

# **SUBMISSION:**

## **Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria**

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**AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIAN LOBBY**

### **About Australian Christian Lobby**

Australian Christian Lobby's vision is to see Christian principles and ethics influencing the way we are governed, do business, and relate to each other as a community. ACL seeks to see a compassionate, just and moral society through having the public contributions of the Christian faith reflected in the political life of the nation.

With around 250,000 supporters, ACL facilitates professional engagement and dialogue between the Christian constituency and government, allowing the voice of Christians to be heard in the public square. ACL is neither party-partisan nor denominationally aligned. ACL representatives bring a Christian perspective to policy makers in Federal, State and Territory Parliaments.

[acl.org.au](http://acl.org.au)



Parliament of Victoria  
Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

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**14 September 2023**

Dear Sir/Madam,

On behalf of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL), I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee (Committee) in relation to its [Inquiry](#) into the State Education System in Victoria (Inquiry).

The ACL would be very willing to meet with the Committee to discuss these submissions.

Yours Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

**Jasmine Yuen**  
State Director | Victoria

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The ACL's submission particularly addresses the following parts of the Terms of Reference (TOR):<sup>1</sup>

*“...the Victorian education system across government schools, including —*  
*(1) trends in student learning outcomes from Prep to Year 12, including but not limited to —*  
*(a) the factors, if any, that have contributed to decline;*  
*...*  
*(2) the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, including but not limited to —*  
*(a) the adequacy of existing measures to recruit and retain teachers;*  
*...*  
*(d) the impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture;*  
*(3) the current state of student wellbeing in Victoria, including but not limited to the impact of State Government interventions, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to address poor mental health in students, school refusal, and broader student disengagement;*  
*... [and]*  
*(6) school funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing.”*

In short, our submission discusses that:

1. Student learning outcomes have been declining in the Victorian State Education system over many years, including well before the COVID-19 pandemic. In our view, this decline is linked to the curriculum being cluttered with non-academic programs. Other recent changes in Victorian Education policies may also have contributed to students being less able to emotionally and spiritually cope (and therefore academically perform) in school environments.
2. There were also concerning indications about declining student wellbeing in Victoria (especially in terms of mental health, but also ‘school refusal’ and broader student disengagement) well before the COVID-19 pandemic. There is clearly a need to holistically support student wellbeing.

### **Recommendations:**

The ACL recommends that:

1. The Victorian State Education system focus more on basic foundational subjects such as Maths, English and Science (particularly numeracy and literacy). The teaching profession should be better trained and supported to teach these foundational subjects, and non-academic programs (such as the Respectful Relationships program and Sexuality and Consent Education) reduced.
2. The Government increase measures to assist students to cope spiritually and emotionally within school environments and support school leadership to holistically nurture student wellbeing, student learning outcomes and school culture. We particularly recommend that Special Religious Education (SRI) programs be reverted to class time and engagement of more religious chaplains.
3. School funding be better directed towards initiatives to enhance student learning and wellbeing.

Our submissions are discussed in more detail below.

## **SUBMISSIONS**

1. **Student learning outcomes have been declining in the Victorian State Education system over many years, including well before the COVID-19 pandemic. In our view, this is linked to the curriculum being cluttered with non-academic programs (including the Respectful Relationships program and Sexuality and Consent Education). There is an evident need to focus more on basic foundational subjects such as Maths, English and Science (particularly numeracy and literacy).**

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<sup>1</sup> These TOR extracts are from the Inquiry website here: [This link](#).

Declining student learning outcomes in the Victorian State Education system

The ACL is very concerned by reports of declining student learning outcomes in the Victorian State Education system. As such, we commend the Committee for conducting this Inquiry. However, we understand that the Committee may be predominantly focussed on considering trends in student learning outcomes following the COVID-19 pandemic. There are of course reports which suggest that factors associated with the pandemic may have impacted student learning outcomes, including Victoria's extended lockdowns.<sup>2</sup> However, there are also many indications that student learning outcomes in Victoria have actually been declining over many years, including well before the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, we consider that other factors are likely also responsible for the ongoing decline.

