

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022–23 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Monday, 16 May 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O’Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Mr James Merlino MP, Deputy Premier and Minister for Education,

Ms Jenny Atta PSM, Secretary,

Mr Anthony Bates PSM, Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services,

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

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

Mr Scott Widmer, Assistant Deputy Secretary, Senior Secondary Pathways Reform Taskforce,

Ms Kylie White, Deputy Secretary, Policy Strategy and Performance,

Ms Jessica Trinder, Executive Director, Asset Management and Strategy Division, Victorian School Building Authority, and

Mr Stephen Gniel, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Department of Education and Training.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their elders past, present and emerging as well as elders from other communities who may be with us today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2022–23 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

I welcome the Deputy Premier, Minister for Education, as well as officers of your department. Minister, we invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of 10 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Mr MERLINO: Terrific. Thanks, Chair, and thanks to the committee members. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are gathered and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. Thank you again for the opportunity to present to PAEC. Today is also international day for education support practitioners, so a shout-out to our education support staff.

Visual presentation.

Mr MERLINO: I will get onto the presentation. Our massive investment in 2015 has transformed education in Victoria. This budget continues our commitment to building the Education State by investing a further \$3.7 billion to deliver excellence and equity for every child. As we celebrate this year, 150 years of public education in Victoria, this budget reinforces the transformation of our schools. They are still centres of academic learning and achievement, but they also offer the social and welfare support that all students need to reach their potential.

As you can see by this next slide, we have massively increased the amount of funding per student, a bigger increase than any other state or territory. In terms of facilities, we have invested more than \$12.8 billion now

over eight budgets and delivered more than 1850 school upgrades. Work to open 100 new schools by 2026 is ahead of schedule—75 of these new schools have now been opened or have been funded. Twenty-seven new schools are funded and set to open in the next two years. This has created almost 17 400 jobs in construction and associated industries. The government's sustained investment in new schools, upgrades and modernisations cover every corner of the state. That is a graphic illustration of Andrew's government budgets over the journey.

This budget invests over \$1.8 billion in new or upgraded schools, creating 3900 jobs, 750 in regional Victoria. It invests \$527.2 million for 13 new schools to open in 2024, and additional stages at four other schools. With a further new school already funded in last year's budget, the government will now open 14 new schools in 2024. There is \$236.7 million to acquire land in our growing suburbs for 15 new schools that will open in the future, and more than \$92.2 million will fund new relocatable buildings to provide immediate extra space for schools experiencing enrolment growth in 2023.

We are investing \$658.2 million to upgrade and improve 163 existing schools. This includes \$326 million for upgrades at 36 special schools. This means that every single special school will have had a major upgrade since 2015. There is also \$290.4 million for major upgrades at 31 mainstream schools and \$41.8 million to fund 96 projects that will make schools better places to learn and teach through the Minor Capital Works Fund—and \$247.3 million has been allocated for essential maintenance and compliance.

We are also changing the architecture of teaching, learning and assessment in the final years of school. Victoria is moving to a single senior secondary certificate that brings together the best of VCE and VCAL. We are investing \$277.5 million to ensure all Victorian students leave school with the skills they need to succeed in work and life. This includes \$120.2 million to help all schools to implement the new certificates and increase access to a new core vocational offering so every senior secondary student has quality vocational and applied learning no matter where they go to school. It includes \$87.9 million to strengthen the teaching workforce for these new pathways, with funded study to attract 400 extra VET trainers; professional development for up to 1900 teachers and increased funding for job skills and pathways coordinators in schools, helping them place students on the best vocational pathways; and there is \$69.4 million to expand the successful Head Start apprenticeships and traineeships model to all government school students.

In 2021 Victorian students again recorded the nation's best NAPLAN results. This is a remarkable achievement given the challenges of the pandemic. But there is more work to do to ensure every student has the opportunity to succeed. This budget invests \$131 million to lift literacy and numeracy support for students who need it most. This investment includes \$87.2 million for the middle years literacy and numeracy strategy. The new Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership will receive a further \$27.4 million, and for our younger learners we are providing \$11.3 million to improve literacy and enhance the teaching of phonics in primary schools. There is also \$37 million to support high-ability students to reach their potential, and an investment of \$28.7 million will build equity and excellence for regional and rural students.

To give our kids the best education it is important to recruit the very best in the profession and continue to support existing teachers. As part of the new enterprise agreement with government school staff an investment of \$779 million will see us recruit 1900 extra teachers. This has been the single most critical issue raised throughout our EBA negotiations. This will mean each teacher has more time to prepare and focus on each student and their needs. Weekly face-to-face teaching hours will be reduced by 1 hour in 2023 and then a further half-hour in 2024 for each teacher, without reducing the one-on-one support students get at school. There is \$58.9 million to attract more teachers, including employment-based degrees for postgrad students and financial incentives. We are extending the primary maths and science specialist initiatives and support for our out-of-field teachers in secondary schools to become STEM specialists.

A \$13.4 million investment in respectful and safe school communities will help ensure that schools are safe places of work and learning for staff and students. This funding is to implement the school community safety order scheme established last year under the protection of school communities legislation. Commencing at all Victorian schools in June 2022, the scheme will empower authorised persons to respond to harmful behaviours by parents and carers or other adults towards members of the school community. Turn to the next slide.

Students can only fulfil their potential when they are feeling well physically and mentally. There is \$41.3 million to sustain mental health services for schools. This includes \$23 million for mental health practitioners in special schools and further funding for the Lookout program and continued partnership with

Headspace. This is in addition to the \$200 million investment we made in last year's budget for the Schools Mental Health Fund. An \$11.4 million investment supports the important school nursing and student support services program. There is \$20.8 million to continue Active Schools in government primary, secondary and special schools.

In terms of our most vulnerable kids, some students need more targeted support to stay engaged or reconnect with school. There is \$37 million for an enhanced Navigator program to increase support for young people at most risk of disengaging, and a pilot program for younger students. This investment will see an additional 1400 young people receive Navigator services each year, bringing the total number of students supported annually to 3000. Children in special and integrated schools will be better supported by an almost \$31 million investment in the transport program. The English as an additional language program will receive a \$23.5 million boost, and there is \$30.3 million to improve the educational outcomes for young people at risk of or involved in youth justice.

In terms of Koori students, Victorian Aboriginal communities are working to ensure self-determination is embedded in the education of Koori children and young people. This budget builds on last year's \$31.2 million Marrung initiatives package with \$5.8 million more to continue to prepare the education system for self-determination and improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians. Key initiatives include supporting Victorian Aboriginal language learning and extending the Speak Out Against Racism program. Half of the 100 campfire conversations have taken place, and I understand we are getting some excellent and practical feedback that will feed into the final report to government.

Chair, this is a budget that affirms Victoria as the Education State. Whether it is better support in the classroom, better training for teachers or state-of-the-art facilities, we are delivering the funding our kids need to make that a reality. This budget builds on every one of our previous budgets to ensure Victorian students have every support they need to fulfil their potential. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Minister, you might recall last year when you were here we spoke about school funding in metro schools. For background, in the last budget, last year, there were 35 metro school upgrades and we discussed how 80 per cent of those upgrades were made in Labor electorates—the funding was into Labor electorates. In November 2020 there were 78 metro school upgrades announced. Eighty-five per cent of that funding went into Labor electorates, and we discussed the importance of ensuring the government funding be apportioned fairly and reasonably despite the fact that of those 113 metro upgrades, 93 of them were in Labor seats, which is 83 per cent. So you can imagine how excited I was to open the 'Budget Overview' this budget.

Mr MERLINO: Rightly so.

Mr NEWBURY: If you cannot imagine, I will tell you how excited I was, because, having spoken to you about it and then spoken to the Secretary about it in November, I hoped that perhaps there had been some apportionment of funds more fairly and reasonably. I can refer you to page 31 of the 'Budget Overview' and the new metro construction table there in the top left: there are 13 schools. Funding has gone to Labor electorates on 11 occasions, so about 85 per cent of the time. Then if I can refer you to the 'Metro school upgrades' part of the table, there are 22 schools there. How many do you think are in Labor electorates? How about I just—82 per cent—

Mr MERLINO: It is your story, Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: It is not a story, it is a fact. It is a fact 82 per cent of the time. And the 'Metro special school upgrades'—again 82 per cent of the time. Minister, it is pork-barrelling. The government is pouring money into Labor electorates. Those are facts—those numbers are absolutely factual. Anybody can go and have a look at them. You can have a look at the tables. To know that only one in six times is that funding going to a non-Labor electorate is shocking, and I would say to you: why is this continuing to happen? Why have you allowed this to happen in this budget?

Mr MERLINO: Okay. Thank, Mr Newbury, for your question. Can I first reject the assumptions and the commentary you have made in your question.

Mr NEWBURY: Are you rejecting those facts?

Mr MERLINO: Let me answer the question. As I have discussed a number of times with this committee and elsewhere, in terms of funding allocations for either a brand new school, an upgrade, minor capital works, the inclusive schools fund, the accessible buildings program—across our whole suite of capital programs—the assessment is made via a number of areas: firstly, the rolling facilities fund. I spoke to this committee five or six years ago as we were rolling out the rolling facilities review assessment. Previously it was like a point-in-time assessment that the department would work off. There was an assessment in 2012. We have got these rolling facilities where every single year there are several hundred schools that are being assessed in terms of the state of their facilities. We also look at enrolment pressures—where is the growth? Do we have capacity in the existing schools in that area or do we need to either add capacity to existing schools or build new schools? So enrolment pressure is a significant indicator in terms of the capital program. Then in terms of existing schools there is an assessment of the functionality of a school and an assessment of the actual state of the building fabric—whether it is in need of either maintenance improvement or it is in such a state that it requires to be part of a major upgrade and buildings replaced with new buildings.

In terms of this budget and brand new schools, the investment we made in this budget for new schools and the 14 that will open next year is based on growth in those communities. So in those outer growth areas—

Mr NEWBURY: No. I was referring to metro.

