 2024, 96 per cent of Victorian early childhood services met or exceeded the national quality standards, and that is well above the national average of 91 per cent. For our sessional kindergartens, 99 per cent of services meet or exceed the national quality standards.

Over the past financial year 125 early childhood facilities were built, expanded, improved and opened, creating more than 7000 new kindergarten places. Also, in January this year the first four government owned and operated Early Learning Victoria centres opened for business across a number of locations in Victoria where there are child care shortages. There are a further 14 centres under construction at the moment that will create 1400 new places for children in child care and three-year-old and four-year-old kinder when they open early next year.

Combined with our other infrastructure activity and programs, these efforts are ensuring that children and families and educators have access to modern, inclusive and high-quality learning spaces. Work continues to prioritise cultural safety, participation and inclusion in kindergartens, where children from all backgrounds and abilities can access enriching, supportive learning environments. I am proud to report that in 2024 we had over 3700 First Nations children enrolled in either a three- or four-year-old kindergarten program – a record number for the state.

A strong and capable workforce is central to quality early childhood education. Following the 2023 release of the Best Start, Best Life workforce strategy, scholarships, mentoring and professional development programs continue to attract and help us retain qualified early childhood teachers and educators. In 2024 we had an 11.5 per cent increase in the number of fully registered early childhood teachers, building on a 10 per cent increase from the previous year.

I will now move on to the school education space. In October 2024 a refreshed vision for *The Education State: Excellence in Every Classroom* was released, reaffirming the commitment to excellence and quality for all Victorian students. This vision recognises that high-quality teaching, a strong curriculum and safe learning environments are fundamental to student success, and these thoughts guide the work of our school leaders, teachers and policymakers.

In 2025, in term 1, the NAPLAN results for Victoria were outstanding, where we ranked first or second in 18 out of the 20 domains, a significant improvement on our 2024 results. Not only did Victorian schools improve, but they improved almost three times as much as other states and territories when compared to the 2023 results. That is not to say there is not more work to do for students who are at risk of falling behind, but these results are a testament to the professionalism and skill of our Victorian teaching staff. We are working to strengthen these excellent results through a range of programs and supports.

The Victorian teaching and learning model is being implemented across the state to improve student learning outcomes with explicit evidence-based teaching. More than 4000 high-quality curriculum lesson plans are being provided to teachers to help deliver consistent and effective instruction in our classrooms. With these tools in place, schools can focus on embedding best practice and collaborating across the system to support student learning.

Our annual student wellbeing survey, the Attitudes to School survey, tells us our programs and supports are working. Building on improvements in 2024, the 2025 survey results showed further positive improvements,

with students saying they feel safer, they feel more supported and they have a stronger sense of belonging at school.

Our work to embed disability inclusion across the education system continued in 2024–25, with all Victorian government schools now under the new funding and support model. In 2025 the mental health in primary schools initiative has expanded to reach a total of 1300 government and non-government schools, and our mental health practitioner initiative connected more secondary students to qualified mental health practitioners, counselling and early intervention services, with whole-of-school mental health prevention activities. Since 2019 this program has clocked up nearly 260,000 interventions. Together, these reforms help us to provide assistance for all children, including those at risk, to make sure they can have access to education and they are happy, healthy and as resilient as they can be.

Working with our partners at State Schools' Relief, we continue to provide essential student learning materials so that all students can succeed at school. We have the affordable school uniform program, free vision and glasses testing and period products available in schools. In 2024–25 we also reached the milestone of 60 million free meals having been provided via school breakfast clubs in partnership with Foodbank, and we also, in the financial year just gone, rolled out the school savings bonus to every eligible family in Victoria.

We also see the results of this work reflected in strong improvements in student engagement and retention. The VCE vocational major, now in its third year in Victorian schools, had a completion rate of 92.8 per cent in 2024, compared to 82.3 per cent in 2022 for the predecessor VCAL program, so it is a lift of 10 per cent. That overall has helped us lift our year 12 completion rates from 91.7 per cent in 2021 to 97.5 per cent in 2024. The years 10 to 12 retention rates have also lifted to a six-year high, and the number of government schools offering VCE VET certificates in priority pathways has increased by 11 per cent year on year into 2024.

Supporting better outcomes for First Nations learners is a priority. The gap in average attainment between First Nations students and other students in NAPLAN reading decreased in both grade 3 and year 9 this year. However, there is still much more to do. Through the Marrung Aboriginal education plan and the Dhelk Wukang Aboriginal inclusion plan we are creating culturally safe environments and celebrating strengths for our First Nations learners. We continue to prioritise self-determination in education in partnership with Victorian Aboriginal communities so that First Nations students feel safe and confident in their cultural identity, have a sense of belonging and feel welcome at school.

We have embedded our major program of teaching scholarships, grants, incentives and placement supports and innovative initial teacher education programs in the past year. These workforce initiatives are delivering results, with 14,000 more registered teachers in Victoria than we had in 2020. We continue to support the government school teaching workforce. Our future teachers at Victoria's universities are supported to go out to rural and regional schools on scholarships and with paid placements. Our graduates are better supported in the early years of their career through the Career Start program, which is having a real positive effect on retention in those early years, and our school leaders are increasingly using flexible work arrangements to balance work and family, gain experience in leadership roles and prolong their careers.

Finally, just turning to infrastructure, we continue to deliver modern, fit-for-purpose learning environments across the state. In term 1 of this year, six new government schools were opened, along with 108 school upgrade and modernisation projects that were completed.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. The first round of questions is going to go to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, officials. Thank you, Secretary. Secretary, I would just like to talk about the exam bungle in 2024. Can the department provide a full and itemised breakdown of the total costs incurred as a result of the 2024 VCAA exam bungle, including the \$553,000 paid to the independent monitor and all costs associated with reprinting, redistributing and securing affected exam papers?

Tony BATES: Thanks, Mr Welch. I can give you some of the breakdown of those numbers you just asked about. I might have to take the cost of the reprinting on notice. I will just find my glasses.

Richard WELCH: It affects us all.

Tony BATES: As you mentioned, you were asking about the \$552,000 for the independent monitor.

Richard WELCH: Yes, and all the costs associated with reprinting, redistributing and securing affected exam papers.

Tony BATES: I can give you a breakdown of that cost. I think that is the number we disclosed in the annual report. That breaks into two components: the payments to Margaret Crawford PSM, who is the monitor, were \$95,200 in the financial year, and then we had a payment of around \$457,000 to KPMG, who supported the monitor doing a lot of the process mapping, auditing and review of things at the VCAA. Then I think I will just take on notice those other questions around the cost of reprinting.

Richard WELCH: The reprinting, redistributing and securing.

Tony BATES: Yes. There was almost no redistribution cost, because we did the reprinting before the papers were distributed. There was a very small amount of repacking that happened at – I will call it the secret warehouse, where we do all the packaging of the VCE papers. But I will come back, on notice, in terms of the cost of reprinting.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Thank you, Secretary. In terms of the scope of expenditure, what specific tasks, deliverables and responsibilities were included in that package of expenditure for the independent monitor, and how does the department assess whether this represented reasonable value for money for Victorian taxpayers?

Tony BATES: The monitor has given me a sequence of reports on different stages of the exam development process. There has been a report around exam preparation, so the whole process of the exam panel's drafting and preparing the papers. There has been another report on the sort of printing and distribution process. The monitor has also been having a look at the marking process now and then will give me a final report in January in terms of the review of the full process.

Just going to the specifics, the monitor throughout 2025 has spent a lot of time at VCAA observing processes and working closely with the senior management and has been supported by the team from KPMG, who have been doing a lot of QA and have been doing a lot of checking of the documentation of the business processes that the VCAA uses. A lot of the work of the monitor has fed into the redesign and redevelopment of the business processes that the VCAA have implemented. My judgement is it is good value for money. I think you have seen this year – marking is still underway – we have had no issues like we have had in previous years. You can see some of the reporting in other jurisdictions. This is a complex business and there are challenges that we have seen in other places. I am really pleased with both the work of the monitor and how that, together with Dr Blacher's report, has fed into the work that Andrew Smith, the new CEO, has done. So in terms of making sure that we have had high-quality, reliable exams for students this year, I think it is money well spent.

Richard WELCH: I think it would be fair to say a lot of that report though would have trod over similar ground to a previous review on it. Did we recoup any money from the previous review? What was the failure? Was it a failure of the previous review content or a failure of the implementation of its content?

Tony BATES: I think there were challenges with the previous reviews, but really the root cause of the 2024 exam issues was IT issues that had not been touched on in the previous reviews. Dr Blacher's review has given us a very clear pathway in terms of the things we need to do to strengthen the IT and systems.

Richard WELCH: Should the previous review have captured these points though, given that there are clearly weaknesses?

Tony BATES: The previous reviews were focused on particular issues. You may recall there were particular issues in mathematics and in chemistry, so the previous reviews really focused in on those curriculum areas.

Richard WELCH: I think the minister promised us a comprehensive review at that time of it so that it would never happen again. So it was not a comprehensive review?

Tony BATES: Well, I think the Dr Blacher review that we have done this year is the comprehensive review.

Richard WELCH: But not the previous. Can you quantify, though, measurable outcomes or improvements from the appointment of the independent monitor, including any evidence of increased security, risk mitigation or process integrity?

Tony BATES: Yes, I can, Mr Welch. Again, I have regular briefings with the monitor. As I said, there has been a very significant uplift in the quality of the process documentation at the VCAA. I know the monitor has worked with the senior management at the VCAA. The level of, can I say, business continuity testing and scenario planning that they did through this year was remarkably improved. There were a few small tweaks along the way or issues along the way, as you get in any process, but because of that much improved business continuity planning and the fact that, with the support of the monitor and the team at KPMG, they had rehearsed a number of scenarios, I think it is really clear, from my point of view, that it is value for money.

Richard WELCH: Is that properly codified into practice now?

Tony BATES: Yes.

Richard WELCH: It is not a one-off?

Tony BATES: No, no, no. So KPMG have assisted with a lot of the business process review and documentation, and there is other work that Andrew Smith has underway where we are really strengthening the codification and the uplift of the business processes at the VCAA. With support from KPMG we have put in Asana project management software. It is a much more modern environment than it was 12 months ago, and I have got a lot higher level of confidence.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Secretary. I think the question is: why did it require the engagement of an independent monitor at over half a million dollars? Did you consider a departmental alternative or a more cost-effective method of going about this?

Tony BATES: It was a decision the minister made, saying that he wanted an external voice, outside the authority and outside the department, to give him and me assurance that the processes were being reviewed and the quality was being lifted.

Richard WELCH: And were you given alternatives of what that external process would be?

Tony BATES: We considered a number of alternatives. In terms of the engagement of KPMG we did do a market approach around a number of different firms who could offer those services, but again, I think the minister was clear that he wanted someone outside the department and outside the VCAA with extensive experience in these sorts of auditing and quality processes to oversight the process this year.

Richard WELCH: Half a million dollars, or more than half a million dollars, is obviously a large amount. What programs, projects or departmental activities, if any, had their budgets reduced or deferred to cover the costs associated with this incident, and have you got justification for any diversions that may have occurred?

Tony BATES: As I said in the presentation, it is a \$17 billion department, so we maintain a roughly \$50 million central contingency for unexpected developments during the year; in the scheme of a department of this size, that is a pretty modest contingency.

Richard WELCH: It came purely from contingency?

Tony BATES: Yes.

Richard WELCH: Okay. This is probably the critical one, and I am glad to say here you have said you have codified the improvements, but has the department in turn identified which internal failures or oversight gaps led to the exam leak and what reforms have been implemented? I think you have actually spoken to some of those already, so I think actually I will move off that question. One concern is that the cost of the exam bungle, for want of a better word, did not get its own announcement; it was fairly subtly released through the annual report rather than publicly disclosed, which I think the community were probably entitled to know. Can you commit to fully releasing all the costings, including all associated contractor, staffing and logistical expenditures associated with this?

Tony BATES: Mr Welch, I think disclosing in the annual report is transparency, from my point of view. I understand the question you are making about the cost of reprinting, which was an abnormal cost, so yes, we will come back –

Richard WELCH: Well, it is not just the cost of reprinting; it is over half a million dollars gone from the education budget because of a systemic problem within the department which has gone on over multiple years that affected many, many tens of thousands of students and their families. So given the significance of that problem, aren't the community entitled to know what it cost us as a separate, standalone disclosure of cost?

Tony BATES: Well, again, I will publish all of those things, as I said. So we have got a level of disclosure in the annual report, I have committed to come back to the committee with those further details that you have asked for. I understand the community interest and concern in this issue, but it just does not seem practical if we are endlessly publishing the cost of responding to various things when, as I said in the presentation, it is a \$17 billion department with more than 100,000 staff. So it is hard to know which things like that would meet the threshold for publication separate to the requirements in the annual report.

Richard WELCH: I do not mean to sound argumentative; I think it is self-evident that it should. The National School Resourcing Board found Victoria was the only state to deliberately fall short of its minimum funding obligation. Who authorised that decision?

Tony BATES: So I think, Mr Welch, with respect, if you read the latest report carefully, it found that although we were short in the 2023 year it was because there was a very significant move in the target that occurred in December of 2023. I have had this discussion repeatedly with the National School Resourcing Board about the fact that the expenditure target just constantly moves throughout the year. So we were on track to meet the expenditure target for 2023, and we would have had a buffer of I think \$30 million, \$40 million above the minimum contribution. Then around about 10 December a letter turned up from the Commonwealth saying, 'We've just increased your spend target by \$160 million.' So I think we can all agree that it is impossible to spend \$160 million extra when you have got one week of term 4 left. So it was not a deliberate decision, Mr Welch. We were on track to meet the targets that we had been advised by the Commonwealth, and then that target changed at the last minute just before the end of term 4, and I think you will find that the summary from the NSRB was that we missed the target but there were reasonable explanations for why that occurred.

Richard WELCH: So it was not from prior decisions earlier in the year that left you with a –

Tony BATES: No, no. And I will just say I have had this discussion over and over again with the members of the board. The funding we give to the government school system is in the order of \$9 billion to \$10 billion; when they move the target by \$160 million a week before the end of term 4 it is impossible, and I am sure committee members would not want me to just be pumping \$160 million out the door for no reason. So the government had made decisions, we were on track to meet the targets that we had been advised by the Commonwealth, and then we got a target revision, as I said, around about 10 December with a week or two to go in term 4; it was just impossible to meet that target. I have repeatedly raised this issue with the board and said they need to lock the targets at budget time or at the start of the year. It is just silly.

Richard WELCH: So it is the board's fault. The teacher shortages are still prevalent throughout the state. I noticed in your presentation you said 'We've added 14,000 teachers,' but I do not know a single school that is not actively having to put in emergency teachers over and over again. Some classes we hear have not had maths teachers for entire terms et cetera et cetera. How many teachers are we short?

Tony BATES: I might just ask Dr Howes or Mr Robinson, who is up there, just to talk to that. What I will say, Mr Welch, is we had a very challenging time after COVID. We saw a lot of teachers exit the system, particularly in the secondary school level. It is still a challenge, but we are in a much, much stronger place than we have been.

Richard WELCH: Okay. Hopefully the figures reflect that.

Tony BATES: As I said, there are 14,000 more registered teachers in Victoria than there were five years ago. The number of teachers working in government schools has grown by 1358 FTE from 2024 to 2025, so we are recruiting strongly.

Richard WELCH: But that does not tally. So how many vacancies do we have? Have we got more vacancies than before? And how does that tally with the experience of schools? We have got all these extra teachers; well, why aren't they in the classrooms?

