

CHAPTER 3: DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Transcript of Evidence

3.9 Education portfolio

VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2007–08

Melbourne — 9 May 2007

Members

Mr G. Barber	Mr G. Rich-Phillips
Mr R. Dalla-Riva	Mr R. Scott
Ms J. Graley	Mr B. Stensholt
Ms J. Munt	Dr W. Sykes
Mr M. Pakula	Mr K. Wells

Chair: Mr B. Stensholt
Deputy Chair: Mr K. Wells

Staff

Business Support Officer: Ms J. Nathan

Witnesses

Mr J. Lenders, Minister for Education;
Dr P. Dawkins, secretary;
Ms K. Henderson, deputy secretary, policy, planning and evaluation; and
Mr J. Rosewarne, deputy secretary, resources and infrastructure, Department of Education.

The CHAIR — I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing on the budget estimates for the education portfolio. On behalf of the committee I welcome John Lenders, Minister for Education, and from the Department of Education Dr Peter Dawkins, Secretary, Department of Education; Ms Katherine Henderson, deputy secretary, policy, planning and evaluation; and Mr Jeff Rosewarne, deputy secretary, resources and infrastructure. Departmental officers, members of the public and the media are also welcome. According to the guidelines for public hearings I remind members of the public that they cannot participate in the committee's proceedings and that only officers of the PAEC secretariat are to approach PAEC members. Departmental officers, as requested by the minister or his chief of staff, can approach the table during the hearing. Members of the media are also requested to observe the guidelines for filming or recording proceedings in the Legislative Council Committee Room.

All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act and is protected from judicial review. There is no need for evidence to be sworn. However, any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript, and the committee requests that verifications be forwarded to the committee within two working days of receiving the proof version.

In accordance with past practice, the transcripts and PowerPoint presentations will then be placed on the committee's website. Following the presentation by the minister committee members will ask questions related to the budget estimates. Generally the procedure followed will be that relating to questions in the Legislative Assembly. I ask that all mobile telephones be turned off.

I now call on the minister to give a presentation of no more than 10 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information that relates to the budget estimates for the education portfolio.

Mr LENDERS — Thank you, Chair. I am delighted to make a presentation and take questions. I think the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee is one of the strengths of accountability in the Bracks government, so it gives me great joy to be here today, although I am a bit puzzled that we are using Legislative Assembly procedure for questions rather than Legislative Council, but — —

The CHAIR — We do not have supplementary questions, Minister.

Mr LENDERS — But I will let that go through to the keeper.

Mr BARBER — We won't.

Mr LENDERS — Thank you, Mr Barber. We have some solidarity among MLCs here. There are only 4 out of 10 on the committee, so I guess I will acknowledge defeat.

Overheads shown.

Mr LENDERS — The presentation on the portfolio of education is now coming up on the slides. As members will have noted from the budget, there is a lot of money for education coming up, and that is because it is the government's no. 1 priority. Firstly, we will go through key achievements, our vision for education and then we will also go through the budget highlights themselves.

I think it is worth reflecting on the achievements. We have now been in government for seven and a half years, and we have come from a position which we thought was inadequate to one where we have invested an enormous amount. There is a lot more to be done, and the achievements are worth reflecting on.

Firstly, I will talk a lot about the blueprint today. It was one of the, I think, absolute highlights of Lynne Kosky's tenure in the portfolio, the work she did with the department, that she has left a legacy of the blueprint, which is a living document that is looked at and read in all 1594 government schools in Victoria. It is one that is looked at, although not obligatory, for the 702 non-government schools, and it is a document that across the rest of the country is frequently looked at as a benchmark for what good educational practice is. That is the thing that is up front for where we are in Victoria. That is a key achievement.

For members who have not seen it, I might ask if we can circulate copies of the blueprint, either for use during this committee or afterwards for members to look at. If there is ever any doubt as to the direction of education in Victoria, the blueprint is something that people should use as a reference.

The second point I will touch on with the key achievements is there are more students in the P-2 reading at expected levels. Again, if we are talking of absolutely fundamentals in education and where we came to in the lead-up to entering government in 1999, we focused on that the early years were critical, that the whole P-2 was an absolute vital start to where you go in education, and we can with some pride look at where we are travelling on that. But in all these areas there is still more to be done.

Record low class sizes — MLCs will know this has been an area of some discussion across the chamber, but it is an area that is unequivocally there. If we are looking again to the P-2, to the starting years of education and the most critical years, we have now got our average class sizes down below 21, and that is 3.1 less on average than when we came to government. Again, there is an investment in extra staff, extra resources in schools, and that is just one indication of it.

Also to students performing at or above the national average in literacy and numeracy — again, I will give more information on it as we go through — and Victoria plays a lead role nationally. They are key achievements and I think we need to put them into the context as we go forward as to the budget estimates.

The blueprint is there. I touched on the blueprint before, but the seven flagship strategies in there are ones that I think everybody should be absolutely aware of. I will touch on some of them during the presentation. Effective teachers, effective leaders, effective schools — the three of those roll off the tongue very easily, but they are absolutely essential if we are to bring forward opportunities for our students and our society as we go forward. The flagships are there, and there are things that are fundamental. This might sound like rhetoric on my part, but until the blueprint came out, often if you were a teacher in a school in Victoria and you were trying to work out what was best practice, we as a state, we as a system, did not necessarily offer advice.

With the flagship we have said, ‘This is a good model of teaching. This is a good model of learning. You are autonomous. Within the Victorian essential learning standards, you make local decisions of your own’. But we have the courage of our convictions to actually say what we think is good practice in teaching and learning amongst other things and offer them to our schools. They are important aspects that are in the blueprint.

Moving on, we are seeing better reading results coming through. We have a whole lot of measures and a whole lot of testing constantly going on now in our schools. There is different testing at levels 3, 5, 7 and now 9. I was in a few schools yesterday and they were actually conducting some of the year 9 tests that were going on. So we are seeing that and we are actually seeing better results coming out of reading. In the junior years on the slide we see the plot of the years of prep, year 1 and year 2. I think the graph speaks for itself, but there is always more to be done.

I mentioned before the smaller classes. This graph shows exactly that statistic: class sizes have come down in Victoria in the last seven and a half years. That is something that every school has noticed.

We will move on to the slide ‘Literacy and numeracy performance at or above the national average’. This graph plots that. It plots the results of reading and writing for years 3 and 5. Last year at PAEC — and I read the transcript — Mr Baxter, who is sadly no longer with us, had quite an interchange with my predecessor on this matter. If there are any questions about this graph, which is quite a technical matter, Dr Dawkins would be delighted to take the technical questions. But in regard to the issue of what the graphs actually show, again there is more to be done. But in all of those areas, Victoria is now performing best in Australia. Again we have eight jurisdictions to compare ourselves with. In most instances we are the best or near the top. That is again something that we can take pride in, but there is more to be done.

But we are not just talking about Australia. We also have some figures on the slide about our international performance in literacy and numeracy. Without going through this at great length, there are some countries that everybody looks at as leaders — Finland is clearly one of those. But however we look at these figures, Victoria — and Australia, but I am more obviously focused on Victoria — is continually in the band. You could probably on five digits of one hand, in most of these measures, Victoria is up near the top of all of those. I think that is important to reflect on because my federal colleague Julie Bishop quite often likes to focus on the negative, on talking down the system. Let us have a robust debate about the system; no-one is fearful about that. But we need to also be looking at where we are. If we look at those figures, the OECD average of those figures in regard to the PISA testing — or where like, for example, the United States is, which has to be at the lead of the world in innovation and a range of other areas — we are performing better than the United States. We need to keep a perspective on

this because if we do not, all we will just talk ourselves down. That is the last thing that we want to do for our next generation.

Mr WELLS — Do you have the other states on the graph?

Mr LENDERS — Can we just go back to that graph?

Mr WELLS — The others would be interesting.

Mr LENDERS — We do not have them, Mr Wells, on the graph there, but essentially we can certainly get that information quite easily for you and take it on notice. The one thing noting on most of these things is the one area, the one jurisdiction, that tends to do that better than us, but it depends on the measure, is the ACT. Part of that is of, course, firstly, the demographic of the ACT is very different, and secondly, one of those great inequities — and I am not here as the Minister for Finance, I am an ex-finance minister — is, and we can never forget the trauma to Victoria, how much our GST money goes outside our jurisdiction, and particularly to a section of a middle class city — —

Mr WELLS — But if you have agreements from the Labor states you would be able to have that result.

Mr LENDERS — It is an inequity of it going to the ACT and Queensland, but no, the ACT is really the only jurisdiction that, in a sense, matches us on these areas and there are good reasons for that.

The next slide, and again I will ask if we can circulate copies of the slides, and I will not spend much time on it now, but there is a document called *The Future of Schooling in Australia*. Now again, I have talked about the blueprint in Victoria and the critical nature of it to us. Again there has been an incredibly long and torturous debate over the last year on education in Australia. My federal colleague — it is quite interesting — has quadrupled the size of the bureaucracy of education to now more than 700 public servants. So they sit there in Canberra, and they do not educate a single child in Australia. There are almost 10 000 schools in this country, and none of them are run by the commonwealth government. As my MLC colleagues would know, I periodically refer to Ms Bishop's bunker as Canberra as Moscow on the Molonglo, because there is far more regulation coming out of Canberra than probably anything since the former Soviet Union. She has her Moscow on the Molonglo. There is a lot of regulation and restriction in schools.

Whereas this is a collaborative document by all eight state and territory jurisdictions as to where we see the future of schools in Australia. It proposes seven areas for work and 12 actions. The significance of this is that it is a collaborative approach among the eight jurisdictions that actually administer schools. It works very closely with the Catholic system and the independent system, so between us, the stakeholders who we have been trying to get to commit to a single document here, it is actually the people who run the almost 10 000 schools in Australia and it is a reiteration that collaborative federalism is the way forward, much like the work done in 1999 — the Adelaide declaration — where all governments of all political persuasions signed up to the same vision.

Moving forward, speaking of vision — a good segue — there is a vision for education in Victoria. I am conscious, Chair, that the time is running out here, but we talk of a modern, responsive curriculum, leading the world in areas, access to latest technology, which my colleague Jacinta Allan would have talked about, and genuine choice for students and families.

School and community partnerships is a very strong area here, and I will try and touch on that if I get any questions on the area. Reducing red tape — I had a go at Moscow on the Molonglo, which I will continue to do while there is breath in my body. One of the things we have done and one of the benchmarks here is that we have reduced red tape for our 1594 government schools and our 702 non-government schools in this state, and we will continue to work on that.

The budget provided a 900 million commitment to education. It is our no. 1 priority — 555 in assets, 349 in outputs. We see as we go through the nature of the problem on a rebuild. There is a graph that will come up here which simply shows the age of our schooling stock. Again I would be happy to take questions on that. It shows what the problem is and the building profile of our schools.

Moving through again, that was a slide on how much we have spent, the age of the schools, budget highlights, which I am sure members will ask me about.

In conclusion, essentially it is a huge commitment — \$904 million over four years extra into education. It is our no. 1 priority. If we get this right, we will change the face of the state, change the face of the nation. Education is a gift that lasts a lifetime and is one that is critical for us to invest in well. Chair, I welcome any questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I am sure each of us will have questions. My first question relates to productivity. I must admit I think it is very important because we need productivity here in Victoria and in Australia. I am disappointed that the federal budget did not seem to do enough. It did something, but not enough.

I would like to hear from the minister: what is the impact you see of the portfolio spend on productivity here in Victoria and particularly in terms of your new initiatives?

Mr LENDERS — Productivity is something we absolutely focus on. When I entered the workforce there were five people in the workforce for every person in retirement. When I leave the workforce — and hopefully at a time of my own choosing — there will be three people in the workforce for every person in retirement. Clearly productivity is an issue that we have to address or else the society we have just will not go. The innovative initiatives of the Hawke-Keating government on superannuation started that, but for us obviously the whole human capital aspect of what our society is — and the people coming out of our schooling system are a critical part of that productivity — is a big thing. It is certainly something the Premier has spent a lot of work and initiative in trying to get a national view on human capital and on the future of schooling in Australia we touch on a lot of the human capital issues. But essentially here there are two aspects of this. If we are talking of the capital component — the 555 million in capital — it is an investment in our schooling system. There are 131 government schools that will receive in this financial year coming either rebuilds or modernisations or totally new schools being built.

Building schools in itself is only part of it, but it is the educational opportunity you have with new classrooms. I was in Trafalgar and Neerim South yesterday at two schools. They were those classic light timber construction schools of the 60s, built for a 25-year period. It is a long time since the 60s. It is more than 25 years, and teaching in that environment is more difficult. The whole idea of breakaway groups and the whole idea of technology are not there, so firstly in productivity we can teach better, by better schools and better facilities.

The second area — and the IT again that Jacinta Allan would have talked about, the ultranet, is an integral part of that — is the 249 million we have invested in outputs in recurrent. This covers a whole range of areas, but fundamentally it is to improve the art of teaching and learning. Fundamentally it is best practice to get that information out — whether it be professional development or whether it be leadership in schools, whether it be best practice. All of those contribute to better productivity.

And again the work done by the Productivity Commission, the work done by the Victorian government as part of the whole human capital venture shows that there is an extraordinarily strong correlation with the time spent in schooling and time people remain in the workforce and productivity. The correlation is very strong, and this investment in our education will probably do more to deal with that earlier statistic I had where there will be three people in the workforce for every retiree by the time I leave the workforce. That productivity will continue to let us be a first-world, growing economy with the quality lifestyle that comes from it.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Minister, I would like to ask you about school maintenance which is an area you did not touch on in your presentation. Last year some information was given to the committee and subsequent follow-up in FOIs revealed that as at June 2006 there was \$268 million backlog school maintenance, and the details are contained in that FOI document. Can you tell the committee please what the current estimate is for backlog school maintenance and how much funding has been provided in this budget to address that issue?

Mr LENDERS — A couple of things — firstly, the Auditor-General in his report identified a figure of backlog of school maintenance which from memory was in the order of 300 million, which he identified. But a couple of things I will say. In this budget particularly — and I will stand corrected on the figures — but the school resource package deals with about a base of 32 or 34 million in maintenance which goes out to schools, and that averages at more than \$20 000 for every government school. Secondly, there is a \$7 million top up for urgent maintenance in there, and in addition there is 10 million in this year's budget for extra maintenance in schools. So that is one part of it. How schools manage this — I mean, how long is a piece of string? You could spend every bit of maintenance on schools, or you could ask, what is the basic level and what do we need to do? So we have a balance in the student resource package to schools which deals with that.

But secondly, and more profoundly, this government is spending \$1.9 billion over this four years to rebuild or modernise 500 schools in the state. So the critical maintenance backlogs, the critical areas will be addressed by that, or will be more effectively addressed than they have been at any time. If we put it into a historical context, that is a 75 per cent increase on an annual basis over the last few years; and it is also a sixfold increase on capital expenditure — or almost a sixfold increase on capital expenditure — on schools than from what we inherited from the Kennett government in 1999.

So if we are talking about reducing the core reason for maintenance, the capital investment will go towards that considerably, but secondly, it is part of the student resource package that schools make choices on maintenance themselves. Plus there has been last year in the budget, this year in the budget, various amounts that come forward. Also there has been a 50 million one-off. There is a range of these things. So we are very conscious of maintenance, but I think the core addressing of maintenance that we are doing — as I mentioned before the examples of Trafalgar and Neerim from yesterday, schools built in the 1960s, 25 years, light timber construction, those schools being replaced or modernised will do more to reduce maintenance need than any other recurrent expenditure that is available.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — I am sure as a former finance minister you would appreciate the difference between accounting for maintenance and capital works. That money through the student resource package, the \$34 million and the other 7 million and the 10 million, is that annually over the period of the appropriation?

Mr LENDERS — I think, Mr Rich Phillips, firstly, as a former finance minister I would certainly be aware that you cannot separate capital from maintenance. One of the flaws of all governments in the history of this state — I am the 55th education minister in this state, and I imagine most of my predecessors had the problem where you separated capital from maintenance. You had this short-sighted view that if you bring the capital down as low as you can so you can build more and do not take account of maintenance and a long life, you have a short-term saving in the year of the budget but your long-term costs to government and to the community are higher. So I am acutely aware of the link between capital and maintenance. I think you cannot simply separate them. I think one of the restructures that Professor Dawkins has brought in as part of the department is to bring the whole capital and maintenance under the one area of the department so there is a greater synergy.

One of the great strengths of public-private partnerships — we are not doing public-private partnerships in education, but one of the learnings from public-private partnerships is that if you link capital and maintenance together the whole-of-life cost of a project is far less than when you separate the two. We have brought them together, so I have absolute confidence that structurally we will do more to deal with maintenance in education than probably any government before us in this state.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Minister, on the issue of the student resource package. that is ongoing? that is an annual figure?

Mr LENDERS — Yes.

Ms MUNT — Minister, while I was on the parliamentary committee for education we learnt how important professional development and leadership training is for our teachers and principals in the outcomes for students. Under the blueprint this is mentioned. I was wondering if you could please tell us what the government is going to do to improve those leadership and professional development opportunities.

Mr LENDERS — Thank you for the question. This is a critical area under the blueprint leadership in schools. Again, if you have a philosophy; if you are sitting in your ivory tower on the Molonglo and you make edicts for the whole country — much like Victor Chernenko used to do in the Soviet Union, and he was probably the last person pre-glasnost who had this view — but if you sit there and make edicts about the world and do not actually do anything about delivering it, then not a lot happens. What the blueprint has identified is that if we want change, if we want a culture of performance change, if we want a culture of leadership and we want to take education forward, then you have to invest in school leaders; you absolutely have to invest in them. So the first point, I guess Ms Munt, is that you have to identify that that is an important strategy, which we have done as a state. Secondly, it is no good just to identify the strategy; you actually have to deliver what you can to assist those principals.

What we have done is a range of things. One is taking principals out of schools, whether it be either learning from their peers or from other jurisdictions, other places. It is a great investment that the state has made to take a number

of principals out, and I can get the actual figures for that. We have taken principals out of schools to learn best practice and then go back into schools. We have also had teachers professional leave, and since its inception in 2004 more than 2000 teachers have gone out for advanced professional leave to actually learn best practice. In this year alone 600 or 700 will do that. So the culture of performance and learning is very critical, but the leadership and professional development are of great importance to us.

So what we see in school after school is that principals either go out for the practice or aspiring principals go out. One of the great joys of my role was to preside over a graduation a few weeks ago in the department, of aspiring principals who had responded to a government initiative where they could do a two-year masters of educational leadership — I think that is the course. They have gone out, and there are some amazing people who have an incredible faith in the education system; they have a commitment to it. There is a ticker there; there is a passion. They want to make the world a better place. In addition to their normal duties they go out and do a masters. A lot of these people are at that time of their lives where they are soaring in their careers, they have got life–work balance issues, and yet they make the time because they believe in education. So we have been helping with that by assisting with the masters course, so that they come back and we have this whole group of future leaders coming through our schools to draw on. So it is a range of those initiatives that together mean we will continue to have those people with a passion for education who want to give.