In fact, student learning outcomes right across Australia were apparently declining years before the pandemic. For example, in 2019 the Sydney Morning Herald (**SMH**) reported [here](#)<sup>3</sup> that Australian students had recorded their worst results in the three-yearly international Programme for International Student Assessment (**PISA**) tests in 2018, "failing for the first time to exceed the **OECD** [Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development] average in maths while also tumbling down global rankings in reading and science". Compared with a top performer at that time, Singapore, the Australian students who sat the test were three years behind in maths, a year and three months behind in reading, and a year and nine months behind in scientific literacy. They were also more than a year behind the students who sat the original tests in the early 2000s. Since 2003, Australia's results in maths had actually declined further than any country but Finland. While NSW was singled out for recording the worse declines, the report also noted that Australian students generally "were either declining or treading water while other countries in the OECD were improving". In particular, between 2015 and 2018 "there was little change in Australia's maths and reading performance, but the country tumbled because other countries improved" (although scientific literacy specifically had declined). In that sense, the report was concerning for *all* Australian jurisdictions, including Victoria, which was noted as having "avoided major declines" and effectively having just "managed to hang in there".

As SMH reported [here](#),<sup>4</sup> these 2018 PISA results painted "a picture of a long-term decline in Australian students' reading, mathematics and science skills". Overall, 14 participating nations had overtaken Australia since the test started. Notably, independent school students were found to be almost one year ahead of students in Catholic schools, and Catholic school students were three-quarters of a year ahead of students in Government schools. Details about Victoria's performance specifically also highlighted reason for concern. For example, Victoria "recorded no significant decline in performance in reading and science and the smallest decline in maths of any state or territory", but its performance was apparently only *comparatively good* against the results from other states – while maths literacy was "in decline in all states", Victoria simply "experienced the smallest decline". Overall, Victorian students were "about half a year behind where they were in mathematics in 2003". Average mathematical literacy was 496 points, down 14 points since 2003 (equal to half a year of schooling).<sup>5</sup> Clearly, while Victoria performed better than other Australian states, its results still reflected a decline.

Unfortunately, the OECD postponed the PISA 2021 cycle to 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initial results for the current cycle, PISA 2022, are not due to be released until the end of 2023.<sup>6</sup> As such, the above results are the latest available indications regarding Victorian students' performance against OECD benchmarks. We are yet to see whether Victoria's results improved or further declined in 2022.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, this article by the Herald Sun: [This link](#) and this article by The Age: [This link](#).

<sup>3</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>4</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>5</sup> The official report published by the Australian Council for Educational Research in relation to the 2018 PISA results also confirms such figures: See [this link](#) and particularly, for example, pages 127 and 130 of this 2018 PISA cycle report: [This link](#).

<sup>6</sup> See this Australian Government Department of Education website: [This link](#).

Other reports also evidence declining student learning outcomes in Victoria before the pandemic. For example, as The Age reported [here](#) in May 2023,<sup>7</sup> Victoria was the only Australian state or territory to register a statistically significant decline in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (**PIRLS**), a test held every five years involving over 50 countries. The test effectively relates to the performance of year 4 students' reading abilities. This decline, while recorded in respect of the PIRLS test sat by Victorian students in 2021 and only reported after official results were published worldwide in 2023, related to a decline since the test was last sat by students in 2016. Effectively, it recorded a decline which occurred over five years from 2016 to 2021, not just a decline which occurred over the COVID-19 pandemic specifically. In 2017, the Herald Sun also discussed [here](#) how "Victoria's school results have flatlined with no significant improvement in years 7 and 9 **NAPLAN** [National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy] results over the past decade", and that Australia's results had also slipped on a global scale in the former cycle of PISA testing.<sup>8</sup>

In our view, such reports clearly reveal that concerns about declining student learning outcomes in Victoria existed well before the pandemic, supported by the results of some benchmark testing.