Tony BATES: I might just ask Mr Robinson to say something. I will just say, though, that it is recruitment season, as we are in term 4. For those of you who have got friends and family who are teachers, there is a whole process where –

Richard WELCH: Actually, just for the sake of time, I am really interested in the number of vacancies that we have got.

David ROBINSON: The number of vacancies fluctuates week by week.

Richard WELCH: What is it now? What are just your latest figures?

David ROBINSON: In the reporting period, which was October to November this time last year, we had an average of 700 per week. Now, that includes not just –

Richard WELCH: If you would, just what is it now, please?

David ROBINSON: As I said, I do not have –

Mathew HILAKARI: We are looking into the financial –

Tony BATES: Yes. We have come with all the 2024–25 data, so we do not necessarily have –

Richard WELCH: But you do not know what it is now?

Mathew HILAKARI: It is not relevant to the inquiry.

Richard WELCH: You cannot tell us how many vacancies you have got right now? Surely you can.

David ROBINSON: As I said, the number of vacancies fluctuates week by week.

Richard WELCH: No, I understand that. What I want to know is: what is the vacancy rate now?

The CHAIR: Excuse me. Is there a point of order, Mr Hilakari?

Mathew HILAKARI: There certainly is. It is not question time at the moment. We are doing an Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes.

Richard WELCH: It is a material, relevant question.

Mathew HILAKARI: No, no. It is not a material, relevant question for the inquiry.

Richard WELCH: The number of teaching vacancies in Victoria is not relevant?

The CHAIR: Mr Welch, Mr Hilakari has not finished. I cannot hear what the point of order is. Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: We are undertaking an Inquiry into the 2024–25 Financial and Performance Outcomes. It is not question time or time to just ask what you randomly want. We have a purpose here for the committee –

Richard WELCH: Well, I want to know if we are making progress.

Mathew HILAKARI: and our witnesses have come with that information for you.

Roma Britnell interjected.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, I am going to rule on the point of order. On the point of order, Mr Hilakari is correct in saying the terms of reference for this inquiry go to the years that he has just mentioned. Mr Welch, if you want to rephrase your question in terms of the year that we are examining, I think Mr Robinson can give us some information.

Richard WELCH: I am not sure how I can rephrase the question. I just want to know: are we making progress?

The CHAIR: Mr Welch, we can rephrase it for you. Do you want to rephrase your question or do you want to move on?

Richard WELCH: I will move on.

The CHAIR: Right.

Richard WELCH: Are we making progress?

David ROBINSON: I think the answer to that is yes. We are seeing continual growth in the teaching workforce year on year. As the Secretary has –

Richard WELCH: Are we seeing a decline in vacancies?

David ROBINSON: Yes. We can take the comparative vacancies question on notice, but the number of vacancies in the reporting period – in the peak recruiting period – was 700, which represents about 1 to 2 per cent of the total workforce. The important point to note about vacancies is they are not just positions, or they are largely positions that are being recruited for for the following school year at schools preparing themselves for what their workforce needs are in the coming year, as well as any –

Richard WELCH: That is great. Thank you. Thank you for that. Just on capital works, Secretary, how many school upgrades or new builds have been delayed because of budget pressures that stem from the government's underfunding of the public school system?

Tony BATES: I might just see if Ms Wandel from the VSBA can come up. I will just say, Mr Welch, that the capital account and the operating things are completely separate. I know we have a lot of discussion about SRS percentages and those sorts of things, but the capital program is not counted in the SRS, in NSRB reporting processes. I do not think that we would say that there are any projects that were –

Richard WELCH: No projects are delayed?

Tony BATES: I mean, there are project delays, and Ms Wandel can talk to some of these issues.

Richard WELCH: Let us go to that then, shall we?

Tony BATES: I might just say that we have got 93 per cent of our projects complete on time. Of course there are a small number of issues – you get onsite and you discover rock, you know, latent conditions like that. In the past year we have had a small number of companies who went into insolvency – Roberts Co. There were a group of schools where projects were mid-stream and the contractors went into insolvency and we have had to re-tender, so there are a small number of things affected by that.

Richard WELCH: But is it the department's position that you do not have delays in building works?

Tony BATES: As I said, we complete 93 per cent of projects on time, but I might just ask Ms Wandel to give you a bit of further information.

Joanne WANDEL: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you for your question. As the Secretary has said, the large proportion of capital works projects are delivered on time and on budget. We are very proud at the VSBA to deliver, across our capital projects, 93 per cent of our projects.

Richard WELCH: Just regarding that 93 per cent figure, can you just qualify that somewhat? Is that based on the final project plan and the final date of the final project plan, or is that based on the original project plan?

Joanne WANDEL: For the majority of them, it is based on the original project plan, but as we have said, there are a proportion of projects that are not completed on time. There are a range of reasons for –

Richard WELCH: Only 7 per cent?

Joanne WANDEL: There are a range of reasons for that, particularly in respect to the 2024–25 financial year. A number of those projects that were priced and planned to be delivered in the 2024–25 financial year

were actually priced in 2021 and 2022, so we were seeing significant fluctuations arising from the post-market –

Richard WELCH: So you updated the 2021 costs, did you?

Joanne WANDEL: As you can see in the questionnaire, for a small number of projects, there was additional funding required to be sought for those to enable those projects to be completed.

Richard WELCH: Because costs from 2021 probably are not that helpful in 2025. Is that right?

Joanne WANDEL: Those projects were funded in 2022 and 2023 to be delivered into the 2024–25 financial year, and as a result of that and the COVID market fluctuations, they did require additional funding to be provided.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Welch. We are going to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Secretary and officials, for joining us today. Secretary, I would just like to continue on capital funding, actually, noting that the financial year for which we are looking, 2024–25, acquitted significant funding to finalise the program of 100 new schools, with the 16 that are due to open in the coming few months now – very soon. Can you please talk to me about the progress made towards them, what has been acquitted in this financial year towards that, and what these projects will deliver.

Tony BATES: Thanks, Mr Galea. I might again just ask Ms Wandel to go through in a bit more detail. We had six schools opened at the start of term 1 this year. We can run through the six in some detail. Again, in the 2024–25 period there are 19 new schools under construction. I have been to a number of them. I was up in Wodonga a few weeks ago and drove past the new school at Leneva, which was looking fantastic. Again, that is stuff that is under construction. But why don't we start on the six schools that opened this year? I will say between this year and next year there will be 25 schools opening in the space of a year and a bit. It is the largest opening this century in Victoria. It is a massive undertaking, and the School Building Authority have been doing great work in that regard. Jo.

Joanne WANDEL: Thank you, Secretary. As the Secretary said, there were six schools that opened for day one this year in the reporting period. Those six new schools, we are very pleased to advise, were: Barayip Primary School in Tarneit, and this school also has a kinder onsite that opened in 2025; Kuyim Primary School in Pakenham, and this school also has a kinder onsite which opened in 2025; Turrin Primary School in Clyde North, and this school also has a kinder which will open in 2026; Wirrigirri Primary School in Wollert, and this school has a kinder opening in 2026; Mirniyan Primary School in Clyde North, and this school has a kinder opening in 2027; and Wulerrp Secondary College in Clyde North. The delivery of the 19 new schools in 2026 will acquit the government's 100 new schools commitment. Of the 19 schools set to open in 2026 we are very pleased to advise that as of today seven schools have already reached practical completion. Those schools are Kala Primary School in Cranbourne North, Yirrama Primary School in Charlemont, Kerribana Primary School in Leneva, Mindalk Primary School in Truganina, Wiyal Primary School in Fraser Rise, Muyan Primary School in Wallan and Murrum Primary School in Weir Views. The remaining 12 new school projects are in progress, and they are all on time for day one delivery in 2026. Those schools are Balambalam Primary School in Clyde North, Birranga College in Clyde North, Biyala Primary School in Armstrong Creek, Gamadji Primary School in Craigieburn, Kolorer College in Cobblebank, Kulap Primary School in Clyde, Marra School in Kalkallo, Narrarrang Primary School in Fishermans Bend, Ngayuk College in Kalkallo, Ngurruga School in Werribee South, Umarkoo Primary School in Wollert and Yurran P–9 College in Werribee South.

We are also very pleased to advise that establishment activities are progressing very well. Key achievements in the operational space include the 2026 new school names being announced and published on the VSBA website on 18 August 2025, the proposed interim council arrangements being approved and the appointment of all 19 new principals, and a range of communications and engagement activities have been rolled out to support the new principals and their leadership teams. Enrolments are also being taken by all 19 schools, and Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority registration is progressing in order for students to start on day one next year. We are also very pleased to advise that five of these schools are located in regional areas: Yirrama Primary School in Charlemont, Kerribana Primary School in Leneva, Wiyal Primary School in Fraser Rise, Biyala Primary School in Armstrong Creek and Muyan Primary School in Wallan. These 19 new schools, which will complete the government's 100 new schools commitment, will help meet rising enrolment demand

from a growing local population. They will ensure local students get high-quality education close to home. These schools also include learning neighbourhoods, community hubs and administration and library buildings as well as outdoor courts and sports fields.

Finally, I want to mention that the two schools also to receive additional stages are Mickleham Secondary College and Wollert Secondary College. Mickleham Secondary College opened in 2023, and the additional stage will create an additional 675 permanent places for local students. These works have included a learning neighbourhood building, an arts building and landscaping works, and the project is on track to be completed in the fourth quarter of next year. Similarly we are building additional permanent capacity as part of an additional stage at Wollert Secondary College, creating space for an extra 600 local students, including 50 spaces for students with disabilities. These works will include an arts and technology building, a learning neighbourhood and landscaping works. It has been a real privilege for the VSBA to deliver these new school works. Next year is our biggest delivery year yet, and we are well on track, as we have said, with seven of the 19 schools already having reached practical completion.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Ms Wandel – as the Secretary well noted, the largest opening this century, I believe, so very exciting. As an outer suburban MP myself, I know all too well the need for these schools, especially in Clyde North. It was great to hear that mentioned several times. These schools are really filling that demand that is growing in our growing suburbs, and I am sure my colleagues on both sides of me would agree with that as well in their respective patches. I just want to touch on something I will again put to you, Secretary, but please feel free to jump in, Ms Wandel. It is the biggest investment in Victoria in a very long time. How does it compare to the interstate investment in new capital schools?

Tony BATES: Again, I might just ask Ms Wandel to give us a bit more information on this, but we did a bit of work looking at the capital program in 2024–25 and comparing to previous years. Over the last four or five years half of the new schools in Australia have been opened in Victoria, so we have a much, much larger program than other states in terms of new schools. I know the other states are probably doing some more expansion of existing schools, but we absolutely have the largest school building program underway at the moment.

In terms of the reporting period, I was just looking at the annual report a little bit earlier, the cash flow in the reporting period in 2024–25 on school building in Victoria – so this is not project announcements; this is what we spend in 2024–25 – was \$1.893 billion on schools, both building and upgrade projects. So it is a very, very significant investment. But Ms Wandel, do you have anything in terms of comparison to other states?

Joanne WANDEL: I think you have summed that up really well, Secretary. From a jurisdictional perspective it is challenging. Each state represents their infrastructure delivery program in a different way in their budget papers, so it is very hard to compare. But as the Secretary has said, what we can say is that Victoria has the largest school infrastructure building program in the country, and more than half of all of the new schools that have been delivered across Australia have been delivered here in Victoria.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. We know the state's economy is growing, the state's population is growing. We may well be leading the nation on many fronts, and it is very good to see on school building as well. But we are not the only state that has an increase in population, so for one in every two of every new school to be in Victoria is quite significant. Thank you.

Again, this might be for either one of you. The same budget paper, page 22, refers to the 25 schools which are receiving capital upgrades over the year. Can you talk to me about the progress of those?

Tony BATES: Again, I might just go to Ms Wandel, who has the detail of those projects. We do have a lot of capital upgrade projects underway. I think we finished, Jo, more than 100 in the financial year just gone.

Joanne WANDEL: That is right. Thanks, Secretary, and thanks again for your question. Yes, in the 2024–25 state budget \$226.7 million was provided for capital upgrades at 25 schools. As part of this investment, 18 of those 25 schools were in metropolitan Melbourne and seven were in regional areas. \$25 million was also made available in the 2025–26 round of the Capital Works Fund, which funded 58 minor works projects across schools in Victoria.

In respect to the progress of the funds invested in the 25 schools, we can advise that the architects for all 25 upgrade projects which were funded in the 2024–25 budget were appointed by December last year. Contractors for 14 of the 25 projects funded in the 2024–25 state budget have also been appointed, and it is anticipated that the remaining 11 builder contracts will be awarded by the end of December this year. So as at 30 June 2025, 18 projects were in the design phase and seven were already in the construction phase.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I understand as well there is funding towards tech schools in this budget, towards supporting their capital needs too. In a similar vein, how are they tracking?

Joanne WANDEL: I might ask my colleague Mr Fraser to respond on tech schools. Thank you.

Stephen FRASER: Thank you. And yes, it is a really great example of the Education State in practice. The 2016–17 state budget obviously heralded the first 10 tech schools. They have been established now for a number of years and are really going great. But it was the 2023–24 budget that announced the six new tech schools, and we were really pleased in August this year to launch the Frankston Tech School, which is a great initiative in partnership with Chisholm. The other five are on track for opening in term 3 next year and are all in the construction stage at this point. We have got tech school directors appointed. We have got governance arrangements in place with those tech schools, committees of management in place, and we are working with local industry and working with schools to design those programs. There are some really, really great initiatives. If we look at Wangaratta, for instance, we have got students in a temporary lease facility coming into that facility and working with local providers, with local industry, to design the programs that they will then participate in. That kind of partnership – student involvement, student voice and agency – is really being replicated right across the five tech schools that are yet to open. We are really excited to be working towards those in term 3 next year.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Mr Fraser. Secretary, I might turn to – oh, he is not here at the moment, but Richard Welch was asking about workforce shortages and staffing levels. I know there has been a number of strategies that were outlined in the budget for this financial year that were seeking to address the issue. Without seeking to go over the same ground that you have already gone over, can you talk to me about what those initiatives were and the success or otherwise of those initiatives that you have been able to notice?

Tony BATES: Thanks, Mr Galea. I might ask Deputy Secretary Robinson to just expand a bit, but as I mentioned in the deck, we have had scholarships. We have arrangements to help students to particularly do placements in regional Victoria. So it is really important to get kids out to regional Victoria, experience what it is like teaching in those schools and in those communities. Of course, when we get students from regional Victoria, they are much more open to doing those sorts of placements, but we have those things. We have paid placement opportunities as well. So that whole thing – when I was a youngster, one of the trainee teachers was working at the local McDonald's and so we did give her a bit of a thing in chemistry of asking what the recipe for a Big Mac was. Basically kids do not need that, so those sorts of supports so that they can focus on their study, focus on their learning prep, and not having to be trying to juggle part-time jobs as well is really important.

Again, we have had a number of programs around Teach for Victoria where we are trying to get the message out to young people. I will just ask Mr Robinson to expand a bit. The really pleasing thing is, I think that the number of students this year who enrolled in undergrad teaching courses was up something like 31 per cent from the year before. That is a massive lift. There are all sorts of reasons why young people choose teaching courses, but I think some of the supports we have put in place and the messaging we have done about the importance of teaching as a profession and the value of teaching as a profession are really pleasingly starting to cut through, and we really hope to see a lot of those young people finish their courses, do their prac placements with us and move into the government teaching service over the coming years. David, can you just do a bit more?

David ROBINSON: Thanks, Secretary. As the Secretary said in his presentation, we have seen growth of 14,000 teachers since 2020 and 1350 over the period. The approach that we have taken in the department is to have a strategy across attraction, recruitment, supporting our early career teachers, retention and career development. By focusing on each of those areas, we are trying to ensure the growth of the workforce continues. We have also seen steady improvements in student-to-teacher ratios. In primary schools ratios have improved from 14.6 to 13, so that is 13 students per primary school teacher. And in secondary schools the ratio

has improved from 12.1 to 11.5. So we have got more teachers per student in our system in the reporting period than in the previous years.

