

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Budget estimates 2020–21 (Merlino)

Melbourne—Wednesday, 2 December 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Mr James Merlino, MP, Minister for Education,

Ms Jenny Atta, Secretary,

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

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

Mr Chris Keating, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority,

Mr Ian Burrage, Acting Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support, 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 would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be with us today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2020–21 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

Note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

We ask that telephones be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. 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 as soon as possible.

We welcome the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, and officers from your department. Minister, we invite you to make an opening statement of no more than 10 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Mr MERLINO: Great. Thank you. Thank you, Chair and committee members. Good morning, everyone. I would also like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we are gathered and pay my respects to elders past and present. Thank you for the opportunity again to present to PAEC. This is a marathon day for me, but my hat is off to all of you for a marathon over multiple days for the committee in terms of estimates and also your COVID work.

Can I begin by also acknowledging the huge efforts of Victoria's students, their families, teachers and school staff over the course of 2020. This has been an extraordinarily tough year, but everyone in education rose to the challenge and played their part in slowing the spread of the virus and driving down case numbers.

Education is one of the most powerful tools we have to drive the recovery from the global pandemic. That is why this budget invests a record \$6 billion in Victoria's schools to deliver world-class education, create jobs and ensure every child gets every chance to succeed. With this budget we can build a stronger and fairer Victoria.

Visual presentation.

Mr MERLINO: We are investing a historic \$1.6 billion in the state's biggest ever disability inclusion program. The disability inclusion education for all program will transform how students with a disability are

supported in every single school across our state. It is a once-in-a-generation reform that will double the number of students receiving extra support in the classroom to an estimated 55 000 students and create over 1730 jobs along the way. It will include a more positive assessment process that values the strengths, aspirations and needs of children. It also includes over \$102 million for new resources and support to build the skills and knowledge of our incredible school staff in delivering inclusive education for every student. Parents can be more confident that students are better understood, included and supported at school. And because students with a disability deserve the very best facilities, we are investing \$388.8 million to upgrade 39 specialist schools as part of our record school building program. That is the biggest single investment in special schools ever.

We promised that we would leave no student behind both at the height of the pandemic and in recovery, and this budget does just that. It includes the biggest single investment in individual learning support in Victoria's history—\$250 million announced recently for more than 4100 tutors at schools. This is to ensure that students who may have fallen behind or are in danger of becoming disengaged in the wake of the pandemic get the support they need in 2021. Another \$8.6 million will enhance the successful Koorie literacy and numeracy and Koorie engagement support officer programs and employ 60 additional multilingual and bicultural workers.

The impacts of the global pandemic have been most heavily felt by some of the most disadvantaged. Thanks to the \$24.5 million to reimburse schools, students will be able to permanently retain the more than 71 000 devices loaned out to bridge the digital divide and ensure they have access to technology at home. Because families are doing it tough we are supporting the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund and the State Schools' Relief affordable school uniform program with \$31.6 million so no child misses out. To help parents return to work or increase their hours we will invest \$81.6 million to increase the availability of before- and after-school care.

We also know that giving young people the skills they need to get the jobs now and in the future will be critical to Victoria's economic recovery. The Firth review found more needs to be done to ensure students have access to training that engages them and delivers the skills in demand they need that lead to the jobs that they want. This budget invests \$38 million to develop a new single VCE-integrated senior secondary certificate, meaning students will no longer have to choose between either the VCE or the VCAL certificate. It will also fund new jobs, skills and pathways coordinators and managers to support and promote collaboration across schools. These reforms will help ensure high-quality vocational and applied learning is available to every senior secondary student no matter where they go to school.

Teaching is a great career, and a great teacher makes a huge difference to the lives of their students. That is why we are providing \$15.4 million for the innovative initial teacher education program. Part of this includes \$10.8 million to give aspiring teachers the opportunity to build their experience in secondary and specialist schools. These programs accelerate the training and employment of high-quality teachers into our schools. This will provide opportunities for recent university graduates and career changers, particularly those whose careers have been affected by the pandemic. We are investing a further \$32.8 million to extend the primary maths and science specialist initiative to train more than 200 teachers to help more students achieve their potential in STEM, and we are also investing \$20.5 million to help build teacher capability and data literacy in schools.