Unfortunately, recent data only continues to evidence reason for concern about declining student learning outcomes, both across Australia and in Victoria specifically. For example, according to The Age [here](#), newly released NAPLAN data in August 2023 showed that almost one-third of Australian children and over a quarter of Victoria's students are failing to meet new proficiency standards for literacy and numeracy. In particular, the data showed that 28.9% of Victoria's students are falling behind benchmarks, particularly in grammar and punctuation (where at least 30% in each assessed year level failed to meet expected standards). While Victoria performed relatively well on some average testing scores compared to other states, grammar and punctuation were problematic across all levels. Some experts called the results a "wake-up call" for Australia, exposing a "long tail of underperforming students" compared to international standards.<sup>9</sup> As the Australian Financial Review surmised, NAPLAN benchmarks may have changed (to better reflect OECD standards), but Australia's bad results have stayed the same.<sup>10</sup>

As such, while concerns about declining student learning outcomes in Victoria existed well before the pandemic, these concerns clearly still exist today and warrant Government attention.

#### How an excess of non-academic programs has likely contributed to the decline

In our view, it is obvious that testing which indicates recent declines in mathematical and reading literacy in Victoria (and falling performance against OECD standards at least in foundational areas), signal a need to focus more on foundational subjects in the curriculum, i.e., Maths, English and Science (particularly numeracy and literacy). If these are areas in which Victorian students are declining in tests and/or failing to improve against OECD averages, it makes basic sense to prioritise their teaching. These declines may also evidence that foundational subjects have not been prioritised enough in recent years. In our view, the Victorian curriculum is cluttered with too many non-academic programs, and this has likely contributed to the decline. Other entities also express such views – for example, the PISA results were reported by other sources in 2019 to have led to calls that the Australian curriculum was too "crowded" with subjects other than literacy and numeracy.<sup>11</sup> The Herald Sun also reported in 2017 that Victorian schools were under pressure as "crowded curriculum and programs swamp literacy and numeracy", including the Respectful Relationships program.<sup>12</sup> The Guardian also

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<sup>7</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>8</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>9</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>10</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>11</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>12</sup> See [this link](#).

published similar reports in 2018.<sup>13</sup> News media have also recently published claims by former teachers and others that the curriculum is “clogged” and “cluttered” with non-academic subjects.<sup>14</sup> According to some sources, Victoria’s curriculum is “significantly broader than the Australian curriculum” and is “becoming more cluttered at the same time as learning outcomes are worsening”.<sup>15</sup>

We also note that some of Victoria’s non-academic programs were introduced through policy changes which occurred shortly before the above declines were recorded, which suggests some potential that they may be linked to declining student learning outcomes specifically. Two evident examples include:

- **The Respectful Relationships (RR) program:** RR became “a core component of the Victorian Curriculum from Foundation to Year 12” in 2016. This program is being taught in all Government schools<sup>16</sup> as well as a significant number of non-government schools (384, as at August 2021).<sup>17</sup> In total, over 1950 Victorian schools are delivering the program.<sup>18</sup> In our view, despite appearing on its face to be an innocuous program about respect, this program is ideologically focussed and concerning for many reasons. For example, Topic 7 is titled ‘Gender and Identity’. A Victorian State Government introduction document [here](#) expressly confirms that learning activities within this topic assist students to challenge stereotypes, critique the influence of gender norms and learn about gender identity.<sup>19</sup> This content escalates through different year levels. For example:
  - **Foundation:** As per [this](#) Victorian State Government document, even Foundation level students are taught to explore gender in Topic 7.<sup>20</sup> Activities assist students to reflect on their ‘gendered identity’, develop an awareness of and challenge gender norms, appreciate gendered differences, etc.. The alleged evidence base for such activities refers to children enacting ‘sexist’ values, beliefs and attitudes in early years and connecting characteristics such as gender with ‘privilege and power’.<sup>21</sup> The material asserts that children benefit from challenging “traditional gender norms”,<sup>22</sup> and includes further resources on topics such as non-stereotypical gendering of adults, same-sex families, gender diverse stories, etc..<sup>23</sup>
  - **Level 1-2:** As per [this](#) Victorian State Government document, Level 1-2 Topic 7 activities involve students comparing gender/identity preferences, learning ‘inclusive gender stories’, resisting gender stereotyping, etc..<sup>24</sup> The alleged evidence base for such activities discusses the usefulness of “explicit work with children to acknowledge, explore and celebrate diverse identities” in early school years.<sup>25</sup> Students learn to reject ‘gender labels’<sup>26</sup> and about the place for two female/male parents.<sup>27</sup> Further resources include gender diverse literature.<sup>28</sup>
  - **Level 3-4:** As per [this](#) Victorian State Government document, in Level 3-4 Topic 7 involves students exploring their individuality and gender norms/roles in literature and children’s media.<sup>29</sup> Notably, activities expressly assist them to differentiate between sex and gender.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, [this link](#) and [this link](#).