As the Secretary said, we have the secondary teaching scholarships, which drove an improvement in secondary ITE enrolments of 31 per cent over the course of the scholarship period. We also have, I think importantly, invested in the retention of our teachers. The career start program provides support for every graduate in the rollout areas with mentoring support, time release and very high-quality professional development. That program has seen demonstrable improvements in the retention of our early career teachers, which is the time at which, if we can keep them in those first five years, they will be in the workforce for a very long time. So the career start program has been one of those central planks in our workforce strategy.

As the Secretary said, we have been targeting areas that have historically been more difficult to staff. The preservice teacher grants program provides support for our prospective teachers to go to those rural and regional areas. We also have the teacher financial incentives program, which provides incentives for teachers to take up roles in our more regional areas. That program has been fully subscribed over the last several years. That program also has seen good retention rates, with 75 per cent of those teachers staying beyond the financial incentive period and around 85 per cent staying in the government school system. So we are seeing good results in that area.

I think the other thing, as the Secretary mentioned in his presentation, is investing in flexible work, particularly for our school leaders. This is a program which provides essentially the funding for the crossover day, where an experienced principal can share leadership roles with emerging school leaders. It both provides the opportunity for principals who would otherwise be considering moving into retirement to stay on in the system while also providing good mentoring support and experience for the next generation of our school leadership. That program supported 246 flexible work arrangements for school leaders across 191 schools in 2024–25. As well as the flexible work initiatives, the academy for teaching and leadership continues to provide really strong professional learning for our teaching workforce and enables them to really deepen their skills in classroom teaching, particularly for those teachers that want a career pathway but not necessarily into the school leadership or management roles.

Finally, on the program which the Secretary mentioned earlier, we are also seeing very strong enrolment in the Teach Today, Teach Tomorrow program. That is the program that enables teachers, particularly career changers who want to move into teaching but would find the loss of income in undertaking a degree prohibitive, that allows those teachers to work in our schools while also undertaking a teaching program. As at the end of June 2025 we had around 1200 people enrolled in or gone through those Teach Today, Teach Tomorrow programs. I think the really valuable part of those Teach Today, Teach Tomorrow programs is that they have real teaching experience in schools and in a school environment while they are going through their program, and that practical experience sets them up for being a strong teacher once they graduate and once they receive their full registration. One of the things that we are continually hearing from schools is that they want people coming through initial teacher education to have that good balance between school-based experience – understanding how to work with and manage a classroom, understanding how the daily cadence of a school operates – as well as the really important theoretical knowledge about pedagogy and teaching practice that they gain through their ITE degree. Those Teach Today, Teach Tomorrows are providing that support.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Mr Robinson. Thanks, Secretary.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. We are going to the Deputy Chair.

Roma BRITNELL: Thank you. My first question is: why does tier 2 disability funding allocate that funding based on student family education, which is an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage – why does the funding model label all disadvantaged students as having a disability? I reference the questionnaire, Department of Education, page 4.

Tony BATES: Thanks, Ms Britnell, for the question. Tier 2 funding is designed to give a sort of whole of school capability to schools to provide supports for the children that do not meet the tier 3 standard getting individualised funding packages. I will say I was having a meeting with a few primary school principals in the inner west a few weeks ago, and they said tier 2 funding had just changed the practice in this –

Roma BRITNELL: I understand that, but are we actually now calling low socio-economic students disabled?

Tony BATES: I might just ask Deputy Secretary Fraser to describe a bit more of the detail of the funding model. There is a correlation and concentration of those things with socio-economic advantage. Mr Fraser?

Stephen FRASER: Thank you, Secretary. And thanks for the question. As the Secretary said, the tier 2 funding is a really important component of disability inclusion. It is a tiered model of support. Tier 1 obviously is the universal support provided to all students. Tier 2 is specific funding provided to schools, and we are now at the position where in the fifth year of rollout of the disability inclusion program all schools now have access to tier 2, so the suggestion that tier 2 funding is focused on some schools at the expense of others is not correct. Tier 2 funding is available to all Victorian government schools. Then tier 3 funding is individualised funding provided to specific students to meet the adjustments that they need to participate on an equal basis with their peers in their learning. There is a method in the funding formula that takes account of the socio-economic situation of the school, and that, as the Secretary said, is to account for the fact that disability is more prevalent in more disadvantaged communities. That is something that has been well established in the evidence base. It appears in ABS data, it appears in our own data and it appears in the nationally consistent collection of data for students with disabilities where we do see the prevalence of disability for students, yes.

Roma BRITNELL: Thanks. Just back to classroom vacancies, in the 2024–25 school year, how many classes across Victorian government schools were assigned a teacher who did not hold the required or specific teaching area expertise? I believe teachers have two areas of expertise for the subject or class they are actually asked to teach. And if you do not have the numbers, could you take that on notice?

Tony BATES: I think Mr Robinson might have some of the numbers at hand. We refer to that as out-of-field teaching. We do collect information on that. It is particularly an issue in areas like mathematics, where there is just a real shortage of mathematics teachers.

Roma BRITNELL: That is my question. Why are there classrooms that have no mathematics teacher for terms and parents are not aware of it? That is what I am told is happening in some of the areas that I am across.

Tony BATES: Yes, and there are different levels where people – if we are teaching VCE maths then we are looking for people that have definitely got that area speciality. One of the programs which we have not touched on before is we do have what I will call upgrade or transition things. So you might have a teacher who has got a chemistry or physics discipline, but they have not done the full mathematics –

Roma BRITNELL: Could they be included in the figures that you either give me on notice – so they are training to go into that area but do not have the two areas of expertise. How many classrooms are there with children that have got teachers without those area-specific qualifications?

Tony BATES: I might just ask if Mr Robinson has some of the stats at hand.

David ROBINSON: I can quickly look them up, Secretary. I think you are asking around the number of teachers in the system that are –

Roma BRITNELL: That are in front of classrooms that do not have expertise.

David ROBINSON: operating under permission to teach. Is that right?

Roma BRITNELL: Yes.

David ROBINSON: I can quickly get those numbers for you. I think there are two categories of permission-to-teach teachers in the system. The first is through the Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow program that I mentioned earlier. Those teachers have a –

Roma BRITNELL: I am not asking about the type of teacher. I am asking how many classrooms there are that have a teacher in front of the students who do not hold the qualification for the area of expertise, whatever the language is, where they have to have one area but they do not have that qualification or they are upgrading. How many classrooms? You can give that to me on notice. I am happy with that.

David ROBINSON: Sure.

Tony BATES: We do do surveys of that, Ms Britnell. Particularly, as I said, it is in mathematics and some of the science areas.

Roma BRITNELL: I understand that.

Tony BATES: I know we have some of that data, so we can provide that on notice.

Roma BRITNELL: And for the 2024–25 school year, how many timetabled classes across Victorian government schools were conducted without a teacher physically present in the classroom? I understand they may have curriculum work given to them by the coordinator, but how many classes were conducted without teachers in 2024–25?

Tony BATES: I might just check that with Dr Howes, but I think the answer is none. It is a legal requirement that we have a qualified teacher in the classroom.

David HOWES: That is right. Correct.

Roma BRITNELL: So there were no classes that did not have a teacher physically in the room, but children were given a pack, particularly in the older years?

David HOWES: Not to my knowledge, where they were unsupervised.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay.

David HOWES: There is a difference between students who are in the senior years of VCE who have scheduled study periods.

Roma BRITNELL: No, I am talking about actually having to teach themselves with the coordinator giving them the material. Okay, I will go on to the child safety review. Who made the decision to appoint the former Labor Premier Jay Weatherill to the head of the review?

Tony BATES: I am not sure if that is in the 2024–25 period, Ms Britnell, but it was a decision of cabinet.

The CHAIR: Perhaps, Secretary – Deputy Chair, as I have said before, you have to ask questions that fall within the terms of reference. If you just reference it back to the correct year, you can proceed to ask the question.

Roma BRITNELL: So the review came about because of considerable flaws in child protection and it has been uncovered this year, I understand that –

Tony BATES: In July.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. All right. I will move off that then.

Jade BENHAM: I have just got one question – this is probably for the VSBA – about the capital upgrades program and the school buildings program. Was it – I was trying to take notes – 227-point-something million dollars for the capital upgrades program?

Tony BATES: Yes, I think that was the budget allocation from the 2024–25 budget.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. So does the completion of schools that have had master plans fall under the capital upgrades program, or does it fall under the capex program? Schools that have had master plans completed, with the view, I would imagine, of completing those master plans – which one does that fall under?

Joanne WANDEL: That is part of the upgrades and modernisation program, which is part of the capital program.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. And that was 227-point –

Joanne WANDEL: 226.7.

Jade BENHAM: 226.7.

Tony BATES: That was the total investment over a number of years. Of that 226.7, the amount budgeted to be spent in the 2024–25 financial year was \$24.6 million.

Jade BENHAM: So why are there schools, particularly in the regions, that still have classrooms being held together by chipboard and without air conditioning?

Joanne WANDEL: There are a range of capital and maintenance programs that are rolled out across Victoria. I think you are talking about specific examples. The first thing I will say is we have a rolling facilities evaluation process, which assesses the condition of all school buildings across Victoria –

Jade BENHAM: Yes, I get that. These are schools though that have had not one, but two master plans.

Joanne WANDEL: It is the department's requirement to balance the needs of around 1600 schools across Victoria. When there are not capital funds available for the implementation of those master plans, what we do is work with those schools through the rolling facilities evaluation program to upgrade and maintain those existing buildings on school sites.

Jade BENHAM: And how long does that normally take, given they have had two master plans and it has been 10 years that the kids have been sitting in particular classrooms like that?

Joanne WANDEL: The rolling facilities evaluation program is an assessment of all school buildings on a five-year cycle. But within that five-year period there are a range of what we call defects, which are identified at schools. So all defects that are structural –

Jade BENHAM: For example, white ants?

Joanne WANDEL: or that are going to impact the learning environment will need to be attended to within 12 months. And all defects which are rated 3 to 4 – there is a difference, though, between having a master plan which leans towards new school buildings versus the upgrade of existing buildings.

Jade BENHAM: But if the defects are that there are white ants and it has been like that for eight years and it is now being held together by chipboard, is that not cause for concern – that it has been like that for 10 years? Where does that fall in the program?

Tony BATES: It might be helpful if I just explain the whole maintenance pyramid, if that is okay.

Jade BENHAM: I would love someone to explain why this is still the way it is.

Tony BATES: Ms Del Monaco can check, but the value of the school assets across the state is around \$40 billion and there are 30,000 buildings, Jo? Something like that.

Joanne WANDEL: 36,000 buildings across the portfolio.

Jade BENHAM: And how many of those actual buildings, while we are on that, do not have air conditioning?

Tony BATES: I will come back to air conditioning. There is a multi-layered system. So every school, in the SRP funding – student resource package funding – gets maintenance funding for basic things like painting, maintaining gutters and various other things. That is determined by the number of students enrolled at the school and a couple of other factors, and also there are extra allowances depending on the size of the school grounds for mowing and all those sorts of things. Then we have the planned maintenance program. That is on top of that individual school funding. Ms Wandel and her team have a \$200 million per year –

Joanne WANDEL: \$110 million.

Tony BATES: Yes. Which, as Ms Wandel said, is related to the assessments we get in from the rolling facilities evaluation program. So there is a planned stream of work every month, I think, or quarter, where we look at projects – you know, repairs like the type you are describing – that need to happen. Then we have –

Roma BRITNELL: So is the allocation not enough? Because if it is taking eight years and we have got schools without air conditioning, we have got leaks in gymnasium roofs and children falling over and hurting themselves, and that funding is not actually meeting the timeframe of keeping children safe, is it not enough?

Tony BATES: Ms Britnell, that probably brings us to the emergency maintenance program. The planned maintenance program is for those things which are not the sorts of things you just described. We then have an emergency maintenance program: so for any situation like that where there is any sort of danger of children or staff being injured, then they can contact the VSBA and access the emergency maintenance program. Beyond that, we have got make-safe. Make-safe is when –

Roma BRITNELL: So is that when the chipboard comes in – rather than being able to upgrade something that has been built a long time ago and is no longer fit for purpose, we are just sticking chipboard up?

Tony BATES: Again, we are happy to take on notice the details of that particular school. I am very surprised to hear that there are white ants that have not been treated for eight years. And as I said, there are a number of different layers of program that can help to intervene in those sorts of circumstances.

Roma BRITNELL: Will you come back to us with how many out of those 32,000 schools do not have air conditioning?

Jade BENHAM: And are not compliant with disability access legislation.

Tony BATES: I think that we do have a disability compliance program.

Roma BRITNELL: So all schools are compliant with disability regulations?

Joanne WANDEL: We have an accessible buildings program, which is a capital program that all schools can apply to, and that there are no –

Roma BRITNELL: Can you just perhaps get back to us with how many are not disability accessible at a standard that we are requiring in this day and age? Would that be possible?

Joanne WANDEL: We can take that on question on notice.

Roma BRITNELL: That would be great.

Joanne WANDEL: With respect to air conditioning, what we can say is that air conditioning is provided to teaching staff and admin spaces in schools that are identified within the nationwide house energy rating – the NatHERS – climate zones 20 and 27, and those climate zones are primarily in the northern parts of the state where you would be expecting that we would be providing air conditioning. For schools that are not located within those two zones, we work with them to provide other cooling options such as ceiling fans, tree canopy protection –

Jade BENHAM: So do you have the number of classrooms that currently do not have air conditioning in this state?

Joanne WANDEL: The specific number of classrooms, we would need to take that on notice. But what we can say is that –

Roma BRITNELL: We might move on, because we will just get the number, and that is all we really need. The next question I have got is: the questionnaire indicates, on page 124, that the department currently has around 5000 FTEs, and this is almost double the number of 2012, which was 2831 FTEs. In the midst of a teacher recruitment crisis, why is the government prioritising bureaucracy over frontline services?

Tony BATES: Well, Ms Britnell, the first thing I would say is that the number of students in our system is very, very significantly larger than it was in 2012. So, as we have spoken about –

Roma BRITNELL: So that is equivalent growth, or is it –

Tony BATES: It is not only that, but there have been a number of what I would probably characterise as machinery-of-government changes. One of the things we have done –

Roma BRITNELL: The bureaucracy has got bigger.

Tony BATES: Well, the model we used to have was the school support service, which is our allied health workers – so speech therapists, psychologists, occupational therapists; in 2012 those staff were based in schools. They would be based in a school, and they would then support a network of schools. What we found was, to be direct, the schools where they based were getting really, really good service, and a number of schools in the network were not getting as much service. So we did what I would effectively call a machinery-of-government change where we transferred those roles out of schools and into the regional offices. So that is around –

Roma BRITNELL: So students are getting better mental health support in the schools, and better allied health support for students?

Tony BATES: It is definitely more equitable than it was under the old system. Really there has been no change in those numbers, but they get counted now in the regional office numbers rather than in the school-based numbers. I think that is around – Dr Howes is just showing me the numbers here – 600 positions. Yes, about 600 positions were transferred from being in schools to being in the department for annual report purposes. I would just point out that a lot of those that growth in numbers is –

Roma BRITNELL: So schools are feeling better supported and getting more equitable services, out in the regions in particular, where they are really needing that extra allied health support?

Tony BATES: The overall feedback we get is yes, compared to 10 years ago, when there were some schools that just could not get access to allied health services. With this change in the tasking and assignment model, that is a more equitable distribution of access to those services.