In terms of capital, we are rolling out—there is my favourite graph—the next phase of the state's biggest ever school building boom by investing a record \$3 billion in capital works. This scale that we are investing in in our schools is unprecedented and only possible because of our consistent strong funding each and every year. Not only will this leave the greatest legacy for our students, it is also supporting jobs in every corner of our state. The Victorian government has now invested more than \$9 billion over the past five years to deliver more than 1600 school upgrades. Thanks to this additional record \$1.9 billion investment in our schools, we are undertaking major upgrades at 169 schools.

We are also continuing to meet enrolment growth. Our investment in new schools means that the Victorian government opened 21 schools across 2017 and 2018. A further 48 schools are being rolled out from 2019 to 2022 as part of our commitment to open 100 new schools, including the one new school we are now opening in 2023. We are also acquiring land for 11 future schools, ensuring more families have the schools they need closer to home. Importantly, our further investment of the \$1.9 billion is creating more than 6400 new local jobs throughout Victoria to support our recovery from the pandemic.

All school communities should have pride in their facilities, with students learning in safe and secure facilities. As part of this we are boosting the planned maintenance program by \$70 million to support work at around 300 schools. Shovel-ready projects will be supported at around 300 schools, thanks to the \$50 million Minor Capital Works Fund. We will also invest \$20 million to build inclusive learning spaces and outdoor accessible playgrounds for students with a disability through the Inclusive Schools Fund so no student misses out.

The budget brings to book our \$1.1 billion building works package that we announced back in May to support over 1500 jobs during the early months of the global pandemic. We have not wasted any time on getting these projects going, with the package set to support 10 new schools for 7000 students. This includes the \$119 million Greater Shepparton Secondary College, a project that is creating almost 300 local jobs and will transform education in that regional city. I am extremely proud of our record \$3 billion investment in school capital. This is going to make such a difference to school communities across every corner of the state.

This has been, as I said at the start, an extremely tough year, but as we recover from the pandemic we will give our students and teachers every support they need. We will also use our big school-building program to create jobs and support communities in every corner of our state. Through a high-quality, accessible and inclusive education system we can build a fairer and stronger Victoria and bring people together, and that is just what we are doing with this budget. Thank you, Chair, happy to answer any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Premier. I will pass to the Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan, in the first instance.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair. Welcome, Minister and education department. This is one of the more important portfolios that as members of Parliament we deal with. Minister, before I get into a lot of detail I want us to go back to a couple of longstanding issues that have been raised at PAEC many times before, and that is really around your commitment to asbestos. We have talked a lot about the Big Build. There are still a lot of our schools that are riddled with asbestos, and it causes no end of complications for further development and safety. It is probably a question to the Secretary: where are we at with the asbestos removal with our schools in this record Big Build?

Ms ATTA: Thanks, Mr Riordan. The department, as I think we have mentioned before, commenced a statewide audit of more than 1700 government school sites and found high risk of asbestos at 497 schools, and by March 2016 we had removed all of that. Following that audit we focused on asbestos that would pose a risk to schoolchildren in the future, and the government commitment was to continue to improve the safety of all schools and remove that remaining asbestos. As a result of investment of around \$407 million this has been accomplished now—the biggest ever asbestos removal program in the history of Victoria—and 1139 buildings will now be free of identified asbestos—

Mr RIORDAN: So how many buildings are left with asbestos?

Ms ATTA: One thousand one hundred and thirty-nine buildings will be free of identified asbestos by the end of 2020. We are absolutely on track to deliver that.

Mr RIORDAN: Sorry, so this time next year we will be free of asbestos in our schools?

Ms ATTA: We will be free of asbestos consistent with the government commitment.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay.

Ms ATTA: Mr Keating might just provide a little bit more detail about that.

Mr KEATING: Thank you, Secretary.

Mr RIORDAN: We are just looking for what is left to remove. Is there a figure of schools, please?

Mr MERLINO: The commitment has been acquitted, Mr Riordan. All identified high-risk and medium-risk asbestos—any asbestos that poses a risk—was removed in 2016, and all the identified asbestos that may pose a risk in the future has been removed. By the end of—

Mr RIORDAN: So I should not go into—

Mr MERLINO: By the end of this year, Mr Riordan, we will have fully acquitted the commitment we made to deliver safe schools in terms of asbestos by the end of 2020.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, so there will be no schools left with those signs that many of my schools have had?

Mr MERLINO: No, that is not what I am saying. The commitment was always about asbestos that poses a high or medium risk, as in a high risk—immediate—or may pose a risk in the future. There will always be an element of asbestos, for example, maybe buried under school ovals, maybe in areas in buildings, that is not a risk in terms of where teachers teach or where students learn. It was never a commitment to knock down every single school building in the state.