<sup>15</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>16</sup> See details regarding this program on the State Government of Victoria website here: [This link](#).

<sup>17</sup> See this State Government of Victoria website: [This link](#).

<sup>18</sup> See this State Government of Victoria website: [This link](#).

<sup>19</sup> See page 3 of the ‘Introduction’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>20</sup> See page 2 of the ‘Foundation’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>21</sup> See page 36 of the ‘Foundation’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>22</sup> See pages 38 and 39 of the ‘Foundation’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>23</sup> See page 42 of the ‘Foundation’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>24</sup> See page 2 of the ‘Level 1-2’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>25</sup> See page 52 of the ‘Level 1-2’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>26</sup> See pages 54 and 55 of the ‘Level 1-2’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>27</sup> See page 59 of the ‘Level 1-2’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>28</sup> See page 60 of the ‘Level 1-2’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>29</sup> See page 2 of the ‘Level 3-4’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>30</sup> See page 60 of the ‘Level 3-4’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

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- **Level 5-6:** As per [this](#) Victorian State Government document, in Level 5-6 Topic 7 includes activities on whether gender is ‘born or made’,<sup>31</sup> creation of different ‘gender identities’,<sup>32</sup> and activities to help students understand the difference between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ and familiarise them with vocabulary relating to sexual orientation and gender identity (e.g. ‘transgender’ and ‘homosexual’). Students are expressly taught to identify actions which contribute to an ‘inclusive’ school,<sup>33</sup> and further resources involve students expressing their ‘voice’ and becoming ‘change agents’.<sup>34</sup> The material also refers to gender inequality.<sup>35</sup>
- **Level 7-8:** As per [this](#) Victorian State Government document, in Level 7-8 Topic 7 includes activities which assist students to further understand gender and sexual diversity (including transgenderism specifically<sup>36</sup>), gain an awareness of the operation of ‘power’ and ‘privilege’ and ‘intersectional disadvantage’ which compounds “oppressions and marginalisations”,<sup>37</sup> and also to learn about related things like gender-based discrimination.<sup>38</sup>
- **Level 9-10:** As per [this](#) Victorian State Government document, in place of Topic 7 in Level 9-10, teachers provide a ‘Stepping out against gender-based violence’ program with teaching and learning activities around the key themes of gender, power, violence and respect.<sup>39</sup>
- **Level 11-12:** As per [this](#) Victorian State Government document, students continue exploring gender stereotypes/norms, gender privilege and gender equity in Level 11-12.<sup>40</sup> Students expressly learn about gender terms such as ‘cisgender’, ‘gender fluid’ and ‘gender queer’ and sexuality terms such as ‘bisexual’, ‘asexual’ and ‘pansexual’.<sup>41</sup> Students are taught to maintain a ‘gender-friendly’ learning environment<sup>42</sup> and further resources include activities in which students write letters to other students about resisting gender norms, develop gender-neutral advertising material, make suggestions to create better social equity, etc.<sup>43</sup>

This material is clearly underlaid by gender fluidity ideology. In our view, it is especially confusing for young primary school aged students and likely to distract from and impact their ability to focus on learning foundational skills. It may well be a factor contributing to the declining student learning outcomes among primary school students discussed above. The material for secondary students also encourages them towards personal activism relating to gender and identity issues, which is also likely to distract secondary students from their academic learning. Overall, we consider the RR material very concerning and likely linked to declining learning outcomes. In our view, general moral or fable stories would be far more beneficial than ideologically-driven content. However, even if the Victorian State Government does not share our concern regarding the material, RR clearly does not advance foundational skills such as literacy or numeracy at least, nor instil tolerance, inclusivity and respect into school children.