I must share my story from yesterday where I was at Trafalgar High School. It was return-to-schools day yesterday. So I went to my old high school. There was a roast. Two of my former teachers had come back to reminisce about me, and I will not embarrass myself or indulge the committee by going on about what they said about me.

Dr SYKES — Go on!

Mr WELLS — You are trying to get your numbers right. Maybe they spoke about that.

Mr LENDERS — But the fantastic thing again was that here were two teachers whose passion was teaching. They had stayed in schools for their entire lives and they had given, and their professional joy was actually in seeing their students succeed.

Ms MUNT — Become the Minister for Education.

Mr LENDERS — So they took joy from my success. But far more significant is a lifetime of teaching. So that is the sort of culture we want to prevail. It is also about what we can do assist principals in particular, in response to your question, but more broadly professional development leading to teachers staying in schools, learning best practice and learning from their peers. That goes again to removing the clutter, removing the red tape, focusing on teaching and learning, and professional development in this area and leadership skills are critical. That is what makes schools even better, and if we are to go forward that is from the blueprint an important lesson for us.

Dr SYKES — Minister, my question relates to assistance measures to non-government schools, and I notice in the overview document that there is an allocation of \$30 million over four years for capital grants and \$83 million over four years for other help for schools supporting needy students. My question is: how do those inputs or allocations compare with previous Victorian state allocations, and, secondly, how does the level of assistance to non-government schools in Victoria compare with levels of assistance to non-government schools in other states?

Mr LENDERS — Thank you for the question. There are several parts to the question. Firstly, there is an \$83.1 million commitment in the budget to non-government schools, which is a rollover of the \$20 million a year that we committed in the last term, and that is indexed, so that is why it is not 80, it is 83.1. That is a continuation of that level of funding to non-government schools. There is a new contribution of \$30 million for capital to needy non-government schools, and that, I think, in the forward estimates is 7.5, 7.5, 7.5, 7.5, although I stand corrected on that. That again is to needy schools. We will obviously work with the Catholic Education Commission and the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria so we are not duplicating, doing a Moscow on the Molonglo and creating red tape. We will work with them to actually deliver that through those particular areas.

Your broader question was about our contribution to non-government schools and how it compares to other jurisdictions. Historically Victoria has the highest percentage of students in non-government schools of any jurisdiction in the country, and there is a range of historical reasons for that — part of it being that Victoria traditionally has had the highest Catholic percentage of any population, and obviously the correlation between

non-governments and Catholics is very high. So there is a historical basis for that, but our figures are that we have increased funding in that area since we have been in government. Most of the funding for non-government schools through an arrangement going right back to the Menzies years and science blocks has come from the commonwealth. The state has focused on funding for government schools; the commonwealth has focused on funding for non-government schools.

We have a figure. I can get the actual statistics on what it is per — bear with me a moment; I do have figures on what it is for each individual school, commonwealth and state. We in 2000–01, which was the first year of the Bracks government — —

Dr SYKES — I just need the comparison with the other states in this year, Minister, I do not need to go back six or seven years; just this year would be fine, thank you.

The CHAIR — I am happy to take it on notice if you do not have it.

Dr SYKES — I am happy to have it taken on — —

The CHAIR — And the other comparison that he asked for as well.

Mr LENDERS — Yes.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, in budget paper 3 on page 41 and also in your presentation you referred to the blueprint. I was looking through it; one of your flagged strategies is creating and supporting a performance and development culture. I was just wondering if you can advise the committee what the government is doing to improve outcomes through that particular initiative?

Mr LENDERS — Thank you for the question. A performance and development culture is a critical part of schools going forward. In 1594 government schools we have a responsibility for that, and obviously what we do as best practice in government schools flows through into non-government schools. Effecting that culture is particularly critical. Our challenge is, how do we do that in a devolved educational system where we want people to go forward? Teachers enter the teaching profession because they want to deliver education to students. So it is how we offer guidance and assistance to them in a way that is useful, and culture it quite critical. So there are few things that we have sought to do with our initiatives.

The performance and development culture initiatives — of course it all comes out of the blueprint, which is where we have guidance on that. There are a number of things which would appear to be absolutely obvious but have not necessarily been in place. One is an induction of new teachers. We constantly hear tales of people who enter a teaching workforce. I was briefly in a teaching workforce a long time ago now, back in 1984 or 85 for half a year in a teaching workforce. It is a classic; you enter the workforce and the assumption is that you have learnt everything at teachers college and you can just hit the ground running and know what you are doing. While I would like to think we are all superhuman, we are not. So an actual induction, a formalised induction into a school and into areas for a start is an important part of that performance culture. So it is one of things out of the blueprint that we have actually identified and are dealing with.

Also, multiple sources of feedback for all teachers to inform of teaching and learning practice. Again, it is logical, but the blueprint tries to formalise some of this and put it in as part of the prevailing culture. We have talked of customised teaching development plans for all teachers, based on student and teacher needs and school priorities. Again, the ultranet will be of significant assistance, above and beyond already the work that is happening on a department intranet site at the moment to assist with that. Also, there is just the whole belief in staff by staff that there is a performance and development culture, there is a place for them in this and that that is a desirable way to go forward if they are going to improve teaching and learning outcomes. All of these things are a very important part of that to come out of the blueprint.

Part of that also is an accreditation process. It is fine to say we will have a performance and development culture; we have got to put an accreditation process in place which is rolling out through government and non-government schools. I had the privilege, probably a month ago, to be out at Essendon Keilor college to actually present awards to schools which had actually gone forward and done this. In many of these cases it was the school council president and principal who came forward for their accreditation. Again, this is a very important day. These schools were being recognised by their peers that they had the performance and development culture. We were also doing

an accreditation, again, on some of those things like even a tick-off on effective induction for teachers as an example. The accreditation process shows how the performance and development culture works, how we move through it, and all these schools, government and non-government, were there. I was there also with Stephen Elder from the Melbourne archdiocese Catholic Education Office who was there also. Dr Dawkins was there with me and a range of other people. We all just watched these schools that had done it. This sort of part of the blueprint will go a long way to assisting in that. We want the culture to change and these are methods under the blueprint where it is changing and schools are embracing it with enthusiasm.

Mr BARBER — Minister, I am not sure you are familiar with the redevelopment of the Western Bulldogs' facilities down at the Whitten Oval. Are you vaguely familiar with them?

Mr LENDERS — Vaguely familiar.

Mr BARBER — You have not been there?

Mr LENDERS — I have been there in a previous ministerial life. I was down there and have been on a tour.

The CHAIR — I am sure Ms Graley has.

Mr BARBER — It is my understanding that Victoria University now plans to teach classes out of those facilities. I was wondering if you think it is an appropriate learning environment for the students to be taking classes under the same roof as a pokies venue? If not, what policy influence do you as minister have over the university's decision, given you are responsible for their act? And what recourse would a student have who might be a recovering gambling addict who said, 'I want to do this course, but I do not want to have to walk past poker machines every time I come to class'.

The CHAIR — Try to relate the answer to the estimates.

Mr BARBER — Give the minister a chance to do that.

The CHAIR — You should also try to relate the question as well to the estimates, Mr Barber.

Mr LENDERS — Firstly, and I will stand corrected, but certainly in my five and a half months as minister I have been under the view that the minister responsible for universities is the Minister for Skills, Education Services and Employment, so I have not given a great deal of thought to what Victoria University does.

Mr BARBER — But you are responsible for their act according to the back of the Department of Education's annual report.

Mr LENDERS — The Premier has made a new administrative arrangements order. I will take that on notice if I am, but I am confident that the Minister for Skills, Education Services and Employment is responsible for universities in this state.

Mr SCOTT — The issue I would like to raise is something I know the minister is interested in, since he was kind enough to visit electorate about it. I am referring to healthier eating as part of the Go for Your Life program. In budget paper 3 on page 15 there is a reference to the Go for Your Life program. Could you please advise what the government is doing to support healthier lifestyles for students?

Mr LENDERS — Thank you, Mr Scott, for that question. It is a seminal question because, in the end, if there has been one thing that all governments have struggled with since all of us have been alive, it is how you actually in health-care terms — and I know I am straying into the health minister's portfolio but it relates to education — it is the preventative versus reactive in health. I guess governments of all persuasions have given lip-service to this, but every time when you are under budgetary pressure you deal with the reactive responding to the health conditions, rather than the proactive in doing what you can at an early stage to actually address them. Go for Your Life is a whole-of-government strategy which seeks to address this. Without taking full credit by this government for it, the concept of trying to deal with this, I give some praise to the Hamer government — my hand shakes as I do it — and Brian Dixon, going back to Life. Be in it, which was obviously the start of this as an important strategy. What we are doing, though, with the Go for Your Life is actually trying a whole-of-government approach to bringing this in, because it is increasingly critical as we age. No matter where you look in the

developed world, we are just having growing levels of obesity, growing levels of unfit and all the diseases and everything that go with that. Getting in early and dealing with it — Go for Your Life — is critical.

There are obviously two aspects of that: one is the exercise component and the other one is the diet component that come from that. I was delighted to be with you, Mr Scott, in Preston at that school. To share with the committee, it was one of those days when there were four television cameras — there was some great issue of state on the day that I was being interviewed on — and on the first day of term the school captains were there. Mr Scott and I admired — I think his name was Justin — the school captain who faced the four TV cameras with great confidence, probably more confidence than I did, and actually addressed them. He did say at the end to me, ‘And I said you have got to eat good food’, so he was very much on message. The importance of school canteens — many families utilise the school canteen as a way of students eating on the day and obviously many canteens for many years have had actually food in there which frankly is junk food, which is not conducive to good educational outcomes. If the kids are having a feed on chips or sweet drinks or something at the start of the day, forget the health component, which you cannot, but also your retention component in class as you get on later in the morning if you have been sort of high on sugars and the like. There is a whole lot of educational and health reasons why we need to be more focused on our canteens.

I guess the healthier eating kit we gave to schools, which we have made available to all government schools and all non-government schools, provides best practice, again, on foods that kids like. Any of us who have had kids know it is often very hard to get them focused on eating good food because tragically they seem to like to junk food, so we actually have a methodology that is best practice in eating good food. Certainly at your school, Mr Scott — I think it was Preston north-east or Preston south-east; one of the primaries anyway — the school there was adapting their canteen to those foods, removing the sugary drinks from it and having healthier foods in the canteen, and also the whole prevailing culture that arises from that. So government is assisting in that area. We have to, again, be very conscious that we do not do a Moscow on the Molonglo and try and prescribe everything students eat down to the last sort of iota, but we need to offer guidance, best practice. Those kits were very useful; a number of parents at a number of schools have said that to me. I think by that sort of practice — offering best practice; it goes right back to the blueprint — we will actually get a far better culture of better eating in schools, which is an important start. Obviously the phys. ed. and other activity components are also part of school curriculum already, which we need to work on as well. The double-pronged approach is what we need to do to take our society into the later part of the 21st century and hopefully one where we are all fitter and healthier than we have traditionally been.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Minister, I was interested in your comments earlier just as a notation talking about the federal government’s public service. How many public servants do you say the federal government has?

Mr LENDERS — They have quadrupled to 700 who purely deal with education policy.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — And you have 1816, so I just thought we needed to put that in some context in your assertions.

Mr LENDERS — Mr Dalla-Riva, we do administer 1594 schools.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I was just making the assertion, Minister — —

The CHAIR — Your question?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — My question is relating to numeracy and literacy programs — —

Mr LENDERS — One per school, that is not bad, as opposed to 700 for none.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — The federal government introduced a welcome initiative in numeracy and literacy programs last night in the announcement of a \$700 tutorial voucher for struggling year 3, 5 and 7 students. Given that we do not seem to find anything in the budget papers, were you relying on the federal government for that program to assist those struggling students?

The CHAIR — Try and relate the answer to Victoria, Minister.

Mr LENDERS — In relating to our estimates, firstly, any federal government tuition grant to individual students obviously is not a path for the Victorian estimates. I am sure that the federal government will find some — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Is there anything similar, Minister? That is what I was asking. There was the link.

Mr LENDERS — Our literacy and numeracy plan, which again the Premier announced earlier this year, is exactly that: a literacy and numeracy plan where through our schools we actually improve literacy and numeracy. In that plan there is a range of observations, a range of actions — activities that we would do as a state. Many of them are in the forward estimates here now. I mentioned earlier some of their teachers and clusters in literacy and numeracy and a range of other areas and the scholarships and the range of things we are doing are specifically in the Victorian budget in our estimates. We also suggested a range of things that the commonwealth could actually do to assist. Going to your earlier point — I am not going to let this point pass, Chair — the commonwealth does have 700 policy officers who do not teach a single student, not a single student! They have 700 people — —

Mr WELLS — But you keep whingeing about the amount of money they do not give you, and you cannot have it both ways.

Mr LENDERS — No, I am making the observation through you — —

Mr WELLS — You keep whingeing about the lack of federal funding, and then you are complaining. I mean, we have heard you complain the whole morning.

Mr LENDERS — Through you, Chair.

The CHAIR — Let us hear the answer, please.

Mr LENDERS — Thank you, Chair. I will make the observation that if you have a bureaucracy of 700 policy officers that does not administer any one of Australia's 10 000 schools — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — But that delivers policies like those announced last night.

Mr LENDERS — It does not communicate with a single student in a school in Australia.

Mr WELLS — It delivers funding and policies, I think you would agree.

Mr LENDERS — You do have red tape. Chair, on the issue of literacy and numeracy, in last year's budget we introduced literacy improvement teams in our schools — a concrete action going out there. That was introduced in last year's budget, and in this year's budget we have a range of measures dealing with carrying out the blueprint which will go to literacy and numeracy in our schools. What we have seen is we have got a maths and science initiative, and just recently — the day before Anzac Day — the Premier announced in Essendon a series of grants for every Victorian government school, primary or secondary, for science, where the schools can literally spend that money on equipment for science to assist with the teaching.

What we are seeing is an investment in this particular area, and we have seen it where it is hands on — putting money into schools — and that money will make a difference in these areas. But the literacy and numeracy plan that the Premier announced deals with a holistic approach for how Victoria is going in these areas, and I welcome any money from the commonwealth government into education — any money — because it will ultimately assist in Victoria. But I do make the observation that the commonwealth government in 1996 spent 2 per cent of GDP on education and training; the commonwealth government in 2007 spends 1.6 per cent of GDP in education and training. The commonwealth has slashed funding in education by 20 per cent in real terms, so the commonwealth should put its money where its mouth is.

Mr WELLS — Maybe, Minister, you could provide — but in real terms — what is the actual dollar.

Mr LENDERS — In real terms it has slashed it by 20 per cent.

Mr WELLS — No, in real terms. In 1996 what was the funding compared to 2007?

Mr LENDERS — It was 2 per cent of GDP compared to 1.6 per cent of GDP, so I rest my case.

Mr WELLS — No, you are talking a percentage of GDP.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister.

Ms GRALEY — I will just pass on to you while I have the opportunity that when I visit my schools the principals actually talk about the blueprint in a very, very positive light. I pass that on. In fact one of the schools in my area, Narre Warren P-12, a very big school, has over 20 different nationalities in it, and I would like to refer you to budget paper 3, page 9, which relates to encouraging diversity in education. Could you please advise what the government is doing to support multicultural communities and families?

Mr LENDERS — Delighted to take the question. Certainly, Ms Graley, your area — having once lived in the city of Casey, and Mr Rich-Phillips would share this — is an incredibly multicultural community. Always for us as a state there is a challenge, obviously, in an area where perhaps English is not a first language, but there are extraordinary opportunities as well for us. There is both the cultural diversity that families wish to have when they pass on their own language skills to their children, and there is also an extraordinary economic opportunity for Victoria and Australia. Being such a multicultural community and with those multilanguage skills, it gives us an unbelievable international trade advantage over so many other countries and communities if we can harness it, so there are very good social and very good economic reasons for us harnessing it. We are acutely conscious of that, and what we have done is we certainly have refunded the core money for language schools in this budget, and we have also increased the per capita grant from \$100 to \$120 through the excellence in languages initiative which is rolled out through the state. That will make a material difference to those tens of thousands of families who generally on a Saturday morning but also at other times actually take their child to a language school to learn the language of their heritage, and sometimes not even the language of their heritage.

I had the privilege at the Victorian School of Languages some months ago to be actually at the graduation of students. I was at the University of Melbourne, and we had hundreds and hundreds of people came to this and it was a classic. It was parents' extraordinary pride in the achievement of their children. We had all the languages as people came through one by one. But also what amazed me was that there were some people there learning languages who also had no cultural link to the language at all who excelled in languages. There was some very fascinating showcases there of students who did that. But the celebration was really about our diversity and multiculturalism and the skills learnt in languages. So this budget through this financial assistance alone will assist in this happening.

We have got more than 33 000 school-aged children in 50 different languages who are learning as we speak in Victoria today, which again is an extraordinary number of students who do that. We have got 200 community languages. Again, these are not-for-profit schools that provide languages in all these areas. So, again, particularly in the area like the city of Casey, this will be something I am sure that many parents would see as of great assistance as they struggle. They want to give their kids the best opportunity, and this funding — 100 refunded going to 120 per student — will make that available right across the length and breadth of Victoria.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Minister, I would like to ask you about carryovers from 06–07 for the new budget. BP4 suggests the carryover will be \$67 million in aggregate, and your explanation for departmental response to the committee suggests that — it would help to put it in percentage terms — 0.31 per cent of the revised budget for 06–07 operating statement is being carried forward, and 11 per cent of the asset initiatives allocation is being carried forward. Particularly with reference to the asset initiatives, relocatable schools and new and replacement schools, why was that funding not extended during 06-07? I refer you to page 13 of your response.

Mr LENDERS — Firstly, any organisation the size of the Department of Education that has on its recurrent a carryover of one-third of 1 per cent is actually managing its resources well, and even on the capital there are reasons. It goes through individual programs and the reasons for the capital, but I think the premise of your question, Mr Rich-Phillips is, 'Why did you not spend it?' I would say unashamedly that we are not in the business of spending for the sake of spending. If we have a project that we think at budget time is ready — and it will not come forward if it is not ready —

Like this particular budget there were 131 schools that we are seeking to fund in this budget out of that \$555 million on capital. There is the ultranet as well — not quite that figure, but approximately \$400 million we are seeking to spend in this budget. When they are put forward by the department and I sign off on them we will only do that if we think they are ready, and ready to be expended, in the financial year, or if it is TEI over the forward estimates — whatever the arrangement is. But we are not going to get into that old, crazy 60s practice of on 29 June spending everything for the sake of spending it, because we have a responsibility for taxpayers money, a responsibility for the outcomes. I guess with accrual accounting in a sense you can deal with it year by year

anyway. But, firstly, we are not going to spend for the sake of spending because it is the end of the financial year. That is bad practice.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Yes.