Mr RIORDAN: No, I understand that. The point is that as of the end of next year we can go into any school and any surface or area that students will come into contact with will be asbestos-free?

Mr MERLINO: Correct. As the Secretary alluded, I will ask Mr Keating to further the answer on this, but the removal of all identified asbestos that poses a high or medium risk will be completed—the commitment acquitted by the end of this year. I might ask Mr Keating to add further to that answer.

Mr KEATING: Consistent with that, we have independent hygienists who have gone through all schools in the state and categorised every single piece of asbestos in all schools. Anything that was identified as higher or medium risk will be removed by the end of this calendar year. There is asbestos that might be in the mortar of bricks in the foundations or things that are inaccessible that you cannot remove without destroying the building.

Mr RIORDAN: So it does not include just painting a sealer over a wall, for example?

Mr KEATING: Not at all. It is removal.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, great, all right. Moving on then, please. Minister, do you give a commitment that budget paper 4 in the May 2021 budget will detail the total cost of all projects completed over the last two years to ensure that any portfolio blowouts will be fully disclosed? With the missing budget paper 4 we are flying blind on your Big Build, essentially.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Riordan. As the Treasurer has indicated—I am assuming you asked a similar question to the Treasurer yesterday—that will be fully acquitted in budget papers in the May budget when we hand that down next year.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, all right, so there will be no delays. For example, the details around the vertical school in North Melbourne—there will be a full breakdown of the costs for the development of that project?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, in the normal way. That is correct.

Mr RIORDAN: Do you have a cost at the moment on what that particular school is going to cost to build?

Mr MERLINO: Vertical schools obviously are more expensive than a greenfield standard construction—

Mr RIORDAN: I understand that

Mr MERLINO: so for example the two vertical schools that I visited in recent weeks, they are in the order of a \$70 million to \$80 million build, but I might ask Mr Keating if he can add to my comments.

Mr KEATING: Yes, we do have an estimate for it. Until it is market tested we do not have a confirmed price. That number is part of the new schools number that is listed in budget paper 3.

Mr RIORDAN: So as the department who is going to undertake what the minister has said is an extraordinarily expensive build—and we understand why—you do not have any costings around that for now?

Mr KEATING: We do have detailed cost estimates in terms of quantity surveying estimates design work that we have done. Until it is formally market tested we do not have a contracted price, so we will seek to move to contract as quickly as possible.

Mr RIORDAN: Is that able to be made available to the committee?

Mr KEATING: Yes, that would be.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, if we could take that on notice. Thank you.

Mr MERLINO: That is following the usual tender process. You know, there are periods of time where tenders come in and they are quite favourable in terms of not just the main part of the build but additional items, and there are other times in the year or times in the cycle where the tenders are less favourable. But we will have that confirmed once the tenders are out.

Mr RIORDAN: So just in the short time I have left, Minister, the government has made much of its Big Build and its investment in capital. What I want to turn to now is budget paper 3, page 169, with performance outcomes. It is hugely concerning—on both page 169, which is primary schools, and page 175, which is secondary schools—that consistently attendance at our schools continues to decline. So grade 5s two years ago, 15.6 and increased to 16.4 in lost days. But more concerning is our secondary school results. Budget paper 3, year 7s to 10s—I picked that one out, which is a big cohort of young people—in 2016–17, 19.7, the following year, 20.2, the following year 20.4, this year 21.3. You have been the education minister for a long time now. You say you are spending money to make quality schools, we roar around the Victorian roadways with ‘education’ on our numberplates, and yet every year less and less children are attending regularly. What is going on?

We might stop the clock. Surely with all the department sitting here, declining attendance rates should be sitting pretty high on your performance—

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Riordan. Student attendance through 2019 was consistent with previous years. We know that student and family circumstances traditionally influence student absence, and 2019 saw these trends continue. Influencing factors include overseas travel to country of origin for some students—

Mr RIORDAN: Sorry. Minister, I have asked—there is an ongoing trend. We have got four years in a row of declining.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, and my answer to you, Mr Riordan, is: student absence through 2019 was consistent with previous years. And I can tell you, you will not see them in the performance measures in this—

Mr RIORDAN: Well, it is not consistent. It is getting worse.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Mr MERLINO: And it is not in—

Mr RIORDAN: Sorry, but he is saying it is consistent—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are not allowing the minister the opportunity to answer the question.