- **Sexuality and Consent Education:** This is part of the Health and Physical Education<sup>44</sup> curriculum in Victoria and mandated for Government schools.<sup>45</sup> The teaching of consent from Foundation

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<sup>31</sup> See page 2 of the ‘Level 5-6’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>32</sup> See page 69 of the ‘Level 5-6’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>33</sup> See page 70 of the ‘Level 5-6’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>34</sup> See page 90 of the ‘Level 5-6’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>35</sup> See pages 68 and 73 to 80 of the ‘Level 5-6’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>36</sup> See page 70 of the ‘Level 7-8’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>37</sup> See page 139 of the ‘Level 7-8’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>38</sup> See page 66 of the ‘Level 7-8’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>39</sup> See page 70 of the ‘Level 9-10’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>40</sup> See page 2 of the ‘Level 11-12’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>41</sup> See page 70 of the ‘Level 11-12’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>42</sup> See page 66 of the ‘Level 11-12’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>43</sup> See page 86 of the ‘Level 11-12’ document for Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships.

<sup>44</sup> See details on the State Government of Victoria website here: [This link](#).

<sup>45</sup> See details on the State Government of Victoria website here: [This link](#).



to Year 12 only became mandatory in Victoria in all Government schools in early 2021.<sup>46</sup> We have concerns about some of the content of this education which are not discussed here, but in any case this education also clearly does not advance skills such as literacy or numeracy, nor respectful behaviour.

In our view, such non-academic programs should be scrapped, or structured as an optional program that allows parents to opt in/out. Instead, there should be more focus on basic foundational subjects like Maths, English and Science (particularly numeracy and literacy).

**2. Other recent changes in Victorian Education policies may also have contributed to students being less able to emotionally and spiritually cope (and therefore academically perform) in school environments, such as the Government’s recent policy which drastically reduced student participation in SRI programs.**

Other recent changes in Victorian Education policies may also have contributed indirectly to declining academic performance, by affecting the ability of students to cope at school.

For example, following a prominent campaign against SRI programs in 2014<sup>47</sup>, in 2015 the Victorian Education Minister announced a new policy regarding SRI to apply from 2016<sup>48</sup> (now reflected in this [SRI policy](#) regarding Victorian Government schools). The changes had the effect of requiring that SRI, a 30-minute maximum program, be moved from class time, so it took place during lunchtime and before or after school.<sup>49</sup> By early 2016, at least 55 schools had apparently cancelled SRI programs.<sup>50</sup> Access Ministries, the major Christian provider of SRI (running around 96% of SRI classes<sup>51</sup>), reported that, after the changes came into effect, in 2016, it only had 60 programs running with 1089 children attending.<sup>52</sup> Previously, in 2015, SRI programs (generally) had around 27,000 students attending.<sup>53</sup> In our view, SRI is an incredibly beneficial program for students, including because it gives young people a framework to better cope with issues (both spiritually and emotionally) within school environments. Such outcomes would likely mitigate against mental illness among student cohorts, which is obviously linked to academic performance. The minimisation of SRI programs at around the same time as students began the (in our view, ideological and contradictory) RR program may also have been confusing. For such reasons, the minimisation of SRI programs may have indirectly contributed to declining learning outcomes among students in the Victorian State Education system.

In our view, the Government should increase measures to assist students to cope spiritually and emotionally within school environments, including reverting SRI programs to class time.

**3. The teaching profession should be better trained and supported to teach Maths, English and Science (particularly numeracy and literacy), and not required to teach so many non-academic programs.**

We understand that the teaching profession in Victoria is currently under some strain. For example, we are aware of reports published as recently as April 2023 [here](#)<sup>54</sup> that public schools state-wide in Victoria are facing workforce shortages. According to Nine News, more than one thousand roles were then vacant, and a union survey of 430 Victorian teachers reportedly found that over a third of schools

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<sup>46</sup> See details on the State Government of Victoria website here: [This link](#) and [this link](#).

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, [this link](#) and <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/5699360>.

<sup>48</sup> The Age, 2015: [This link](#). See also The Guardian, 2015: [This link](#).

<sup>49</sup> The Age, 2015: [This link](#).