Roma BRITNELL: Okay. And the recent review of the administrative burden recommended that this be solved by adding even more staff to the department. Isn't it possible that the thousands of extra bureaucrats in the department are in fact responsible for the increased workloads on schools?

Tony BATES: I can ask Mr Robinson to talk to the administrative burden if you would like. Look, there are a range of things around record keeping, things like making sure that we have got safety plans for students. As you know, we have had a small number of tragic circumstances, some of them in both government and non-government schools, where students have been exposed to peanuts and there have been severe anaphylaxis incidents. So there is an increase in some of the record keeping we need to make sure that all students are being kept safe. But the independent review did recommend potentially getting more admin assistance to help teachers with some of those tasks, so it is something that we are alive to. I might just ask Mr Robinson to talk a little bit about –

Roma BRITNELL: I think you are talking about in the schools there, but this is referring to in the department. Teacher support in the classroom is not something I am arguing against at all.

Tony BATES: Part of what the admin review talks about how we do have a program called the support service for small schools. There are a number of things that principals and business managers need to do to comply with WorkCover requirements, child safety requirements and a whole lot of other things, so we already do run a program where we have a central admin bureau where, rather than every small school having to do all that themselves, they can delegate some of that work to some central offices, which we have spread across regional Victoria. I think there is one in Latrobe Valley and there is one in Ballarat to help support regional schools. The review of the admin burden recommends expanding that type of program so that some of those tasks that principals and school leaders are doing can be transferred to other people so they can focus more on educational leadership. It is a report that we are continuing to consider.

Roma BRITNELL: Yet we hear from principals, certainly in the regions where I frequent, that they are incredibly overburdened with the administrative challenges, and my experience on school council was doing

lots of that policy work for the school, which I would have thought the department would do. So that is not the experience that I am hearing about in the regions.

Tony BATES: I think you are picking up the point that the independent reviewer made in the report. There are a number of compliance things that can be done. The question is: do they need to be done by the school principals and the leadership team? I might ask Mr Robinson to very quickly talk about where we are in the implementation of the review.

David ROBINSON: Thanks, Secretary. The independent review undertook some extensive consultation over the back half of last year, and they did hear from principals and teachers about the issues that you have raised. From the report, we are implementing immediately, from the start of 2026, six of the recommendations. The first is going to your point, making sure that we have got clear tracking of the administrative and regulatory requirements of schools, making sure that we are tracking that and making that as streamlined as possible and ensuring that –

Roma BRITNELL: Perhaps you could give us the numbers of how many people have been allocated to the schools, particularly in the regions, who assist them with that administrative burden, because I am not seeing that.

Tony BATES: We can definitely come back with the numbers in, as I call it, that SASH program.

Roma BRITNELL: Allocated to the individual schools, though, so we can see that evidence that these schools which are really struggling, where principals are struggling and teachers are saying they have got too much regulatory compliance, have actually been given physical assistance, which is what I am hearing, in the classroom and at the school level, right across the state and right to the borders – like Portland and –

Tony BATES: Yes. We can definitely give you the details of the SASH sites spread across the state. The other thing I will say –

Roma BRITNELL: I actually want to hear what was allocated to each school so that we can see the difference made, so if you have got six teachers and one principal, that they actually have three extra people allocated to work on that regulatory burden. That is what I am hoping you just said.

Tony BATES: Well, it is a bureau, so the point is that there is a group of people –

Roma BRITNELL: So if one school is better at yelling, they will get more support than a school who is overwhelmed and just has not got the chance to even speak out.

Tony BATES: No. There is a bureau model. I can give you the list of the schools who are signed up to the bureau, so we can do that. These are the number of people –

Roma BRITNELL: So you have to sign up to get that assistance, and it does not go to every school?

Tony BATES: It is designed primarily for small schools.

Roma BRITNELL: Small, remote or both?

Tony BATES: Yes. Yes. Well, both. We can give you a list of the schools. It is not a compulsory service, it is an opt-in service for principals and school leaders. We can definitely give you a list of the number of people in each of the bureaus and then which are the schools that have asked to be working with and to have support from those services.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you so much, Chair, Secretary and officials. As much as I do love hearing about reducing admin burden for teachers, I want to move on to student learning, if that is okay. In the 2024–25 budget papers in that main table there, 1.7, it has got a description of the early years literacy assessment funding of \$8.2 million. I am very interested in this, with a daughter in prep and one in grade 2. Speaking of admin burden and getting footage of my daughter on camp on a flying fox, I am very happy that there is somebody

filling out the paperwork, by God, because that looked pretty scary. But on the early years literacy assessment, can you tell us a bit about this program and how it is supporting students with their learning?

Tony BATES: I will just ask Dr Howes to go through that in some detail.

Lauren KATHAGE: Mostly on the reading development, yes?

Tony BATES: It is interesting. We are evolving what we have been doing there, and we have got a new system that is rolling out that we have found lets teachers do those assessments much more quickly but still get the same level of accuracy.

Lauren KATHAGE: Is this the same as the year 1? This is different from the year 1 phonics –

Tony BATES: I will get Dr Howes to go through the details.

Lauren KATHAGE: Is this the same or different from the year 1 phonics assessment?

David HOWES: There is a year 1 phonics assessment that has been very widely adopted by Victorian schools, and it will be mandatory next year. But it has been very, very widely taken up by over 90 per cent.

Lauren KATHAGE: I have heard very positive feedback from my principals about that in terms of the time saved for teachers, and also for some schools who were never willing to spend that teacher time on it, the money saved from where they were buying supports. It has made a huge difference, so congratulations on that.

David HOWES: That is pleasing to hear, and that is consistent with what we hear. It was driven by two things. One was that we wanted to provide an assessment tool that more closely aligned with the revisions that have been made to the way in which reading will be taught in Victorian government schools, so that was an approach that put systematic synthetic phonics at the core and recommended to schools that they spend about 25 minutes on that critical element of reading. The assessment that was in place was a longer assessment, and it did not provide that same focus on establishing that crucial foundational element of knowledge of phonics. So we did move to implement that new year 1 check, and that has reduced the time that is required dramatically. Teachers are reporting that the data they get from that is very, very useful.

Of course part of the motivation of this is, as the Secretary said in his opening address, we think Victorian schools – principals and teachers – have done an extraordinary job, as evidenced by the data that we are seeing in both NAPLAN and the Attitudes to School survey. I want to start by acknowledging that. But as the Secretary also said, we are aware that the job is not finished, that there are still gaps that we want to address, and one of those is the continuing challenge of addressing the disadvantage that some students face. We know that one of the critical elements of that is providing all students, but especially those from a disadvantaged background, with that critical foundational phonics knowledge. This assessment provides teachers with a quick and accurate way to get access to that data so they are then able to put in place the supports that some students need more than others.

Lauren KATHAGE: In some ways it is a bit of an admin burden reduction as well, isn't it? I think it used to be 40 minutes and now it is 10 minutes or something like that.

David HOWES: Under 10 minutes. It was in that realm of 45 minutes to an hour. What that means is that teachers have got more time now to give individual attention to individual students who need that support. We have been very pleased with the feedback that we have got in the same way that you have – that overwhelmingly teachers have welcomed this and principals have as well.

Lauren KATHAGE: The early years literacy assessment is unlocking the key now for future learning, isn't it? How is it going to help throughout the education, looking at NAPLAN results and all that sort of thing?

David HOWES: It is a good question, because the early years of schooling and the acquisition of those foundational skills of literacy and numeracy we know play a critical role in a child's trajectory through school and indeed their capacity to become lifelong learners, which in the contemporary economy is going to be critical. But you cannot help a student develop those skills unless you know what they are lacking, and this is a diagnostic tool that does provide teachers with better information than they have had before.

The other thing that is proving really important in the way in which we are approaching the work, is that having a single tool that is being used across all schools means that schools can collaborate more closely and look at strategies that have been implemented in one school and talk about where they have worked and where they might need to be tweaked. They can work with similar schools – schools facing similar challenges – to share that kind of knowledge.

We think the information from the phonics assessment is going to be a critical part of addressing those areas where we still want to lift student performance and change not only the schooling trajectory but the life trajectory for students who might otherwise struggle.

Lauren KATHAGE: Are there any early indicators of what those areas might be or where the focus will go?

David HOWES: Well, again, what we know is that students who come from more disadvantaged backgrounds – not always, some students are able to achieve very highly – on the whole will face greater struggles. That provides us with the chance to do work with those individual students, or in small groups with the support that has been provided to enable that to happen, to be able to work out what is it that they had not been able to acquire in their first year of school. That is why we are rolling out assessments that schools will also be able to use with students who are in prep. But this gives schools a chance to evaluate after the student has been in school for a year or so, what is it that we really need to focus additional attention on to ensure that they have got the foundational skills in those two critical areas, particularly of reading and numeracy?

Lauren KATHAGE: Fantastic. You spoke about disadvantage, and we spoke about that earlier in terms of tier 2 for the disability inclusion. Question 2 of your questionnaire talks to the program being rolled out. I think you said, Mr Fraser, we were in the fifth year altogether. Can you speak a bit to how the rollout of the disability inclusion program is going across the schools?

Stephen FRASER: Yes, I am happy to take that. It is a fantastic indicator of the progress that the system has made. We are in year five now, and that means that we have every school in the state transitioned to that tier 2 funding that we mentioned before, but also every government school in the state has now transitioned to the disability inclusion profile, which is that really strength-based, functional-needs assessment of what students are excelling at and where they might need additional support based on the adjustments that schools are making to support their participation in learning.

I think really importantly, disability inclusion in its fifth year is not just what happens inside the schools but it is what is happening in the system around schools as well. We have a range of system initiatives: professional learning, coaching and partnerships between schools that are really supporting that approach. A great example is the inclusion outreach coaches. These are specialised teachers based in specialist schools. They have significant expertise in teaching and supporting students with disability. They now work as part of their day-to-day work with other schools – mainstream settings – in their network. So they spend one day a week in their specialist home school setting, and they spend four days a week working and consulting with teachers in mainstream settings, passing on their knowledge and skills but also working in really practical ways to support those classroom teachers with the challenges that they are facing and supporting the children in their care to really excel and meet their potential. That is just one example.

I think you asked about the indicators of success. One thing that we are really seeing is teachers increasingly reporting that their awareness of inclusion adjustments is making a difference for their students. It is a real shift in practice and disposition in the system. Not all teachers have benefited in their early career education from knowledge of supporting students with disability. That is a compulsory part of initial teacher education, but it is not really dealt with in the kind of depth that would support all teachers to build inclusive classrooms and really respond in detail to the needs of their students. The role of those inclusion outreach coaches, the additional professional learning – we have a graduate certificate in inclusive education, a masters in inclusive education. We are now at the point where we have got, I think the figure is, over 500 teachers who have successfully completed those qualifications in our system. That is transformational. That number of teachers working across our system, working in partnership with their colleagues, supporting other schools – 520 is the precise figure.

The other really important initiative is the diverse learners hub. That is about building our expertise, our knowledge, as a system in supporting diverse learners, those students with neurodiversity, autism and ADHD,

and really making sure that the kinds of practices that we know are supportive for those students and good for all students are embedded in our classrooms. That work – the expertise, the knowledge – has been developed through partnerships with Amaze, ICAN and the Association for Children with Disability, who work in partnership with us through an expert advisory group. They are real key partners in the delivery of disability inclusion and make a real difference with the contributions that they make. It is fantastic to see disability inclusion reach that stage of implementation. Really importantly, five years in is not job done. It is simply that all schools are now working with the new model. We will have some way to go before all students in the state have transitioned from the former program for students with disability funding model to tier 3 disability inclusion funding, and that is going to take at least through to the end of this decade, where we have got that full system-wide transition in place. It is a work in progress, but one that is transforming outcomes for students in Victoria.

Lauren KATHAGE: Speaking with my schools about the process, it is quite rigorous for that tier of funding. I am just wondering about the process, I guess, for the coming pre-prep year, or working with kindies so that students come to school ready with appropriate funding and needs understood or adjustments understood before they start.

Stephen FRASER: Yes, and it really does build on the transition statement that has been in place from kindergartens and early childhood educators – writing again that strength-based assessment and description of students, their needs, what they like, what they are great at, and passing that transition statement over to the foundation or the prep teacher. That gives that prep teacher a real leg-up in understanding that student's strengths and what kind of adjustments they might need when they enter primary school. But we do also require that we have evidence of the unique adjustments that the schools are making. On the one hand, it is a real asset to rely on that knowledge from the early childhood educator and to benefit from that professional transfer of knowledge. But we also do not want to make assumptions about the supports that students need. A similar example is when students transition from year 6 into year 7. They are in a different environment. They are exposed to different subjects, different teachers and different peers around them. That is going to lead to different adjustments to support their inclusion in schools. On the one hand, we want to benefit from that knowledge. On the other, we do not want to assume too much. So we do rely on schools documenting and really collecting that evidence of the adjustments that they are making to inform the disability inclusion profile. Typically, that is about 10 weeks worth of evidence that schools collect. And then they sit down with the family, with the student, with the classroom teachers, with any allied health staff who might be involved in that child's learning and then say, 'Well, what is it that we need to put in place to ensure the success of this young person? And then what does that look like in our school?' Obviously, it is different in a specialist school environment than it is in a mainstream school environment. What does that cost? What are the professional workforces that we need to engage to really provide that support? That then informs the disability inclusion profile and that tier 3 funding that then flows through to the school and the student.

Lauren KATHAGE: What are the typical sorts of supports or adjustments that are made for students?

Stephen FRASER: Referencing that multi-tiered systems of support approach that I mentioned earlier, tier 1 universal supports, tier 2 more targeted supports and tier 3 more individual supports. It really depends on the young person. So a student who is deaf or hard of hearing, for instance, may require the assistance of an Auslan interpreter in the classroom. That is a really practical tier 3 intervention that benefits that student. A tier 1 intervention for the same student, if they are hard of hearing, might be a teacher wearing a lanyard microphone to support that child to hear in the classroom. It might involve the student moving closer to the front of the class. There is a range of adjustments that a student or a school or a teacher puts in place to benefit that young person. It might involve the employment of education support staff or the addition of additional therapeutic practices through an occupational therapist or a speech pathologist delivered in the school, supporting the classroom teacher, for instance. It really is that tailored, unique, strength-based approach to ensuring the student succeeds.

Lauren KATHAGE: It sounds like a bit of a twin-track approach in terms of disability-specific supports for the student as well as some changes or adjustments by the surrounding environment, being the school, as well. Beyond the physical – I know in my schools I have seen ramps going in and the like, and you spoke about some of those teaching method changes. Are there other adjustments that schools are making to be more inclusive of students with disability more generally?

Stephen FRASER: Yes, there are. Ms Wandel referenced the disability capital project before, those funds that support schools to be DDA compliant. The adjustments that schools make range from the physical infrastructure through to the pedagogical through to the cultural through to engagement with families. A big part of that is just ensuring that when a student walks in the front door and they are enrolling and their family is enrolling, the message is 'How can we support you?' – and then tailoring interventions to that student's specific needs, and they do vary. We can make some generalisations, particularly around the physical access needs, but when it comes to learning and the strengths that students have or their interests, that really is about tailoring to the individual.

Lauren KATHAGE: Has the department put much thought in terms of different cultural approaches or attitudes towards disability and how that might affect a preppy starting school?