Mr MERLINO: Yes. That is what I am talking to, Mr Newbury—18 per cent plus growth in metro growth areas versus 1 per cent for metro Melbourne in total. So we build where the demand is, and in previous budgets that has included electorates in regional Victoria, whether that is Greater Shepparton, Bass Coast, Oberon, Lucas Primary School, Torquay, Armstrong Creek, Bannockburn or Hamlyn Views. We invest at the time that it is required, where it is required.

You have got similar growth in regional Victoria, but the thing we have in regional Victoria, for the most part, is that there is capacity to cater for that enrolment growth. So that is new schools. It is purely based on demand, and it is not just the brand new schools that we are funding, it is also the four additional stages for relatively new schools. In terms of our special schools program in this budget, 36 special schools are receiving a major upgrade; 14 of those are in regional Victoria. In terms of our minor capital program, 96 schools are receiving funding under the minor capital program; 43 are in regional Victoria.

I just refer you, Mr Newbury and the committee, to the slide deck that showed the capital investment of this government budget after budget after budget, touching every corner of the state. The advice I receive is not based on electorates. The advice I receive is based on enrolment demand, capacity, functionality of the existing buildings and whether they are in poor condition and in need of an upgrade.

Mr NEWBURY: I do not think that in any way goes to explaining why on five out of six occasions the funding is going to Labor electorates, and that would suggest that some of the historic schools that are in Liberal electorates somehow do not need funding, when clearly they do. I mean, one way I could perhaps show you an example, because it is sometimes easier to see, is on the department's website. This is the southern region, and I have circled here the areas where there has been no government school funding: the Park area, Malvern and Brighton. Do you see that ginormous circle there? That is all of the Brighton area. That is quite a visible way to see. There is literally nothing in that entire area.

And to your point of schools being in need, in one of my schools—and it is an historic school; it is one of the oldest schools in the area—half the school, the primary school, has been in demountables since the 1970s. We were not around, but when people were wearing flares half the school went into demountables, and you are telling me that that school is not warranted for school funding. They have had nothing. No-one in the school community can remember ever receiving school funding. I mean, that is extraordinary, isn't it? So I would say to you it is too much of a coincidence. Look at the maps. The Liberal electorates are being neglected quite purposefully, and I have said it I think quite strongly to you now. The stats are there, they are available. They are now publicly available for anyone to see. I think pork-barrelling is wrong, but I am happy to move on, noting that you are not going to answer the question.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you have put a proposition to the minister.

Mr NEWBURY: It is not a proposition, it is a fact.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you have just put a statement and a proposition on the table.

Mr NEWBURY: It is a statement.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, the minister is entitled to answer it.

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Chair. And I would be keen to respond to Mr Newbury and talk to that beautiful part of Melbourne and the investments that we have made. It is a fact, Mr Newbury, that Brighton Beach Primary School has received almost \$265 000 through the minor capital works fund; nothing when you were in government. Elsternwick Primary School—

Mr NEWBURY: I was not in government.

Mr MERLINO: Well, your side of politics. Elsternwick Primary School—three allocations, three projects: minor capital, inclusive schools—

Mr NEWBURY: That is right. Minor—

Mr MERLINO: No, no, that particular school is around a million dollars of investment—nothing from your side of politics when you were in government. Elwood College—a significant upgrade to that school. A \$10 million major upgrade as well as \$600 000 for a new three-storey modular classroom building and over \$280 000 for minor capital works—nothing from your side of politics when you were in government. Elwood Primary School—

Mr NEWBURY: I was not in government. You keep saying ‘you’.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr MERLINO: \$1.74 million for a new architect-designed modular building to Elwood Primary to replace older classrooms—nothing from your side of politics when you were in government. Gardenvale Primary School—two projects, \$500 000 and \$178 000—again, nothing from your side of politics when you were in government. So I completely reject your assertion that—

Mr NEWBURY: You are talking about funding that is so old it is not even on your website.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you allow the minister the opportunity to answer your lengthy proposition, please.

Mr MERLINO: That is why I encourage you, Mr Newbury, to look at the slide deck that shows the capital investment of the Andrews government right across Victoria in Labor electorates, Liberal electorates, National Party electorates, Greens electorates, independent electorates. It is colourblind, our capital program. \$12.8 billion—whether it is new schools, upgrades, modular buildings, maintenance, minor capital, inclusive schools or accessible buildings, so I completely reject the proposition that you are putting to me.

Mr NEWBURY: Well, the facts are in the budget. Anybody can go and look at which electorates those are in, and it is clear: five out of six times it is going into Labor electorates. That is just a fact. If you were concerned about those numbers, you would even look and say—

Mr MERLINO: I cannot help it that Labor won a lot of electorates—

Mr NEWBURY: Sixty per cent of the seats, that is right—

Mr MERLINO: and that Labor secured victory in growth corridors, and now in turn Labor has invested in those growth corridors.

Mr NEWBURY: And 85 per cent of the funding is going into 60 per cent of the seats.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Newbury. Your time has expired, and I will pass the call to Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Deputy Premier. Thank you, departmental officials, for your attendance today. Deputy Premier, a topic that is really of interest to my community is the senior secondary reform, particularly in the vocational and applied learning pathways space. Narre Warren South P-12 in particular has a great interest in this area. I note that in the output initiatives of budget paper 3, on pages 8 and 15, there is a line item that refers to 'Improved vocational and applied learning pathways'. I was hoping that you would be able to explain for the committee how this line item will improve vocational and applied learning pathways for students and how this initiative fits into the senior secondary reform agenda.

Mr MERLINO: Terrific. Thank you, Mr Maas, for your question. You are right to highlight the secondary schools in your electorate, including Narre Warren South—outstanding providers and deliverers of vocational pathways for students. What this reform is about is trying to replicate the excellence at Narre Warren South right across Victorian secondary schools. Thank you for your question, and if I could just quickly provide some context for the Andrews government's senior secondary reform agenda, which you referenced, this has been a bit of a journey that we have been on.

In 2019 I commissioned the *Review into Vocational and Applied Learning Pathways in Senior Secondary Schooling*, the Firth review. It called for us to do more to make vocational and applied learning in senior secondary high quality, highly regarded, accessible to all and relevant to the needs of students and employers. In saying that, it is important to acknowledge that since the Bracks government introduced the Victorian certificate of applied learning it has been successful. We have got some 22 000 or 23 000 students undertaking that certificate, and it has many strengths that we want to preserve in our system. In essence the Firth review found that the strengths of the current design of VCAL should be retained but that VCAL was being dogged by image problems and that being separated from the VCE would continue to mean it would be seen as the other and defined by what it is not.

The Firth review identified opportunities to improve the certificate design and quality of delivery by incorporating the new vocational major as a program of study within the VCE. It recommended that we change to an integrated senior secondary certificate system with vocational education to be embedded in the VCE. We accepted this recommendation. Indeed we accepted in principle all of the 38 recommendations of the Firth review, and since then we have embarked on a transformational program of reform. A critical part of this was changing the legislative framework, and last year we passed the Education and Training Reform Amendment (Senior Secondary Pathways Reforms and Other Matters) Bill 2021, and it had bipartisan support. I thank colleagues for that. It has committed the Victorian government to introducing the VCE vocational major and Victorian pathways certificate (VPC) in 2023. Having established a new framework this budget now backs that up with the funding to implement it. It invests \$277 million in senior secondary reform in this budget combined with \$315 million since 2018. It brings our investment to \$592 million in this term of government alone.

So the improved vocational and applied learning pathways line item which you referred to is actually the centrepiece of these reforms. It relates to the changes that we are making to the certificate—that from 2023 there will be one VCE certificate with the new VCE vocational major and the Victorian pathways certificate replacing the intermediate VCAL. This investment of \$34.1 million over four years will support providers such as schools and non-school senior secondary providers to introduce the VCE vocational major and the VPC in 2023 and champion vocational and applied learning pathways. It is going to give students more choices and a higher quality curriculum to learn from as well as workplace experiences that will make sure they are ready to jump into further study, training or work as soon as they leave school.

This is the biggest reform to our senior secondary system since the VCE's inception. It will mean more young Victorians will leave school with the skills, knowledge and real-world experience they need for a great career, and it is an investment in the future, investing in skills which help our economy as our state recovers from the pandemic.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Deputy Premier. In budget paper 3 at page 15 there is a description about professional learning for government schoolteachers to implement that new curriculum. Would you be able to outline for us what schools will need to do to prepare to implement those new pathway certificates and how this line item supports that?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr Maas. The funding is going towards a number of things that introduce and implement the new certificate pathways in 2023. We know that building workforce capacity to deliver these new certificates is central to the success of the reforms. For this reason we will make sure all senior secondary providers have access to a suite of professional learning opportunities delivered by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority to build workforce capacity. The funding will support government schoolteachers to attend professional learning and preparation programs. We will also give funding for the VCAA to oversee and ensure quality and consistency in the programs across Victoria. The VCAA is already delivering an extensive suite of professional learning to support providers during 2022. This includes sessions which provide an overview of the certificate changes, transitional credit arrangements, because there will be students right now in their first year of VCAL, and authorisation, and in person sessions to unpack each of the certificate studies for educators to develop their teaching and learning programs.

Building on funding from 2021–22 all government schools will receive the equivalent of three days of time release for applied learning for teachers in 2022, 1½ days in 2023 and 2024 and one day in 2025. That is similar to the time release provided when the VCE was introduced three decades ago, and it gives a sense of the significance of these reforms to schools and students and for Victorian communities. Schools will be able to use this funding flexibly in the way that best supports their individual preparation needs. For example, they can use this to release teachers to engage in professional learning, develop teaching and learning programs and prepare for high-quality delivery. We also understand that for a small number of schools—approximately 9 per cent or 40 of our 408 secondary schools—they will be required to deliver vocational applied learning for the first time. This goes to the point that we want this to be universal—no matter what school a student goes to, there is a vocational pathway. At those schools it will be for the first time, and we want to ensure that they provide high-quality certificates starting from next year.