<sup>50</sup> The Age, 2016: [This link](#).

<sup>51</sup> Women’s Agenda, 2015: [This link](#).

<sup>52</sup> Eternity News, 2018: [This link](#).

<sup>53</sup> Eternity News, 2018: [This link](#).

<sup>54</sup> See [this link](#).



were being forced to increase class sizes to manage workforce shortages. Almost 40% reportedly said that they were using principals and assistant principals to help fill gaps in the classroom. Other news media sources have also published similar reports.<sup>55</sup> For example, according to The Age, teaching vacancies have in fact surged to around 1,000 from around 600 at the beginning of Term One.<sup>56</sup>

While likely a multi-faceted problem, the issues discussed above may also be contributing factors. In particular, we consider that teachers are being required to teach too many non-academic programs. In fact, we understand that some teachers are effectively forced to teach non-academic programs despite not agreeing with their ideologically-driven content. The pressure faced by many of these teachers likely impacts staff morale and the quality of their teaching, and may ultimately lead some to lose motivation and consider quitting. In our view, reducing the number of non-academic programs and providing teachers with better training and support to teach basic literacy and numeracy would clearly have a positive effect on student learning outcomes in foundational areas. However, it may also improve the effectiveness of existing measures to recruit and retain teachers generally, by equipping teachers to better teach academic subjects generally and also reducing the pressure on teachers who do not agree with ideologically-driven content being taught in non-academic programs.

**4. Concerning indications about declining student wellbeing in Victoria (especially in terms of mental health, but also ‘school refusal’ and broader student disengagement) also existed well before the COVID-19 pandemic. There is clearly a need to holistically support student wellbeing.**

The TOR regarding student wellbeing in Victoria specifically refer to factors including (but not limited to) the impact of State Government interventions following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to address poor mental health in students, school refusal, and broader student disengagement.

There are reports which suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic may indeed have impacted the mental health of students in Victoria. For example, Independent Schools Victoria published [this report](#) about COVID-19 and its impact on the mental health of school communities.<sup>57</sup> A student wellbeing hub also contains survey results regarding the impact of the pandemic on young people in Victoria.<sup>58</sup> The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne also published [this report](#) regarding the mental health of children and parents in Victoria during the pandemic. There are also reports that COVID-19 exacerbated problems with ‘school refusal’.<sup>59</sup> For example, many Victorian students have apparently struggled to cope with returning to school without COVID-19 disruptions.<sup>60</sup> The ACL is of course concerned by such reports. However, there were already concerning indications about student wellbeing in Victoria (especially in terms of mental health) well before the pandemic. As such, there are clearly also other factors at play.

Indications of declining mental health among Victorian students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

A Victorian ‘student health and wellbeing survey’ collects information about the health, development, learning, safety and wellbeing of children and young people in Victorian schools every two years involving students in Years 5, 8 and 11 from a sample of Victorian schools across all school sectors.<sup>61</sup> The Department of Education and Training conducted the first survey in 2014.<sup>62</sup> The latest available

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<sup>55</sup> See reports by The Age: [This link](#) and [this link](#), The ABC: [This link](#), The Educator Australia: [This link](#), etc.

<sup>56</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>57</sup> See <https://is.vic.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ISV-Mental-health-and-wellbeing.pdf>.

<sup>58</sup> See <https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/educators/covid-19/> and particularly [this link](#) and [this link](#).

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, [this link](#).

<sup>60</sup> See The Age: [This link](#).

<sup>61</sup> See <https://www.vic.gov.au/victorian-student-health-and-wellbeing-survey>.

<sup>62</sup> See page 4 of this 2018 report: [This link](#).

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report is from 2018<sup>63</sup> (well before the COVID-19 pandemic). Notably, it contains concerning indications about changes in student wellbeing in Victoria since 2016. For example, [the 2018 report](#) found that:<sup>64</sup>

- **‘Psychological resilience’** (students with a high level of resilience): The figures had declined from 70% in 2014, to 69% in 2016, and 67% in 2018.
- **‘Quality of life’** (students satisfied with the quality of their lives): The 2018 results were “statistically significantly lower than 2016”, and results had in fact declined from 77% in 2014, to 75% in 2016, and 72% in 2018.
- **‘Psychological distress’** (students who showed high levels of depressive symptoms): The 2018 results were “statistically significantly higher than 2016”, and results had in fact increased from 16% in 2014, to 18% in 2016, and 20% in 2018.