Mr LENDERS — And it certainly is something that the Bracks government thinks is bad practice, and I would certainly hope that you as shadow finance minister think is bad practice. I am sure you were not suggesting we spend for the sake of spending, because you would disappoint me, Mr Rich-Phillips, if you were.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — I am just wondering why those projects were not ready to commit to. Obviously you would expect them to be when the budget is framed, and 11 per cent of net asset is significant.

Mr LENDERS — If we do talk about an asset program, when the planning goes forward — under Building Futures or whatever — for a school, and again there is a sign-off in the lead-up to the budget, it is announced by the Treasurer in the budget, we wait for it to be formally appropriated for the Parliament, and then obviously from 1 July we start carrying it out. But as you would be well aware, Mr Rich-Phillips, on any school site, when you start construction on a school site you might find contaminated soil, as we have just discovered at Albert Park, where contaminated soil was just found on the school recently. The reality is that until you commence the actual construction you may not find out that there is contaminated soil. For example, finding contaminated soil will clearly, prudently and logically delay the building of the school, because we are not going to build a school just because we have got an appropriation for it, if suddenly we have to rip the thing down to clean up the soil.

We have also had other ones, like last year in the new and replacement schools project there were delays associated with the Victorian College of the Arts. That was an underexpenditure of \$13.1 million. Those delays were due to a possible location for the school, alternate sites being put up for the school, and also dealing with links to commonwealth funding. I will not have a go at the commonwealth on this one, but I am just making the point that if your funding is coming from two sources, you make a reliable guess as to when the money is going to come and try to plan accordingly. So we were waiting for commonwealth funding for the Victorian College of the Arts. Perhaps if some of those 700 policy officers went and looked at the school, there might not have been a problem. But I digress. My point is that sometimes with capital you have to be cognisant of all those things.

We have 131 projects coming forward in this budget. I am confident they will all be delivered. But inevitably on some projects there are issues like matching funding from another source, particularly as we go down partnership approaches. I did not get to it on my slides, because I have obviously been waxing lyrical on other things for too long. But talking about partnerships with a school, I was at Neerim District Secondary College yesterday, and the classic there is that there is a library at that school which is a shared facility between the Shire of Baw Baw and Neerim District Secondary College. That library works very well, and it is a model that I think we should look at. But, again, if you have a partnership between Baw Baw shire and us, and Baw Baw shire, for whatever reason, slows down, the construction will slow down.

I was at a school in Glen Iris but two weeks ago that is a partnership between the City of Stonnington, the education department and the Uniting Church, on the co-use of facilities. That project — and the Chair would well — —

The CHAIR — It is actually in Boroondara.

Mr LENDERS — Boroondara. The Chair, Mr Stensholt, would well and truly know about this, Mr Rich-Phillips, because he played a significant role as the local member in getting this up and running between three institutions that were all a little bit slow. Sometimes this happens, and things slow down, so that is the main reason our capital slows down. But we will be acutely conscious of spending our capital prudently on the task of getting 500 schools rebuilt or modernised over the next four years and also in rolling out the ultranet and other capital projects.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — The VCA example you gave accounts for 13 of the 67 million. Can you give the committee details of the other projects that were not — —

Mr LENDERS — I am delighted to take it on notice, but it is typical of them.

The CHAIR — We have some details on pages 13 and 14. You are looking for financial details, are you?

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — I am looking for details of which projects and the amounts, yes.

The CHAIR — I am sure you will provide that on notice as an estimate — because he has not actually finished yet.

Minister, I would like you to continue to focus on the asset investment in infrastructure and link it to, in terms of building this infrastructure, how it relates to teaching and learning environments and what you are going to achieve in this regard. It is not just a matter of building buildings; you also have to provide a high-class educational environment for the children.

Mr LENDERS — There is a whole range of things we want to achieve, and under Building Futures one of the starting points is obviously the educational outcomes that we can achieve. All of us who have been into schools in our own electorates will have multiple examples of how these things can be improved — for example, the first instance I use is the ultranet. You would have heard from my colleague Jacinta Allan earlier in the week about the ultranet — that is, capital. What it can achieve is that it obviously brings us into the 21st century. We have rolled out broadband and done those things in schools which let parents, students and teachers all take advantage of the 21st century technology.

That is one example, but in other schools as we go forward it is what we can actually achieve. The whole concept of teaching and learning — Mr Dalla-Riva raised literacy and numeracy as an issue before, as an example. The whole concept of reading recovery, for example, in the junior primary years, the whole idea of a light timber construction school with a square classroom that can seat 35 or 40 students, and that being the sole way you teach, for example, does not contemplate something as fundamental as reading recovery, which any educator would now say is a critical intervention in the early years of school. You actually take the student out of the classroom — those light timber constructions like those at Trafalgar and Neerim South where I was yesterday being examples.

How do you in that environment do something as basic as reading recovery, let alone other forms of group work and the like? Firstly, on the capital to educational outcome, it addresses something as fundamental as that. You have also got, particularly in the senior years of schooling, the whole concept of a study club or an area where you have a group of students who simply want to work together in a collegial and harmonious environment; they want access to the library, they want break-out space, they want tutorial space, they want places even where you can sometimes have lectures when you have a larger group who are preparing for VCE subjects and the like. That whole concept of flexibility in the classroom is where the educational outcome comes to, where the structures we have make teaching more difficult.

Now I am sure that in the 1960s — it is not a go at the 60s; I am sure at the time they thought that was the best form of educational outcome when they constructed, and I am sure again at the time the department and the ministers thought they could roll out a lot of schools quickly and they would deal with the need. Good on them. There was a good investment in the 60s — but times move on. So whether it be the technology, whether it be the actual size of the classroom — all of those are absolutely critical.

Stage 2 of our Building Futures is that educational rationale to target the educational needs in the community. One of the joys of the portfolio is that every school is very passionate about it. They have a vision as to how you can achieve educational outcomes. Whether it be the links to environmental sustainability, whether it be the kitchen gardens that they have — and partly in response to Mr Scott's question before, the Stephanie Alexander garden kitchens, for example, are all part of that — people have innovative ways of learning. So for us the challenge is: how do we, in a devolved system, get the best from local input and how do we tie it into our knowledge state wise under the blueprint to invest in that capital? So it is a big investment and lots of schools are often disappointed because they are not among the 131 in a given year. But as part of Building Futures we try to evaluate, we try to get them all into the matrix. But the simplest answer is, using reading recovery as an example, that is just but one of many examples of how modern buildings and modern facilities will actually improve educational outcomes.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I must admit the new relocatables are really useful in that regard, and also the flexibility which is being built in — and I hope it continues to be built in — in terms of designs for the modernisation program becomes a hallmark rather than necessarily having the same thing for everybody.

Mr WELLS — Minister, I want to talk to you about voluntary fees. What is the exact incremental increase in voluntary fees over the forward estimates that you are expecting?

Mr LENDERS — That would not be in the budget because they are not part of the appropriation.

Mr WELLS — I am just wondering what calculations you have done as a department in regard to the amount of voluntary fees the schools are receiving, and what increase you would expect. The reason I ask this question is that in budget paper 4, page 146, you talk about sales of goods and services and you give a preamble, but then you say:

Major factors contributing to this change are:

expected increases in TAFE fees and schools revenue.

Could you explain that and link it back to voluntary fees, please?

Mr LENDERS — Okay, the voluntary fees, firstly. There is a fundamental policy issue on voluntary fees which the circular from the deputy secretary out to schools makes clear. I am happy at any time to go through what that is. Obviously voluntary fees are that. I mean, they are ones that a school community will seek to levy, to actually allow it to do things above and beyond what the student resource package does.

The government does not resile from the fact that we believe the student resource package is sufficient to deliver a good education in schools. We do not resile from that. We believe we meet the basic requirements. But we also acknowledge that parents are aspirational; they want the absolute best outcomes possible for their children and therefore they will in school communities do whatever they can to add money, to add resources, so that they can do more things that are in place. We do not measure that because it is an individual decision for our 1594 government school communities on what they do. We do have a policy overlay that makes these fees voluntary and not compulsory.

Now each year there will be tensions on that because some schools zealously, or overzealously, try to make it appear, or certainly put pressure on to make it appear that it is a compulsory levy. Whenever that happens our regional directors will be speaking to the individual school principal and addressing that so that families are not under pressure to do that. But the fundamental constraint — and we can go back in history where a predecessor of mine, Don Hayward, was talking about making fees mandatory in schools, and fortunately his successor, Phil Gude, overruled that in 1996. But there has been a debate on this issue as to whether it be mandatory or non-mandatory. We certainly have voluntary fees.

School revenue that is mentioned in budget paper 4 includes fundraising, which is far more than voluntary fees. So fundraising in a school will also include fees. We talked before about language schools, for example, which pay fees to schools for access to them. I think we have 200 joint-use agreements, from memory, with municipalities where there is joint use of facilities, ovals and the rest of it. So the revenue that schools get, the fundraising for schools, is much more than voluntary fees. So again, it is not the department, it is not our revenue, so we do not measure it. But there is a general observation about revenue coming into schools from a whole range of sources. I think that probably answers the question.

Mr WELLS — Let me clarify a couple of points then. So you are expecting that parents will be doing more fundraising in this budget. There is a comment where you have an increase in school revenues and your offsider has indicated that it is fundraising, so there is an expectation that the parents will be doing more fundraising. Secondly, are you saying that you do not have any figures which relate to the amount of voluntary fees that are collected in the state?

Mr LENDERS — Firstly, on parents doing more fundraising — —

Mr WELLS — That is how you answered the question. You said that in relation to the increases in schools revenue, your offsider has given you a note saying that it includes fundraising, so you must be expecting parents to be doing more fundraising.

Mr LENDERS — You can read the deputy secretary's note from a great distance, Mr Wells. You are interpreting his note.

Mr WELLS — No, that is not what I am saying. Let us clarify it: are you correct in saying that the increase in school revenue relates in some part to an increase in fundraising? It is a straightforward question. You have said it before.

Mr LENDERS — But no, there is a difference between fundraising — —

Your question is value laden, saying, 'Parents doing more fundraising'. One of the central themes of this government since our re-election has been joint-use agreements and facilities in schools. In regard to a joint use of a facility of a school, we are going back to my example before, of say Glen Iris, which the Chair is very familiar with, where the school in that particular case has a 10-year lease with a 10-year option of extending to get certain rooms from this Uniting Church complex to use for after-school care and for some teaching areas. If the reverse of that situation was the case and the Uniting Church was actually leasing buildings from the school, the school would be receiving money from fundraising, but it would not be the work of the parents. There would be no obligation on the parents to do that. The joint-use agreement would mean that there would be a revenue stream to the school.

In technically responding to your question regarding fundraising, yes, there is an expectation that more money comes in from that from a range of sources — yes, you are correct on that. But what I am taking particular technical issue with is, 'Do the parents need to fundraise?'. Not necessarily. If there is a joint-use agreement where the school council, as an arrangement with the municipality, for example, with the revenue stream, then more money goes in. I will take the question on notice. Whether there is any more detail we can provide you with, whether this is just a general estimate in budget paper 4 or we may have more material. I will take that on notice.

Mr WELLS — The other part of the question was are you saying that you do not have the amount for the amount of voluntary fees that are collected in the 1594 schools across the state?

Mr LENDERS — Mr Wells, either you or I could go through the reports to — —

Mr WELLS — No, it is a straightforward question — —

Mr LENDERS — No, I am answering your question — —

Mr WELLS — How much does your department — —

Mr LENDERS — I am answering your question — —

Mr WELLS — You absolutely need to cut to the chase!

Mr LENDERS — Either you or I could go through the 1594 annual reports of schools to the community and extract that information.

Mr WELLS — There would be a more sophisticated way of doing that. I mean it is a straightforward question: does the department, yes or no — —

Mr LENDERS — The answer is no.

Mr WELLS — You do not have a clue on how much voluntary fees are collected in this state?

Mr LENDERS — It is general revenue we are measuring in here, but I say this to Mr Wells: on the issue of transparency — —

Mr WELLS — That is okay. I just wanted to know — —

Mr LENDERS — You or I could go through 1594 reports to school communities which are extraordinary reports in place with information for parents to make choices from and people to read, and you might be able to extract that information from there, but the department does not it.

Mr WELLS — All right, that is fine.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — There are 1800 public servants there. That is one book per public servant.

Mr WELLS — Just to finish on this point, in regard to the increase in school revenue, do you have an amount that you are expecting to increase in fundraising over the forward estimates period?

The CHAIR — The minister has said he will give to us on notice the details of that school revenue and the components of it. I assume some of it actually relates to overseas students.

Ms MUNT — I bring the minister's attention to page 53 of budget paper 3. It relates to the government's challenge to drive system-wide improvements in student performance. In relation to the report by the Council for the Australian Federation, *The Future of Schooling in Australia*, which you touched on briefly in your presentation, I was wondering if you could indulge in that a little more deeply and advise the committee of the main issues of that report.

Mr LENDERS — Thank you for that question. I guess the first thing that leaps to mind or comes forward is the very fact that there is a systemic plan across jurisdictions to try to address the issue. That is the most significant thing. If we go back to *The Future of Schooling in Australia*, and we go back to, for instance, the Adelaide declaration that was signed off by nine Australian ministers, and I am assuming Norfolk Island and New Zealand probably had something to say as well who attended these ministerial councils, we had a joint collaborative approach to improving student outcomes, teaching and learning.

The significance of this was that I think this is one of the things that we lose in this current debate. The signatories to the Adelaide declaration included David Kemp, the federal education minister, who was now the president of the Liberal Party in Victoria, and included Phil Gude. It was not a pack of, you know, Labor apparatchiks, it was actually a group of people who had a shared vision. Despite different ideologies in some area of education and the like, it was that if we walked down a common pathway together we could collectively and collaboratively bring out the best in our schools.

Some of those issues that we constantly hear about things between states that might be different where you harmonise things that you can logically harmonise, and if you have particular strengths you deal with them. Some of that is obvious — I mean a student in your electorate at Parkdale Secondary College comes from a very different environment from a student in a remote community in the Northern Territory. One size does not fit all.

I guess the starting point was an acknowledgement that there is diversity, but an acknowledgement also that you can actually walk together, this collaborative federalism. From 1999 until 2007 something dramatically and radically changed on that whole sense of collaboration. Again, and it was not necessarily a partisan sense, because David Kemp was a partner, it was just that after David Kemp, Brendan Nelson and Julie Bishop just seemed to get lost — they just lost the plot and just built up their policy advisers in Canberra up to 700 and forgot that they needed to collaborate with the people who actually taught students.

When we go to the future of education in Australia and we talk on these particular issues, we say, 'What actually can we do?'. Firstly, we reviewed the Adelaide declaration and said, 'Okay, we had this consensus back then in 1999, where could we actually go forward to see how we can keep the consensus going forward?'. I am delighted, Ms Munt, that Dr Dawkins chaired the working group for all the jurisdictions on trying to find our way through how we could have a common position going forward that would we would all sign to and actually put some signposts in place of where we go. That is where the future of schooling came from and where the Council for the Australian Federation signed off and endorsed on it.

We looked at a range of things. We looked at work that had been done on literacy and numeracy. Again rather than theorising from an ivory tower we actually said, 'What is actually working in this almost 10 000 schools across Australia?'. With literacy and numeracy we see all sorts of schools. We see some schools with extraordinary high achieving students, and they continue to be high achievers. Other places with students who were low achievers we see them progressing forward. They are the sorts of things that, again if you are looking at literacy and numeracy, you need to look at all these things.

We have seen that, it is that early childhood development parts where they all link together. So the first thing in *The Future of Schooling in Australia* was to actually look at what is happening and what has worked. Then you move on to the key challenges that are there, the whole issue of collaboration and unity. These are particularly important if we are going to actually see where we can go. We also looked at that international performance, and we had some slides up before. Professor Barry McGaw did work for the Council for the Australian Federation on international comparators, how they are working, how they are going forward.

All of these things were fed into the process. In the end we had our 12-point plan that we all signed up to, and we also had — and I can go through the 12 points, and the document has been circulated, but in the interests of brevity I will not, but I am happy to go to through the individual ones. But the 12-point plan takes us through ways that we

can go forward. All of these are ones that the states are committing money to. A lot of the 249 million in recurrent in the forward estimates goes to, when you look at it, to addressing various parts of the 12-point plan.

There is so much more that can be done, and collaborative federalism will assist. There were some things in the federal budget last night that of course we welcome, but these things can be done more effectively in collaboration. I would be delighted if this document came back to me with a big scrawled autographed 'Julie Bishop' on the front of it to show that the commonwealth had signed off on it as well. There is a lot more that we can do.

Dr SYKES — Minister, I would like to discuss further student performance. One indicator is the year 12 completion rate, and the Minister for Education Services spoke very proudly of Victoria's average of 85 per cent comparing very favourably with the other states, but upon dissecting of that figure down into country and city, we established that the year 12 completion rate in country Victoria is in the order of 66 or 69 per cent, which is way down on the 85.

My question is: what is being done to address that? I do not want you to limit your answer to these specifics, but I will give you a couple that I would like a comment on. First of all, in relation to Kyabram Secondary College, where it is falling down around the students, I am told — is there money in the budget this year for land purchase to upgrade or to replace Kyabram? Secondly, Myrtleford Secondary College, which is in my electorate, is well and truly falling down, and they are looking for basic maintenance and construction of democratic learning spaces.

Mr LENDERS — There are a couple of things, Dr Sykes. Firstly, those two specific schools — I will take them on notice. I do not recall that those two did receive funding out of the 131, but I will need to check a list on that.

Firstly, year 12 retention rates — and we can look at a whole range of figures and data, and we can go through that, but I am absolutely confident that retention rates in schooling in regional Victoria are on the improve. There are various discontinued forms of data and other forms of data. I have had an interesting dialogue with your colleague, Mr Hall, in the Legislative Council on this, and I know your leader has been very mischievous in the *Weekly Times* on how he has used some of these figures, to be polite, but the significance is our expenditure on regional schooling has gone up significantly.

If we can compare capital alone in the last year of the Kennett government to the last year of the Bracks government, allowing for CPI — there is a construction CPI over that period — the figure has gone up almost sixfold in raw terms, and adjusting for inflation it has probably gone up about four or five times in actual terms. That investment is spread across the state.

If you are talking about the capital investment this year in schooling — and I will stand corrected on the exact figures — taking out the statewide programs, and a lot of the statewide programs are actually skewed towards rural areas because of the size of schools and a range of things, but if you take out the statewide programs, about 55 per cent of the specific programs have actually gone into the metro area and about 22 into regional Victoria, so that means of the specific schools programs, about 30 per cent of that component has gone into regional Victoria, so it is at or about the state average.

That is not counting some of the programs like the retention of teachers in rural schools, and it is certainly not counting some of the programs that go to educational performance and outcomes, like the commitment to small schools. In this budget we have funded six small schools, and they are about \$2 million per school. I do not think there was one in your electorate, but there was certainly one in Gippsland at Drouin West. I did not go to it, but we certainly went past it yesterday. It is one of the feeder schools for Neerim District Secondary College. Previously there was no commitment from government to these schools in small rural communities. What had happened was there was a holding pattern. We had 300 schools close during the seven years of the Kennett government.