Stephen FRASER: Absolutely. There are some cultures that are part of our school communities with different attitudes. There is stigma attached to disability in some communities. Working with leaders in those communities and working with families to ensure that, whatever the cultural background, those families feel welcome in the school environment and that we work in whatever way is going to work for that family and that student to overcome those barriers, we take the time to work through that and have the conversations with the families, with the student and with the teachers to ensure that we are adjusting for those cultural differences. We do a lot of work with our Marrung central governance committee as part of our Marrung education plan to make sure that we are working with First Nations communities, for instance, who, again, are over-represented in disability statistics. We know that accommodating for both the cultural inclusion aspects as well as the disability inclusion aspects and doing that in partnership and doing it together is a really important aspect of ensuring better outcomes for First Nations students with disability.

Lauren KATHAGE: I guess a bit of a cost-of-living thing as well for families with students with a disability: access to out-of-school-hours care being more introduced now I think has been really important to allow parents to work who maybe have not been able to work until their child started school et cetera. What is the rollout like there with the out-of-hours care for the specialist schools?

Stephen FRASER: I might ask my colleague Dr Howes to speak to that element.

David HOWES: Thank you for that question, which does highlight the gap and one of the additional challenges that parents, carers, families and students with disabilities face. It is referred to as high-intensity out-of-school-hours care. It builds on a pilot program, which started with five schools. That was very successful. Parents really did, as you would expect, welcome that program. Twenty-five schools are now hosting high-intensity out-of-school-hours services, and we want to increase that further. These are services that are by necessity specialised for students with disability. It is not as if you can roll out the same service for everybody. There are particular things that need to be taken into account, and they focus on really offering very strong learning and social activities. They perform two functions: one is providing enrichment for those students who participate in the program themselves, and I think, as you indicated, it really allows parents and carers fuller workforce participation, so it is playing both of those important roles. 1360 students have attended a high-intensity OSHC service so far in 2025. Seventy-nine per cent of the parents or carers with children who accessed those services were indeed in the workforce or looking for work, and 12 per cent were studying. I think that data indicates that it is a service that is meeting a real need.

Lauren KATHAGE: I think I read that Marra in Kalkallo, when it opens next year, will have out-of-school care, will it? It is a new specialist school opening in Kalkallo next year.

David HOWES: I will have to check.

Lauren KATHAGE: I am just thinking about parents in the outer suburbs who have to commute to work. I think it becomes especially important for them, if their child is at a specialist school, to have that access. Who provides that, then? For government schools often they have external providers. Who is providing it in the specialist schools?

David HOWES: We contract third-party providers.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. So in terms of then the students with disability and attitudes towards disability in the schools, I think we heard a bit about the education of new teachers and that it is now a

compulsory part of first year or initial learner education. Do we ever see much migration of workers from the disability sector into taking up scholarships to become teachers or seeking to work in the classroom more full time?

Stephen FRASER: We do; we see a significant transfer. One of the things I mentioned before was the disability inclusion profile that is completed by, or really led by, a disability inclusion facilitator workforce. That is contracted at the moment through Australian Healthcare Associates, but that facilitator workforce is a new workforce that has come about through disability inclusion, and we do see a fairly significant transfer from teaching staff across to disability inclusion facilitators but then back into the teaching workforce, often into senior leadership roles in inclusive practice in our system. We also see significant inclusion of other workforce –

The CHAIR: Mr Fraser, I am going to stop you there to keep to time. The committee is going to take a short break before resuming its hearing at 3:15 pm.

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

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. I want to talk about child safety. Complaints around child safety to the regulator have risen 45 per cent since 2018, while enforcement actions fell 67 per cent. Can you explain why and how this is?

Tony BATES: Thank you for the question, Ms Benham. The number of complaints rising is a reflection on the growth in the sector. As we know in that time period you mentioned, there has been a very significant expansion in the number of providers coming in, a very significant growth in for-profit, ASX-listed private equity companies coming in. I might just ask Deputy Secretary Fitzgerald to talk a little bit about enforcement action. Of course we did have the reforms passing the Parliament last week where we hosted the national law, which will give us a number of important new levers. You will be aware there was a two-year stop clock – the regulator could not take action if it was more than two years after the incident happened. Some of those reforms are really important to allow us to look more closely at things. But I will just ask Deputy Secretary Fitzgerald to talk a bit further.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: In the publication of enforcement actions in the reporting period for the period July 2024 through to December 2024, the enforcement actions were 11 under the national law and three under the *Children's Services Act*. And in the second half of the reporting period, under the national law there were 15 enforcement actions and under the *Children's Services Act* one. Now, those are the published enforcement actions. It is worth calling out that there is a number of enforcement actions that, under the national law, are not permitted to be published, and I can take you through the reason for that.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. Just quickly. That would be helpful.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Under the national law, so this is the Education and Care Services National Law which is the applied law scheme nationally, which is hosted in Victoria, the regulatory authority both here in Victoria and all the other state and territory regulatory authorities, are subject to strict limits in relation to the publication of enforcement actions. To get a bit technical for a moment, the law prohibits the publication of information which could identify or lead to the identification of an individual other than an approved provider or nominated supervisor, or a person who is being prosecuted for an offence against that national law, or a person in management or control of an education and care service. The result of that is that prohibitions and enforceable undertakings for individuals are not able to be published. So that is part of our enforcement action done by the regulator that does not get published.

Jade BENHAM: So that is why there is such a big gap.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: That is right.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. No worries. So how is the department going to ensure – as you mentioned, there was a 600-page block of legislation rushed through last week – that the new offence of inappropriate conduct in early childhood settings is enforced consistently across all services? As you said, there are a lot of newcomers to the sector.

Tony BATES: Again, Ms Benham, I know we are partly outside the period, but after 30 June the government announced additional investment in the regulator, so there are an extra 60 authorised officers being recruited at the moment. That will take us from about 100 authorised officers to about 160 authorised officers. That is very much designed so that we can up the tempo, particularly of unannounced inspections in services.

Jade BENHAM: Sorry, those 60 extra resources that you mentioned, did they come about as part of the rapid response review?

Tony BATES: In response to the rapid review, yes.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Was that the department's recommendation? Can you run me through how that worked? I just want to get to how that number was arrived at.

Tony BATES: Again, I probably cannot go into details of advice to the minister in relation to cabinet consideration, but we did request a lift in the number of authorised officers, particularly, as I said, because this is such a strongly growing sector and with a number of, as I said, for-profit ASX private equity firms coming in. There are some of those providers that do provide good quality services, but our intel says that they are more risky, so as that portion of the sector continues to grow, we are keen to have more authorised officers being able to up the tempo of inspection.

Jade BENHAM: So the 60 new authorised officers are just the beginning to get across the sector.

Tony BATES: Yes. I will say, I am in fairly ongoing and vigorous discussions with the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth used to contribute to the cost of the regulators in all states and territories. That funding ended in 2018–19, so I am in pretty regular discussion with the Commonwealth secretary about the importance of the Commonwealth commencing a retribution into that regulatory effort.

Jade BENHAM: Could that be why there has been such an increase in the incidents that we mentioned previously, the complaints to the regulator?

Tony BATES: It is partly about the expansion of the sector, but also we have been doing quite a lot of work putting information out to both staff and parents, effectively saying that if you see something and you are not sure, contact the regulator. We are trying to encourage reporting.

Jade BENHAM: Okay.

Tony BATES: You know, I know it sounds unusual, but I actually welcome that there are more reports coming in, because it gives us more intelligence to direct the regulator's activity.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. And as you mentioned earlier, the legislation that went through over the last fortnight was rushed through – 600 pages of legislation – because of the government's failure to meet deadlines. So where were the delays and bottlenecks with the response to the rapid child safety review?

Michael GALEA: Point of order.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea, on a point of order.

Michael GALEA: As Ms Benham knows, this is well outside the scope of the 2024–25 financial year.

Jade BENHAM: The department Secretary actually referred to that legislation.

Michael GALEA: He was responding to your earlier question, on 2018.

Jade BENHAM: No, the department Secretary brought it up.

The CHAIR: I am going to rule on the point of order. I do want to remind members – I know you have some really great questions – they have to be tied back into the terms of reference, on the period of time that we are looking at.

Roma BRITNELL: You cannot ask the –

The CHAIR: No, Deputy Chair, I am ruling. So if you can tie it back to the terms of reference, Ms Benham, and proceed to ask the question.

Roma BRITNELL: You cannot ask a question of what the Secretary has referenced? You cannot refer back to what the Secretary has referenced?

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Deputy Chair, I have ruled on the point of order. If you want to continue.

Jade BENHAM: It is okay. Thank you, Chair. I will move on. How will the department evaluate whether the amendments to the national law that we were discussing previously actually improve child safety outcomes in practice rather than just on paper and in the data?

Tony BATES: Again, I am not sure if we are in the 2024–25 space. I can ask Deputy Secretary Fitzgerald, Chair, to talk to some of that.

The CHAIR: Do you just want to clarify that, Ms Benham?

Jade BENHAM: Well, we have just been discussing the national law. I want to dig down into that national law and how the department plans on evaluating it. I get the data – we can all see that – but how is that going to be implemented in a practical sense for child safety?

The CHAIR: For the period we are reviewing?

Jade BENHAM: Yes.

Tony BATES: Chair, I might just ask Deputy Secretary Fitzgerald to talk about the things that we did in 2024–25 and that might help sort of indicate a bit of the path that we are trying to go down.

Jade BENHAM: Great.

The CHAIR: That would be perfect.

Tony BATES: I think as I said in my presentation, we exceeded the inspection visits target by around 20 per cent during the year, and that was before we had additional resources. But Deputy Secretary Fitzgerald, do you want to expand a little, please?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Absolutely. So just to speak to the operational targets and throughput that the regulatory authority does, the target percentage of approved eligible services assessed and rated was 25 per cent, so 25 per cent of eligible services would be assessed and rated within the period. That was exceeded with a result of 28.6 per cent. As the Secretary says, the target number of inspections done of early childhood services was 4000, which was exceeded with a result of 4729 inspections. The target average number of days taken to report an issue, a notice of quality rating, was 50 days, with a result of 54.4 days. The reason why that one is slightly over target is because a larger number of inspections and compliance visits were done in the year, so it was a trade-off between the speed to report and the number of inspections done.

What we would expect to see over time is the frequency of those targets lifting. With more resources coming in, in practice what it means is that an authorised officer can be in a service more often, and so we would see those numbers lift. In addition, to answer your question in a generalised way, which would apply to the reporting period, the efficacy of the particular regulatory tools that authorised officers have at their disposal in services is something that we get regular feedback from authorised officers about, and that input feeds into the national regulatory policy process.

Jade BENHAM: I am going to move on, just in the interests of time. I want to talk about teacher lesson plans. The rollout of Victorian lesson plans has blown out by \$1.6 million and the ARC 4.0 platform is 12 months behind schedule. What has been the actual application in classes? The *Age* stated that the lesson plans have been downloaded 80,000 times, but how many schools have actually formally adopted them?

Tony BATES: Thanks, Ms Benham, for the question. ARC is a website where we put all our learning materials. ARC is finished and it is fully operational. Some of those numbers you are referring to – we are expanding and modifying it now to be the hosting point for the lesson plans. ARC was built before lesson plans

were approved by government, so we are continuing to expand it so the lesson plans can be easily accessible – and as I said I think in the presentation, for all schools in Victoria, so government and non-government. I know in some other jurisdictions non-government schools cannot access the department's resources. Our view is that we want to support all schools and every student. I might just ask Dr Howes to talk a bit about the usage and uptake of lesson plans.

David HOWES: Thanks for the question. Up until the end of June this year, we had released nearly 800 lesson plans, with the primary focus being on support for the new phonics program, order in English, and in mathematics. They have been viewed half a million times and downloaded 60,000 times, and of course this was up till June next year, so a lot of that will be –

Tony BATES: June this year.

David HOWES: What did I say?

Tony BATES: Next year.

David HOWES: June this year – because it will be in preparation for the 2026 academic year, and they are preparing their teaching and learning programs for next year. Certainly the response that we have had to those lesson plans has been very strong.

Jade BENHAM: You have got the views and the downloads. Have you got any data about how many lesson plans have been used in classrooms?

David HOWES: No, not at the moment, because –

Jade BENHAM: Do teachers report on whether they have actually used them or not? It is one thing to go and have a look –

David HOWES: It varies so much. Some schools, we know, are using them and are using them thoroughly. Others are using them to prepare their program before next year.

Jade BENHAM: Do you have the numbers on how many schools have formally adopted them?

David HOWES: I do not have that to hand.

Jade BENHAM: Are you able to supply that? Is that data you would have?

David HOWES: Well, we do not normally track every lesson that people are delivering, so we would not have that easily to hand.

Jade BENHAM: Given the investment, though, are there no KPIs to measure whether it has been successful?

David HOWES: We have certainly got an evaluation program, because of course we want to know the effectiveness of their use. We also want the feedback on where they could be improved. So that program will be evaluated.

Jade BENHAM: How do you measure if it has been successful if you do not know how many schools have actually formally adopted it and how many classrooms they are being used in?

David HOWES: Because we have got a number of ways of getting that feedback already through the network meetings that we have.

Jade BENHAM: So you do have that data?

David HOWES: We have got feedback on the extent to which schools are becoming familiar with them, the extent to which they are planning on either using them now or implementing them next year. There is an evaluation that is underway, and we will look to that evaluation to provide us with the key feedback on the program.

Jade BENHAM: What has been some of the feedback on the Victorian lesson plans? According to the Grattan Institute, a lot of teachers and school leaders say they avoid government resources because they perceive the quality to be low. So what has the feedback been?

David HOWES: The feedback that I have had is that these are the best that are available at the moment, and one of the reasons that that is the case is they were developed by practising teachers. The feedback I have had has been overwhelmingly positive on those lesson plans from schools who are using them and who are planning on using them.

Jade BENHAM: What was the cost to develop the Victorian lesson plans?

David HOWES: I have to take that – I will see if I have got that to hand –

Tony BATES: Just while Dr Howes is looking for that, I know we have got that somewhere in the information here.

Jade BENHAM: I am happy to take that on notice because I have actually got a couple of other ones.

Tony BATES: I will just say, Ms Benham, and I will not name the jurisdiction, but I have had a discussion with some of my secretary colleagues, and there is one state where they had done a lot of lesson plans, and they had to junk them and start again because of the sort of feedback you were getting –

Jade BENHAM: Okay. I am actually just concerned with Victoria at the moment.

Tony BATES: As am I. As Dr Howes said, we get pretty strong qualitative – We are early in the process, so we are at that early phase of looking at downloads and views.

Jade BENHAM: Yes.

Tony BATES: We are getting qualitative feedback at the moment, and the qualitative feedback is very positive. As we move into next year, we will start to try and –

Jade BENHAM: When are we able to see some of that data?

Tony BATES: Again, I think, as Dr Howes said, we expect a lot of the lesson plans will go into classroom usage in 2026, and we will be trying to figure out ways to track that detail.

Jade BENHAM: So this time next year we will actually have some real-time data on that?

Tony BATES: Well, I have asked for that, so yes, I hope so.

Jade BENHAM: Great. I want to talk about the changes to the schools resourcing package, and this might be another question for Dr Howes, and this goes to the P–12 complexity allowance that is being phased out over the next few years. P–12 colleges, particularly in rural and regional areas, which is where most of them are, are very, very concerned at a reduction in the P–12 complexity allowance. It will mean that these schools will not be able to maintain a level of face-to-face teaching, so there will be less teachers in classrooms. How is the department going to fill this gap?

Tony BATES: I might ask Deputy Secretary Del Monaco to speak to this one. She is the SRP specialist. I will just say there are a number of associated reforms. Again, I am conscious that this is outside the period, but I know it comes from some work we did in 2025. The process for small schools is they overspend their budget, and rather than making them pay it back next year we just write it off, up to a particular point.

Jade BENHAM: So shouldn't you just increase that budget, if you are continually doing that?