For those schools that will be expanding provision, this funding includes one-to-one consultancy support and additional teacher time release to prepare registration and authorisation applications. It also includes a mentoring and coaching program for school leaders delivered by the Victorian Applied Learning Association. Importantly, this will also provide support for vulnerable learners at non-school senior secondary providers. The department will work with these NSSPs to support students and providers with support, including increasing staff FTE—including wellbeing staff—to provide general enrolment and attendance support, staff time release for professional development and access to interventions such as those on our school's mental health menu.

Communication and change management will be critical as part of the implementation, and the government, the department and the VCAA will be making sure schools have clear resources to explain the changes and supporting them to have conversations with parents and students. Those conversations, particularly in middle secondary, are happening right now—May, June, July—as parents and students think of what their pathway is in senior secondary.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. I have a daughter in year 9 at the moment who is having all those various options presented to her, so I can vouch for that. You also mentioned the importance of communication as a means of raising the profile of vocational applied learning and lifting that perception as well. I was hoping you could elaborate on that for the committee—how the government will address this and in particular how we can engage in a way that makes pathways appealing to all students.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks for the question, Mr Maas, and this is a really important part of the reform. As I mentioned earlier, unfortunately VCAL has developed a stigma as being less than equal to the VCE, which is a great shame as it has delivered great advancements for education and training in Victoria. However, the Firth review found that although improvements to the quality of the program could be made, this was unlikely to overcome the image problem of VCAL as the perception has developed as it being viewed as less than equal to VCE. There are many factors that influence this, including limited recognition of the benefits of VCAL, an entrenched preference for VCE and university pathways, limited recognition of VCAL in the media and negative stereotyping of its student cohorts. To address this, the Firth review recommended that:

Implementation of the new senior secondary reform package should be accompanied by a promotional campaign to drive cultural change and address entrenched perceptions of vocational pathways.

We want to change the way vocational applied learning is viewed in schools and in the community. That is not just the government's view. I think the Member for South-West Coast put it really well when she said in her contribution to the Bill last year:

I hope the government takes the opportunity to run a campaign to promote vocational education and the value of it and the value of the students who take that on, because I tell you what, I cannot fix my own toilet, I cannot tile my own roof and I cannot look after my elderly mum all the time. I need people in the community with those skills, which are very valued.

I could not agree more with the Member for South-West Coast, and that is exactly what we are going to do. Very soon we will be launching an advertising campaign—again timed to those discussions, Mr Maas, that you are having as a parent—that increases the community's awareness of the changes to the VCE and VCAL certificates as well as builds positive perceptions of the new VCE vocational major as an equally valuable learning pathway for senior secondary students. We want this campaign to reach all students and resonate with them, so it will be designed to make the new pathways appealing to male, female and gender-diverse students, students from high and low socio-economic backgrounds, Koori and non-Koori students, students from LOTE-speaking backgrounds and metro, rural and regional students.

The campaign will be accompanied by change communications activities and materials which the department and the VCAA are going to give to schools and providers to support them through the reforms and embed change throughout the sector. We are determined to change perceptions and highlight the value of applied learning pathways and how they can equip students with the skills they need to find rewarding careers and reach their full potential. Some of the examples the department and the VCAA will be providing to schools, parents and students are videos of students' and teachers' experience in vocational and applied learning—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Maas. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Minister, and your team for appearing this afternoon. I want to start off with mental health practitioners in schools. I have heard from a number of schools and students that schools are really finding it hard to provide enough mental health practitioners to keep up with demand from their students. I have heard of schools fundraising to pay for specialist mental health workers and mental health workers being only available one day a week or not a good fit for a student and there being no other option. Can I ask: can schools expect any further support this year to meet the demand from students?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Hibbins, for your question. It is a question in two parts in terms of the workforce challenges that are very real, and I will talk to that in a second. I can go into more detail when I appear before the committee as mental health minister. But in terms of what we are implementing in schools, you have got to go to what the royal commission recommended. So, for example, if I go to the royal commission, it talked about, at recommendation 17:

develop a fund ... to support schools, with priority given to those in rural and regional areas, to select the ... appropriate suite of initiatives for them.

And we are doing exactly that: we funded the \$200 million mental health fund that is for rural and regional schools this year and metropolitan schools in 2023 and 2024. It will be, just as the commission recommended, a suite of initiatives and schools will determine what is best for them.

For example, you will have three tiers. Tier 1 is around positive mental health promotion, so school-wide positive mental health promotion—things like active schools, mental health first-aid training, anti-bullying programs, therapy dogs, those kinds of initiatives. Tier 2 is early intervention and cohort-specific initiatives, including cross-cultural responsiveness training, arts therapy, trauma-informed care—for a primary or a secondary school with a high proportion of students from a refugee background, what may be best for that school is investing the \$200 million mental health fund allocation at that school for trauma-informed care. And then tier 3 is targeted support for those experiencing mental health issues, such as additional mental health professionals, additional Headspace counselling or suicide-related support. So there is the mental health fund, and we are delivering it exactly as per the commission's recommendations.

In regard to mental health practitioners, it says:

The Commission supports the Victorian Government's full implementation of the Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary Schools program by the end of 2021.

We did exactly that. We brought forward that program and delivered it a year ahead of schedule to every secondary and special school. In regard to the mental health pilot program for primary school students, at the time of the commission's report it was a partnership, a pilot program with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute. The commission said:

Should this pilot prove to be effective, the Commission encourages the Victorian Government to extend the pilot to more schools.

And again that is exactly what we have done. The pilot is now at 100 schools through that partnership.

Mr HIBBINS: Is there any—

Mr MERLINO: So we are investing significant amounts. If I could just quickly—I know you have got other questions, Mr Hibbins—go to the point of workforce, you are absolutely right to highlight that. That is our biggest challenge, and that is why in the budget in my other portfolio of mental health the pipeline of mental health workforce is key in our budget allocation this year. We delivered our workforce strategy as per the royal commission by the end of last year. We delivered that. It said we needed 2500 mental health workers over the next four years, and that investment we are making through my mental health portfolio will deliver more than 2500 mental health practitioners.

Mr HIBBINS: And is there any evaluation or has there been an evaluation undertaken of the mental health practitioners in schools initiative so far?

Mr MERLINO: There is ongoing evaluation of both the mental health practitioners in secondary schools and of our partnership with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, so I might ask the Deputy Secretary to speak to that. Thanks, Stephen.

Mr FRASER: Thanks, Minister. Mr Hibbins, thanks for the question. As the minister said, the mental health in primary schools pilot is being evaluated alongside the Murdoch Children's Research Institute. Findings of that pilot and the evaluation will be delivered later this year. In terms of mental health practitioners in secondary schools, that is undergoing an internal evaluation through the department's performance and evaluation division.

Mr HIBBINS: And when is that due to be completed?

Mr FRASER: That will be ongoing and is due to be completed in 2024 I believe it is, but I can check on that.

Mr HIBBINS: All right. Great, thank you. I want to ask now about something we have discussed at previous hearings and that is digital devices for students, particularly for students and families that do not have them. In previous hearings the department has indicated that there is work in that area. Has there been any update in terms of addressing that massive gap of students and families who just do not have access to digital devices at home?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. I might ask Deputy Secretary Bates to speak to that. As I have talked to the committee about previously, the pandemic has highlighted a number of inequities in our society, one being—and you will probably hear from Minister Pulford in her broader role as digital and innovation minister—the digital divide. There was immediate work through the course of the pandemic to ensure that students, particularly through remote learning of course, had access to a device and to the internet, but in terms of the broader question I will ask Mr Bates to respond.

Mr BATES: Thanks, Minister. Mr Hibbins, we have pretty much got the program running in a constant state at the moment; I think we have talked here in the past. We have provided so far this financial year an extra 1385 devices, so that brings the total devices that we have allocated out to students to a bit over 93 000, so it is about 15 per cent of the government school population. We have also given out this financial year, 2021–22, just under 1100 further internet access points, which brings us up to about 29 500 internet access points that are with students. We have just had a good negotiation with our partners at Telstra, so we are just in the process of changing over those internet access points. We had them on for the first weeks of term 1, but with the return to face-to-face teaching we had turned most of them off unless the school asked for them to be kept on. Any school that asked for them to be kept on we have, but we are in the process of putting different SIMs in which

means from the end of term 2 we will have at least 15 000 of those devices that will be on continuously for 12 months and schools will be able to reallocate them, particularly for secondary schools to support those families that do not have internet access at home, and I am hoping to have all of those devices permanently turned on by the first part of term 3. At the moment we are really focusing on supporting that internet access and maintaining the program in a bit of a steady state. Also, as we have talked about before and I think we all know, it is really hard to get computer equipment. There is still a global shortage, but we are setting up a pool and they are the 1000 devices which we can rapidly loan out to schools if anyone gets into a circumstance where they need additional devices.

Mr HIBBINS: So in terms of switching on the internet access, that will be available to students regardless of whether they are in face-to-face learning or learning at home?

Mr BATES: Correct.

Mr HIBBINS: All right, terrific.

Mr MERLINO: And we made that decision, you recall, once we came out of the second period of remote learning last year. We made it clear that students can keep their device that was provided to them by their school.

Mr HIBBINS: I want to ask finally now about the federal-state funding deal. I understand that expires next year. Will that require another renegotiation with the federal government? What is the outcome that you are seeking from there? Just noting that Victorian schools are still some of the lowest funded per capita out of all schools in the country, is there any chance of actually accelerating the state government's contribution to making sure that we can get to 100 per cent SRS as soon as possible?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. Yes. There are, again, two parts to the question. One is what we can do at a state level and then the second is what we will be seeking from the federal government as negotiations commence towards the end of the year, so following the federal election then towards the end of the year we will start negotiations on what is the critical issue for us in Victoria. In terms of what we can do, we are going as fast and as hard as we can in terms of per-student funding in Victoria. Growth in funding per capita in government schools, under the *Report on Government Services*—under the ROGS—the latest figure takes us to 2019–20, and it would be even better than what I am providing to the committee now, so this is the latest figure, but Victoria's growth from 2014–15 to 2019–20 is 16.4 per cent; New South Wales, 11.8 per cent; Queensland—

Mr HIBBINS: But in terms of growth, you are coming off a very low base. Can I put to you that the speed of the growth is probably because Victoria is so far behind and we are having to catch up.

