

VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2007–08

Melbourne — 7 May 2007

Members

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| 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.