Tony BATES: Well, it is not every year, and it depends. It is related to student enrolment fluctuations. Of course schools staff up at the start of the year, and then sometimes they get more students and some families move, and this is particularly an issue for small schools. We will be extending that same write-off arrangement to the P–12 colleges. The analysis that we have done indicated that the P–12 complexity allowance was basically a duplicate of a number of other SRP allowances – particularly, there are regional allowances and small school allowances. We did a whole lot of econometric modelling, which showed that, to repeat myself, it

was a duplicate. But we will extend that automatic write-off to P–12 schools, which in practice is going to go a fair way to replacing that funding, which is, I think, dropping at \$25,000 per year, roughly.

Andrea DEL MONACO: Between \$16,000 and \$25,000 per year.

Jade BENHAM: That is a lot of money for small schools.

Tony BATES: For a very small school, it is, but most of the P–12s have got 200-plus enrolments – 150, 200 – and that is small in the scheme of a secondary school. But we think that that policy adjustment we have done will buffer the impact for those schools.

Jade BENHAM: So the schools that are very concerned about this, are their concerns justified?

Tony BATES: I think without understanding that other change that we have done, I think they have not understood the full package of supports that are available to them.

Jade BENHAM: Will they be able to maintain face-to-face learning in their classrooms?

Tony BATES: I am very confident they will.

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Can we go back to lesson plans for a moment? Can I ask why the department did not buy an off-the-shelf lesson plan, like Ochre Education, for example, instead of reinventing the wheel? Or is this one of those ones that had to have been done again?

Tony BATES: I will again ask Dr Howes to expand, but it is substantial, because we have the Victorian curriculum. We have modified the Australian curriculum to be what we think is a better version in Victoria, and so the lesson plans are aligned to both the Victorian curriculum and the explicit teaching reforms that Dr Howes just referred to a little bit earlier. David?

David HOWES: Yes, thanks, Secretary. That was certainly one of the key elements in the thinking. We did contract out some of the work, so we are not presuming there is no expertise outside the department, but we also did want to have a very strong role for Victorian teachers, especially in the rollout of the development of the new work around phonics, which reflected the changed reading position. The feedback we have had, especially on the Phonics Plus material, that comprehensive plan, we have provided the resources as well as the lesson plans to go with it. The capacity for schools to purchase those has been overwhelmingly positive so far.

Jade BENHAM: So there are no schools in Victoria that use Ochre that you know of – no government schools?

David HOWES: No. I am sure there are some that have used – there are some individual teachers that are accessing those resources. And of course this was one of the drivers for the development of the lesson plans. We are not mandating them, but we are strongly encouraging schools to take a collaborative approach because the evidence does suggest – and this is the direction that more and more schools are heading in – that the more teachers work together on a common plan within a school or across school, the more efficiencies are generated and the greater the level of effectiveness. We did not want to have the situation where teachers are continuing – and this brings us back to our discussion about workload – to go and search out their own resources, whether that be Ochre or anyone else. We wanted to provide a bank of centralised high-quality resources that had been quality-assured that were available to every Victorian government school, and therefore –

Jade BENHAM: I am sorry, I did ask about the cost to develop this earlier. What was the figure?

Tony BATES: I think it was about \$16 million.

Jade BENHAM: About \$16 million.

Tony BATES: David has just got the number there.

David HOWES: Yes, it is \$16.4 million.

Tony BATES: \$16.4 million.

Jade BENHAM: \$16.4 million. And how much will it be by the time it is implemented into classrooms? Is that just the bill?

Tony BATES: That is the cost of developing the products. That is developing products, publishing and having them on the website where they are accessible free of charge to all schools in Victoria, both government schools and non-government schools. I might just say we are aware that some schools have been purchasing products from – we get into licensing issues where teachers get into trouble if they share those commercial products, whereas what we are trying to do is make it free and accessible to every teacher in Victoria.

Jade BENHAM: An open platform?

Tony BATES: Yes.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Secretary. I am going to go straight to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, secretaries and officials. I refer to budget paper 3 on page 15. I note that it says funding was delivered to support the expansion of the Glasses for Kids program to more schools. I also know that in my electorate at Westall Primary School, which I have attended too, I could see the happy, smiling faces of the parents, the teachers and also the kids who are getting their glasses. Secretary, through you, how many schools have benefited from this expansion?

Tony BATES: Thank you, Mr Tak. I will ask Deputy Secretary Fraser to go to this issue, but it is a really important program. A lot of us can remember having friends at school who – I was walking after school one day, and I said to one of my friends, ‘What’s the time on the town hall clock?’ and he said, ‘What are you talking about?’ He could not see the town hall clock. Particularly with young children, and particularly in the more disadvantaged communities, it can be quite some time before parents take them for screening or even know that there is an issue. The glasses in schools program picks up those students early and gives them access to free or very, very low cost glasses. It is really important to help them be able to really fully engage in what is going on in the classroom and then develop their literacy. Deputy Secretary Fraser, could you just talk a bit about the rollout and the number of schools, please?

Stephen FRASER: Thank you, Secretary. Thank you, Mr Tak, for the question. Glasses for Kids we have talked about at this table in previous years. At that point the program was being rolled out to just under 300 schools – 297. The additional funding secured through the budget, the \$6.8 million, has allowed the program to be expanded to a total of 770 schools, which is just fantastic – another almost 400 schools across the state. They are schools in low SES communities. Every student in prep to year 3 in those schools is screened for any vision issues, and then, if they are identified, they are provided with free glasses and free lenses to meet their prescription. That screening, the testing, the provision and the dispensing of glasses are all part of the program. It is delivered in partnership with State Schools’ Relief and, as the Secretary said, is delivering some really outstanding outcomes, not just for students – the learning benefits of being able to see are pretty clear – but for families as well. The cost of glasses and replacement pairs of glasses all adds up over time, and that is exactly what we are seeing.

In August this year the Deputy Premier and minister went out to the Victorian College for the Deaf to announce the delivery of 10,000 pairs of glasses under the program. What we saw out there – we talk about students like Toby, a year 7 student who is hard of hearing and requires an Auslan interpreter to support his education. He was not able to go to a standard optometrist and have that Auslan interpreter there. Instead the optometrist came out to the College for the Deaf. An Auslan interpreter there supported Toby and his family to get the glasses that he needed, and that is now supporting his education. During 2024 alone, 110 schools were visited right across the state, more than 6700 students received vision screening and over 1800 free pairs of glasses were dispensed. That is really quite indicative of what we are seeing across the whole program. Roughly one in four students who are screened end up requiring glasses, which if you think about the numbers across the state across 770 schools, it really adds up to a lot more students needing glasses and being supported to see properly in their education as a direct result of this program.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Mr Fraser. Back to the Secretary: in your presentation you outlined other ongoing cost-of-living support for families of Victorian students, such as the school breakfast clubs, the glasses for kids, which you just answered before, free period products and the affordable school uniform program. Can you explain how these programs are helping students and their families?

Tony BATES: Thanks, Mr Tak. It is a really important support we have for children in our schools. I might again ask Mr Fraser to talk about the affordable uniform program and the partnership with State Schools' Relief. As well as providing materials, uniforms, bags and other things to students, it also goes to removing the stigma. Children turn up in uniforms that look like all the other kids' uniforms, and they can participate fully in school life. Deputy Secretary Fraser, can you talk a bit about that, and then Mr Tak, I might after that ask Deputy Secretary Del Monaco to talk about the school savings bonus, if that would help as well. Could you talk about the core programs, Stephen?

Stephen FRASER: Thank you, Secretary. There are a couple of programs mentioned in there that are providing really significant support to families and to students. The Secretary talked about affordable school uniforms, as did you, which is really leveraging the partnership that Victorian government schools have with State Schools' Relief. State Schools' Relief was started in the Great Depression by teachers out in Elsternwick, and it has really just gone from strength to strength over the years. The budget commitment in 2023–24 saw an additional \$32.9 million invested, which together with previous investments represents over \$75 million invested in the affordable school uniforms program, and it is all delivered through that partnership with State Schools' Relief.

What we have seen over recent years, particularly with the cost-of-living crisis, is that demand for uniforms, workboots and underwear and all kinds of supports that really ensure that students are able to participate in education equally and without that stigma, which the Secretary mentioned, is increasing. Unfortunately demand is increasing, and high demand means that more families are needing to utilise the support offered by State Schools' Relief. Again, as the Secretary mentioned, delivery of the program and how it is done to avoid that stigma is really important. Principals make the applications to State Schools' Relief on behalf of families. They work with families. They see where the need is, particularly for those students and families in ongoing duress and need but also for those families requiring emergency relief, whether it is their out-of-home care status; refugee status; students experiencing homelessness or families experiencing homelessness; family violence; fires, whether it is a house fire or a natural disaster; financial hardship; family illness; or any other kind of emergency. Principals spot that need and they make the application directly to State Schools' Relief on behalf of the family and then whatever that is – it might be uniform support, it might be additional clothing or it might be workboots for a student enrolled in VET – it is delivered to the school in a plain package and the family then comes and collects that package. All of that is done without stigma and without shame, supporting students to participate in education.

The other program that you mentioned is really focused on the breakfast clubs, which is just outstanding. The Secretary mentioned in his opening remarks that we have hit the 60-million-meals mark this year, which is a huge number, and I need to pay tribute to Foodbank, our delivery partner in that program. The breakfast club program has been expanded through an additional \$21.1 million in the 2024–25 state budget, which builds on the initial \$141.2 million invested in 2016 – so a significant \$160 million-plus investment to reach that 60 million meal mark. I think the thing to say about the breakfast club program, though, is it is not just breakfasts. Schools have significant flexibility in the food products that they order, when they arrive and the quantity that they arrive in, and schools use the support through Foodbank to deliver not just breakfast but to deliver school lunches, to create take-home meal packages, and again, similar to the program with State Schools' Relief, really tailoring the support to individual student and family needs.

The other aspect to the school breakfast club program is that it is a universal program in every school that offers it. That additional funding that I mentioned before has allowed us to expand the program to 1200 schools. We had 1000 at the outset, so an additional 200 schools have now either joined or are on a waitlist to join the program, and all of those schools will be participating by June next year. When a school signs up to the program it is all in: the meals are available to every student in that school. Again, it is really about addressing stigma and ensuring that no student misses out. It is a fantastic program that is supporting so many students to participate, and for schools where the program is in play it has really supported increased engagement, increased engagement in learning and increased community participation, which is a really, really important factor. I might just pause there and bring in the school saving bonus and Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund.

Tony BATES: Mr Tak, if it is helpful, Deputy Secretary Del Monaco can talk about the school saving bonus. Andrea can go through some of the numbers, but I think it was \$85 million spent on uniforms across the state. It is really, really impactful stuff. I know from talking to a number of business owners who are working with the program, they were saying things like parents were coming in and they were buying better quality shoes. I am not pushing Clarks or anything like that as a brand plug, but you know, when there were the cheap shoes and the better quality shoes, with the school saving bonus they were buying the better quality products and they were lasting longer. So there are just some really positive things. But Andrea, if you could just go through some of the highlights of the school saving bonus.

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes. It was announced in the 2024–25 budget and provided nearly \$300 million to help families with the cost of education. This was the \$400 per child, so if you had three children that would be \$1200. The support was provided to nearly 700,000 students in the government system and 44,000 in the non-gov system, so it is a really significant number of people that have benefited from this program. It was for the 2025 school year, but people were provided with their voucher in November of 2024. It was for school uniforms, textbooks, camps, school activities and graduations. Look, we worked closely with stakeholders. Parents wanted choice in what they could do, so in the design we included textbooks, as a result of feedback from community, and they wanted to be able to articulate how much each individual could spend on each thing. And it was redeemable. The schools have their service providers that provide those things, so each school had its own relationship with the supplier, and we worked with those. In rural places that might be the small newsagent in a small town, so it was not just the big providers that were providing the supports.

The important part about the policy design was that you could spend that money up to 30 June, but the money does not expire. An important part of the program was that all that money then goes into the family's account, and the family can then spend that money forever. It will not ever expire. They can use that for excursions. Families would have chosen to wait and hold that for graduation, or you know, in year 6 and year 9 there are quite significant camp programs, so you could have potentially pooled your money from a couple of children to support the investment you may have wanted in a camp program. The important part is it does not expire; you do not lose it. If one child leaves the school, it can go to their sibling. If that child is leaving permanently and there are no siblings, then it is left for the school to then use the same policy intent to provide it to other students in need. From a spend perspective, \$85 million was spent on school uniforms, \$32 million on textbooks and then a significant amount on camps, activities and sports. But that is continuing to be spent as people roll through the year and into next year.

Look, it did involve a fair bit of work from our schools and our business managers, and we want to acknowledge and thank them for the work that they did, but it was a really important initiative, and there was a lot of correspondence and feedback from families that really went to the Secretary's point in terms of how valuable it was in supporting them with their costs. For the non-government schools it was provided directly to schools, and then schools worked with – so it was means based; similar to the eligibility for the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund. Healthcare card and others were eligible, and then schools worked with the individual families to work out how to allocate that funding. The 2025–26 budget announced then the continuation of that \$400 payment for the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund. So if we look previously, in primary schools the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund provided families with \$154 in primary school and \$256 in secondary school, and that will then be increased to \$400 for primary and for secondary for those eligible students – so they are healthcare card holders and parenting payment, refugees and the like. So that will continue over the forward estimates period, and we are watching and tracking that carefully and supporting schools – where some schools have not spent all their funding, supporting them in terms of what activities they can use it for to provide for family members to spend that bonus.

Tony BATES: Thanks, Andrea. Mr Tak, the other one I will just call out, which we often do not think about, is VET in schools. So in 2024–25 the government continued to provide funding for students in Victorian government schools who are doing VET subjects, so we basically have covered all of the fee costs. We covered the fee costs and we are covering the cost of materials; as Mr Fraser indicated, through State Schools' Relief you can get things like steelcapped boots for students that are doing apprenticeships as part of their VET studies, so it is a really important thing to help families and students who are interested in that career path into the trades. Another thing, if we go back a number of years, is that there were requests for co-contributions for materials or fees, so that is all now provided free of charge – a really important thing we think helping with cost of living and making sure that students have the full choice of courses that they can pursue.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you so much. Your example of imagining a family with three children at primary school is spot on in terms of uniforms, because I remember when the Deputy Premier attended a school in Clarinda in my electorate, Athol Road Primary School, and when asked by the media a mum who was there actually said exactly what you said: she does not have to worry about having to spend on school uniforms because it has been looked after. What is even better now, because of the relationship between school and the provider, is the uniform actually can be tried – students can try them at their own school before making an order. That is a fantastic idea.

Transportation is also important. I refer to budget paper 3 on page 12, that notes that \$32.8 million is being invested to support and expand the students with disabilities transport program. Could you please explain how this program is helping students with disabilities and their families with cost of living?

Tony BATES: Thanks, Mr Tak. So again, it is a very important program to help students with disabilities get to school, particularly to get to specialist schools. As the committee may be aware, we have opened a number of new specialist schools over the last few years, so there are several new bus services that have come online to enable students to get to their new schools. I might just ask Deputy Secretary Del Monaco to talk a bit about that. The thing I will say is that with all of those services we have a very high priority on child safety; so there is a driver and a chaperone. All of those bus services that the Department of Education contracts for the disability program are fully fitted out with seatbelts, or for children in wheelchairs there are appropriate harness and safety fitting points. We are very, very clear and have high expectations in relation to the standard of those services. I might just ask Deputy Secretary Del Monaco to talk a bit more about that extra expansion in the 2024–25 financial year.