Mr MERLINO: Yes. But, Mr Hibbins, it is about how much effort we are putting into growing direct per-student funding. We are far and above every other state and territory, and we will maintain that level of pace over the forward estimates. I have said it from the moment we reluctantly signed the current national agreement right through to today: the key issue for us is the unfair, illogical barrier of the schooling resource standard. Under the current national agreement, the federal government insisted on the ability for non-government schools to get to 100 per cent of the SRS, and beyond, yet put this ceiling of 95 per cent for government schools. That will be the key issue that we will bring to the table on behalf of all Victorian schools when those negotiations commence, and I am hopeful that we can see movement on what is, frankly, unfair and illogical.

Mr HIBBINS: So what you are putting on the table is—I mean, currently—

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you, Mr Hibbins, but your time has expired. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks. Thank you, Minister, and officials, for your time this afternoon. I would like to explore the apprenticeship and traineeship program and in particular refer you to budget paper 3, pages 8 and 15. The output initiative I am interested in understanding a little bit more is the 'Head Start apprenticeships and traineeships for all Victorian government school students'. I understand this builds on the investment from the 2018–19 budget, and I am hoping you can explain for the committee the thinking behind the decision to expand this to all government schools. It would be important for us to have some examples of the success of this program, and I think it does sort of segue nicely from Mr Maas's comments and questions before.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Richards. This is a program that I am really excited about, and it is going to inform an important part of our senior secondary reforms. Head Start is highly successful and delivers a great outcome for students and value for employers. Students that participate in the Head Start program—the beauty of this and why it is called Head Start is that they can complete their VCE as well as receive paid, on-the-job training that leads to a qualification. So you get your apprenticeship, get your traineeship, even if it means you are undertaking your VCE over three years. It leads to a qualification, as I said, along with career-planning advice from the school career practitioner to find the right pathway; a Head Start pathway plan tailored to the specific needs of the student and the employer; one-on-one support from a Head Start coordinator to keep students on the right track; quality-assured training through TAFEs and Skills First contracted providers; a VCE of VCAL certificate—next year it will be VCE or a VCE vocational major; significant progress towards or completion of a trade qualification; payment of a fair training wage; and a tailored pathway into a priority-industry career.

As you said, Ms Richards, in 2018 we funded \$49.8 million towards the Head Start program over four years. The original goal that we set was to deliver 1700 apprenticeships and traineeships in over 100 secondary schools in 10 locations across Victoria by June of this year. We smashed that target in April, and we are well ahead of schedule, having 1837 students as at 10 May. The evidence is clear that this program has been a resounding success. Our evaluation in 2020–21 showed significantly improved retention rates compared to non-Head Start school-based apprenticeships and traineeships and full-time apprentices and trainees. The retention rate for Head Start apprentices at two years is 83 per cent, compared to 57 per cent for non-Head Start apprentices. Head Start apprentices have a 10 per cent higher completion rate compared with full-time apprentices post school and a 30 per cent higher completion compared to non-Head Start SBATs at school.

Students thrive in well-designed placements, with improved school engagement. Those students who are not academically inclined or prefer hands-on learning and work report increased engagement and improved appreciation for school and engaging in Head Start. Students are more likely to complete year 12 than they would have without Head Start. Students directly reported that without the opportunity of undertaking their Head Start apprenticeship or traineeship many would have been unlikely to finish year 12. Most reported they would have sought a full-time apprenticeship or traineeship and left school early, while some suggested they would have left school to find any full-time job.

So in this budget we are investing \$69.4 million over four years to expand the program statewide into every government secondary school. Again, it is that message of universality. No matter what secondary school you go to this awesome program is going to be available to you, giving all Victorian students the opportunity to sign up to an apprenticeship or traineeship while completing their VCE.

The expanded Head Start program will include support for every government school across 12 cluster areas, each managed by a Head Start cluster director, at least 60 coordinators, 16 teaching or learning leaders and 12 admin support staff who will be based in schools, supporting students, school leadership and employers to minimise the administrative burdens and maximise the quality of SBATs. By doing this, the Head Start program helps students get the best start in their career by developing skills and work experience that employers value.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you. Thanks, Minister. I am interested in perhaps exploring the other side of this, because you have already identified that Head Start delivers great outcomes for the students, but I am interested in understanding whether it delivers value for employers and economic benefit. So I am hoping you can expand on this and explain how this is going to support Victoria's economic recovery.

Mr MERLINO: I can, thank you. Head Start matches employers with motivated young people with a passion for their industry who have the literacy and numeracy skills they will gain from completing their senior secondary certificate. So far over 1400 businesses have become Head Start employers, the majority of which are small to medium enterprises, with many not having had a school-based apprentice or trainee previously.

The support to the student, school, training organisation and employer that is provided through the Head Start model is key to the success of the program. Through this initiative more employers have seen the value of employing school-based apprentices or trainees and the benefit they bring to their workforce. And this is what excites me: our data shows around 75 per cent of Head Start employers had no previous experience with a school-based apprentice or trainee, but almost 80 per cent of Head Start employers that were surveyed intend to use Head Start again in the future. Head Start also has had a positive impact on their pipeline of workers,

productivity and workplace culture. The feedback from industry is that they find Head Start to be a low-risk recruitment model which does not pose additional costs on their business.

The expansion of this program to all government schools, from the current 150 schools to more than 400 schools across the state, will continue to help build Victoria's future workforce as we recover from the pandemic. That is because our Head Start teams connect with local employers to find opportunities for students that meet local workforce needs. Head Start teams have found opportunities for students on some of our major projects, such as the West Gate Tunnel and the Drysdale bypass, as well as in industries with significant staffing challenges, such as child care.

Head Start teams are also in discussions with a number of large companies bidding for components of the Big Build and other major Victorian infrastructure projects, with commitments made to recruiting young people through Head Start.

We have a student from the Hume Moreland Head Start cluster who has secured a cert III in carpentry apprenticeship working on the West Gate Tunnel Project. And it is not just large employers that are benefiting; Head Start has successfully partnered with small and medium businesses to provide high-quality SBAT pathways, particularly in niche occupations like marine mechanics that struggle to attract interest against more well-known occupations, such as motor vehicle mechanics. For example, Mercury Marine's partnership with Head Start has enabled 10 young people to begin apprenticeships in cert III in marine mechanical technology across Victoria. This niche skill is in shortage, and Mercury Marine has been able to access highly motivated young people to build their future workforce through Head Start.

We have a student called Tahlia, whose story was profiled on the Tradeswomen Australia website. She commenced her apprenticeship in cert III in air conditioning and refrigeration with SP&R air conditioning and mechanical services in Hallam in 2021 through Head Start and is now completing year 12. So Head Start has opened the door for many small businesses to employ a school-based apprentice or trainee, and this shows how critical a program like this is to our state's economic recovery.

Ms RICHARDS: That is terrific. Great, thank you. I do note that a focus of the senior secondary reforms is to provide a core offering of VDSS courses that align with Victoria's growth sectors and of course local industry needs. I am just wondering if you could explain what role Head Start will play in driving this.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Richards. So as we have discussed, our aspiration with the VET core offering is that it will increase opportunities for each student to explore a range of vocational education options and identify the right learning and employment pathway for them. So the VET core offering allows students to start their vocational pathway through a cert II or III in year 10 or 11 and transition to a cert III traineeship or apprenticeship in years 11 and 12. As I have mentioned, the VET core offering will include flexible pathways that reflect local employer needs and lead to jobs in Victoria's growth industries. Our expanded Head Start program will support students to explore pathways in any qualification available as an SBAT across a diverse range of industries. These include emerging technologies, social services such as early childhood and family violence, health, business and administration, retail, logistics, creative industries, hospitality and tourism and the traditional trades.

I will give you an example of how this works. In October last year I announced that Head Start had partnered with Think Childcare, which operates early childhood education and care centres across Victoria, to employ Head Start trainees at each of its 49 Victorian centres. It is just one example of an employer in the social services and care economy who has found that Head Start can help it meet its growing workforce needs. Under the Head Start Tech Futures initiative four technology-focused qualifications have been developed in partnership with our TAFEs which will skill Head Start trainees to gain the skills to work in the digital economy, another one of our priority pathways. Head Start Tech Futures qualifications prepare students for roles in the growing fields of cybersecurity, web development, coding, robotics and telehealth administration. These types of partnerships will continue to grow with our new investment of \$69.4 million over four years in the Head Start model.

And it is servicing the needs of local industries, such as those in our regions. For example, many schools in the Gippsland Head Start cluster prior to the program being introduced had zero or very low SBAT uptake. Since the introduction of Head Start coordinators to schools in Gippsland, SBATs have increased as the coordinators

take on the burden of sourcing the appropriate employers, student matching and then overseeing the administrative sign-up process. And it is delivering results. Inner Gippsland's Head Start cluster has supported 42 young people into cert III in early childhood education and care, working with Think Childcare, Goodstart Early Learning and other major providers in the region to build a workforce of skilled childcare workers.

As we know, agriculture is a key driver of the Gippsland economy, and the Head Start team in Gippsland are supporting 31 young people to undertake their traineeships in either cert III agriculture or cert III agriculture (dairy production), helping the next generation of farmers develop their skills to succeed on family farms. Hospitality in Gippsland has often faced a shortage of skilled workers. Through Head Start 18 young people have begun cert III in commercial cookery.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister.

Mr MERLINO: Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Budget paper 3, page 21, lists \$236.7 million being allocated for land acquisition for new schools. Are you selling the land from Wanganui Park, McGuire College or Mooroopna secondary school to part-fund that spend?

Mr MERLINO: No, we are not.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Can you give a guarantee that you will commit to keeping the land from those three former schools?