Effectively, since the Victorian Government began conducting this survey in 2014, successive years’ results have apparently indicated ongoing decreases in the psychological resilience and satisfaction of students with the quality of their lives, and an increase in students in psychological distress. The raw statistics collected in this survey are also concerning in themselves – e.g., that 20% of students showed high levels of depressive symptoms in 2018, and only 72% were satisfied with the quality of their lives.

Other sources publish similar indications. For example, a separate 2018 Victorian State Government report on ‘The State of Victoria’s Children’ [here](#) also similarly indicated that<sup>65</sup> “resilience, life satisfaction and mental health have declined significantly among adolescents”. It found that mental health service usage was increasing (with the proportion of adolescents using mental health services having almost doubled since 2012, from 7% to 12%), and that concerns about access remained (only 2-in-5 Year 8 and 11 students believed that they could access mental health services when needed).<sup>66</sup> News media reports from 2018 and 2019, i.e. from well before the COVID-19 pandemic, also published claims that teachers were “overwhelmed” by mental health problems in schools<sup>67</sup> and that there were “unprecedented levels of depression and anxiety among students” in Victoria.<sup>68</sup>

In our view, such reports clearly indicate that reasons for concern regarding declining mental health among Victorian students existed well before (and due to factors other than) the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ‘School refusal’ and broader student disengagement in Victoria prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

According to *The Age*,<sup>69</sup> the COVID-19 pandemic “supercharged” rates of ‘school refusal’ in Victoria. In particular, the rate of ‘school refusal’ in Victoria grew by 50% in the three years to 2021, with almost 12,000 students in government schools – about 2% – officially absent in the second year of the pandemic. However, this was apparently only a worsening of an existing problem.<sup>70</sup> ABC News also similarly reported in 2023<sup>71</sup> that the ‘school refusal’ phenomenon had been growing over the past few years. The issue of ‘school refusal’ was “a small but growing proportion of absences – up from 1.2% in 2018 to 1.8% in 2021”. Again, it indicated that this issue was just “accelerated by the COVID pandemic”.

Clearly, a ‘school refusal’ problem was known to exist in Victoria well before the pandemic. In fact, a submission by School Refusal Australia [here](#) to a Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System in 2019 expounded a clear problem of ‘school refusal’ among “hundreds” of children and

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<sup>63</sup> See <https://www.vic.gov.au/victorian-student-health-and-wellbeing-survey>.

<sup>64</sup> See page 5 of the report.

<sup>65</sup> See page 9 of the report.

<sup>66</sup> See also other detailed statistics, particularly in Chapter 3 of the report.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, *The Age*, 2019: [This link](#).

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, *The Age*, 2018: [This link](#).

<sup>69</sup> See [this link](#).

<sup>70</sup> See also discussion of these statistics by ‘Education Matters’: [This link](#).

<sup>71</sup> See ABC News: [This link](#).

teenagers in Victoria<sup>72</sup> (though there was no data available to understand the true numbers).<sup>73</sup> Some Victorian schools have also catered to this problem for several years. For example, Hester Hornbrook Academy (HHA) is an independent school which offers a flexible learning environment,<sup>74</sup> including for students who have disengaged with traditional schools.<sup>75</sup> It is known as a school “for school refusers”<sup>76</sup> with campuses in Melbourne CBD, Prahran, Sunshine and South Melbourne.<sup>77</sup> It was reported in 2023 to have a “soaring waitlist to address rising school-refusal rates in Victoria”, but its enrolments have been rising for many years.<sup>78</sup> Since 2018, the number of students enrolled across HHA campuses each year has grown from 170 to 382 in 2022 – more than doubling in the last five years. 421 student enrolments were forecast in 2023. The waitlist had also doubled over 12 months to 78 students.<sup>79</sup>

Again, in our view, this clearly indicates that concern regarding ‘school refusal’ and student disengagement in Victoria existed well before (and due to factors other than) the COVID-19 pandemic.