Dr SYKES — There have been a few closed in my area during your term, too.

Mr LENDERS — We had 300 close during the Kennett years. If we go to a commitment to schooling, in small rural schools it is not just an issue of numbers. There is also an issue of the school being the central community facility, so what we have done in this budget, for example, and Drouin West is one example of this, is where you have a cluster of portable classrooms that sit there and house a group of students and teachers, we are actually in this budget committed to six, and in the forward estimates we will commit to more in our next budget. We have said we are building a permanent community facility in this rural community and that permanent facility

will be a school. That in itself is but the starting point of building up that whole culture of education, teacher-learning performance that you need to do. But our commitment to regional education I think is equal to any. We are seeing growth rates in regional Victoria now higher than they are in Metropolitan Melbourne, and I am sure there are a lot of questions you could ask of other ministers at PAEC rather than me on that, and I am sure they would wax lyrically on our commitment to growing the whole state not just part of it.

In a very serious response: the previous Premier — and you, Dr Sykes, were not part of the Parliament at that stage so I will not hold you accountable for the previous Premier — certainly made the statement that Melbourne was the beating heart of Victoria and regional Victoria was the toenails.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — We have heard this.

Mr LENDERS — ‘You’ve heard this,’ says Mr Dalla-Riva — —

The CHAIR — Keep on the question, please.

Dr SYKES — I should say, Minister, that the particular query I put it to you in relation to Tawonga Primary School has been addressed. The Treasurer has given a categorical commitment to the funding of the relocatable buildings being replaced with permanent buildings. I am very grateful to the Treasurer for doing that in the PAEC meeting last week.

But the underlying issue is that country schools have a year 12 retention rate of 66 or 69 per cent. Yes, there has been improvement from 66 to 69, but I think if we have both passed our numeracy training satisfactorily, there is a heck of a difference between 69 and 85. Therefore is it correct for me to assume or interpret that your government will make a significant further commitment to get country year 12 retention rates up on a par with the city ones? It is a simple philosophical question.

Mr LENDERS — Chair, to Dr Sykes, there is a number of fairly fundamentals. He talks of ability to have numeracy. Firstly, we are committed to a year 12 or equivalent. So if a student in country Victoria, for example, chooses to take an apprenticeship rather than complete year 12, we are not about to start lecturing the student to say, ‘You had better complete year 12 so there will be a better statistic in rural Victoria’. We want the individual pathway of the student to actually be addressed.

There has been a historical difference partly because students go through different pathways as to where that goes. And there are so many lines of statistics you can use: year 12 or equivalent, year 12 alone; there is a range of ones. There is even a whole lot of mythological arguments as to how those are measured. If you are measuring some of the statistics — current year 12 divided by year 10 of two years ago; some the current year 12 divided by year 7 of six years ago, and there are all sorts of methodological areas there.

And populations do move; some areas do grow. I am sure in Ms Graley’s electorate, if we were to start measuring any school by that you would have statistics that would probably blow the Excel spreadsheet out because of the growth in the area. So we measure them in different ways, but the underpinning that I can give you an assurance on is that we are investing in those communities. Whether they vote for us or do not vote for us, we invest in them.

We have a view that all of Victoria is the beating heart. There are no toenails. We will invest in country schools, and we have. So we invest in the schools, we invest in the teachers, we invest in the programs, and they will deliver the outcomes. But in the end the choices as to what a student does, whether they do an apprenticeship or a traineeship or complete year 12, rests with that student and their family, not with a meddling central government. We do not have 700 people doing a Moscow along the Molonglo. We actually devolve to individual schools and families.

The CHAIR — I would just like you to finalise on that, please, Dr Sykes, we need to move on.

Dr SYKES — I think, as you say, there are a number of educational pathways available. Whether country students choose not to pursue the academics stream more so than city students — perhaps that issue needs to be explored to understand whether they are being forced to do that because of family circumstances or educational opportunity circumstances.

I would put it to you that it is a possibility that educational opportunity, and distance to education facilities available may impact on that, but if I have interpreted correctly, you have made a very strong commitment on the part of the

government to ensure that country students have equivalent training or educational opportunities to Melbourne students. Is that a correct interpretation?

Mr LENDERS — We are absolutely committed to the whole of the state and investment in schools across Victoria. Dr Sykes, as you are well aware, whether it be the bus conveyances or a range of things that in place — I mean, there are a range of things in place to try and deal with the issue of distance, which you correctly address, which makes access to opportunities harder in regional areas, and the education that we provide and the transport conveyances we provide, the schools we provide, are all designed to let every Victorian child have an equal opportunity of education.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, page 7 of budget paper 3 goes through a number of the infrastructure regeneration projects. I think I noticed the Treasurer out at Broadmeadows the other day. I am just wondering if you could give us some advice on the progress of the regeneration project at Broadie?

Mr LENDERS — I thank Mr Pakula for his question. If there is a single almost-flagship project which, I guess, gives me as a minister in the Bracks government extraordinary pride, it is our regeneration projects in schools. Mr Pakula mentions Broadmeadows, and in, I think, my first or second week as minister I went out there to have a briefing with Professor Dawkins, Wayne Craig the regional director, and a number of the principals on what the project was about and what it could achieve.

For those of the committee who are not as familiar with Broadmeadows as is Mr Pakula, the educational outcomes for students in Broadmeadows were one of the great disappointments — that is the nicest way of saying it — of where we were in Victoria. We as a government, and my predecessor Lynne Kosky, identified that this was an area that we needed to make a priority, because we govern for the whole state, and in response in a sense to Dr Sykes' question about the geographic challenges in some parts of the state, Broadmeadows was an extraordinary challenge.

We had about 1000 of the government school students in Broadmeadows who left Broadmeadows to go to schools in other areas. Some went to schools of choice like Pascoe Vale Girls High School and others, and some went simply because they thought they had better opportunities outside Broadmeadows.

So the regeneration project is essentially to regenerate 17 schools, with six new amalgamated schools in place, a lot of new building construction, and also an extraordinary investment in assisting the principals and teachers there in providing educational opportunities for those kids. I have been past schools in Broadmeadows with chain-mesh fences with barbed wire on top, so that once school hours are over the community just does not go in. This is really all about getting those kids into schools, providing the best leadership, the best teachers and the best facilities so we can address some of the disadvantage that has been there.

We have a figure of something in the order of less than one-third of Broadmeadows students going on to complete year 12; and for those who do, their ENTER scores are very disappointing by state standards. So the challenge for us if we are governing for the whole state, if we are giving everyone an equal opportunity and a chance, is to provide the best educational facilities in Broadmeadows and to have them match those in any other area of the state, and there are some real challenges in doing that. But again the blueprint is a fantastic guide in that it provides leadership skills; it provides advice to Broadmeadows principals on how to lead, and as new principals come into the area, the professional development for teachers.

Also on the Broadmeadows schools, I heard a very plaintiff tale out there about an incoming educator who heard about many of the dozens of welfare programs being offered in school but not a lot about the educational programs. So we need to run them both; we need to run them concurrently. It is also about bringing community into schools. There are still people who go to school because it is a law of the state that a child has to go to school up to the compulsory age of 15, or 16 once the act is proclaimed later this year. We want people to want to go into schools.

Again some of the community partnerships there are benchmarks although there is still some water to go under the bridge. As part of the budget we announced two sites where funding of more than \$20 million will go, and there is a lot of work still going on with the community. But some of the proposed sites, particularly the Broadmeadows Secondary College, are still to be finalised and announced, but some of the preliminary work there is just unbelievably exciting.

The City of Hume and the Broadmeadows community are working together in partnership. The old town hall is being used as the assembly hall for the school. The sporting facilities are being shared between the City of Hume and the school. The library is being shared between the City of Hume and the school.

These are the sort of things where we are talking about communities that may not have an engagement with education. If the families start coming onto the school grounds, whether it be even senior citizens clubs meeting in schools because often those senior citizens are the carers of their grandchildren while the parents are at work, as many working families do — for Mr Dalla-Riva's edification these people want to live, work and raise a family and part of that work sometimes means that work-life balances are tough.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I worked there for three years in the police, so I know what it is like.

Mr LENDERS — If you can integrate all of those things — so, Mr Pakula, there is a lot more work to be done in Broadmeadows, but I guess what gives me extraordinary pride is a Labor government has put that investment into a battler area. There are no votes in this at all; it is the right thing to do to give every Victorian an educational opportunity. To an extent it is mirrored in Dandenong, with the investment in Dandenong, and a range of other communities. Unless we make that investment, we will leave some of our state behind. As we go into the 21st century, with all the issues — we talk of human capital and the potential for our young people — we will not have the luxury ever again to leave part of the state behind. This investment in the regeneration is truly a flagship. I am really proud of it, and I am sure you as a local member can be really proud of it. I would say to the whole committee that anyone who wants to see a government making hard decisions in partnership with the local community should just go to Broadmeadows and have a talk to some of the educators and communities up there, and I think it would give people a lot of hope.

Mr BARBER — School services officers are some of your lower paid employees, and many of them are part time. Why did your government, or the department, make a decision to charge them for the working-with-children check when other departments pay it on behalf of their employees? And what is the saving to the budget as a result of that particular cost shift under the government policy onto those workers? How are you planning to phase it in, given it would probably also involve volunteers and other people who assist or have very few hours a week? How are you going to phase it in to make it easier for them?

Mr LENDERS — The whole issue of working-with-children checks is a policy issue that the last Parliament in particular struggled with. As Mr Barber said, in a sense your community wants two things. You want the absolute certainty that those people working with children have had the police checks; that is a fundamental principle and an added safeguard, I guess, in all areas, not just schools, where adults are working with children. You can never, ever completely have safeguards in this, but you know that if someone has a criminal record and an offence against children, that is something that you as an employer or community organisation ought be aware of so that you can deal with that.

There was also a policy decision made, and various departments have different responses to this, as do various non-government organisations, whether it be Catholic schools, independent schools, kindergartens, or whatever it may be. Each have their own decisions on how they deal with this. But who actually pays for the police check? That has been a policy issue that all governments and all departments have gone through. Often there have been ones on these where there are transitions in place — like what happens to someone who has already been in the workforce before the change came? What is the obligation of an employer? Is it to pay for that or not to pay for it? And what happens if someone enters the workforce knowing that this is a legal requirement and a cost to be made? There is a whole range of those particular areas.

There are also the areas that individual departments, agencies and organisations need to make. Do they pay it for their workforce? If it is a very small organisation where the compliance costs and red tape would be such, often an organisation for its own economic reasons will pay it. If it is a very large organisation with a large workforce, it may be different — where simply you can have systems in place to far more effectively and efficiently to deal with that.

The threshold really comes with all those policy constraints, I guess, addressed. With an organisation, for new employees are joining the organisation or after a transition, is it appropriate that someone who seeks to work in a particular area pays the costs of seeking employment, which includes a working-with-children check, or is it that their employer picks up those costs? There are policy issues in that.

Mr BARBER — That was my question to you. You are putting the question back to me.

Mr LENDERS — No, I am not. I am phrasing, Mr Barber, this is a public policy discussion.

Mr WELLS — You are doing a Kevin Rudd.

Mr LENDERS — This is a public policy discussion, and sometimes people expect of ministers or parliamentarians simple yes/no answers, and there seldom are simple yes/no answers. There is a range of policy considerations you put into place. Within the department we have 17 000 employees in that staff service area who require working-with-children checks. We have gone through a process where we have been in discussions with our workforce on this area — are there more efficient or better ways of dealing with this? We are continuing to be in discussions with them. But we do have a policy that after the transition area, it is not unreasonable for a person seeking employment to pay for the working-with-children check. That is just one of the requirements of seeking work in the workforce. I am not sure, Jeff, if you want to add to that at all. It is an area that is not a simple area, but the fundamental principle is, if you are seeking employment, once you are over the transition, it is not an unreasonable expense to occur if you are seeking to work with children.

Mr BARBER — Is 17 000 times \$70 a reasonably good estimate of the savings to the budget for this year, given this year contains the transition?

Mr LENDERS — I would have to take advice on what the exact figure is. There are all sorts of different figures that the police charge to different departments, different agencies at different times. I do not see any reason not to accept your \$70 as an exact figure. There are issues, obviously. Mr Barber, you may say that the state is parsimonious on seeking savings in these areas, but every dollar that we actually have in education we can actually spend on educating children. We make choices at all times.

Mr BARBER — DHS had a different policy, though. DHS is paying it for its employees.

Mr LENDERS — As I said earlier, each employer — and it goes beyond government. I take your word that DHS is paying for its employees, but each department, each employer in the state makes different choices on how it does these things. There is never a simple answer. We do not have a whole-of-government policy on this. It is one that is left for individual departments to make policies on.

The CHAIR — In terms of some of the details, you will take that on notice.

Mr LENDERS — Yes.

Mr SCOTT — My question is regarding schools for innovation and excellence, which is referred to in budget paper 3, page 8. I would be grateful, Minister, if you could please advise the committee what the government is doing to support excellence in the classroom.

Mr LENDERS — I thank Mr Scott for his question. The schools of innovation and excellence was announced in the budget back in 2002–03. It was exactly as it says — to encourage teaching innovation and excellence. It goes to a fundamental question: how do you actually do that? Again, it is very easy to sit in your ivory tower on the Molonglo and sort of preach about how you do these things. Mr Dalla-Riva scoffs but it is a fundamental point of how you effect outcomes in schools. You can pontificate from a great distance or you can actually empower schools and teachers to actually do things. That is where I think fundamentally it is an underpinning of everything in this educational debate. Are you prepared to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty and get out there and actually do this, or do you want to sit in a refined building and pontificate? Every school in this state, for example, has to fly flags. Every school in this state has to put posters on walls in different times and different places to meet federal regulations. But what this program is about — —

Mr WELLS — So you do not agree with them flying the flag?

Mr LENDERS — What this program is about, Chair — —

Mr WELLS — Do you not agree with flying the flag?

The CHAIR — Ignore — —

Mr WELLS — Are you saying you do not agree with flying the flag?

The CHAIR — Ignore that question.

Mr WELLS — I am asking a straightforward question: do you or do you not agree with flying the flag?

Mr LENDERS — So, Chair, in response to Mr Scott — —

Mr WELLS — So you are not going to give us an answer on that?

Mr LENDERS — What we are doing here is we are actually empowering students — —

Mr WELLS — That is a disgraceful thing to actually bring up. That is disgraceful.

Mr LENDERS — We are empowering teachers to actually teach students in innovation and excellence, whether it be in Broadmeadows or whether it be in Preston or whether it be in any other area, having lead teachers who come out of the classroom, often successful teachers, and who will go to a school in an area where they actually service a cluster on innovation, excellence and how you can get better teaching outcomes. Breaking through to year 9s historically has been a really hard area. How do you engage a year 9 student? You can see by the looks around the table — anyone who has had a year 9 as a child or taught a year 9 has a knowing look and says they are tough. If you have some really good teachers, and we are talking about the middle years of schooling in some of these areas — Mr Barber said before that Darrell Fraser, one of the deputy secretaries, was his maths teachers at Glen Waverley Secondary College and obviously Mr Fraser had an impact on Mr Barber, which is really good.

Mr BARBER — He probably remembers me as well.

Mr LENDERS — And maybe in two ways; that is correct. So you have a good teacher, and what this program has done, Mr Scott, is let you take some of those good teachers out, put them in a school as a cluster where they then start advising other teachers on ways to bring a Mr Barber or any other student forward.

Mr BARBER — I'm a credit to him.

Dr SYKES — Working off a low base!

The CHAIR — On with the answer, please.

Mr LENDERS — Perhaps that is why Mr Fraser came to the department — to get away from Mr Barber! Nevertheless, to answer Mr Scott's question, these educators were funded for a limited period of time, and in this budget we have extended the funding on a number of these positions so that they can continue the work that has been done to its logical completion.

It goes back to the blueprint and it goes back to all these areas — we need critical interventions at critical times. Every student is an individual, and individual pathways of students is an evolving education phenomenon which we all subscribe to that says the more you can individualise the pathway of a student, the more likely a good outcome for the student will be, and the more you can get the best practice in teaching — so it is not just PD courses, it is also having these educators out there in clusters — the more likely we are to have an outcome.

Chair, through you to Mr Scott, that is one of the things that we are very impressed with, and the logical extension now of some of that earlier work in the innovation and excellence initiative is obviously the rollout of the Ultranet that will come to schools, and some refocusing will be needed. That is obviously the newest part of technology and it is the newest part of teaching, and that whole idea of parents, students and teachers all using the one tool to all be part of this educational journey for the individual children will be assisted by this.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Minister, can I take you back to the slides on literacy and numeracy performance, if we can get them up on the screen. While we get into that, can I assume as an aside that you do not support the flying of flags in schools?

Mr WELLS — We can take that as a no — no response?

Mr LENDERS — Chair, I will rise to the occasion.

The CHAIR — The question is irrelevant to estimates.

Mr WELLS — He is refusing to answer it. That is disgraceful. I cannot believe the Minister for Education — —

The CHAIR — I think you should ask that in the house. This is not for the estimates hearings. On literacy and numeracy; the slide is up there, Mr Rich-Phillips.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — In relation to the assessment for writing for years 3 and 5, I note the error bars are very small for Victoria. Has there been any change in the way tests in Victoria are assessed relative to previous years in the writing category?

Mr LENDERS — Chair, we have a testing. ‘Is the test changed?’. Obviously there are minor iterations on them from year to year as you have better practice, but no, we have consistent testing.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — No change as to how they were marked from 2005 in relation to reading?

Mr LENDERS — I will take advice on that, Chair. But while I am waiting for the advice, I will take the opportunity to say I absolutely support the flying of flags in schools, but I do not support the crazy red-tape certification where Darrell Fraser of Mr Barber’s fame has to prepare certification that all 1594 — —

Mr WELLS — It has taken you 10 minutes to think about that. That is a disgraceful situation. Which adviser told you to say that you have to support the flag because it is going to be embarrassing otherwise?

Mr LENDERS — All 1594 schools have to certify a range of things with red tape that probably keeps 70 of Mrs Bishop’s policy advisers busy filling in the forms.

Mr WELLS — Which adviser told you that you had to say that? You really do not believe in that.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. Can we get back to the issue about the writing tests? Try to relate this to the estimates too, please. I notice they are the best in Australia.

Mr LENDERS — Chair, straying back to the answer; yes, there was a minor change in 2005. I am happy to take the detail on notice and get back to Mr Rich-Phillips with that particular detail.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — In relation to the international comparisons, which is the next slide, how does Victoria compare on this measure relative to the other Australian states?

The CHAIR — We have that question on notice, and then we are going to provide the details.

Mr LENDERS — I have taken that on notice already.