Mr MERLINO: What I can commit to, Mr O'Brien, is what I indicated to the Member for Shepparton when a question was asked in Parliament not that long ago in terms of those sites. So two of the sites, as I recall, are identified for future education purposes as well as—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, when you say 'identify', as in they are zoned for that, or that is what the department is—

Mr MERLINO: So it is an assessment by the department that we want to retain those sites for education purposes. As well, Mr O'Brien, I gave a commitment in terms of community access to the sites. There is performing arts, there is sport and recreation, there are community groups—I gave commitments in terms of all of those organisations. We are working with council and will consult extensively with the community in regard to the Wanganui Park Secondary College site, Mooroopna Secondary College site and McGuire College site as well.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry. You said two are identified to be kept for future educational use. Which two?

Mr MERLINO: Give me a moment, I am just reading through this: McGuire campus particularly, Mr O'Brien, with respect to GOTAFE and the future needs of the neighbouring Wilmot Road Primary School; retaining Wanganui campus for potential education and training purposes, particularly with respect to accommodating Verney Road School and its future needs. We are continuing negotiations with interested parties with the council in regard to Mooroopna Secondary College land and buildings, ensuring joint use agreements with community groups and the Greater Shepparton council continue for the foreseeable future. The allocation—the \$236 million that you mentioned—is an allocation out of the budget, not funded in any way by our important deliberations in terms of those three sites that were formerly part of the Greater Shepparton cluster of schools.

Mr D O'BRIEN: You spent \$123 million on Greater Shepparton Secondary College, but as a result there is no choice for students. What is your plan to deliver choice for students, given the violence, the bullying and the staff shortages we have seen at this school but also simply by having one college for a regional population of 66 000 people?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you for your question. Again, and we have had this discussion at this committee before, you need to go back to what was the ‘choice’ and opportunity for students and families before we engaged in the Shepparton Education Plan, and following that consultation—

Mr D O’BRIEN: No, I do not need to go back to that, Minister. I am asking you what goes forward.

The CHAIR: Mr O’Brien, the minister is attempting to answer your question.

Mr MERLINO: So prior, Mr O’Brien, to the merging, three of the four secondary schools had more than 60 per cent of students in the lowest 25 per cent of academic achievement across the state. The fourth school—

Mr D O’BRIEN: With respect, Minister—

The CHAIR: Mr O’Brien!

Mr D O’BRIEN: No, Chair, sorry. I did not ask—

The CHAIR: Mr O’Brien, you asked a question, and the minister is attempting to answer it. If you could allow—

Mr D O’BRIEN: I asked a question: what happens in the future now that this campus is built? Not what happened in the past.

The CHAIR: Mr O’Brien, you asked the question. The minister will determine how it is most appropriate in his view to answer it. You need to allow the minister time to complete his answer without interruption.

Mr D O’BRIEN: No, sorry, Chair. It is your job as the Chair of this committee to ensure that ministers’ answers are relevant. I asked about what happens in the future, what happens now, not what happened in the past.

The CHAIR: Mr O’Brien, as Chair I believe that the minister’s answer is relevant, and I would like to hear the completion of the answer without interruption please.

Mr MERLINO: The fourth school had a percentage of just under 50 per cent in this bracket. Less than one in 10 year 9 students in Greater Shepparton were achieving in the top two bands of reading compared to double the rate across all Victorian schools.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Minister, I do not need a history lesson.

The CHAIR: Mr O’Brien!

Mr D O’BRIEN: No. I do not need a history lesson.

Mr MERLINO: I think you do.

Mr D O’BRIEN: No. We have got it now. We have got a new school—

Mr MERLINO: I think you do, Mr O’Brien.

Mr D O’BRIEN: We have got one new school. I just want to know: if a child gets expelled from that school in Shepparton, where do they go?

Mr MERLINO: Mr O’Brien, I think you do, because over decades of representation in that part of Victoria, you cannot tell me—

Mr D O’Brien interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr O’Brien, you are out of order. The minister is attempting to answer your question.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Chair, you constantly say, ‘Bring us back to this budget’, except when it suits you.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, will you please stop shouting over the top of me as Chair. The minister is attempting to answer your question—

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, he is not. He is going on about decades of representation—

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, would you please stop yelling over me as I attempt to compel this committee to order. The minister is attempting to answer your question, and if the minister believes that some of the histories of the situation are relevant to the answer for today and for the future, that is the minister's prerogative. You asked the question; the minister has the right to answer it.

Mr MERLINO: In terms of secondary students in Shepparton and poor student outcomes—despite the best efforts of our educators and families in Shepparton—compared to the rest of Victoria, the rest of regional Victoria, at each of the schools they were not able to access the full suite of VCE and VCAL offerings. What we have done via the *Shepparton Education Plan* is deep engagement with the community, with education experts and with schools in the region. It is not just secondary—it is also primary, early childhood and post secondary as part of the overall education plan—but in regard to secondary education, the creation of Greater Shepparton Secondary College provides the ability for every single student to have the opportunity to undertake any VCE subject that they want to. The full suite is now available to those students—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Great. What about someone who gets expelled or has an issue with bullying and cannot stay at that school?

Mr MERLINO: as well, Mr O'Brien, in terms of students that are struggling, as wellbeing teams. So it is a large school, yes, but constructed via a house model, where you have got 250 to 300 students in each house. They stay together. There is a wellbeing team—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry. On a point of order, Chair—

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: On a point of order, it is 2 minutes in now. I asked about what happens to a child who is expelled or for whatever other reason needs to leave the school, and the minister has not gone remotely close to that.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, there is no point of order. The minister is attempting to answer your question. Your constant—

Mr NEWBURY: No, he is not.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you do not have the call. Your constant interruptions, Mr O'Brien, make it difficult for any of us to hear the answer.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Listen to his answer. He is not even close to it.

The CHAIR: Well, Mr O'Brien, I cannot listen to his answer because you are—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I just want a quick answer.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: What do they do? Do they go to Kyabram? Do they go to Nathalia? Do they go to Benalla?

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, could you please control yourself.

Mr NEWBURY: Very controlled.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, you asked a question. The minister has the right to answer. I am sure we would all like to hear what that answer is, but we cannot with your constant interruptions. And Mr Newbury, you do not have the call. Minister.

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Chair. Within each of the neighbourhoods there is a wellbeing team embedded, providing mental health and wellbeing support and Koori engagement officers supporting particularly vulnerable children and students. There is also a therapeutic program, Mr O'Brien—

Mr D O'BRIEN: That is no good for someone who is expelled.

Mr MERLINO: No. I am sorry, I am going directly to your question. If you would give me the respect of giving you the answer—

Mr D O'BRIEN: For a kid who is expelled, where does he go?

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien. Mr Newbury, you do not have the call.

Mr MERLINO: In terms of students that need support beyond what a wellbeing team can provide at the school—

Mrs McARTHUR: Once expelled.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, you do not have the call either. Mrs McArthur and Mr Newbury, could you please control yourselves.

Mr MERLINO: There is the therapeutic pathway through the Invergordon campus to support those students who are at risk of disengaging or whose behaviour is a risk to themselves or to other students, so we have that support in place.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Invergordon. All right.

Mr MERLINO: Finally, Mr O'Brien, to go to some of your commentary in your question, the number of family complaints related to bullying and violence at the college has fallen by more than 70 per cent—70 per cent—in the first term of 2020 compared to that same period a year ago at the three campuses. Now, it shows, Mr O'Brien, that the support is in place and the excellent teaching support staff for wellbeing and Koori engagement and broader engagement with the Shepparton community, with multicultural communities and Aboriginal organisations are making a positive difference.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. I also mentioned staff shortages. Today the entire year 8 cohort at Greater Shepparton Secondary College was told to stay home due to staff shortages. I would have thought that, outside of the last couple of years, that would be unheard of. Is this a COVID issue? Are you surprised? And is this going to happen more given the staff shortages at this school?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. This is a COVID-related issue. We have gone through two years of the pandemic, significant periods of remote learning, and there was a commitment by the government to get students back at school day 1, term 1, of this year. I was very clear when we made that announcement and delivered that. Schools have been open from day 1, term 1. The biggest challenge, not just in our school system but in businesses right across the board and in our health system, is the furloughing of staff due to positive COVID cases. That is going to be the issue of 2022. So—

Mr D O'BRIEN: So is that happening at other schools?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, it is, but in small numbers. For the most part, Mr O'Brien, schools are managing. They have got their usual group of CRT teachers that they can approach. There are CRT agencies that they can approach. There has been excellent work by area staff, department regional staff, that have gone in to provide support in schools as well as a pool of almost 1000 retired teachers available. So schools go through a process—

Mr D O'BRIEN: And with all that background, though, do you think it is acceptable in this day and age that an entire cohort of year 8s get told with 24 hours notice, 'Don't come tomorrow'?

Mr MERLINO: So for a small number of schools and as a last resort you may have a school—you know, a one year level cohort at home, learning from home, for a day or so as the school manages their demand on staff. But schools have been open since day one, term 1, and they remain open. We have got 28 to 32 teachers away today at Greater Shepparton Secondary College, so for one day the year 8 cohort will be learning from home.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Thank you, Minister. We will take a short break in proceedings now for 15 minutes and resume thereafter.

I declare back open these public hearings, and I pass the call to Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. Right. If I could refer you to budget paper 3, page 23, could you please explain: of the total funding for school infrastructure in table 1.5, how much is going towards projects related to student enrolment demand?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Ms Taylor, and I am happy to answer that question. It goes to an earlier discussion we had in the hearing. The Andrews government has provided, as I said, an additional \$1.8 billion for school infrastructure in the 2022–23 budget. This brings the total investment in school infrastructure over the past eight years to \$12.8 billion to deliver more than 1850 school upgrades, fund 75 of the 100 new schools to open by 2026 and support around 17 400 jobs in construction and associated industries. The 2022–23 budget invests over \$856.1 million in capital funding for projects to accommodate enrolment growth across the state plus output funding of \$71.2 million over four years and \$23.4 million ongoing. This includes \$527 million for new school projects across the state, including to build 13 new schools to open in 2024 with a further one new school already funded in last year's budget. So we will now open 14 new schools in 2024 and deliver additional stages at four new schools.