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes, and there was already base funding in the budget for that program. So in 2024–25 the students with disability transport program provided transport assistance to 8952 students attending 85 government specialist and integrated schools across Victoria. This ensured that the existing services were maintained and we were able to meet new demand in growth areas and cover bus contract increases that the department is legally obliged to cover. It is a really significant program. I think it was brought up earlier – the ability for a family to have their child picked up from home and then dropped off after means that they can actively participate in the workforce in a way that they would not have been able to if it was a 9 to 3 drop-off and pick-up. It is really significant from an economic perspective there. The program provided travel assistance to almost 65 per cent of all students attending a government specialist school. It is really quite a significant piece of infrastructure to support that. So we are very proud of the work that we do in that space, and it really does improve attendance at schools and support families in helping their children get to school.

Tony BATES: And I will say it is not the only method. One of my dearest friends has got a disabled son who was at East Burwood SDS. The bus program is really, really important, but also eventually teaching those children how to use public transport is really important as well, and a lot of the schools do that. It gives those students independence and it gives them mobility in their future lives. So when we think about transport, there is the bus program and there are a small number of students that we do taxi services for if they are really a long way from the school that they go to. It is mainly the bus program, but there are some other things. But, as I said, helping students to gain those everyday living skills is also a really important part of what the transport program in those schools focuses on.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you.

Mathew HILAKARI: I can speak directly to that. Warringa Park Cayleys Road campus is a real beneficiary of students being able to use the public transport system. I was at their graduation on Friday, and it was a very happy and tearful moment – students graduating after 13 years at Warringa Park School. People listening will know the school because Snoop Dogg attended the campus, if that gives a memory jolt for everyone. But that specifically is a school which is in a more rural area in the electorate that I represent, and it gives students the opportunities to take and navigate the public transport system as well as using school buses. It is a really big deal for that life experience. And they just rolled out a mini Woolies there as well as part of that program, so they are going great guns at that school.

Tony BATES: And of course that is the program that we manage and contract, but in partnership we also work with transport on the broader regional bus program.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Just looking at the 2024–25 department performance statement, page 6, ‘Early childhood sector supports and regulation’, the average target turnaround for issuing a quality rating for early childhood services was 50 days. Can I ask how many authorised officers were undertaking those assessments for the 2024–25 period?

Tony BATES: I might ask Deputy Secretary FitzGerald to go through that. As we said earlier, Mr Puglielli, we know we missed that target a little bit, but as I said, there are the three targets there around the number of inspections – so 4700 versus 4000. We did prioritise getting more inspections done even if it meant we were a few days behind on writing up some of the reports. We thought that was really important in terms of trying to lift the standards of child safety as much as we can. Bron, do you want to talk to that one?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Yes, thank you, Secretary. Thank you for the question. It is an important matter. The number of authorised officers that the regulator had in place at the end of the reporting period was approximately 100. Those authorised officers are responsible for conducting ratings and assessments – so the assessments about which those reports are written – but they also conduct unannounced compliance visits and other investigations and inspections. So their activity needs to be divided carefully across those different roles. We do expect that authorised officer workforce to increase over time. With the additional 60 roles coming in, we expect that group of authorised officers who are based out in regional teams across the state to grow. It does take time for the authorised officer workforce to uplift, partly because we are recruiting. These are pretty technical specialist roles, so it takes time to recruit the right group of people. And then it does take nine to 12 months to train those authorised officers in the specialist skills that are needed for their work, up to their full capacity.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: For the 2024–25 period specifically, though, can I ask: what was the total FTE for those authorised officers that were in place at that time?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: It was approximately 100.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: FTE, though – so that is the number of positions?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Right. Okay.

Tony BATES: Mr Puglielli, just to go to your question, we do not tend to say, ‘You are doing an initial service inspection, and you are doing reaccreditation.’ It is a geographic model, so as Deputy Secretary FitzGerald said, the authorised officers tend to be based in our regional offices, and what we are looking for is that they know their patch and they know all the services. So it means that they range across those different types of regulatory inspections.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Just on that actually, what is the average number of early childhood services that would be allocated per staff member?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: I am happy to answer that question. The specifics of that we can take on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: There will be some variation across the different parts of the state. Some parts of the state have a larger team because they are dealing with a larger group of services – because they are in a metropolitan area – where others have a smaller number of services but larger travel times to be able to do the compliance, surveillance and other work that they do. But the specifics of what the ratio is we can take on notice and get back to you about that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That is much appreciated. Just to clarify, from that target I referred to at the beginning of the questioning, if an early childhood education provider has been rated below quality standards, it would take six weeks for the centre to be notified. Is that correct?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: For all services, regardless of what the outcome of their rating assessment process is, the target is 50 days, and we are currently at 54 days in terms of the turnaround on that. Once the rating and assessment outcome is known by the service and communicated, that is also published on the Starting Blocks website, which is a publicly available website that makes that information available not just to others in the sector but also to parents and persons in the wider community.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So parents and guardians are notified within that timeframe?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: The information is published after that timeframe. So after the service is notified, then the information is inputted into the National Quality Agenda Information Technology System, or NQAITS, which is the technology system that ACECQA hosts and administers. Out of that system then it is published on the Starting Blocks website, and so any parent can search their local services and look at their assessment and rating outcome. It publishes not just the headline outcome of 'exceeding', 'meeting' or 'working towards' but also the individual outcomes for the seven national quality standard domains.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. How long after the centre's been notified would they expect that to be published?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: I can take on notice whether there is a little bit of lag between when the service is notified and the publication, but I would not expect it to be a long period. Once it is in NQAITS, it would then upload fairly quickly to the Starting Blocks website. But allow me to take it on notice. It might be a matter of a week or two.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. No worries. Thank you. Can I ask, staying in this sector, how many incidents of abuse were reported to QARD in 2024–25 – during that budget period – and how many of those have resulted in action?

Tony BATES: I will just say, Mr Puglielli, there is a very broad spectrum of notifications that come to QARD. Again, I will just get Deputy Fitzgerald to speak to that. Appropriately, staff members yelling at children will be reported. If a staff member grabs a child that is running past, that will be reported. So there is a very big spectrum of different behaviours that are all required to be reported under the national law. Bron, can you maybe just talk to some of those stats?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Yes. That is right. The rate that we measure here – and I can take on notice the numbers – is the number of serious incidents per 100 services. In Victoria we recorded 126.4 serious incidents per 100 national quality framework services. So this excludes the *Children's Services Act* services – there are about 150 of those in Victoria. Now, that 126.4 serious incidents per 100 is the second-lowest incident rate in Australia. The national average is 148.1 serious incidents per 100 services. In terms of the number, we will need to take that on notice and come back to you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. That is okay.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: The thing that I think is important to acknowledge, as the Secretary says, is serious incidents encompass – yes, they encompass the most concerning instances of physical or sexual abuse but they also include a wider variety of serious matters, including notifiable diseases; if a child has an asthma attack, for example; trips and falls and other accidental injuries of a serious nature that might require hospitalisation. It captures a fairly broad –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: The question was more closely around incidents of abuse, but I appreciate the information that you are providing. Can I ask: has QARD ever been subject to litigation over its handling of a case?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: I am sorry. Could you repeat the question?

Tony BATES: Has it been subject to litigation?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: On occasion –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: On occasion?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Not litigation. On occasion their decisions are challenged at VCAT, so there is a matter to resolve for the regulator, but I am not aware of civil litigation. But allow me to take that on notice. There might be some historical matters that I am not aware of.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Where possible, the numbers there would be important and whether there were any outcomes in particular from those cases would be of benefit to the committee. Thank you. Do you have a list of providers that you can provide to the committee that have been reported more than once?

Tony BATES: Reported under the serious notification –

Bronwen FITZGERALD: I am sorry. Can I ask you to repeat the question for me?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. Any providers that have been reported more than once for incidents of abuse.

Tony BATES: Abuse?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: In particular physical or sexual abuse or just for sexual abuse?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Physical or sexual abuse.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Yes. And you are asking about the approved provider as opposed to the service? Is that what you are –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I am asking for a list of the providers that have been reported more than once for those types of events.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: More than once.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: I do not have that information to hand, but we can take that away on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

Tony BATES: Mr Puglielli, I will just say there are active police investigations still underway. So I am just going to say that we will just need to be very careful. We are working closely with Victoria Police. I would not want to in any way jeopardise any ongoing criminal investigation. Again, we will take that on notice, but we may need to defer the release of some information until other processes have run their full course.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. I might move on to another matter. We touched on air conditioning before. With respect to Brunswick Secondary College, their art building was once a rope factory, and therefore it is not a purpose-built classroom space. I understand two of the west-facing art rooms overheat every afternoon as they do not have air conditioning, but using fans also is not an option because then they start blowing all the art materials all over the room. Can I ask: is the department aware of this issue, and will it be fixed?

Tony BATES: I might just ask Ms Wandel if she could come up and just check if –

Andrea DEL MONACO: West?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Their west-facing classrooms.

Tony BATES: Yes, I know the one. It is Dawson Street.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I would have to check the street, but I can come back to you if that is useful.

Tony BATES: Yes. Ms Wandel, if you have anything on Brunswick Secondary.

Joanne WANDEL: Thanks, Secretary. Thanks, Mr Puglielli, for your question. I do not have anything on that school specifically. I am very happy to have a conversation with the region and that school around what might be possible in those instances. As I have previously mentioned, schools that are generally in the north of

Victoria, where extreme heat is experienced, are provided with air conditioning. Where schools are not in those zones, we can still work with them to identify what might be suitable options available to them. In this instance I am very happy to take that on notice and have those conversations with the school.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you – much appreciated. I should stay on that school actually. Likewise, I understand one of their staff offices requires a replacement air conditioner. Its existing one is broken, and this is an office that is used by, I am told, six staff members who regularly meet with students, with parents and with other teachers. Again, is the department aware of that issue? When and how will that be addressed?

Tony BATES: Again, we might take that on notice, but I might then just refer to some of my earlier answers about can I call it the maintenance pyramid.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: We can probably refer to the transcript for that, if you have already provided that information. Thank you, though.

Tony BATES: But we will look into that one, and it may qualify for support under the emergency maintenance program. We will just get some understanding on the thermal issues in that room.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, thank you. Staying nearby, for years Brunswick North Primary School has been asking government for help to replace the rotten window frames on the top storey of their original heritage building. For understandable reasons it is a safety risk, and it also becomes more expensive to fix the longer that the issue goes on. The school has got a 100-year anniversary celebration coming up. Can we expect those frames to be fixed by then?

Tony BATES: Again, we will take that one on notice. I understand in a lot of those heritage buildings, particularly the two-storey ones, that maintenance is complex, but that is the sort of stuff that the SRP maintenance should have been used for along the way. It really is for painting and that basic maintenance. We are aware that, for whatever reason, a number of schools let that go and then it starts to become a much more expensive and complex issue, but we will follow up on that one and see what we can do to support the school.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, thank you. On another matter, Docklands Primary is set to reach capacity once again early next year, and with their annual midyear intake I understand the school will be over capacity. I understand the school is working with the VSBA to acquire additional space at the Docklands shopping centre to expand the temporary campus, but my understanding is this will not be ready until term 1, 2027. Given population growth and a significant rate of enrolments at the school, that is not a long-term solution really. Are there any plans to fund a second campus for Docklands Primary or build a school that would reduce those enrolment pressures?

Tony BATES: Again, I might just ask Ms Wandel to refer to that one. I will just say that in that inner-west area the population growth has exploded at a rate unlike anything we have seen before, so we are very alive to that whole area of Docklands up into Parkville and then across into North Melbourne and Arden. We have got a new school that opened – a second campus of North Melbourne Primary – I think at the start of this year, which has helped with some of the demand in that area, but the number of families with small children living in high-rises has far exceeded normal predictions and patterns. I might just ask Ms Wandel to speak to that a little bit.

Joanne WANDEL: Thank you, Secretary. Mr Puglielli, as you say, a second temporary campus for Docklands Primary School was opened in late 2023, and \$1 million was allocated in the 2024–25 state budget to investigate options for capacity pressures in inner Melbourne. We are continuing to work with the school and the region to actively monitor demand and enrolments at that school and in the broader area also to determine whether additional provisions will be required. The Secretary mentioned Arden, and so obviously a new primary school has been included in the Arden structure plan. That would likely be required in the middle of the next decade, so we are continuing to look at the broader capacity areas around that inner-north area and how we can ensure that we are delivering to manage growth.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I might move on now to Kensington Primary. Looking at budget paper 4, page 44, there is a line item attributable for them. I understand they received \$7.3 million five years ago to complete stage 1 of their master plan. However, only half could be completed, because construction costs were much more than the VSBA had budgeted at the time. Lots of parts of the project, I am informed, have not been done, such as removing mould from walls, removing old asbestos-ridden heaters and putting in an elevator so

kids with disabilities can get to the first floor classrooms. Consequently many classrooms, I am informed, are currently not usable, due to these issues. Can I ask: does the VSBA intend to complete stage 1 of the master plan, given it was already agreed that these works were necessary five years ago?

Tony BATES: Again, I might just ask Ms Wandel to refer to that.

Joanne WANDEL: Yes. Thanks, Secretary, and thank you. We are aware, obviously, of the issues at Kensington Primary School. As you say, they were allocated \$7.3 million in the 2021–22 budget. As I mentioned earlier today, there was a particular period with those projects where those projects were experiencing significant market volatility, which has resulted in challenging prices being allocated for those projects. This project was their refurbishment of block A, and as you would be aware, block A is a really complex building as well, a heritage building with significant latent conditions, including what were found to be some undocumented asbestos and structural issues. Pleasingly, the majority of those issues have been worked through with the school. We are looking at when the school will be next eligible for its rolling facilities evaluation review, which, as we have mentioned, is the annual five-year review of all school buildings across the state. Subject to that, additional works that are identified as priority one and two would be funded through the planned maintenance program, but we are continuing to work with the school and the region in respect to other maintenance issues at that school.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. And staying on this school, it is not currently at capacity, but with a huge amount of apartment developments – we were just talking about them then – going up in the area, it is likely to be at or over capacity in the coming years. I understand there is a parcel of land next to the school that is for sale, but the government and VSBA have said that they will not at this stage look at buying it to expand the school until after the school is already overflowing. By then it will be too late. I note this because it seems ridiculous that we are not planning for the future in that way, even when the population estimates for the suburb are set for significant growth. I mean, it is exactly what has caused problems with overcrowding in other inner-city areas like Docklands that we just spoke about, and it is difficult and expensive to solve later, once it is already too late. So I ask: why is the VSBA only planning for now with respect to the school and not for the future?

Tony BATES: Mr Puglielli, I might say it is my part of the world and I walk around there on weekends. I drive Jo crazy because I come back on Monday and go, ‘Have we thought of buying this block of land or have we thought of buying this block of land?’ But I will say, as Ms Wandel mentioned, the Arden master plan does have provision for a new primary school, and that will take some of the enrolment zone that is currently assigned to Kensington Primary. The department is very conscious of the enrolment pressures in that part of Melbourne, but with that one we have got Debney Meadows not far away – or the next school along in terms of zoning – that has very significant spare capacity. So we are doing a lot of detailed planning work around that inner-Melbourne area. I understand the passion and commitment of the parents and the school council at each individual school, but we are looking at things from a network point of view to make sure we have got appropriate high-quality facilities for all students in that part of Melbourne.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. With my remaining time, I might actually go back to the QARD questions that I had earlier. Can I ask: with respect to inspections in early childhood services, were all the inspections in the 2024–25 period conducted in person, or did the department also accept self-reported information from services as part of that inspection count?