Ms GRALEY — Minister, I think we all agree that improving our maths and science curriculum is a major priority, especially in a growing and innovative economy. I would like to refer you to page 9 of BP3, which relates to the government’s focus on increasing capability in mathematics and science. Could you please advise the committee what the government is doing to improve the performance of Victorian students in mathematics and science?

Mr LENDERS — I thank Ms Graley for her question. Through this budget we certainly are implementing a very comprehensive Victorian maths-science education strategy. It is all about improving those outcomes in maths and science, because we want more students to continue to study in these fields. There is a range of things we are doing, Chair. There is \$50 million to refurbish or replace 200 science rooms across the state, so as a starter — going back to that earlier point about the educational opportunities and teaching — revamping our science rooms is a significant contribution, and a range of schools already in the first of the 131 schools now with regenerations, modernisations and the like, and a number of science rooms are already part of that. So that is one of the first parts: to improve the teaching environment to encourage students to take up maths and science. That is certainly one of the ones.

The second one, and the Premier announced this — and I mentioned this before — the day before Anzac Day is the grants for science teaching across all Victorian government schools. Again, the Premier, Minister Hulls as the member for Niddrie and I went through one of the secondary colleges in his electorate. Some of the students there — their enthusiasm for science was just inspirational. Whether it be through the IT where they are doing projects, whether it be — —

They had these frogs under microscopes. They were a far more gentle student group than when I was a student, I must admit — I will not go back to my student practices — but they were gently and delicately dropping water drops on the frogs. But they had frogs under microscopes, they had — —

Dr SYKES — That is a scarce commodity. Some of them would not remember water.

Mr LENDERS — We will not ask you, Dr Sykes, what you did in veterinary school with frogs — but nevertheless! I am sure you were very gentle also.

But watching the students' enthusiasm — whether it be in this particular case is it is frogs, carrots or a range of things they were looking at and a range of experiments they were doing — but it is about the quest for knowledge in science. The facilities to provide that are absolutely critical. In this particular school, whether it be — —

You could use your science equipment grant. You could do it for the microscopes. You could do it for the tanks to store the animals. You could do it for a range of things — that is, the scope they could use. Again, we do not purport to have a single syllabus controlled from on high, whether it be from Spring Street or Moscow on the Molonglo — we leave that to schools. Give them the resources so they work out what is going to actually bring out the curiosity factor in the student.

I have a very strong view that you need to put some tests in what you think an education system is, if it is to work. One of the personal tests that I put on in my own language as a new minister is that in an education system, if it is going to work, you want a child to be literate and you want them to be numerate. I think they are givens; everyone would say that. You also want the child to be curious, because if the child is not curious, they are just not going to perform at school, or I do not think they will. You also want them to be articulate and you want them to have a bit of passion about their future and the world they are in.

So there is curiosity factor. Individual schools, in the science if we can harness that curiosity of students. It was the curiosity that got us an Einstein. It is the curiosity that got us a Marie Pasteur. It is the curiosity factor we need to harness. This sort of individual resources for schools will assist them in bringing it out for students.

We have also got a further 50 places in our Career Change program, where we are trying to actually convince scientists and others or people to change their career and come into schooling. Again, in the size of our workforce it is small, but again an induction of new scientists coming into teaching, that sort of thing in particular will encourage people to come in, and teaching is a great passion. We have scholarships for three years to maths and science graduates who undertake to come in, particularly in some of the more difficult areas to staff; we have those scholarships that we provide.

We also have the additional commitment to three new science and maths specialist centres, which we are building, which again will provide for students who have a passion, curiosity and commitment and will assist in all these areas. We are talking of this in the next four years in Geelong, Ballarat and La Trobe Secondary College.

Also talking of our science centres that we have established, the teaching and learning aids that we talked about under the blueprint, and the learning standards and tools — whether it be the P-10 mathematics development — all of these are but part of fostering the culture of learning in the area.

It is quite interesting. The Governor, who of course is one of our lead scientists in the state, will be conducting a round table in Government House at the end of this month, again to try and bring together people from maths and science, and part of that arises out of the parliamentary committee that was on in the last Parliament on coming out of the strategy on this. Again, these are all part of how we foster this culture of maths and science. That round table will have the best minds in research, some really good educators and also some interested parties, including me, the shadow minister and others, who will be there to try, in a collective fashion, to come forward with great science and maths.

The final thing, to conclude on that, is that my colleague the Minister for Innovation has been unbelievably passionate about the synchrotron for many years. A lot of people, some around this table — not looking in anyone's direction in particular — have been critical of the synchrotron, Chair.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — They are all down there on the left of us. They were all sceptics.

Mr WELLS — The commonwealth is putting in how much?

Mr LENDERS — I take up Mr Wells's interjection, because he has made a pertinent interjection. The commonwealth has finally committed some money to the ongoing running of the synchrotron, and I commend the commonwealth on that.

The vision of the synchrotron was: what can we do to keep our best and brightest in Australia? What can we do to stop them all going off to the Northern Hemisphere to do their research? The innovation minister has been unbelievably consistent on this: that if we can start providing opportunities for science graduates — and this is obviously located next to Monash University, a very good university — —

The CHAIR — Yes, excellent.

Mr LENDERS — I say to Professor Dawkins quite often that I think a better university is the University of Melbourne — being provocative!

The CHAIR — The Chair would have to agree with that.

Mr LENDERS — But it is a fantastic university, the university that the synchrotron is next to. From memory, going back to my days as major projects minister, we have a queue of thousands of scientists just waiting to use it, because they can do their innovation and research work here in Australia. We have the private sector wanting to be part of it, but we have had this brain drain where our best and brightest go to Silicon Valley or Oxford or Singapore or to any of those other places where there are synchrotrons. Now they want to stay here for science.

If we want to bring out the best and brightest, it is the strategies in schools, it is the resources in schools and it is also a vision that we want to encourage science in Victoria. The synchrotron is a classic. There were thousands of people queuing to go into the synchrotron on its open day, and they were overwhelmingly young people with a passion for science. Many of us around the table would have heard Professor Julius Sumner Miller in our youth saying, 'Why is it so?'.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — We're not all that old!

Mr LENDERS — I take it from that interjection that Mr Rich-Phillips is a mere callow youth, if he cannot remember Professor Julius Sumner Miller. Perhaps he should watch some re-runs, and he might learn a lot about science.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Minister, your government continues to make assertions about class sizes. I refer you to budget paper 3 at page 55. In respect of the quantity in the early years, where it shows the numbers are purported to be higher leading into the 07–08 year and in particular the years 3–6 class sizes, and I am just wondering if the minister can refer to why the numbers are increasing, and what he intends to do to try to stop the increase.

Mr LENDERS — In opening, as to why a number increases and what can you do to stop the increase, the government that we took over from not only closed 300 schools but also sacked 9000 teachers.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I am talking about this current financial year and — —

Mr LENDERS — Chair, Mr Dalla-Riva asked me the cause and effect — —

Mr WELLS — How many schools have you actually shut down over the last seven years, just out of curiosity?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I want to know about the year 2007–08. I do not want to know about previous years. I just want to know, as it is increasing, what you propose to do.

Mr LENDERS — What the government has done is we have reintroduced 7000 teachers into government schools. Above and beyond attrition, we have reintroduced 7000 teachers into government schools, which is what brings down the class sizes.

This government unequivocally and unashamedly takes pride in the fact that we have injected resources into schools so we can have teachers available to teach children. What we also have is that schools get their student resource package which takes into account what an optimum number of students is, and they are resourced accordingly. Schools also exercise individual decisions, and sometimes this affects class size numbers — for instance, the example I used in response to a question before, the withdrawal of students for reading recovery.

If a style of teaching is that there are a number of students who, for whatever reason, you wish to give some intensive assistance to, a school will always have the flexibility. Again, if a school is going to withdraw students because it thinks a reading recovery program or a music program or a phys. ed. program — all of us can name a dozen other important educational or worthy programs — sometimes schools make the choices that they will have these specialist teachers who then take students out of classes and assist them. What happens is that when we report the figures every year, we report the figures on school census day, which I think is 28 February as to what is at that stage a definition of a class, and a class size does not take account at all of the specialist teachers that schools may have effectively withdrawn so that they can assist in these particular educational areas.

Dr Dawkins has just alerted me to the fact that on page 55 of BP3 the actual numbers have come down. It is the actual target, so we have actually exceeded the target. If we are talking of those particular times, in the years 3 to 6 class size, which Mr Dalla-Riva, I assume, is referring to, we have actually seen a decline. But the reason that can happen is because the student resource package has been targeted to enable schools to do it.

Chair, when we talk of 1594 government schools and we talk of each of them receiving a student resource package, it is a very sophisticated tool that deals with raw numbers — it deals with disadvantage, there is equity funding, it deals with size of schools; there is a whole range of variables that go into the program. Mr Rosewarne will understand far more than anybody else how that actually works. It is a sophisticated model where schools get the resources. But the fundamental is that in Victoria we have a blueprint, we set guidelines and we actually empower our principals and educators to make decisions on a local school basis. Now the federal minister talks about empowering principals constantly.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I do not want to know about the federal minister.

Mr LENDERS — And I share the federal minister's view that we should empower principals. But there is a fundamental difference between empowering principals and regulating them to within a nanosecond of their life, which is what the federal minister seems to like to do, creating mounds of paperwork, buckets of red ink and more red tape than the original IBM computer.

Mr WELLS — Which your government is going to fix.

Mr LENDERS — That, Chair, is the fundamental difference. If we are about getting the best educational outcomes, the best innovative outcomes, we have to train our workforce, give them clear direction and give them opportunities, but you have to empower them and you do not regulate them to within an inch of their life.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I think he has answered the question, Chair.

The CHAIR — Minister. I would like to pick up where in your departmental mission statement you talk about reducing the disparity between the city and the country in terms of what you are looking to do to improve the outcomes for young people in rural and regional Victoria. What are you proposing to do? What initiatives, what action, are you looking to take to try to improve these outcomes? I am looking for more specificity.

Mr LENDERS — Chair, there is a range of particular things that we can do to encourage students to stay in schools. For example, we as a government have not just — —

In response to the question from Dr Sykes before on the actual raw resourcing of schools, whether it be into capital or the student resource package, if we are talking of retention, and you are talking specifics, it also comes to some

of the options that we put into our schooling system and education system generally to encourage students to go to year 12 or year 12 equivalent. We obviously have a Growing Victoria Together target in this area that we are working towards.

Some of the areas are obviously in my colleague Jacinta Allan's area, the apprenticeships and traineeships, so I will not go into the details of those other than to outline that they are specific options in education or equivalent for students to stay there. But within the education portfolio there is the VET material that becomes available and the VCAL. The Victorian certificate of learning is again one of those areas where — and obviously it is run in I think approximately 400 places, schools and other providers, government and non-government — again it is a legitimate option for students who do not want to go to university and who want practical experience to come into the workforce.

There has almost been a litany today of me telling the awards that I have been to. But I went to the VCAL awards recently where there was just a range of students and also their families present who saw VCAL as an ultimate pathway and gave them an extraordinary opportunity to stay and participate in education which they might not have otherwise had. So there is a range of specifics in here that we do, if we are talking about a holistic system.

I mentioned in an earlier response that in an ideal world you have an individual pathway for every student that will take them through from their schooling years to a career path or a path in society where they want to go. So we have the traditional VCE, we have VET and we have VCAL. These are all additions to what has traditionally been available in education. In regard to VCAL, again, all of us who have been to schools in our electorate that run VCAL programs will know of the students that it has captured brought forward. It is interesting, but we also have a challenge with VCAL that it is not seen as some secondary kind of education that is inferior to others. It is fascinating that one of the students who won the I think it was the VCAL student of the year award, — —

Ms GRALEY — He came from Narre Warren South P-12 College.

Mr LENDERS — Ms Graley had a very passionate school principal and a large community there.

Ms GRALEY — Yes.

Mr LENDERS — But there are a number of people who do these things and get involved in a range of things. But I mean, one of students who had a very successful outcome actually highlighted how his family were very dubious about maybe doing it, by thinking that this was second to the best. Again, when you see the students participating it is fantastic. They are some of the alternatives that we do offer. We also have 24 transition support workers who are employed in organisations across the state who assist with this. A lot of the areas, the learning networks, are more under the jurisdiction of my colleague Jacinta Allan than myself, because a lot of the resources go into those areas. We also have \$6.3 million to support further vocational education and training in schools programs.

All of these things together mean that we have a far broader range of offerings in our education system for students. All of them together will work towards us getting that greater retention rate of year 12 or equivalent that we share a goal of aspiring towards.

The CHAIR — You might provide us with a list of rural and regional schools which have the VCAL program. I am sure that members will be interested in that.

Mr LENDERS — I would be delighted to.

Mr WELLS — In regard to the estimates questionnaire, can I draw your attention to page 8 in regard to your staffing levels? Can you just step us through, so we have a full understanding as a committee, that on 30 June 2006 the total of all public service staff was 1978. Then it goes to 1816 in 07; and 1776 in 08. Are we on the right page?

Mr LENDERS — Yes.

Mr WELLS — So is that the total number of — —

The CHAIR — Can we make sure that Hansard has a copy of this?

Mr WELLS — Is that the total number of public servants effective full-time that are under your direction? Does it include your regional officers, your VCAA and VIT?

Mr LENDERS — Yes, it does, but one qualification I will make is, under my direction, they are the public service staff in the Department of Education.

Mr WELLS — Yes.

Mr LENDERS — So some of those are accountable to Jacinta Allan. But this is the total for the Department of Education in the central office and regional office.

The CHAIR — I ask Hansard to ignore the first attempt at a question. Strike it from the record.

Ms MUNT — Can I refer you to budget paper 3 which deals with water, environment and climate change. I think one of the schools in my electorate is actually one of the first schools in the state to be built under new guidelines where sustainability and environment had to be factored into the new plans. I know schools are very interested in sustainability and environment. So can I please ask you what the government is doing to make schools environmentally sustainable?

Mr LENDERS — I thank Ms Munt for her question. It is a very broad question as to what the government is doing to make things sustainable. Sustainability is more than just buildings, it is a state of mind and it is also best practice. I guess I will start off with just an example, and will use an example of a non-government school here to start off with and come back to the government. I mentioned the Governor before. The Governor mentioned to me one day that he had been to a school which actually had very good sustainable practices and actually had incorporated some of its practices into its architecture and into its teaching. I thought this will be very interesting, so much to the surprise of the local school in Ms Lindell's electorate, I went to the St Leonard's campus at Bangholme.

Ms MUNT — Yes, I visited there.

Mr LENDERS — And visited that school. The school was very passionate about the things it could do with integrating environmental sustainability in schools. State schools are doing equally well, but this is just an example. I fairly spontaneously called down there, as I think a minister should, as minister for the whole system both government and non-government schools, and if there is a good initiative in a non-government school we should explore it.

This school had built a new building which had a range of things: it had solar panels, it harvested wind and put it into the grid at the end, although that was not functioning as well on the day I visited. It had opening windows, it had resources in such a way that students could see every step of the way how windows opened, they had louvres, and they had a whole range of things. They also incorporated sustainability into the curriculum at every level.

It is good educational practice, and in a collaborative sense we should learn good educational practice. We should not purport to be the font of all wisdom. I guess my office is not on the Molonglo River so I can be more humble, but we can purport to have more wisdom, but this school is just an example, and it is also extraordinary work in government schools at every step of the way on how we bring sustainability in.

Certainly in curriculum there are some extraordinary advances; I think state-of-the-art and those sorts of things are being shared by government schools and non-government schools as to how we can bring it in a way that our students are interested in and enthused. Also on government schools, on the same day I went to St Leonard's I went to Western Port Secondary College in Hastings to see a new government building that was being built in a government school with a lot of sustainable practices. The deputy principal — and the name escapes me at Western Port secondary — was extraordinarily enthused because she had part of the responsibility for sustainability, not just the curriculum, but also the building.

By common practice, like a water audit, by a range of other things, like automatic switches on turning off lights and a range of things, that school saved \$12 000 a year from its budget just by having sustainable practices. So green sustainability is not just an ideological statement, it is not just about saving the planet, which is very important, it is also good economics. As Western Port Secondary College found, just by better practice, the school's discretionary budget, after staff, \$12 000 is not something to be sneezed at. They were very delighted in doing all of that.

It brings forward a question as to how we can be more sustainable in all of those measures where it is good for the students to learn best sustainable practices for their lives. It is something they can bring back to their homes, it is also good for the school, it is also good for future generations. There is a range of things that we are seeking to do. Under the Victorian schools plan we are incorporating our water-efficiency measures. That obviously is probably the thing nearest and dearest to most of our hearts in the environmental debate at the moment, simply because of a water shortage, but in a sense it is no different from any other area that we need to focus on.

We are now rolling out water tanks in every building. We have been doing it for the last two years in Victoria in all new school buildings. There is an odd exception in some rebuilding where the site just does not allow it. I have been to schools now where they have huge bladders under portable classrooms. You have schools where there are tanks. A lot of schools are also adding on to the commonwealth grant money on tanks as well, so when we do this in synchronisation, we and the commonwealth together can do really good work. So the schools are getting water tanks, and water tanks being primarily used for flushing toilets. Whether it be just the water measures that you put in place to — whether it be dual flushing systems and all the rest, or water-free urinals and a range of things that schools are experimenting with, but also the water tanks so the water is harvested and used on toilets rather than potable water coming out of the system.

All of these things are being worked on in schools, and the enthusiasm from the students and teachers is palpable. As you go out there it is something that is really capturing the imagination that people are doing something to assist what they see is a — the old adage is ‘Think globally act locally’, and we are seeing this happening in our schools again and again and again as we try to address best practice in these areas.

We have a school water-efficiency program, and again one of the challenges in this area here is in a devolved education system, where you do not dictate to every school what they do, how do you encourage best practice? It goes to Mr Pakula’s earlier question in this area: how do you encourage best practice in this area? We had a take-up of about 10 per cent of government schools on a water-efficiency program where the Department of Sustainability and Environment was offering to essentially do bridging finance for a school that did a water audit, and then took the actions from that audit for saving water. The take-up was quite low — and the school paid this back. By the savings they made from water, they paid back this interest-free loan effectively. We have been trying to find ways to encourage all schools to have water audits so they can learn from them. That is something the department is now taking on board so that in each of those cases we can go through.

Going to technology innovation, if you go to a school, they have all got a metering box of some sort and there are groups of kids who monitor it. They go around the school looking for best practice. They deal with this with considerable enthusiasm. So there is a whole range of other things that we will roll out — whether it be the solar panels that my colleague Mr Thwaites announced as part of the budget. There is a whole range of these areas that will get better practices still in schools. They are old buildings. Retrofitting is very difficult, but with this huge rollout of infrastructure, there are extraordinary opportunities for us to bring out the absolute best, which will be good for the education of the students, savings for the schools and, by thinking globally and acting locally, we will all do our little bit to make this a better planet.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I assume with the modernisation program that that will include water-saving actions?

Mr LENDERS — Yes, it is a modernisation program.