There is \$236.7 million to acquire land for 15 schools, \$56.4 million for upgrade projects at two existing metropolitan schools to provide additional capacity to meet enrolment growth, and \$92.2 million in asset funding for the relocatable buildings program to relieve pressure at schools that are reaching their capacity and to provide functional spaces for learning. With the projects funded in the 2022–23 budget we will create space for around 18 100 additional students in Victoria's public education system. This means since 2015 the Victorian government has delivered 156 400 additional student places in Victorian government schools—71 200 additional places in Victorian government schools through the construction of new schools and the new established area upgrades, and 85 200 places provided by the relocatable buildings program to meet demand. To break down the 18 100 additional places in the budget further, our investment in 13 new schools provides around 10 500 additional spaces. Our funding for four additional stages of existing new schools provides around 900 additional spaces. The relocatable buildings program will provide 5900 additional places, and our two school upgrades for growth for 2025 create a further 800 additional places.

I should also mention, Ms Taylor, that not only is our investment creating a significant number of new student places across our education system, it is also creating more construction jobs. As I mentioned earlier, our school infrastructure program has supported more than 17 400 jobs in construction and associated industries. This budget alone is delivering 3900 of these. Thank you.

Ms TAYLOR: It is a huge program. Zoning in particularly on the new schools, noting that the government committed to deliver 100 new schools across the state, how many of these new schools are in the budget and how many of the 100 are being delivered?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Taylor. In answering the question I will go back to an earlier question about enrolment growth and where that is happening, just for the benefit of the committee. Enrolment growth 2021 to 2026, I will go through and compare municipalities: Melton, 22 per cent growth; Wyndham, 28 per cent; Whittlesea, 16 per cent; Cardinia, 15 per cent; and Casey, 13 per cent growth. In terms of declining enrolments over that exact same period, 2021–26: City of Stonnington, -4 per cent; Boroondara, -3 per cent; Bayside, -4 per cent; Mornington Peninsula, -1 per cent.

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, please do not interrupt.

Mr MERLINO: We build the new schools where the growth demands it and we do not have existing capacity to meet that. So, as I mentioned, in terms of new schools we made a commitment at the last election to deliver 100 new schools between 2019 and 2026. With this budget we have now funded 75 of the 100 schools. Prior to our 100 new schools commitment we opened 21 new schools in 2017–18—in 2017, 10 new schools, and in 2018, 11 new schools. Then since the last election and as part of the 100 new schools commitment we have funded the rollout of 75 more. Nine new schools opened in 2019, 11 new schools in 2020, 14 new schools opened in 2021, 14 new schools opened this year, 13 new schools will open in 2023 and now 14 new schools will open in 2024.

The \$527.2 million for new school projects in this budget includes building 13 new schools to open in 2024 and, as I said, additional stages of four. This means in 2024 we will now open the following 14 new schools: four new schools in the Tarneit area—Tarneit North primary, Truganina North primary, Truganina North secondary and Riverdale secondary; three new schools in the Werribee area: Black Forest east primary, and these are interim names, Lollypop Creek secondary, Lollypop Creek specialist school.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Stick with those.

The CHAIR: Lollypop is a great name for a school.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I want to go to that school.

Mr MERLINO: They are good. Aintree secondary school, Aintree specialist school, Lockerie central primary, Merrifield South primary and finally, Alexander Boulevard primary, Officer Brunt Road primary and Brookfield primary school.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. Can you go through some of the other initiatives in this budget to deal with enrolment growth, such as funding for land acquisition, relocatable classrooms and the school upgrades growth for 2025?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mrs Taylor. The 2022–23 budget also includes an allocation of \$236.7 million to acquire land for 15 future schools. These include four new sites in the City of Casey: three new sites for future schools in the Clyde North area—Clyde Creek North primary, Clyde Creek North secondary, Thompsons West primary and one new site in Cranbourne North for the future Casey Central primary school. There are four new sites in the City of Melton: in Truganina, for the future Tarneit plains primary school; Weir Views, for the future Toolern Waters primary school; Cobblebank, for the future Cobblebank secondary school; and Fraser Rise, for the future Plumpton primary school. There are three new sites in the City of Hume: two new sites in the Kalkallo area—the future Lockerie secondary school and the future Lockerie specialist school; and one new site in Craigieburn for the future Mickleham South primary school. There is one new site in Cardinia shire in the suburb of Pakenham for the future Pakenham North-West primary; one new site in the City of Geelong, in the suburb of Charlemont for the future Horseshoe Bend primary school; one new site in the City of Whittlesea, in the suburb of Wollert, for the future Wollert Andrew Road primary; and one new site in the city of Wyndham in the suburb of Tarneit for the future Riverdale North primary school.

The budget also includes \$92.2 million in capital funding and \$16.9 million in output funding over four years, with \$3 million ongoing for the relocatable buildings program, which provides functional spaces for learning to relieve pressure at schools that are nearing capacity. This funding will deliver up to 150 new relocatable buildings for schools experiencing enrolment growth.

Relocatable buildings are cost effective and flexible and a rapid means of supplementing existing classrooms in schools, ensuring that students across the state have access to appropriate facilities, and as I am sure each of you in your own electorates have seen the new modern relocatables are great teaching and learning spaces.

Through the 2022–23 budget we have also invested \$56.4 million to provide additional capacity at two existing metropolitan schools, supporting space for 800 students, 400 additional places at Staughton College and 400 additional places at Kambrya College.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. I note the significant investment in special school upgrades in the budget. Can you explain in more detail the schools that have received funding and what it will be used for?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Ms Taylor. The Victorian government is committed to ensuring that all students can fully participate, learn, develop and succeed in government schools, and we are committed to supporting all students, including students of course with a disability, so all Victorians can thrive at school and in life. The government uses all available information, including condition assessments, as I have talked about, and pre-existing project plans when determining priorities for capital investment. Targeted investment in special schools is necessary due to the unique and diverse needs of the student cohort. Capital funding means we can ensure that these schools have the required design and specialised spaces to deliver the effective educational programs that students deserve. This budget includes \$326 million to upgrade and modernise 36 special schools, of which \$223 million will fund upgrades at 22 metropolitan special schools and \$103 million will fund upgrades at 14 regional special schools. This builds on the government's previous investment in special school infrastructure of more than \$650 million since 2015. The Andrews government has now invested \$980 million in special school infrastructure since coming to government. It is quite an extraordinary program. It now means that all 82 special schools in Victoria will either have received a major upgrade since 2015 or have opened during that time, with 81 schools receiving an upgrade and one new school, Endeavour Hills Specialist School, opening in 2022.

Investing in special school infrastructure creates safe and modern learning environments so that every child and young person can learn in a setting best suited to their needs. With the right teaching and support every Victorian student can thrive. Our historic investment in special school upgrades helps ensure that all students with disabilities and additional needs have access to an inclusive, high-quality education. To put this in context, the previous government invested a mere \$111.3 million in special school infrastructure, on average \$27.8 million per budget; the Andrews government has invested almost \$1 billion—\$980 million—in special school infrastructure, on average \$122.5 million per budget.

Ms TAYLOR: Very good. I have still got time. Just thinking about the school workforce, can I refer you to budget paper 3, page 18, which outlines targeted initiatives to attract teachers to Victorian government schools. Can you please explain the benefits of this package and what else the government is doing to make teaching an even more attractive profession?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Ms Taylor. Again, it is an important program. So the 2022–23 budget has targeted initiatives to attract more teachers. It provides \$58.9 million over four years for the department to continue attracting and developing quality teachers in Victorian schools. These initiatives will both grow the aggregate numbers of teachers in Victoria and better distribute teachers to the locations where they are needed most. Improving teacher supply across the state will support schools to access quality teachers and in turn support the achievement of our Education State targets, particularly Learning for Life and Breaking the Link. Since 2019 initiatives such as teacher financial incentives and innovative ITE programs have been implemented to increase teacher supply and improve distribution across the system, particularly in roles for which schools experience challenges in attraction. \$33.5 million will continue and expand the delivery of innovative ITE for a further three intakes, providing places for 1200 student teachers. The program was launched in November 2020 to fast-track the supply of teachers to secondary schools and early childhood settings, particularly in hard-to-staff subjects and locations. The program has been funded for four years and allocates \$8.8 million for secondary teaching. Student placements are occurring across secondary schools, with five participating universities.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I am not sure what page you need to go to in your notes for these answers, but it is page 15 in budget paper 3. Also in your presentation, on slide 9, 'Investing in our teachers', you indicate a plan to hire 1900 teachers in 2022–23. What are you planning to do with the 420 teachers who were either sacked or are on permanent leave because they are not triple vaccinated?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mrs McArthur, for your question. Just give me a moment. There are a couple of points I would like to make in regard to your question. We are indeed recruiting as part of this budget 1900 additional teachers. In terms of staff and vaccination requirements, as you would know and as is under the Act and the health minister's responsibility through the public health orders, staff are required to be triple vaxxed and continue to be required to be triple vaxxed. And I would just say to you, Mrs McArthur, and to the committee: the whole suite of interventions that we have made in our schools have enabled us to deliver our commitment of getting students back at school face-to-face with their peers, with their teachers, day one, term 1

of this year—the vaccination requirement for staff; the rollout of air purifiers, and we are going through the second tranche of rolling out air purifiers for the coming winter; the supply and provision of rapid antigen tests; the surveillance testing that we have had throughout term 1 and the first four weeks of this year; and a whole range of other COVID-safe measures and guidance provided by the department to government schools and guidance provided to our non-government school partners, Catholic education and Independent Schools Victoria, providing advice to schools. In terms of your question, Mrs McArthur—

Mrs McARTHUR: Oh, good.

Mr NEWBURY: We will get there.