### The need for measures to support holistic student wellbeing

Many factors may be contributing to declining student wellbeing in Victoria, including in terms of mental health, ‘school refusal’ and broader student disengagement. However, we do query whether ideologically-driven and non-academic programs are one relevant factor at least. For example, we expect that some students may refuse to attend school because of the requirement that they attend classes with material relating to sex, sexuality and gender with which they do not feel comfortable, do not agree and/or which they are aware does not contribute to their academic studies. Students who disagree with the ideological content in such subjects may also question the purpose and quality of classroom education and schooling more broadly, lose motivation in terms of their academic studies, or lose confidence in the teachers who are required to deliver this content to them.

In any case, one thing is obvious at least – there is clearly a need to holistically support the wellbeing of Victorian students. Declining mental health, ‘school refusal’ and broader student disengagement are apparently ongoing issues among young people in Victoria.

## **5. School leadership should be supported to nurture student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture through increased holistic student support measures, including through a reversion to class time SRI programs and increased engagement of religious chaplains.**

In our view, it is evident that school leadership has an impact on student wellbeing, student learning outcomes and school culture generally. It makes decisions which affect student cohorts in all sorts of practical ways, as well as the general school and teaching environment in which they develop. Such decisions contribute greatly to the way in which learning is delivered and the overall culture of schools. However, school leadership must also be supported to nurture these outcomes in a holistic way.

In our view, measures which contribute to the spiritual and emotional wellbeing of children, such as SRI programs and the engagement of religious chaplains, are vital in this context. Such measures are specifically designed to support children personally and holistically. The values taught by such religious and faith-based measures nurture better student behaviours and emotional resilience generally, and may even contribute to improvements in respect of common problems such as bullying and mental health issues among student cohorts. We consider that the personal values which these measures

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<sup>72</sup> See, for example, page 2 of the submission.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, page 7 of the submission.

<sup>74</sup> See Australian Association for Flexible and Inclusive Education: [This link](#).

<sup>75</sup> See Melbourne City Mission page: [This link](#) and [this link](#). See also Hester Hornbrook Academy page: [This link](#).

<sup>76</sup> See The Age: [This link](#).

<sup>77</sup> See Melbourne City Mission page: <https://www.mcm.org.au/services/learning/hester-hornbrook-academy>.

<sup>78</sup> See Melbourne City Mission page: [This link](#).

<sup>79</sup> See Melbourne City Mission page: [This link](#). See also The Age: [This link](#).

impart also do so in a far more effective way than other programs (such as the RR program) which approach such matters in a secular way and distinct from any personal faith context. While dealing with bullying and promoting respect and tolerance is important, the RR material takes a harsh ‘identity politics’ approach to such matters, categorising some groups as ‘oppressed’ and ‘marginalised’ and others ‘privileged’ based on their gender, race or characteristics, and encouraging student activism on that basis. In contrast, faith-based approaches nurture a more holistic respect among children (regardless of a person’s identity), which cultivates better character and school culture generally.

Unfortunately, as discussed above, only a limited cohort of students currently have access to the holistic support offered by SRI programs conducted outside of class time. The Government should increase holistic supports, including reverting SRI to class time and engaging more religious chaplains.

**6. School funding should be better directed towards initiatives to enhance student learning outcomes, particularly in literacy, numeracy and science, as well as student wellbeing.**

Given the issues we have discussed above, there is an evident need to better direct school funding towards initiatives which enhance student learning outcomes and student wellbeing. In our view, some recent announcements by the Government exemplify how funding may be readily directed towards other aims. For example, in late 2022 Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews announced funding to educate students about “the works of the Prophet Mohammed” (see video [here](#)). However, Government school teachers already teach students about religions and world faiths as part of the Victorian Curriculum.<sup>80</sup> In our view, instead of funding a program which teaches students about a specific religion, the Government should direct more funding towards SRI programs and religious chaplains generally. Both of these programs are likely to contribute to improvements in the mental health and holistic wellbeing of students, and therefore also their academic performance.

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<sup>80</sup> See <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/special-religious-instruction/policy>.