The CHAIR — That is meant to cover all the schools, then?

Mr LENDERS — All of them will. We do not have a green building council tool yet for education, so we are working off a national building code for the same sorts of principles, but we are also working with the green building council towards a particular tool for education. Most of our schools subscribe to green power, so the best practice we are getting into our schools is one again of a culture of cooperation, putting forward best practice; we are getting fantastic outcomes because it is just an area where our community is very enthused that they are empowered to assist.

The CHAIR — It might be useful to take on notice and give us a short note on what is available to schools and what programs you have. I know a lot of schools, for example, are interested in water tanks and things like that. It might be useful for the committee.

Mr LENDERS — I would be delighted to.

Dr SYKES — I have a question in relation to students with disabilities, but prior to asking that question, in relation to my earlier question regarding assistance to non-government schools, I have a table which would be helpful. This table relates to an analysis done by the Catholic schools in relation to funding for their schools Australia wide in 2001, and at that stage Victoria scored lowest of all states on both primary school and secondary school funding per student. It was \$844 for primary school students compared with the Australian average of 1104; and for secondary school students, it was 1371 compared to the Australia average of 1618. Obviously there is a great opportunity to get Victoria up to at least the national average, and if I was able to get the current information in that format, it would be very helpful.

In relation to my question regarding students with disabilities, I think it is referred to in budget paper 3 at page 62, in a general sense, it is my understanding with students with disabilities that the key issues are early identification of the disabilities that the students have and then appropriate case management. Autism is an example that I have become familiar with as a result of working in particular with the Mansfield Autistic Centre.

The issues that they have drawn to my attention that may span other ministerial portfolios beyond yours are: first of all, there appears to be an ongoing problem of limited funding for early detection or early identification of children with autism. I understand it is particularly critical to be able to identify them at less than five years or preschool age, or school age. Secondly, there is another program they have in place which is called the travelling teacher program, which helps children with autism, their families, their schools and their communities to support that child with autism and enable him or her to achieve to the maximum ability. That seems to be an ongoing limitation on funding there.

The other interesting funding issue is that when children with autism go from their normal school to Mansfield Autistic Centre for a term, which is a normal way of handling or helping those children, apparently the funding support stays with the school which the child normally attends. So that means that Mansfield Autistic Centre looks after the child for one term with no funding following on with the child, but the school of origin retains the funding. I am just wondering whether you could take on board the general issue, and perhaps advise me of any additional initiatives in this budget to address those sorts of issues and whether there is any more can be done.

Mr LENDERS — Chair, two things: certainly on the issue of individual students and disabilities, they are in the portfolio area of my colleague Jacinta Allan, so they are issues for Dr Sykes to ask her. On the issue of the funding, I will certainly take on notice and get to him the updated chart — the information he passed me across the table is for 2002 information from 2001. We will certainly take on notice and get him the most updated information.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, when you answered the question about the Broadie regeneration — Broadmeadows regeneration.

Ms GRALEY — That is right.

The CHAIR — Is this Eddie McGuire or Martin Pakula?

Mr PAKULA — You touched on the use of school facilities in communities. I am wondering if you could just expand on that a bit, that issue of strengthening the links of engagement between schools and the local communities.

Mr LENDERS — Chair, you may have to pull me up on this one because Mr Pakula has asked the issue that I am probably extremely excited about. The most exciting thing about being minister in this government is we have a great blueprint and we are investing resources into education, but as a subset of that, the better use of facilities with communities is an area that I think we collectively can make such a difference. Mr Pakula raises the issue in general of what we do on that, and I have used a few examples here. I will go back to a couple of them.

The challenge that I have made to local government in this state — and I would open up with this — is I do not believe there is any reason that any of our 79 municipalities should ever again invest in a stand-alone public library, because they can share with the schools and build them in our secondary schools. The statement I am making is quite profound in one way; but if you think of the way that we have historically operated the education system and local governments, there is no logic to it. There is no logic why. I will use the example when yesterday I was at

Neerim District Secondary College in Neerim South and, you know, it is a small school. It has about 190 students. It is a small town. I think the town is probably between 1000 and 2000 people. And it is on the edge of Baw Baw shire. But years ago, rather than the old Shire of Buln Buln having a mobile library going around, they came to an arrangement with the school that they would actually share the running of this library at what was then the Neerim South High School. So what you have is a library where four days a week a member of the school staff is a librarian and runs the school, and the library is also open on Friday, Saturday and I believe Sunday, and the now Shire of Baw Baw actually pays for the library to be open. What happens is for the Neerim South community and region community, they have got access to a library for longer hours than probably almost anybody else would.

The vexing issue for me in a sense, the only issue on that, is how do you actually deal with adults and adolescents crossing paths during school hours? Going back to Mr Barber's question, I have worked with children before. It is obviously an important issue for everyone to work through.

In the case of Neerim District Secondary College they have designed the library so there are actually two particular areas. They would probably get five or six citizens coming in during most of the days using the library — a limited resource. But after school and on weekends you have obviously got both citizens and particularly students wanting to stay and work longer. So as an example, Mr Pakula, of a facility, it is absolutely common sense. The issues for the joint use agreement between in this case the Shire of Baw Baw and the Neerim District Secondary College council, are ones that they have worked through, through necessity, and have a far better outcome.

Whether it be libraries, whether it be sporting facilities, whether it be anything — again, Mr Wells would be very interested in this; it is not in his electorate but very close to it. There is a Catholic school, St Joseph's, in Ferntree Gully which I visited last year at one stage in my capacity as TAC minister. Again, this school is extraordinary. It was a struggling Catholic boys school that was losing enrolments. It had inspirational leadership at the school, and what it came forward with was to say, 'What can we do to make it a more integral part of the community?'. This school now has — I think it is in the city of Knox — a relationship where it shares a basketball stadium with the local municipality. Essentially the school has exclusive use during school hours; the community then has parking and all sorts of things out of school hours. It is now a gymnasium with a private provider where, again, all the lads go and do their weights and aerobics and whatever else they do during the day, and after hours it is open. Now the old Tupperware swimming pool site — they are in negotiations to try to acquire a swimming pool. In both these instances vandalism is down because the facility is being used seven days a week, or close to it. The community has extraordinary ownership. It is public money and community money being spent well.

So there are numerous examples of this where if we just put our minds to it in a sensible way, and break out of our silos which we in government do and municipalities do. The example given by the Chair before of the Glen Iris Uniting Church and Glen Iris Primary School and the City of Boroondara — and my apologies for getting the wrong municipality, Mr Stensholt — shows that again, if we all break out of the mould and work collaboratively, it is just a fundamental step to getting better outcomes for all of us.

So I think in that area, if there is a challenge for us now in the huge capital investment in schools, it is the opportunity that we have to do this. At my old school, Trafalgar High School, yesterday they were saying to me that Trafalgar is a town of 2300 people in Gippsland. The West Gippsland Regional Library service goes there. They are talking about building a library; the school is building a library. Again, it is one of those synergies. We may be too late on this one, but if we can get them going we will all look back and say this was an opportunity taken rather than an opportunity lost.

I will close with an example of sometimes why it has not happened. When I was first elected as the member for Dandenong North there was a school in my electorate — Lyndale Secondary College — which handed back \$750 000 to the state government that Tom Reynolds, the outgoing sports minister in the Kennett government, had offered to it. It handed it back because it was trying to find a service agreement between the college and the City of Greater Dandenong. Both bodies had spent close to \$15 000 on legal fees trying to work out a good joint use agreement. In the end both said it was too difficult, and it handed back the \$750 000.

So I guess the lesson for us is that the template for the first 90 per cent of a joint use agreement should not vary from place to place; it is the last 10 per cent that we need to work on. I guess we in the Department of Education, and obviously in the Department for Victorian Communities — and my colleague Peter Batchelor is equally passionate on this — the more we can get templates in place, then communities can come to government and say, 'How do we do a joint use agreement?', and the less we will require people like the Chair here to broker

agreements between municipalities, churches and schools, and the more we will roll these out. We will then look back in 10-years time and say, 'That was a great initiative'.

So in response to Mr Pakula, there is a lot that we have done; there is an extraordinary amount more we can do. But I guess the lesson for us all is that it is these local communities that come up with good ideas and it is how we assist them to get the better outcomes for their communities. There are some really good stories out there, and I hope that by the end of my term that there are a lot more good stories.

Mr BARBER — Stress claims amongst teachers — I think that last year the budget papers indicated you had some stress claim numbers up around the level of the police department. I know that is not a proportional measure but teaching is not meant to be a high-risk occupation either. What is the cost to the department? Obviously stress claims are very difficult; it is not like a council worker doing their back where they can come back and do some light duties picking up rubbish or something. So they are very corrosive, and they are also very expensive. What is the cost to the budget in terms of premiums and in terms of other costs of those claims, and — I guess generally — what is your plan to get those constantly moving down?

Mr LENDERS — Specifically, the cost to the budget, I am advised, in the last financial year was in the order of \$41 million, which was a premium the department actually paid for WorkCover claims. I will answer your question about how we are addressing that in two areas. We can talk of statistics and can go through claims and all the rest of it, but the harsh reality of all of this is each statistic is individual. A person who walks into teaching wanting to make a difference and suddenly leaves with stress is a disappointment for the whole community — that that people coming through feels that way. We really have to address them.

Responding on two levels to how we address them — as a previous WorkCover minister I can say with great pride that the Victorian WorkCover Authority is an exemplar, certainly in Australia, in dealing well in these areas. How does it deal well with them? It does not just treat them as insurable risks, it actually looks at every case and says, 'How can we offer guidance for good practices in the workforce?', and that links essentially to the blueprint.

Mr BARBER — That was my experience at local government, so we got our claims down —

Mr LENDERS — But how do you do that? It is important to answer your question, Mr Barber. One, you develop a best practice — so, a blueprint again. If you are a teacher in a school, what adds to stress? Stress can come from a whole range of areas — it can be a bad working environment, it can be difficulty working with your colleagues, it can be difficult students, it can be too much to do in too little time; we can enumerate dozens of reasons why a person's stress levels will rise in a workplace.

But if we try to address them on how to change the nature of that workplace to bring it down — the blueprint by itself is a starting point in that, because it actually suggests a best practice; it actually provides the tools for delivering on that best practice, which, by definition, should reduce some of the pressure on teachers when they are struggling to find out what is a good form of teaching, what is a good form of learning, what materials do we use. We are certainly conscious of that, and professional development and leadership in schools all assist with that.

The other thing which WorkCover does though, going back to the WorkCover aspect of it, is to identify best practice in a workplace that can produce some of these areas. Again, WorkCover inspectors will, for example — one of the changes this government brought in with the OHS act changes in late 2004; until then a WorkCover inspector by law could not advise a school on best practice.

A WorkCover inspector could come in and say, 'You have broken the code' — and the Chair is nodding his head; he lived the OHS act intimately, the changes to it; for example, something as simple as — there are 200 or whatever number of WorkCover inspectors; their job is to go through a number of schools in a part of Victoria and they actually have advice on what is good practice to reduce stress or whatever, and since the changes under the act of 2004 they can actually offer advice rather than previously they could only say, 'You have broken the law' — like a Moscow on the Molonglo-type prescriptive solution — 'This is the regulation, you have crossed the line'. Whereas here it is far more proactive where they go out and offer advice.

The premiums are 40 million. Like most of Victoria, they do come down, and that is through good practice. The premium rates are a good reflection on injuries in workplaces, because there is a direct correlation between them. There have been four 10 per cent cuts in WorkCover premiums, which is essentially because injuries are coming down through good practice on WorkCover's place, good management of claims on WorkCover's place and

fundamentally a change of attitudes in workplaces across the state, whether they be in the workplaces where Mr Pakula used to organise in his previous life or whether they be in workplaces in education — it is the cultural change in workplace around best practice, which more than anything will bring this down.

The actual statistics that you sought — \$41.024 million on premium last year — —

Mr BARBER — That is the total premium or that is the premium associated with stress-related claims?

Mr LENDERS — That is the total premium, we do not have particular stress-related ones. That was an increase of 1.59 per cent on the previous year, but the total remuneration for the department via the wage increases, or salaries, or more teachers was 5.8. So in real terms, that was a reduction. On the particular area of stress claims, I will have to take on notice what was the proportion of those — I am not even sure whether that information is available.

I think you can take comfort, Mr Barber — like you said you did in local government — that the WorkCover authority under the new act provided by this government is generally dealing with the issues more effectively, but every single stress claim is one too many, because these are all again about an aspiring teacher who wants to make a difference but is ill, and we need to manage that more effectively. Nothing would give me greater joy than to see these figures go down every year, because that would be a very positive achievement.

Mr SCOTT — My question relates to an area I have particular interest in as the member for Preston, as we have a flagship in technical education in Northland Secondary College in my electorate. It refers specifically to tech wings, which are referred to in budget paper 3, at page 8, which relates to the government's investment in technical education infrastructure. Could you please advise what the government is doing to improve the delivery of skills training in schools?

Mr LENDERS — Governments do a range of things for skills training. I think, first, it is important to note that VET in schools has increased in numbers from 28 000 four years ago to 51 000 now. I guess if we are measuring that as a measure for that particular area — and there are multiple measures you can use — the actual number of participating students has gone up. I think that is an important starting point. That includes 6000 skill-based apprenticeships and trainees as part of those enrolments.

Also as part of skills training we have committed 50 million over the next five years to renew tech wings or build tech wings in every government secondary school. Again, that is a very large commitment to assist in those skills. We all share and know the dilemma: are there enough people with technical skills around? I am very fortunate having a 19-year-old son who is actually an apprentice carpenter, because there are plenty of technical skills around my house, and the house has actually been improved considerably as a consequence of this.

Ms GRALEY — I hope he is not charging you.

Mr LENDERS — He is not charging me, Ms Graley, which is very heartening. The shortage in those skills areas is one that we do need to address, and technical wings in schools are obviously a critical part in us doing this.

There are the new state-of-the-art tech wings. There are also equipment upgrades to all other government secondary schools to assist in this area, which are particularly important to us. We need to address that because of the traditional trades and skills shortage and also to provide pathways to students who want to go down that path towards a technical skill. The tech wings in schools are important. The investment in staff resources in schools is very important to us. We will see them roll out, budget by budget, as we have it.

We are also linking students to industry to help meet local skill needs. They are again far more in the portfolio area of Jacinta Allan than mine. Nevertheless it is that constant interface with industry in schools, with us being conscious of what is around in our community and getting partnerships going that help that all go along.

There is also new technical education centres. We have announced 32 million into providing and constructing new state-of-the-art facilities and TAFE institutes. We are also announcing some particular ones. For example, 160 students at Wangaratta High School are undertaking vocational programs through the Wangaratta TEC in 2007. I know Wangaratta is just outside the borders of your electorate, Dr Sykes, but I am sure you will have some of your constituents cross into Mr Jasper's territory and go to that Wangaratta school.

Dr SYKES — Only with an authorisation from Mr Jasper.

Mr LENDERS — That is right. Mr Jasper probably requires visas on the border and stamps to go into his electorate. Nevertheless he is very enthusiastic. Also, Chair, the Ballarat technical education centre will be opening in mid-2007 and Heidelberg will open in 2008. Obviously Heidelberg is one that will be of interest to Mr Scott, because I would imagine a number of his constituents will go into Heidelberg for that.

There is a big investment going on in this area. It is one that, again, I would welcome the commonwealth investment in technical education, but I would urge a greater collaboration between the two jurisdictions so that we can actually go down this path together. We deliver very good services in all our schools in the state. As I said, I welcome the commonwealth's contribution of funds, but I do genuinely urge them — it is Jacinta Allan's area primarily, but I have raised it with Andrew Robb informally at a citizenship ceremony — that we should be talking more about this, because I think if we work collaboratively we can get far more bang for our buck, and we can deliver the services that our community actually wants. With a collaborative approach we can deliver them far more effectively.

There is a lot of it being rolled out in the state, and people are walking with their feet towards it. As I said, the participation in VET and VCAL, for example, over the last few years is a clear sign that that is what parents and students want. That is what our business community wants, and our obligation is to deliver that in an effective and transparent way.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Minister, I would like to ask you about school attendance rates. I refer to pages 57 and 60 of budget paper 3. The first reference is the average rate of student attendance in years 7 to 10. The target has been reduced from 93 per cent in the current year to 91 per cent in 07–08. The same on page 60 for years 11 and 12, where the target has been reduced from 93 per cent to 91 per cent. There is a footnote there referring to the target being reduced because parents are taking their children on extended family holidays. I am guess I am surprised at the reductions, firstly, in years 7 to 10 given that that correlates to the compulsory period of education, particularly with the 16-year minimum coming in this year — you would actually expect attendance to year 10 to increase. Likewise for those students who have elected to continue at years 11 and 12 — you would expect them to attend school and not be on holidays. I guess what I would like to ask is what strategies has the government got in place or is putting in place to address this decline in attendance? I find it quite extraordinary that you actually have that decline in target for that reason.

Mr LENDERS — I thank Mr Rich-Phillips for his question, a very pertinent question. I guess there are two questions: why is it happening, and he addressed part of that by parents making choices. We obviously monitor the absenteeism rates with considerable interest, because it is of relevance to us. Sadly there is an increasing number of parents who will make the choice to withdraw their children from school during the compulsory years because of family holidays. There are the ones Dr Sykes would be aware of — my own experience, growing up on a dairy farm, is during the harvest season we would be withdrawn from school. There are some of those things that probably have not changed with parents who run small businesses or farms or whatever; they will sometimes make those choices when there are particular economic moments that they want to address. That probably has not changed, but the growing area is parents making a choice during the compulsory years for holidays and the like. There are two issues about how we address that. One, again we can use the issue of prescription and enforcement and come down hard, throw the book at people and say, 'You should not be doing this. You shall not, you should not, you shall not, you should not'. I am sure my federal colleague likes doing that, but we in the state would rather go to the causes of things and actually find ways of addressing them. That is one. That is a challenge for us if a family takes out their child for two weeks to go on a holiday to, I guess, get the message through that those two weeks are an educational opportunity lost and while it might only seem small, that ultimately it makes it that bit tougher for your child. That is a challenge for us with parents.

But there are a couple of specific things, I guess, that we are seeking to do. One of them is a program called It's Not Okay to Be Away, which we are now running as an information program through our schools. It sort of has two key messages. One, that student attendance is a responsibility of everyone in the community, not just the school. The second one is that effective schools monitor, communicate and implement strategies to improve regular school attendance. They are the sorts of things that come out of It's Not Okay to Be Away, where we are trying to address those cultural issues there. There is a tool kit for every school to help plan and deliver local school and community strategies to reduce truancy and absenteeism. There is a website with a lot of the hints that have worked in schools, brochures, posters and other info for parents. And also grants for schools that have got innovative activities to

reduce absenteeism. A lot of schools have embraced this and there are some really good examples, in a sense, of what they have done. One is that Yallourn North Primary School presents awards to students with 100 per cent attendance. Again, the aim is to change students' attitudes towards attendance and alert parents and students to that importance of being at school. Some of this can have a program. My earlier response of curiosity being the absolute key, if we can as one of my five goals get students to be curious and want to come and learn, then half the problem of the student not wanting to be there is addressed. Yallourn North is an example of that. The Cathedral cluster of schools has evolved a safe and caring communities program. It has a whole range of things about classroom programs. Woori Yallock Primary School has developed an information campaign to parents which seeks to work this through. There are a lot of other case studies and examples that I could use. Certainly one of the initiatives is an increased capacity to address issues related to attendance, also capacity of the schools to monitor them. All of these things are ones that we try to look at in a holistic way to have a good methodology to do this.