Mr MERLINO: Indeed we will, but this is an important context. You do not have kids back at school if you do not have these interventions in place, including the vaccination requirements. As at 30 April, 297 government teaching service staff ended their employment as a result of being on unauthorised absence for not meeting the vaccination requirements—so around 121 teachers, Mrs McArthur. This group of staff did not meet the first and second dose vaccination requirements and have not worked since October last year. On 28 January they were placed on unauthorised absence, and their employment came to an end after 28 April as a result of being absent without leave for three months. A further group of approximately 200 have not yet met their third dose vaccination requirement, and I encourage those employees to complete their vaccination program, but I again reiterate to this community and to anyone watching this hearing: the vaccination requirement was an incredible success, to the extent that 99.4 per cent of the government teaching service staff have met the vaccination requirement. This will have no impact whatsoever on the operation of Victorian government schools. I am sorry that that very, very small percentage of people decided not to get vaccinated, but the vaccination of staff, the surveillance testing, the air purifiers, all of the COVID-safe measures—that is exactly why we could have kids back at school day one, term 1 of this year.

Mrs McARTHUR: So you are never going to lift the vaccination mandate for teachers, Minister?

Mr MERLINO: My responsibility as the minister, the department's responsibility with our schools, is to operationalise the decision that has been made by the Minister for Health under the Act and the public health orders. We operationalise the public health orders, Mrs McArthur, and those public health orders continue to require staff at schools to be triple vaxxed.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. So you have got 420 teachers potentially operationalised out of the workforce. They can eat or shop anywhere they like, they can attend religious services or events, they can even go to brothels, but they cannot work to earn a living. Why wouldn't you make use of this available workforce?

Mr MERLINO: Mrs McArthur, I can only repeat the answer I gave to you. The vaccination requirement, supported by an overwhelming majority of the Victorian government workforce—99.4 per cent of government school staff—combined with all of the COVID-safe measures, surveillance testing and air purifiers has meant that we have had schools open for students. Now, that may not be in line with your narrative, to be frank, Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Minister, that might be the case in the metropolitan area, but out in the country it is very different. It is very different out in the country, where schools might only have three teachers. If two are unvaccinated, the school is unviable.

Mr MERLINO: As I said before, this very, very small percentage of staff—like, tiny percentage—have been on leave since October last year. There is no operational impact on schools across Victoria.

Mrs McARTHUR: I am sure they will all be pleased to hear that. Minister, for many years the department of education's subregional office in Warrnambool operated with two staff. Can you tell me what is budgeted for in this operation in this financial year in the forward estimates period?

Mr MERLINO: I might defer to Dr Howes in terms of our regional staff, but we have got—as you may know, Mrs McArthur—four regional offices, 27 areas, and we support them all. But in terms of the specifics of Warrnambool I am not sure if Dr Howes has any additional information.

Dr HOWES: We have a number of staff, Mrs McArthur, who will be working in the Warrnambool area—the area executive director, senior education improvement leaders—and there will be allied health staff who are supporting schools.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Dr Howes. There used to be two some years ago, who used to operate reasonably efficiently, I understand. Now I understand there are about 100. How do all these regional offices assist in the educational outcomes in that regional area, especially when there are staff off because they are unvaccinated or with COVID? I understand that some specialist maths teachers are in the regional office, yet they are too busy to go and fill a spot in a school. Is that acceptable?

Dr HOWES: Thanks for the question. The area staff play really important roles in relation to the two fundamental goals of our schools, which are supporting learning and supporting wellbeing. We have a range of specialists who are looking at how to best support different schools improve their academic performance, because obviously different schools are at different stages and have got different needs. Likewise with the wellbeing teams—there are different specialists who are addressing a range of needs in a range of schools.

At the moment I think our area staff have worked exceptionally to provide every support possible over the last couple of years, which were challenging, and this year some of them have been in schools supporting where that has been needed—those who have maintained their teacher registration after coming out of direct classroom employment. They have gone into schools to support where some schools have been particularly hard hit by COVID. So I do think our area staff have done a really exceptional job working alongside our teachers and principals and in working with our communities and supporting parents and carers where they face particular challenges as well.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Dr Howes. I am sure the parents in this area would be pleased to learn there are 100 staff assisting teachers, but actually there are not teachers in the school to be able to teach. Minister, you said previously that schools suffering staff shortages from COVID and the flu could be assisted by departmental staff. Now, I know for a fact that has not happened in an instance in the Warrnambool area.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mrs McArthur. So, yes, what I was saying before was that the approach at any school that are dealing with some challenges in terms of staff being furloughed as a result of COVID is that they go through their normal CRTs that would be on call, if you like—the usual staff that come on to cover absences—and also engage with CRT agencies. As Dr Howes said, there are area staff that continue to have their teacher accreditation that can provide support. There is also the support through the pool of retired teachers. Now, when we get to the point that a principal has exhausted all of those avenues, then for a very, very short period of time for a small group of their cohort there may be a day or so where those students are in home learning.

Mrs McARTHUR: Nobody in the regional office near Shepparton could help out for this whole year 8 cohort.

Mr MERLINO: Mrs McArthur, I will give you one example down your neck of the woods. We have two area staff at Portland Secondary College today. So some challenges at Portland Secondary: ‘How many CRTs have I got? Who’s available?’—contact the regional staff.

Mrs McARTHUR: Any for Shepparton, Minister?

Mr MERLINO: Well, as I said, Shepparton would have gone through exactly that same process.

Mrs McARTHUR: No regional staff available?

Mr MERLINO: No, there will indeed be, I imagine, regional staff supporting Greater Shepparton. But with the challenge of, as I said, the 28 to 32 staff who are absent today due to those furloughing pressures, we have year 8 students learning from home for today.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Can I ask you to perhaps give us on notice the number of work hours or days that public servants across the department, including in the Warrnambool office, have assisted in covering school lessons? You can take it on notice, if you like.

Mr MERLINO: Mrs McArthur, if there is any additional information, I am sure we can provide that.

Mrs McARTHUR: Minister, I learned yesterday of a school that is so desperate to get staff they are actually asking parents as they collect their children if they could help out. Is this acceptable?

Mr MERLINO: Mrs McArthur, is this in regard to COVID or another pressure?

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Your time has actually expired. I will pass the call to Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Deputy Premier and department officials, for joining us today. Minister, I want to take you to a very important part of the budget—investment in the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership. I am wondering for the committee's benefit: how will the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership support teachers to become leaders in their field?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr Richardson, for your question, and I encourage you and any other member of the committee to have a look at the new Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership Melbourne base just around the corner. We will be opening progressively regional academies across Victoria, but the Melbourne one is open and is quite a brilliant building and program.

This budget provides \$27.4 million over four years and \$7.5 million in 2026–27 for investment in professional learning to strengthen the expertise of our teacher and school leader workforce through the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership. The academy's specialised and targeted professional learning empowers and equips Victorian teachers and school leaders to have lasting, significant and positive impact on students, schools and the system. The academy's work in teacher professional learning spans government, independent and Catholic school sectors, and that was an important part of this project. We wanted an academy of teaching and leadership no matter what school you are teaching at. This does put it in a unique position to elevate the whole of the profession and influence teaching and school leadership excellence in every Victorian school.

As the statutory authority, the academy is established through the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*. It is governed by a board that includes members from government, independent and Catholic school sectors and led by a chief executive officer. The board balances school, education and community interests to support the academy to meet the diverse professional learning needs of Victorian educators. The academy also provides impartial expert advice to me and to the Department of Education and Training.

The academy's locations across Victoria will be hubs for collaborative learning and educational and community activities. Each facility is designed to be a place where great ideas are explored and people flourish. As I mentioned, its new flagship location at 41 St Andrews Place and the existing North Melbourne location are exciting contemporary spaces that draw inspiration from the rich history of their sites. New locations in Bairnsdale, Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura, Moe and Shepparton complement these spaces, bringing high-quality and contextually responsive professional learning to all Victorian educators.

In terms of training, the centrepiece is the teacher excellence program, which enables highly skilled teachers to extend their capacity for exemplary teaching. This is the thing that is different about the academy—it was a trip to Singapore pre pandemic to see what they do at their institute, targeting the highest ability teachers and really honing their craft, and they become leaders in the classroom. The TEP is a year-long, multifaceted professional learning experience. It is grounded in the key discipline areas: practitioner inquiry, teacher agency, reflective practice and contemporary research. Open to Victorian Catholic, government and independent schools, the TEP is Australia's first advanced professional learning program for highly skilled teachers. The program is designed for teachers with a minimum of three years teaching experience who demonstrate exceptional teaching in their selected discipline area. It includes specifically designed conferences and masterclasses, supplemented with learning communities and self-directed learning.

Participants are supported by master teachers in their selected discipline area. These master teachers have demonstrated success in their discipline, pedagogical practices and student learning growth as well as being recognised as teaching experts in their field. The team of master teachers co-design, collaborate and leverage their expertise to enhance and refine the professional learning in TEP. So they are the go-to person to support the participants and enrich their learning in each discipline area. The master teachers were selected from Catholic, government and independent schools across metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. These intensive sessions deepen participants' discipline knowledge, skills and dispositions through exploring big ideas, teaching demonstrations, examining new approaches, reflection and dialogue.

The discipline areas in the TEP are the arts, English, health and physical education, the humanities, languages, mathematics, science and technologies. Through active, thoughtful participation and learning experience, participants will: synthesise and develop a deep understanding of the complex relationship between contemporary research and responsive teaching for diverse learners; investigate the essential questions of their discipline to generate and mobilise new knowledge for their profession; inquire into problems of practice to design, implement, evaluate, modify and capture exceptional teaching; activate, demonstrate and reflect on dispositions that sustain dynamic exceptional teaching; and engage in professional dialogue in and across networks to explore practices, scrutinise evidence of learning and generate new possibilities. TEP graduates contribute to program development and become influential role models for their colleagues, and they are also able to apply to become master teachers in future years. You speak to your local prin; there are not hundreds of PD opportunities, there are thousands. This is about an academy of teaching and leadership for our very best, exceptional educators and providing another career pathway and career opportunity through this academy.