Tony BATES: I might ask Deputy Secretary Fitzgerald to respond to that.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: The vast majority of inspections, both the ratings and assessment and the announced and unannounced compliant visits are definitely done in person, and some of those visits can take quite a period of time. Particularly ratings and assessment can take one to two days of constant presence in the service. There is a small number – it is a very small percentage – of circumstances where providers and services would provide some documentation that might be by way of follow up from a previous visit, but the –

The CHAIR: I am just going to cut you off there. I am just going to keep to time. Mr Puglielli expects it. We are going to go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Afternoon. I thought I would take us to senior secondary pathways reform, and that is on budget paper 3, page 12. I do want to do a shout-out to Rishit and Aariyan, two impressive young people

who have been in the office recently from secondary colleges out in my patch. On senior secondary pathways reform, can you outline how this funding has been delivered and the sorts of supports that it has provided over the 2024–25 year?

Tony BATES: I might ask Dr Howes to just expand a little bit in a moment, Mr Hilakari, but it is a fantastic new story. As I said in my presentation, when we compare to VCAL a number of years ago, the completion rate now that it is VCE Vocational Major is fantastic. We have got the Head Start program supporting SBAT, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. When students are in the Head Start program they get a range of supports that continue after they leave school. We know for young people the transition from school can be a bit challenging, so we continue those supports for the six months after they leave school. As I think I mentioned during the presentation, it means that the number of students who are still enrolled in their course 12 months after starting is up really, really significantly, and as I mentioned, that is contributing to our lift in year 12 completion rates in Victoria. So it is a really positive –

Mathew HILAKARI: They were great figures you had in your presentation.

Tony BATES: Yes. Again, I will ask Dr Howes to expand, in a moment. We have been pretty directive with government schools. There were a number of schools in the past that said, ‘Oh, VCAL’s not for us.’ We are requiring almost all government schools to offer a vocational major. There is only a small number who do not, and that is because they have either got very, very small year 12 cohorts or some other issues. I am really pleased with the take-up that we have seen. It has been taken up strongly in the government sector and in the non-government sector. To repeat: it is really, really contributing to lifting our completion rates. It is keeping young people in school and giving them all of those other supports, so the longer they are in school, the more literacy support and numeracy support they are getting. I might ask Dr Howes to expand just a little bit on that.

David HOWES: Thanks, Secretary, and thanks for the question. It is worth taking a step back I think and saying these reforms are about individual pathways and they are about the needs of the economy in the future. The latest data that we have says that in Victoria over the next decade 85 per cent of people entering the workforce are going to require a secondary school qualification, so that means we have got to make sure that the senior secondary qualifications are fit for purpose and provide access for as many students as possible to the changing economy. It is also worth pointing out that these reforms are of course at the pointy end of senior secondary schooling, but they go back a lot further than that. One of the key reforms is strengthening career exploration and advice, because it is a more complex economy that young people are entering into – so that need for schools to provide better, more up-to-date intelligence about the range of careers that are available. Again, making sure students are not caught in stereotypes about what particular careers might suit particular individuals is critically important for the workforce of the future. That has been a critical part of the reforms. We have now got almost 90 per cent of year 9 government school students completing a career assessment using an online diagnostic tool. That tells us, as the Secretary outlined, that those reforms are being well implemented by schools. So career exploration and advice is critically important and work-based learning is really important – that capacity for schools to provide the opportunity for students to learn on the job and to develop those practical skills is really important.

Then there is the expansion, as the Secretary said, of vocational education. There are two components to that that are equally critical, I think. One is calling out the need to change the perception of vocational education – that it is not a second-rate pathway, it is not a second option for students, and that everyone should aspire to go to university. That is why the link with the careers education work is so important. But we want to use these reforms to encourage families and the community more broadly to have a different attitude towards vocational education – to recognise it is going to be at the heart of the economy going forward. There are really increasingly complex skills that are required for work – to be trained through a vocational pathway – so that change of perception is critical, and we want to match that with lifting the quality of what is delivered. The reforms that have been done to what students will learn and how they learn has been critical as well. That has been through the development of the vocational major, and the Victorian pathways certificate has been a critical component of that reform in supporting as many students as possible to complete their secondary education, because we know what an important factor that is in the life trajectory that a student’s career will take.

Tony BATES: Mr Hilakari, I get going a bit on this stuff.

Mathew HILAKARI: I actually love how passionate you both are on this. It just screams through.

Tony BATES: I might just mention a couple of things. We have got the vocational taster experience. We have had 6000 students over the course of this year. That gets students pretty much at year 9 and lets them go to TAFE for a couple of days, again with appropriate supervision. We have had the Your World, Your VCE campaign. As Dr Howes said, part of the effort here is opening up parents to things that – there are careers that with respect I had no idea about and lots of us do not know about. I think of my nephew in regional Victoria. He has gone into an apprenticeship as a linesman in the power industry, and I can tell you it pays pretty well.

Mathew HILAKARI: And he will have a job for life.

Tony BATES: In fact my son works at Deloitte Access Economics, and his cousin is getting paid a fair bit more as an apprentice linesman. These are important jobs that we need for the economy and they are high-paying jobs, and we are continuing to work to try and overcome the gender stereotypes as well. We run a Trade and Tech Fit career expo that is for female and gender-diverse students. This year those expos had 3700 students from 143 government and non-government schools, and it is a safe space where girls and gender-diverse students can come in and not have, to be stereotypical, the boys pushing them out of the way. There are fantastic things there about technology. There are short cybersecurity courses that are offered at Box Hill TAFE, and NAB and ANZ basically run a minibus that drives up out the front of the TAFE: ‘Anyone who’s graduating cybersecurity, hop on. I’m paying you for a job right now.’ This is really, really important and game-changing, and it is supporting a number of the really key areas that Dr Howes has mentioned, like the economy, things like the clean energy transition. But then we also see the other areas of demand in aged care, in early childhood – educators in our early childhood services. There are just fantastic jobs and fantastic pathways everywhere.

As Dr Howes said, it is about good career education, doing those Morrisby tests to help students understand their personal preferences and passions and then helping them into the correct pathways. We are putting a lot of effort into training our careers advisers at schools. About 46 per cent of them are teachers, but you do not need to be a teacher; sometimes it is people with industry experience who can be more valuable to some students. So there is a lot of stuff we are doing there. It is a really, really important reform. We are really happy with how it is going.

Mathew HILAKARI: I really commend you both on the passion, and the numbers that you presented at the start of today really speak to just how that translates into better real-life experiences. I want to take us to school safety and the schoolwide positive behaviour support program. I am hoping you could run us through how the program works and how people are supported with its rollout.

Tony BATES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. Again, another really, really important program. I might ask Deputy Secretary Fraser to talk a bit more about that one. But I know, again, I have been out to some schools and we have had some sessions with principals where they just talk about how it is a game changer. It develops a common language in the school. It helps students from a whole different, diverse range of backgrounds have a common language about behaviour at school. Schools that do it well just report that the schools are calm. They are safer. Children are more ready to learn when they go into the classroom. I might just ask Mr Fraser to expand a bit more on that program and the continuing rollout.

Stephen FRASER: Thank you. As the Secretary said, it is a game changer. One of the reasons is because schools really get behind it. It is evidence-based. They know that when they sign up to schoolwide PBS, they are part of a cohort of schools internationally that are doing this work. It is one of the evidence-informed resources, policies and approaches that we provide. In this year’s budget an additional \$10.4 million was committed to increasing the support for schools participating in schoolwide PBS, as we call it, and particularly increasing the coaching support. It is not an off-the-shelf program that a school can just pick up. It involves behaviour change from classroom teachers. And those regionally based coaches are absolutely pivotal to supporting that behaviour change in their teaching peers. It is one of the most internationally recognised behaviour support programs available – I think at last count it had been subjected to about 19 randomised control trials demonstrating its impact and efficacy – and it is a program that delivers results. I mentioned before in the context of disability inclusion the multitiered systems of support approach; schoolwide PBS is exactly the same thing: so universal approaches that support all students to identify – and students are part of identifying – what the expected behaviours are in their class.

Tier 1 is really about supporting those universally expected behaviours, tier 2 is where students might need additional support, and then tier 3 is targeted support. With tier 3 we might talk about putting a behaviour support plan in place for an individual student who might be struggling to regulate their behaviour in the classroom. That is exactly what it is. It is a tier-based intervention approach where schools are engaged in setting expectations for behaviour and then supporting students and schools and teachers to implement those behaviours with fidelity and regularity and routines and all those things that we know support good behaviour in the classroom.

One thing that we supported through that additional funding that I mentioned is not only support for schools to implement the program with fidelity or to implement it really well but acknowledging that there might be schools that do not want to go down the full path of school-wide PBS and want a lighter touch approach. We have been developing what we call the positive classroom management strategies, which are eight actions or areas of behaviour management that schools can implement without that coaching support that might be required to really embed school-wide PBS in the classroom. I am happy to talk about the detail of those eight approaches.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am interested in the feedback that you are getting from schools who have implemented all three tiers or one tier and whether they are happy with it and satisfied with it. Is it working for students and teachers?

Stephen FRASER: Yes. Look, by and large, as the Secretary said, we have got what I would in a really positive frame call absolute zealots in our system – principals and teachers who are converted to the approach. They swear by it. Every time they get the opportunity to advocate to their peers to put it in place in their school, they take that opportunity. We have also got some schools that might not have been in a position to really embed the approach in years past, and one of the things that the additional funding has allowed us to do is to go back around to those schools and say, ‘Look, you might’ve tried PBS in the past; give it another go. It’s got additional coaching support and support from your peers implemented in a different way, in a more embedded way that makes a difference in your school.’ So there is a mix. I will not say that there is a 100 per cent conversion to those absolute zealots, but those schools that do implement it with fidelity see the impact on student engagement, connectedness to their school, regular attendance and improved learning outcomes as well. That has really shone through in the evaluations that we have done internally alongside those randomised controlled trials that have been conducted all around the world.

Mathew HILAKARI: I did have a question from page 13, table 1.7, on the ‘Safer Victorian faith-based schools’ program. I am not sure if you are the best person to speak to that or others here.

Tony BATES: It might be up this end, Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much.

Tony BATES: Just talking through the program?

Mathew HILAKARI: Yes. Thank you.

Tony BATES: I might ask Deputy Secretary Del Monaco to talk a little bit to the program. The Victorian government introduced the program following the tragic events in the Middle East a number of years ago. We had concerns about safety both at Jewish and Islamic schools. We have had a number of rounds of the program. It is designed to support schools to implement safety measures. It can be capital things like upgrading fencing or CCTV, but it is also for schools where they feel that the threat level is such that they need guards, so they can apply to have support for all of those different types of interventions.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am keen to understand how that rolled out in the 2024–25 period.

Tony BATES: Yes. Deputy Secretary Del Monaco, do you want to maybe talk about particularly the allocations in 2024–25?

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes. There is a little bit of an overlap in the financial years. Round 1 opened on 17 November 2023 and ran to March 2024. That provided \$20,000 for each school for immediate security costs. Twenty-seven schools were invited to receive an allocation. Round 2 was open from late December 2023

to the end of December 2023, and that delivered a competitive merit-based application process to support larger scale security projects. It has gone through this period of each phase being redesigned based on the need and speaking to the schools in terms of what they need.

Mathew HILAKARI: Modified on what we are learning and what their needs are.

Andrea DEL MONACO: Yes. With that one a total of nearly \$1.5 million was provided to 13 schools for round two. Round 3 opened from 31 July 2024, which is outside the reporting period.

Tony BATES: I think round 3 is probably the relevant one for the committee. It was in the first part of 2024–25, and we allocated just over \$2 million to 29 schools. As I said, there are a range of different things that they are using the funding for. We have been very careful. The Commonwealth government has also been running programs which are more around places of worship rather than schools. We have been very clear with the schools. One of our questions is ‘Have you received funding from the Commonwealth?’ I have personally met with the Australian association of Jewish schools. My staff have been out to a number of the Islamic schools. And I will say, some of the schools’ initial applications – they needed a bit of support where they were not used to applying for state government programs. The pleasing thing is that – as Deputy Secretary Del Monaco mentioned – in the early rounds we had a minimum allocation for everyone. The thing I am pleased about is that I am getting better applications coming in from a number of the schools, and we are continuing to support them to upgrade their security. Hopefully with things moving forward a little bit in the Middle East, the risk around the schools will gradually decline, but it is a real issue of concern to a lot of those school leaders.

Mathew HILAKARI: Understood. I might change gear a fair bit and talk a little bit about the Best Start, Best Life program. I am really interested in the presentation that we are seeing really great numbers coming through for particularly three-year-olds, and obviously we have got great numbers for four-year-olds. Is the Best Start, Best Life program really driving that, or are there other things going on?

Tony BATES: I really think the free kinder element has been a real driver. So again, for those of us who –

Mathew HILAKARI: Do you recall the numbers that there were previously?

Tony BATES: I mean, my kids are in their late 20s. I sent them three-year-old kinder, but I was lucky enough to have the resources to do that. As we have moved to Free Kinder, the participation rate is great across the state. I will ask Deputy Secretary FitzGerald to speak about that in a moment, but the evidence is just overwhelmingly clear. If we get kids that 15 hours a week at three-year-old, that helps them be better ready for four-year-old and that helps them be better ready for school and be more resilient. The research shows that their whole life trajectory starts to change. I might just ask Deputy Secretary FitzGerald to talk a bit about the three-year-old rollout. I will say I talked a lot about how we are building kinders on school sites. We are giving grants to local government. We are giving grants to not-for-profit providers. There is a massive expansion of the classroom footprint to make space for all those children.

Mathew HILAKARI: The community I represent is a beneficiary of that, so I am very appreciative. We opened another kinder room recently. We have got a kinder opening in 2027 as well, at the same site as the Yurran school, which is opening next year, so we are definitely feeling that, and it is really important for the community I represent.

Tony BATES: Bron, have you got some stats around three-year-old to share with the committee?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: I do. Thank you, Secretary. Thanks for the question. It is nice to check in on the program. The participation rate we had for the 2024 calendar year, because we measure the participation in calendar years was 90.1 per cent. We have also got about 90 per cent of services doing at least 10 hours – between 10 and 15 hours – which means that the uptake is great from families, but it is also showing that services are within the expected period of time for the rollout trajectory, lifting the number of hours they are doing. And that is supported, as the Secretary says, by both the infrastructure program that is creating the physical spaces to make it possible to enrol children at those numbers, but also the workforce supply programs, the scholarships, the lifting people from diploma into teaching positions through scholarships and targeted programs, but also bringing people in at the diploma and certificate level so that we are filling the gaps left by the people improving their career by taking on more senior roles in the sector.

Those two supply arms are supporting us achieving those objectives. The other thing, as the Secretary says, is that free kinder is definitely contributing. It really helps families to be able to access a sessional service for free or to be able to access a program in long day care with a very significant annual offset. The other thing that I will acknowledge is that there are a series of targeted programs which are about assisting those communities that might have additional barriers to participation to be able to know about the program, understand how to navigate the processes, enrol their child and then follow through and do the regular participation –

Mathew HILAKARI: You predicted where I am going to go. I might talk about Aboriginal communities, if you have got some of those figures.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Absolutely. Yes.

Mathew HILAKARI: But I am also keen to understand some of the historic figures around three-year-old kinder participation, if you have got any point-in-time data for the committee.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: So how the trend has changed over time?

Mathew HILAKARI: From previous years, how has it changed over time?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: I do not have that data to hand other than to say it is a dramatic increase. It is not a matter of going from 85 per cent to 90; it is a very significant step change.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms FitzGerald. I am going to cut you off there, just in light of that being our last session for you all. Thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing. I do have to remind you responses are required within five working days of the committee's request. It will happen pretty quick. The committee is going to take a very short break before beginning its consideration of parliamentary departments at 4:45 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.