Also, student support officers are an important part of this. Obviously we have invested heavily in this in this budget and in previous budgets to try and deal with that. In 2006, over \$50 million was allocated to a range of services. They included psychologists, social workers, youth workers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, visiting teachers and curriculum consultants. There are responsibilities here that lie with individual school councils for policies and with individual principals and teachers, and also responsibilities, frankly, that lie with individual parents who are quite happy to have their children leave the school or not attend school.

I guess there is no easy answer to that, but in a holistic sense It's Not Okay To Be Away is an effort by the department to try to put tools in place so that individual schools and individual families can deal with this whole complex array of things. But the new area there — the growing area, as you identify it — is the parents choosing to withdraw children at holiday times. Targets obviously seek to be realistic. They are aspirational and realistic in a way that we can measure them. So, yes, they have changed, and I guess that is the reason for a change in circumstance.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Are you expecting they will plateau at that, or do you think this is will be a growing problem?

Mr LENDERS — We have set the targets for what we think is realistic, so we are confident that that 91 per cent will be achieved, but we will obviously be watching the space like you will. Hopefully we are underestimating what the It's Not Okay To Be Away tool and others are actually doing. But, again, what we seek to do in budget paper 3 is have targets that we can be measured against as a way that our community as well as the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee can keep track of where we are going.

Ms GRALEY — Minister, I was going to ask you a question about class sizes, but I think you have already given all the good news to Mr Dalla-Riva. As a former school teacher and a former school counsellor, I was just wondering if you could advise the committee what the government is doing to free up teachers from administrative work to allow them to focus more on improving teaching and learning.

Mr LENDERS — A very good question, and it is one of the areas that certainly the Australian Education Union is very strong on, saying that if you want teachers to be able to teach more effectively, you have to remove some of their administrative burdens. It is certainly something about which the Victorian Independent Education Union has the same view and the other two sectors — the Catholic and the independent sectors. The more we can actually reduce the administrative burden on teachers, the more we can carry out the blueprint.

We can do that in two ways. I think one of the most effective ways of cutting red tape — I mentioned before the annual reports of schools to the community, for example, and there is a lot of information that schools are required to collect every year, whether it be testing results, whether it be the A to E reporting requirements or whether it be the various prescriptive things that the commonwealth has required — the flag poles that Mr Wells gets very excited about. We all like flying flags, but he gets very excited about the prescriptive nature of flag poles.

Mr WELLS — You don't like it, do you?

The CHAIR — Back to the estimates please.

Mr LENDERS — Chair, if this committee room were a government school, again the deputy secretary of schools, Darrell Fraser, would have to certify on my behalf that we had two posters prominently displayed with all sorts of things that the federal minister requires on the walls of schools. We spend time counting these every year,

making sure they are displayed and reporting to the commonwealth. So in reducing red tape, what we seek to do is reduce red tape on the mandatory requirements, and annual reports of schools is one.

But in the specific area of assisting teachers — and that is more school leaders we are talking about rather than teachers — one of the things is administrative assistants in secondary schools, which we have pledged in our election commitment, and the first 90-plus are being announced. I will not presume the appropriation gets passed by Parliament — I certainly hope it does — but once the appropriation is passed, obviously, on 1 July we would then seek to roll them out in the most needy schools in the first instance until we have 300 administrative assistants to teachers in all government secondary schools.

A lot of what they will do, of course, will be issues for individual schools in how these teachers assistants are deployed and in what they do, but we are looking at them doing things like undertaking the sourcing of teaching and learning materials; they may supervise students on some occasions when the teacher works with a small group; they would monitor some of the student attendance, which is pertinent; they might collect money for excursions; they might book rooms; and they might do other administrative things, even like photocopying, so that the teachers can actually spend their time teaching.

It sounds fairly simple — teachers should be spending their time teaching — and again it is very easy rhetorically to say that teachers should be spending their time teaching, but again what this government is seeking to do with things as simple as this rollout of assistance in schools is to actually listen to our own rhetoric in the blueprint, our own good practice, and say at every step, ‘What can we do to reduce red tape?’. Mr Wells takes exception when I get excited about the flagpoles and about the posters on the walls and all the other things.

Mr WELLS — No, it is the flagpole. We just were horrified at your attitude towards it.

Mr LENDERS — What we get, Chair, is constantly from the commonwealth where to the point — —

Mr WELLS — The flagpoles, which were funded by the federal government.

Mr LENDERS — I am happy to share with Mr Wells over a cup of coffee one day just some of the prescriptive paperwork that we as a state are required to fill in from the commonwealth. Mr Wells says we can hand back their money — —

Mr WELLS — No, it is your criticism of the flag flying.

Mr LENDERS — But if we wish to hand back 12 per cent, or whatever the figure is, of our schools funding to the commonwealth, because we of course will fill in every bit of paper we need to because we want money for our students — but I think if the commonwealth minister were to actually come to some of our 1594 government schools in the state, talk to teachers about some of the administrative burdens, talk to school principals about the burdens of filling in the paperwork to put up the flags — —

Good on them for putting up the flags, but it is this paperwork — the two flagpoles of paperwork. For Ms Graley’s knowledge, we have the Flying Fruit Fly Circus in Wodonga — getting close to Dr Sykes’s electorate. In Albury-Wodonga this is a wonderful school. In one of my first acts as Minister for Education I got a letter to the ‘Honourable John Lenders’ and addressed ‘Dear Lynne’ from my federal colleague, and a big, scrawly signature ‘Julie Bishop’ on the bottom, lamenting the fact that when the notification for the schools had gone up that the ‘Victoria: the place to be’ was a millimetre or two higher than the commonwealth logo.

So here is the federal minister signing correspondence on this. Her parliamentary secretary, Pat Farmer, now has this wonderful task — I would certainly know my parliamentary secretary, Fiona Richardson, has more meaningful tasks in the Victorian government. But part of Pat Farmer’s job is to monitor that we mere mortals in the states put the placards in the right place and meet the protocols of announcement. Good on the commonwealth for wanting recognition for its funding, but there is an obsession on red tape. Administrative assistance in schools is part of what we can do, but all of us need to have a performance culture that says education is the outcome, not minute bureaucracy and red tape.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I acknowledge the minister’s former position as minister for WorkCover, who insisted on posters being placed in workplaces, but that aside — —

Mr WELLS — That would be different, wouldn’t it?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It would be different.

Mr WELLS — They have different standards. I understand that.

Ms GRALEY — Like one in your electorate office?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — One in my electorate office? Yes, it has to be up there, as directed by the minister. Can I suggest that on budget paper 268 — —

Mr LENDERS — You have got more budget papers than I remember — 268 of them! That is Julie Bishop's bureaucracy! Julie Bishop would be proud of you.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — That's a Freudian slip.

Ms GRALEY — You're on your own now!

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I apologise, Minister. I should have used the codeword BP3. I did not use the codeword BP3, for those in the know, page 268. In relation to two select-entry high schools there is a TEI of \$40 million. I note that there is only \$1 million to provide for planning for select-entry schools. Can you just advise why that is the case and when you intend to apply the \$40 million proposed?

Mr LENDERS — Chair, I am delighted Mr Dalla-Riva has asked the question. It goes, I guess, back to my earlier response to Mr Rich-Phillips — that we just do not spend for the sake of spending; we do things right.

A million dollars is obviously the planning money for the two schools. We have announced the site in North Melbourne for one of the two selective-entry schools, which will obviously be to Melbourne high and to MacRobertson high that have been in place for, I don't know, perhaps a century. Certainly those two schools have been in place for a long time.

We have committed to obviously one at North Melbourne and one in your electorate, Mr Dalla-Riva — somewhere in the eastern corridor with a site still to be determined. The reason that there is planning money there is because we actually want to plan this right. We have not created a new selective-entry school in Victoria for the best part of a hundred years, so there is not necessarily a great methodology in place for it, so the planning money is that we get it done correctly.

Obviously I will certainly be putting out a discussion paper and seeking information from stakeholders, and I would be delighted, Chair, if Mr Dalla-Riva were to contribute to that, if he has ideas on it. But certainly we want to get it right. As he would be aware, there are a range of things where there is a 3 per cent threshold. At the moment a maximum of 3 per cent of students from any government or non-government school can actually go to the existing select schools. We need to review whether that is the correct figure or whether there should be a higher figure and whether that is the approach.

There is the testing method that is used on how you recruit staff. You do not just say something is a select school and expect it to be. There is a whole establishment and a whole range of things about that that we need to get right. If we had to do it in a hurry, I think we would probably do it okay, but I would rather do the planning on it correctly and take our stakeholders on board with us and get it absolutely right, because there are a number of issues with selective schools where there is a debate on. Parents want them. Parents want their children to be able to go to them. Some of the other schools in the areas are nervous about what it may do to them. We are committed to the schools that my predecessor announced and the Premier confirmed during the election that we will deliver the two select-entry schools. But we will use the planning phase of next year to get it right so that when they hit the ground running, they will operate smoothly. They fit into a context, and we want to take our stakeholders with us in delivering what many parents think is an important addition to the state system, and we want to deliver them well.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I would like you to take on notice a final question: what resources and staffing costs does the department anticipate applying to service PAEC hearings in the 2007–08 financial year based on experience over the last few years?

That concludes consideration of the budget estimates for the portfolio of education. I thank the minister, witnesses and departmental officers for their attendance today. It has been a very useful session. Where questions were taken on notice, the committee will follow up with you in writing at a later date, as indeed I will also do in regard to the

incomplete answers to question 9 of the questionnaire, which was sent out to all departments. The committee requests that a written response to those matters be provided within 30 days. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.

Transcript of Evidence

3.10 Education Services portfolio

VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2007–08

Melbourne — 7 May 2007

Members

Mr G. Barber	Mr G. Rich-Phillips
Mr R. Dalla-Riva	Mr R. Scott
Ms J. Graley	Mr B. Stensholt
Ms J. Munt	Dr W. Sykes
Mr M. Pakula	Mr K. Wells

Chair: Mr B. Stensholt
Deputy Chair: Mr K. Wells

Staff

Business Support Officer: Ms J. Nathan

Witnesses

Ms J. Allan, Minister for Skills, Education Services and Employment;
Dr P. Dawkins, secretary;
Ms K. Henderson, deputy secretary, policy, planning and evaluation;
Mr J. Rosewarne, deputy secretary, resources and infrastructure; and
Ms C. Britchford, chief finance officer, Department of Education.

The CHAIR — I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings on the 2007–08 budget estimates for the portfolios of education services, skills, employment and women’s affairs. On behalf of the committee I welcome the Honourable Jacinta Allan, Minister for Skills, Education Services and Employment and Minister for Women’s Affairs; Mr Peter Dawkins, Secretary of the Department of Education; Ms Katherine Henderson, deputy secretary, policy planning and evaluation; Mr Jeff Rosewarne, deputy secretary, resources and infrastructure; and Ms Claire Britchford, chief finance officer; departmental officers, members of the public and the media.

In accordance with the guidelines for public hearings, I remind members of the public that they cannot participate in the committee’s proceedings. Only officers of the PAEC secretariat may approach PAEC members. Departmental officers, as requested by the minister or his or her chief of staff — her in this case — can approach the table during the hearing. Members of the media are also requested to observe the guidelines for filming or recording proceedings in the Legislative Council committee room. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act and is protected from judicial review. However, any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. There is no need for evidence to be sworn. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses shall be provided with proof versions of the transcript to be verified and returned within two working days. In accordance with past practice, the transcripts and PowerPoint presentations will then be placed on the committee’s website.

Following the presentation by the minister, committee members will also ask questions relating to the budget estimates. Generally the procedure followed will be that relating to questions in the Legislative Assembly. Please turn off all mobile phones. I now call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information relating to the budget estimates for the education services portfolio. Thank you, Minister.

Overheads shown.

Ms ALLAN — Thank you very much, Chair. As you have indicated, this presentation will just be on the education services part of the portfolio. I look forward to following that up with another three presentations on the other portfolio areas. Certainly it is a great opportunity today to outline the key achievements in the education area in this year’s budget. But, before I start, I thought it might be useful for members of the committee, particularly members who have been here previously — no, we do not have any previous members who might be familiar —

The CHAIR — Do you have a handout?

Ms ALLAN — Handout of the presentation?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms ALLAN — Yes. I will just go through the portfolio responsibilities that I have in relation to Minister Lenders, who I understand is coming before the committee on Wednesday. Since the machinery of government changes following last November’s election, as you will see there on the screen and in the handouts, there are different arrangements for the education services portfolio, which means I now have responsibility for the areas of youth transition, which include the local learning and employment networks; student wellbeing and safety; the program for students with a disability; information technology infrastructure; international education; the education maintenance allowance; the School Start bonus; the delivery of senior secondary certificates outside of the school environment; and the Victorian Qualifications Authority, apart from those areas that are courses taught in schools. In the post-compulsory area, if it happens outside of schools, it is in my portfolio area.

The next slide just shows us some of the key achievements. It is important to look at where we are coming from in this year’s budget and to quickly look at the key achievements. There have been significant improvements over the last seven years in the education and training portfolios, particularly as a result of the additional investment that has been made by the Bracks government. Certainly in the area of student health and welfare, which I have a responsibility for, we have made that a real priority — for example, by introducing the 256 full-time primary welfare officers into high-need schools. This budget continues that initiative, and again it should be seen that they sit alongside the additional 7300 teachers and staff who have been invested into Victorian government schools.

We have connected every government school to VicSmart broadband, and that is really going to assist government schools meet future infrastructure needs in the technology area. At the same time we have made quite significant reforms in the post-compulsory education and training area that have seen significantly increased numbers of students participating and completing year 12 or its equivalent. As a result of this investment we are seeing very good results for Victorian students. This slide, just very quickly, shows us a good example of how well Victoria is performing. It shows our year 12 or equivalent completion rates. This slide will show you that not only have we had an increase over the last seven years of young people completing year 12 — we have had a 2.1 percentage point increase in the numbers completing year 12 — you can also see that we are both above the national average and we are the best performing state. You will see there the figures for the territories, but as they are much smaller jurisdictions you can see that compared to other states we are performing very, very well. Clearly that is a result of the additional investments that have been made in education over the last seven years.

I turn to this year's budget. This year's budget has some key areas that I wanted to focus on this afternoon and obviously, through questions, get the chance also to talk about them in a bit more detail. The first one is the Ultranet. This budget provides \$60.5 million over four years to connect every school to the new system — the Ultranet. But this is not just about connecting every government school, it is also about providing parents and students as well with connection to the Ultranet, which will become an online teaching and learning system that will provide one single information point that parents, students and teachers can access 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As the Ultranet rolls out I think we will see it revolutionise not only the way education is delivered but also the relationship that parents have with schools and the relationship between students and teachers.

Also in the area of technology, the budget provides an additional \$7 million to provide more computers for students and teachers in government schools. As I mentioned before, the additional support for students and their families will continue through the extension of the primary welfare officers initiative, which has been a terrific program supporting students who need help, in particular, in key areas around things like improving attendance levels, connectedness to school and also connecting families to schools.

You will see on the final slide that the additional funds that have been invested in schools since 1999 total \$6.1 billion, and this includes \$2.3 billion invested in school capital assets. I should also note that the investment in training and skills is in addition to that \$6.1 billion and that this budget is delivering a record \$904 million, including our significant investment in school capital works, which I think every member of PAEC is very well aware of.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I am particularly interested in the impact on productivity of the budget, and I do not mind if you answer this in regard to other parts of your portfolios as well, but what do you anticipate to be the impact on productivity of the portfolio spend this year and the following years, particularly in regard to new initiatives?

Ms ALLAN — Would you like me to answer that for all four?

The CHAIR — It will save you answering the same question four times, I guess.

Ms ALLAN — I would be happy to. Obviously in the area of education, the significant investment in our infrastructure projects are a \$555 million capital commitment which, as I think every member has heard also, is one of the largest single ever investments in capital works in Victoria's history. That will really position Victoria very well, and it will also drive high levels of productivity, because some research for us has indicated that there is a direct relationship between the quality of education infrastructure and improved educational outcomes. That is also why this is not just starting from this year's budget. As you saw from that previous slide, we have had a very heavy focus over the last seven years in school capital works. This budget takes it to another level again, so we know that a quality education very much underpins the development of a highly skilled and productive workforce, and we know that that is critical to Victoria's economic prosperity, which is also why, in the area of training, just moving to the skills portfolio, you have also seen over the last seven years our government invest heavily in delivering more places for apprenticeships and traineeships, and why we have also made a significant investment in TAFE capital works and new TAFE facilities. This budget will also build on that and link back to the comments I made earlier around improved productivity as a result of better education outcomes, as a result of improved facilities.

We have had provided more than \$38 million to expand and equip Victorian TAFE institutes for the future, so there are some funds there for big capital projects — I will talk about some of those when I come back as skills minister — but also some funds for equipment as well.

Then further in the employment portfolio, we have a number of initiatives that are very targeted at key groups in our community who need some assistance in getting back into the workforce. Obviously the more we can increase workforce participation for people, say, with a disability or mature age workers, the more we can help those people get into the workforce, obviously the more skilled labour industry and business we will have that will continue to drive economic prosperity and productivity. Also, when I come back as employment minister, we will talk about the continuation of the very successful skilled and business migration program which is also great for Victoria's economy and productivity in the numbers we are attracting and the skill areas that they are coming into.

Finally, I will finish a very quick overview in this area. In the women's portfolio, there are just a couple of things in particular that I wanted to touch on that whilst at first blush might not necessarily indicate that they will make a contribution to productivity, but certainly the initiatives around family violence and the Safer Families training program will assist because we know that the cost of family violence to the Victorian economy is \$2 billion every year, so the more we can do to invest in initiatives that reduce family violence, we will see more productive people and reduce that cost to the Victorian economy. That is obviously a very brief snapshot across the four areas of the initiatives that support Victoria's productivity.

Mr WELLS — Minister, at the start of each year MPs receive a number of requests from parents for further funding for children with disabilities. I am wondering what new funding there is in this budget for students with disabilities, considering that on page 278 of budget 3, in the output initiatives, there do not seem to be any new initiatives for students with disabilities?