Mr RICHARDSON: That is a really, really exciting initiative, Minister. I want to take you to the topic of teacher workload. Obviously alongside health workers our teachers were some of the heroes of the last couple of years. In the onsite and offsite learning that was done and the face-to-face pressures that they experienced, they were absolute superstars. But on easing that pressure on them as well, I am wondering for the committee's benefit what has been proposed to reduce that face-to-face teaching workload in the Victorian budget.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Richardson, for your question and your comments about our teachers and support staff and principals over the last 2½ years. They have been exceptional, and every opportunity I get, as I am sure you do, I send that message to our educators because they have been brilliant. We know that high-quality teaching is the most important in-school factor for improving student outcomes and that strong school leadership and strategic decision-making are important for driving school improvement and results. Teachers report that a high number of face-to-face teaching hours can impact their ability to provide quality instruction to students. Teachers in the 2016 ACER school staff workload study reported that workload affected the quality of their teaching as well as their health, work-life balance and overall stress level. This was the single biggest issue in the recent enterprise negotiations. International evidence suggests that Australian teachers have higher face-to-face teaching hours than many other high-performing jurisdictions. Australian teachers responding to the 2018 TALIS survey reported working an average of approximately 20 face-to-face teaching hours per week. Primary school teachers in Victoria have more face-to-face teaching hours per week than teachers in New South Wales, the ACT, Queensland and WA. Face-to-face teaching hours and workload can impact rates of teacher retention. In 2020 the department commissioned research into the motivation of registered teachers who were not currently working in a full-time or permanent role. The research found that over half—54 per cent—of these teachers did not want to return to a permanent teaching role, with heavy workload being listed as a key reason for not wanting to return. Over one-quarter, 28 per cent, of these teachers had experienced burnout, stress or high workload when they had previously worked as a teacher. So the in-principle agreement with unions has been reached for a new enterprise agreement covering the Victorian teacher service in government schools. The 2022–23 budget initiative improving teaching quality was negotiated alongside the proposed agreement and is a separate initiative funded through the 2022–23 budget.

Funding has been provided to reduce the maximum number of weekly face-to-face teaching hours for every primary and secondary teacher at government schools. This initiative supports more time for teachers to prepare lessons, plan and mark assessments. The maximum number of weekly face-to-face teaching hours for teachers will initially reduce by 1 hour for the 2023 school year and then by a further half-hour in 2024. The total 1½ hour reduction in maximum weekly face-to-face teaching hours will continue in subsequent school years. Output funding of \$779 million over five years is provided for a 1-hour reduction in the maximal weekly face-to-face teaching hours for primary and secondary teachers in 2023 and the extra half-hour in 2024, taking the new maximum number of weekly face-to-face teaching hours to 21 hours per week for primary teachers and 18½ hours per week for secondary.

Reducing maximum face-to-face teaching hours will provide the Victorian teaching workforce more time to focus on activities such as lesson planning, collaboration with colleagues and with other schools, mentoring, coaching and peer observation. These are the things that improve practice of teachers, the things that will make a difference in terms of student outcomes as well as responding to the significant issue of workload. Providing teachers with more time for these activities will lead to higher quality instruction and, as I said, improve student outcomes over time. The initiative is also expected to support improved rates of retention among the teaching workforce and make the teaching profession more attractive to prospective entrants, while all students continue

to receive 25 hours of instruction per week, consistent with the Victorian curriculum—so no change in terms of instruction per week for students, but we are providing this workload benefit for our staff.

Mr RICHARDSON: Just finally, Deputy Premier, on the important issue of out-of-field teachers, I am wondering if you could explain: how are teachers currently employed teaching out of field being supported in both secondary and primary schools?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Richardson—again, a significant issue. There are insufficient numbers of highly trained teachers in mathematics, science and technology, leading to out-of-field teaching in secondary schools, and that is why funding is being provided to continue the secondary maths and science initiative to train 50 mathematics and 25 science out-of-field teachers in priority curriculum areas and to extend the new secondary science, technology and mathematics initiative. Funding also supports the introduction of 50 graduate certificates of secondary digital technology and 50 graduate certificates of secondary design and technology. Half of the program positions will be filled by rural and regional teachers. Output funding of \$10.1 million over four years will offer a total of 175 graduate certificates in mathematics, science and technology. The new expanded initiative—the secondary science, technology and mathematics initiative—will cover all STEM priority curriculum areas, with funding including—I will catch up with you later.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and team. You have allocated \$779 million to hire up to 1900 new teachers for primary and secondary schools. Over the past decade high-achiever enrolments in teaching courses in Australia fell by a third—more than any other undergraduate field of study. Today only 3 per cent of young high achievers choose teaching in their undergraduate studies, compared with 19 per cent for science and 9 per cent for engineering. As part of this recruitment process to get more teachers, has the government allocated any funding to increase the number of high achievers who choose teaching?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Barton, for your question. This is a significant issue. Again, I have talked to this committee before about the need to raise the quality of the intake and raise the aspiration of potential teachers but also deal with attraction and retention. Part of it is cultural. I mentioned Singapore before.

Mr BARTON: I was going to say that.

Mr MERLINO: Yes. You go there, and if you are a teacher or a principal, you are right up there in terms of the society's view of the profession and that career; you are looked up to like a doctor or a lawyer. We need to get there culturally.

Part of it is practical. We increased the ATAR, sending a very strong message to students in secondary school: if you have got an ambition to be a teacher, we want you in the top 30 per cent. We had universities, Mr Barton, around the state where you could have an ATAR in the 30s and 40s and you could go on the initial teacher education pathway. So we raised the ATAR at a national level—states and territories and the commonwealth. We agreed to the LANTITE to make sure we have got high-ability students coming through our universities to be teachers. That places some pressure. We want more teachers, but we also want to raise the standard, so we knew that for a few years there would be a bit of a dip in terms of those going through that university pathway—ITE. There is also, as I mentioned in the answer to Mr Richardson, the role of the academy in lifting the esteem of teachers. At a practical level we have got attraction and retention. We wanted to look at, particularly through the period of the pandemic, how we could expedite the ITE pathway: how can we attract people who may be an engineer to come into the teaching workforce? So there are financial incentives as well.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Minister. Mr Hibbins mentioned before mental health support for students. I would like to go back there. This is a very important subject to me and very important to some little people that I know. We know that the return to face-to-face teaching after the past two years has been an overwhelming and difficult adjustment for many students. Many of these students are experiencing similar patterns of mental health issues which are distinct to this period of time—for example, difficulty making friends or anxiety when it comes to social situations. Of this funding allocated, what programs are available and have been tailored specifically to support Victorian students?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr Barton. It is a very important question not just for this year but for the 2020 school year and the 2021 school year. Through periods of remote learning, some students thrived and some

students struggled immensely, and as students return back to face-to-face learning following a period of remote learning, the very strong message via the department through to schools is to focus on student mental health and wellbeing, identify the students that are struggling and put all the supports that we can in place. There are a few things we are doing to achieve just that—not just, Mr Barton, in responding to the pandemic but ongoing.

One of the major changes we made was the development and now the implementation of FISO, the framework for improving student outcomes. This is essentially the operating model for government schools. I am happy for the department to provide the committee with some further information about FISO, but in a sense we put wellbeing bang in the centre. You know, it is a very powerful message to schools: the health and wellbeing of your students is paramount. They cannot learn if they do not feel safe, happy and engaged at school. So there is the framework for improving student outcomes.

In terms of programs that we have implemented, I have mentioned the mental health practitioners in secondary schools and special schools. We brought that forward so we got universal coverage by the end of 2021. We have got the mental health pilot in primary schools, the partnership with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, and we have got the \$200 million mental health fund and the suite of initiatives that schools can choose from this year in rural and regional Victoria and in the next two years from next year in metropolitan schools.

In addition to that, Mr Barton, we have got doctors in schools. A significant part of their work is supporting students in their mental health. We have got the doctors in schools program in 100 secondary schools, and then each school has its own wellbeing team. They each look different—they cater for the needs of their school and their community—but every school has a wellbeing team, whether it is a mental health practitioner, the federally funded chaplain service or additional mental health practitioners that are funded with equity funding. And now we will have, as I said, the \$200 million mental health fund.

This is a significant issue, and we know, like with any crisis, the mental health impact will have a long tail. We are seeing—and I might talk about this later when I engage with you on mental health—a lot of indicators are better than last year or the year before but still above pre-pandemic 2019 levels. ED presentations for mental health are less than last year but still higher than 2019. Eating disorder indicators are better than last year but still higher than 2019. So there is a lot of work through the Department of Education and Training as well as the mental health division to provide support in schools. And schools are very different places. It is not just a place of learning; it is a place where we support the whole of the child.

Just in closing, you are right to talk about the start of this year. I have been visiting many, many schools, and just in the first few weeks and months of the school term this year there were socialisation issues and some behavioural issues, so there was a bit of time for kids to work out how to play nicely together and how to engage socially. Again, that has been the number one priority for our staff, and they have done a brilliant job.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Minister. The Active Schools program: budget paper 3, page 12, outlines the government's intention to continue to provide funding for the Active Schools program for a further two years. Why hasn't the government chosen to guarantee funding for the program beyond this time frame and take it out further?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr Barton, for your question. It is \$28 million over two years to continue the Active Schools initiative. I guess the short answer to your question, Mr Barton, is similar to the previous conversation we had around mental health and wellbeing. The other impact of the pandemic was on just physical activity, and we want students to reengage with their local sporting clubs and to be physically active in schools. I want to evaluate this program and see what works. We have put a lot of things in place, particularly reconnecting local sporting clubs with students at school, so this is not a lack of commitment to Active Schools and physical activity and sport engagement—it is the contrary. We have got to focus on this, but we want to evaluate and see what works over the next few years.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the education portfolio with you today, Minister. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee in this capacity. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a short break before beginning consideration of the mental health portfolio at 3.30 pm. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.