Ms ALLAN — Thank you, Kim. The program for students with a disability, as you have indicated, is a program that there is a lot of focus on from parents, and you can understand that when parents want to provide the best support they can for the children. That is certainly backed up by the work we do through the program for students with a disability, by making sure when we are delivering an education system that it caters for everyone. That is why in last year's budget, the 06–07 budget, there was an additional \$215 million over five years provided for in last year's budget. We can get to the breakdown of the figures after the hearing, if you like, in terms of what that looks like over the forward four years. Those funds are continuing through. There are additional funds in the PSD area, they are just not coming up in this year's budget because they were allocated in last year's budget.

If I can take a moment of the committee's time, this current financial year the government is investing over \$350 million into the program for students with a disability. That also should be seen in addition to the \$50 million that is provided for school support officers, health specialists, allied health specialists, speech therapists, psychologists and counsellors who provide very important supports to the program for students with a disability. Over the last seven years, since 1999, the Bracks government has increased funding to this area by 82 per cent, but we recognise that there are particular challenges in this area, and that is why there is a review process that is under way. It has been under way since 2005 where we had a working group set up. They provided me with a report. I have established a ministerial advisory committee which advises me directly on a range of issues. Every year we are looking at reforms to the program, both in terms of how we can best support the students who need it the most and also make reforms to help streamline some of the processes for parents and teachers and principals as well.

Mr WELLS — So the \$215 million over the five years which you mentioned, is that staggered funding over that time or an average of, say, \$43 million?

Ms ALLAN — It does go up each year incrementally. As I said, we can provide that detail. It would have been in last year's budget papers, so we can provide that information to the committee.

The CHAIR — In *A Fairer Victoria*, I think.

Ms ALLAN — Yes, that is right, it was detailed in *A Fairer Victoria* as well.

Ms MUNT — Minister, I was very pleased to hear in your presentation about the commitment to put the ultranet in place. I was actually part of the parliamentary committee on education that recommended that, and we are very pleased to see it becoming a reality. It will lead the world. Critical, of course, in that being a success is the

availability of computers in schools. I was wondering if you could tell me what the government is doing to increase student access to computers and technology?

Ms ALLAN — Yes, certainly. As you have indicated, and through your work that you did on the committee, because I think you also did a report into multimedia technology as well.

Ms MUNT — Yes, we did.

Ms ALLAN — We certainly have a very strong commitment to providing our students with access to the latest technology in the classroom. The reason why we do it is for really two reasons: we know that it can make education very exciting, very engaging and also improve access, but it is also about making sure we are preparing young people with the skills they need for the workforce of the future.

That is why we have worked very hard at improving the student computer ratio. Back in the 1996 it was one to nine, there was one computer to every nine students. That was the average ratio. Today we have a target of one to five, and we are below that at present, and that is largely because of the significant investments we have made in this area in additional funds for computers for students, and that is why in this budget we have committed a further \$7 million to provide student access to computers. That should again be seen alongside the other initiatives, such as the VicSmart rollout, which I mentioned in the presentation where we are connecting every single government school in the state. It does not matter whether you are in Murrumbidgee — is that in your electorate? No, I do not think it is.

Ms MUNT — Close.

Ms ALLAN — Close, but not far away.

The CHAIR — Close to mine.

Ms ALLAN — Or in Violet Town you have the same fibre-optic broadband connection in any part of the state. That will be complete by 2008, and we are delivering that in partnership with Telstra. I do not know if any of you have picked up on this in your visits to schools, but we have also invested \$6 million to make every school a secure wireless network. It is actually the largest school wireless network in the southern hemisphere. We all know from using our wireless computers in Parliament how portable that makes the technology, how much easier it makes the technology to use.

It is really because of that platform of computers of making schools wireless and the high-speed broadband rollout, and alongside having teachers with notebooks, that we have been able to go down the path of rolling out the ultranet. Those members of the lower house might have heard me in Parliament last week talking about how we really will revolutionise, as I said before, the relationship between parents, teachers and students in a way that, I think, from some of the work we have done and the trialling we have done, we have quite a very good idea about what it will do, but as it rolls out I think the potential of it will only be fully realised. It will be tremendously exciting to have the opportunity at future PAECs of talking about it a bit further.

Dr SYKES — Minister, you made reference to the retention rates, or completion rates, for year 12, and that Victoria has an average of 85 per cent. It is my understanding that averages are made up of above and below-average performances, and I understand that the year 12 completion rate amongst Victorian country students is substantially below the 85 per cent. Can you advise what is the year 12 retention rate amongst country students, and what are you doing about seeking to lift it?

Ms ALLAN — Certainly. I have noticed some of the comments from the National Party in this area, and it is a bit unfortunate that in having a bit of a go at the government, I think the National Party has missed sight of the real issue, which is that retention rates for country kids are going up — we have seen an increase of 2.7 percentage points since 1999 —

Dr SYKES — From what to what?

Ms ALLAN — Yes. From 66.8 per cent to 69.5 per cent. And, as I said before, we have got the best year 12 or equivalent completion rates of any Australian state, and it is important to focus here when we are talking about year 12 completion rates, there are not just the VCE completions, there are the kids who go off into the apprenticeship and trainee pathway in an environment where we have got very strong employment growth,

particularly in country Victoria. You would know it as well as I do — we are seeing terrific jobs growth across country Victoria. That is opening up a whole world of opportunities for young people in terms of getting apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities. They are certainly becoming more and more attractive as we are seeing the unemployment rate decrease and employment opportunities increase in country areas.

In terms of the second part of your question around what we are doing about it, over the last seven years the Bracks government has invested enormously in opening up alternate pathways for young people, whether it is alongside the VCE; there is the VET in schools program as well; we introduced VCAL back in 2002, which is providing an alternate pathway for young people, and again we have seen — —

I think I have a handout here actually for the committee's benefit; I forgot to hand out my computer one before. We do have a handout here I can show you in terms of the increase in numbers of people who are completing the Victorian certificate of applied learning, and we have seen that increase to now over 12 000 young people undertaking study in VCAL, and there is a range of schools in country Victoria that are providing VCAL for their students. We also have introduced things — —

I might have given you the slightly wrong figures there. Can I have a chance to correct the record, Bill?

Dr SYKES — Don't worry about that. Wrong figures amongst friends!

Ms ALLAN — The thing is, Bill, I have given you the figures for 7 to 12 retention rates whereas — —

Hang on, just give me two seconds to double-check these figures. Okay, the correct figures — sorry, with the committee's indulgence — the 7 to 12 government school rate has increased from — —

No, that is the statewide rate. I think I was right the first time. Yes, I was right, sorry, with the committee's indulgence. I just want to briefly finish. The one thing with which the National Party could be of tremendous assistance, Bill, is getting the federal government to provide more places at our regional universities and to recognise the extra cost of delivering university education to our regional communities. It would be great if you and I could sign a joint letter to Julie Bishop and get Peter McGauran and all the other senior Victorian National Party members to raise that with the federal government, because that is one area that we are being held back in. We are doing our bit in vocational education and training in government schools, but the federal government unfortunately is not funding regional university places, or we are not getting enough regional places across Victoria.

The CHAIR — Thank you. We need to move on because Mr Pakula — —

Dr SYKES — At the — —

The CHAIR — No, I think we have to move on. We have indulged you. We do need to move on to the next one, sorry. Everyone asks a question each time, so we have only got half an hour each time.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, in the presentation you talked about the wellbeing of students, and this issue of students at risk of disconnecting from schools, or disengaging. I am interested in the primary area especially. How is the government planning to enhance the capacity of primary schools to prevent that disconnection?

Ms ALLAN — Certainly the primary areas whether it is, you know, having our commitment to achieve an average class size of 21 or less — and we are achieving that, and it is a result of the additional teachers and facilities — we do need to provide some specific interventions in particular school communities. That is why this budget continues, as I said in the presentation, the funding for the primary welfare officer initiative.

It was introduced in the 2003–04 budget — that was for 49.5 million to primary welfare officers in 450 high-need — in fact, the highest need — Victorian government schools to support students at that risk of disconnection that you have identified. It has proven highly successful. There have been three evaluations that have been undertaken on this program.

As a result we have continued the funding — it is actually now \$79.9 million in this year's budget — to extend it for a further four years. As I said, we have an evaluation. We are seeing some tremendous results as a result of both that evaluation and the program. We are getting feedback that it has very much improved links between not just the student and their school but also families and external agencies. I have visited some schools where they have

formed a very strong partnership off the back of the primary welfare officer with external agencies in the local community. Welfare agencies that might also be working with that family can now do it around the school.

As I think I indicated before, we are seeing an increased attendance from the students where there is a primary welfare officer. We are seeing improved self-esteem and lower incidences of aggressive behaviour. So it really does show that we can have a targeted and strategic intervention that sits alongside the universal delivery of education with the extra teachers and extra funding that goes into schools. It can make a real difference.

That is why when we came to office back in 1999 we immediately put back the school nurses and welfare officers into secondary schools because unfortunately in the 1990s they went by the wayside. We put them back in secondary schools and then from 2003 onwards we introduced the primary welfare officers as well.

Mr BARBER — I also have some questions about the program for students with disabilities. I understand you are putting more money into it, but what I want to get a sense of is how much is enough. At the time of the regulatory impact statement into the federal disability status for education, Victoria, and all states in fact, had a lot of trouble getting to grips with exactly what proportion of the student body they thought would likely be requiring support — from 3 to 18, back down to 5, up to 10 depending on what sector they were talking about.

I suppose I have a two-part question. As a question on notice could you perhaps provide us with some information about how the program for students with disabilities over the last, say, four or five years has grown broken down by those subsectors like language disorder and so forth, and obviously the funding that accrued with that, and how much you think it will grow next year?

My question for now is: whether it is through your review or advisory committee, how are you coming to grips with the likely growth of need under this program?

Ms ALLAN — Sure. I can go through all of those now, if you like. I came prepared with some information in anticipation of the committee wanting a break down on the PSD. We can hand them out. There are two bits of information which I will be handing around. One is the numbers of students by category on the program for this year, and the other is the funding levels by the proportion of funding levels.

By way of information for the committee and just to assist in the discussions, the second slide shows you — and this goes very much to your question, Greg, as well — how the funding has increased year-on-year for both the program for students with disabilities and the SSSOs. As I said earlier, this year in terms of the program for students with disabilities, we are about \$350 million. For the SSSOs we provide \$50 million. So it is over \$400 million this year. You can see how in each year that has increased and, as I mentioned, that is part of the 82 per cent increase in government funding over the last seven years.

In terms of how much it will grow next year, I think it is reflected in the budget papers that we have a target of 3 per cent of the student population that will require supports under the programs for students with a disability. When we talk about that 3 per cent, I do not mean that is the beginning and the end of the support for students with additional learning needs in our schools. That is support for that proportion of the student population who are identified as being most in need. We go from the severely disabled — physically and intellectually disabled — to things ranging across the autism spectrum and lower level intellectual disabilities. Then there is a whole range of additional supports that sit outside of that \$350 million that is available for the program. There is the \$50 million for the SSSOs. There is the funding we were just talking about in terms of the primary welfare officers as well. There are the additional funds that go into literacy and numeracy programs — I think we have spent over \$1.5 billion on that over the last seven years. We have very strong commitment to helping the students most in need, and that is what this program is about. Then there are the additional supports we provide to schools.

In terms of your question about how we are coming to grips with the growth, I personally have been working on this for nearly five years, and it is a particular challenge. With improved medical technology, with improved diagnosis we are seeing a growth in students coming into this program. We are seeing particular pressures put in place on schools, and that is why, as I mentioned before, the working group and the ministerial advisory committee are looking at how things can be refined and how they can be managed. It is always about looking at how we can improve processes to free up time. We are undergoing a trial of outsourcing our assessments. The early feedback from those trials shows us that it has freed up SSSO time, so that means less time on paperwork and more time with the student and helping them with their education. We are looking at revising the eligibility criteria and educational needs questionnaire (ENQ) to keep pace with those improvements in medical technology and advances, and also a

better understanding of illnesses like autism and autism spectrum disorder. I think it is around 10 years since the ENQ has been revised. That is a lifetime ago in terms of medical technology. I think we will see improvements as a result of that.

We are also undertaking significant research projects that look at the abilities of young people with additional learning needs. We talk about disability all the time, and I am not sure if anyone saw the Logies last night, but this was actually a feature of one of the speeches at the Logies — talking about peoples' abilities rather than their disabilities. That is part of a very significant piece of research the department is undertaking through the ministerial advisory committee and with a range of experts to really help us understand where this area is going and how we can improve our educational supports.

The CHAIR — Thank you, minister. Mr Scott.

Mr BARBER — That is an excellent chart. Can you give us a breakdown for the last few years? That was my question.

The CHAIR — Sorry, Mr Barber, I think we will go on to the next question.

Mr BARBER — Can you give us a breakdown for the last few years. That was my original question

The CHAIR — Can you ask that on notice?

Mr BARBER — On notice.

The CHAIR — That is fine. We will do that.

Ms ALLAN — Yes, sure.

Mr SCOTT — My question relates to youth transition, which is related to budget paper 3, page 59. I would be grateful if you could provide some further information to the committee about what the government is doing, and I will quote:

... to provide young people with effective and varied pathways and support to secure their first formal qualification and to make a successful transition to further study, employment or a combination of both.

Ms ALLAN — This also goes back to the question from Bill earlier about how we can do everything possible to increase the numbers of young people completing as high a level of educational qualification as possible, and also provide them with a range of pathway options and a range of supports. That is why, as I said, alongside the VCE we are providing things like VCAL and providing more supports for VET in schools. It is why we are seeing in this year's budget — and I am sure Minister Lenders will talk a bit more in detail on this — we are putting in technical wings. We are spending \$50 million to provide technical wings in government secondary schools. That is why when I come back as schools minister I might talk a bit about the four technical education centres we are putting in. There are also things like the youth guarantee, which commenced this year. This is, of course, ensuring a place at a TAFE institute or another educational and training provider for a young person up until the age of 20 so they can complete their year 12 or equivalent. There are other initiatives that have been in place for a couple of years like On Track and Managed Individual Pathways that complement this.

That is where, in terms of the specific question around youth transition support, this year saw the commencement of the \$10 million Youth Transition Support Initiative which provides 24 youth transition workers in 12 local learning and employment network areas.

These are workers who are, again in terms of target interventions, we have put these workers into the 12 LLEN areas that have the highest numbers of young people unemployed, highest numbers of young people not in education or in training, and we have also focused this in on the 15 to 19-year-olds group in particular. We are already seeing, I am pleased to report to the committee, some success in this area, whereas as at 31 March — and they only started in January — we have seen 133 young people already being assisted by this initiative, which I think is really about a hands-on approach.

It is providing one-to-one support to help that young person reconnect with school or training or a job, because we know if we can lift their education qualifications, increase their connections to jobs, it means they are going to have

better lifetime earnings, better health outcomes, and that is better for the community, and in terms of your first question, Bob, better productivity for the economy as well.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Now the final question in education services.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Minister, I refer to budget paper 3, pages 56 and 57. In respect of the top of page 56 under ‘Early years’ we see the statewide computer-to-student ratio, primary, the ratio target for the coming year is 1.5 — —

The CHAIR — One to 5.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes, 1 to 5, sorry. In respect of ‘Middle years’ on page 57, statewide computer-to-student ratio, secondary, the ratio is 1-to-5. Then I refer you to page 397 of budget paper 3, or BP3. Is that right Mr Wells?

Mr WELLS — So I am told.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — So we are told, BP3. And I refer you to appendix C ‘Discontinued outputs and/or measures’ and I note that under ‘Early years’ the schools with a 1-to-5 or better computer-to-student ratio in primary the target was at 95 per cent, and it has actually only been 89.7; and in terms of the middle years secondary, again the same quantity, the target was set at 95 and was actually 84.5.

My question is twofold in the sense that: why is it that the government has replaced the school with a 1-to-5 or better computer-to-student ratio primary and secondary with the new measure statewide computer-to-student ratio, primary, as I have outlined on pages 56 and 57. Just as a supplementary to that, is it an admission that the government has actually failed in terms of its ability to deliver schools with a 1-to-5 or better ratio and you have just fiddled the numbers again, which you are quite good at.

Ms ALLAN — Again? I personally haven’t, thank you.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Not you, particularly, but the government is quite good at that. I like appendix C, it seems to be a good way for removing government scrutiny. Would you like to respond to those comments and questions?

Ms ALLAN — Certainly. In assisting me to respond, in terms of government achievements rather than failures, we have seen a great record of achievement. I mentioned in my comments before, in 1996 the computer-to-student ratio was 1-to-9, and if I can hand it around, I have got a little chart here that shows how over the last seven years — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — You have a chart for everything!

Ms ALLAN — We certainly do. We like to provide PAEC with a lot of information.

The CHAIR — And you’re happy to incorporate them as well.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Just give us all your charts and save us asking questions.

Ms ALLAN — That is right. And that shows a steady decline in the student-to-computer ratio, because as I said before, we very much believe in providing access to students to the latest technology because it improves their education outcomes and because it improves their prospects when they go out into the workforce.

In terms of your question on school ratios and student ratios, they are two different measures. One is mentioning a school average, and the other is mentioning the student-to-computer ratio. In terms of the student-to-computer ratio, we see that as a better indicator in terms of the access that students have to technology. Since Jeff was making some comments to me, I might let you make those to the committee, Jeff, if you like.

Mr ROSEWARNE — Thanks, Minister.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Handballed!

Ms ALLAN — No, I am happy to come back and I am happy to continue.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — No, that is all right. I am just disappointed after Essendon's loss, don't worry.

Mr ROSEWARNE — It is just to pick up the aggregate statewide system data in terms of whether or not school information was giving it to us because by reporting it at a school level what we have discovered as part of the census, you might in fact have schools having quite variable ratios within the school within particular year levels across the classes. So a particular school therefore from our perspective might not be putting enough effort in to get the ratio down across the whole of the school because reporting at a school level it would actually say we have satisfied the ratio because some classes are down to 1 to 1, other classes are down to 1 to 10. What we are saying is across the system at the primary level we want schools to bring the ratio down; down at a student level, not at a school level. So we think it is a better driver of the way schools manage the information, if we record it at the student level rather than the school level.

Mr WELLS — Just to clarify that point: so you are saying there is a problem with the school identifying how many students it has and how many computers it has?

Mr ROSEWARNE — No, not at all, not in terms of reporting. What we are saying is a school might think that its efforts in regard to the ratio have been satisfied when an overall school ratio has been met, but within the school some classes are well under the ratio, when in fact some classes might be over. What we want is a considered effort across the school and we take it down to a student level therefore, rather than a school level, in terms of the measurement.

Ms ALLAN — If I can just briefly mention too, I think it is also about we do know that there is some variability and we have been to those schools that have a very strong focus on IT and, frankly, others that have a focus in other areas. I think that is where we provide the funds to schools and, under our self-managed system in Victoria, principals can allocate those funds to their local priority areas. So I think that is where also you see some of that variability that Jeff is talking about, and that is why we use that student-to-computer ratio rather than — well alongside the school's average.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I thank the witnesses for their attendance and we will now welcome the next group of witnesses.

Witnesses withdrew.