Mr MERLINO: I am happy to answer the question, Mr Riordan. So 2019 was consistent with previous years. And it is not in the budget papers, but I can advise the committee that in 2020, during a period of a pandemic, and for the better part of terms 2 and 3 remote and flexible learning, attendance this year was actually an improvement on 2019, and that will be reflected—

Mr RIORDAN: Deputy Premier, with all due respect, the students for over half of the year, for six months of the year, were at home. They did not have anywhere else to attend. What I am talking about is—

Mr MERLINO: With respect, Mr Riordan—

Mr RIORDAN: Under your watch for four years it has declined.

Mr MERLINO: Attendance was quite good—in fact it was even better than last year—and absence through 2019 was consistent with previous years.

Mr RIORDAN: Deputy Premier, they only had to get out of bed to go to school this year.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I am sorry, but your time has expired. I would remind committee members that in putting a proposition to the minister or the witness at the table you need to give them the opportunity to answer it.

Mr RIORDAN: Sorry, Chair; he kept saying it is the same. It is not. The budget says every year—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, your time has expired. The call is with Mr Gary Maas, MP.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Deputy Premier, and thank you to your departmental officials as well who are in attendance for today. I enjoyed that presentation, particularly on school infrastructure and its spend. In terms of the budget papers, Deputy Premier, I would like to take you to budget paper 3, pages 27 and 41. I was hoping that you would be able to break down the core components of the government's \$3 billion spend on school infrastructure. Also I notice today the government's announcements earlier this morning about the Minor Capital Works Fund. Would you be able to go into detail about those projects?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Maas. I would be very pleased to, and I am glad you liked the presentation. I enjoyed giving it. As I outlined, this is the biggest school building program budget in our state's history. The budget invests more than \$3 billion in school upgrades: \$1.1 billion as part of our building works package announced earlier, and I can recall, Mr O'Brien, a conversation we had and you indicated, 'Well, that's just your normal budget allocation that a Labor government delivers'; we then delivered a further \$1.9 billion to roll out the next phase of the school building boom, which will support more than 6400 construction and supply chain jobs.

So of that \$1.9 billion, Mr Maas, \$1.28 billion is for 162 upgrades, with the architects to be appointed from January of next year and construction work on every project to start within 16 months. In regional Victoria this provides \$347.9 million for 54 regional school upgrades, and if you combine regional and rural schools across the \$3 billion, the investment is the biggest ever. And, as I said, there is more than \$388.8 million for 39 specialist schools—again the single biggest ever for our specialist settings. More than \$85 million will expand seven existing schools, providing extra space for 1175 students. More than \$147 million has been allocated to acquire land for 11 new schools, \$122.4 million for the new vertical primary school in North Melbourne, opening in 2023, and a further four stages of new school projects.

It is a budget that includes projects in every corner of the state. Across the \$3 billion there is \$45.1 million for Lilydale Heights, Lilydale High, Upper Yarra Secondary and Yarra Ranges Special Developmental School as part of that *Lilydale and Upper Yarra Education Plan*. There is \$42.6 million in Polwarth to rebuild Colac Specialist School, relocate Hampden Specialist School primary campus and Terang College P-4 campus to the Terang College 5-12 campus, upgrade Birregurra—is that correct pronunciation, Mr Riordan?

Mr Riordan: Perfect.

Mr MERLINO: Primary School and upgrade Skipton Primary School and Lorne P-12, and \$12.8 million to upgrade Korumburra Secondary College, which I know Mr O'Brien is very, very pleased about.

A member: The champagne corks would have been popping.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Six years after stage 1, for the record, Chair.

Mr MERLINO: You would almost think Mr O'Brien was a member of the government, the way he was popping the champagne. I did like that picture. There is \$10 million to upgrade the Victorian College for the Deaf and \$15.5 million for the next stage of works at Windsor Primary School in Mr Hibbins's electorate. These are just a small number of examples of what our unprecedented \$3 billion school infrastructure budget is delivering. There is \$70 million for the planned maintenance program for improvements at around 300 schools, and together this \$3 billion infrastructure investment provides for 22 700 additional places for our students.

All of this means in the past five years \$9 billion and 1600 upgrades, creating more than 10 000 construction jobs, and we are ahead of schedule in our commitment to open 100 new schools by 2026, with 48 schools opening between 2019 and 2022 and the vertical school in North Melbourne being the first investment for schools opening in 2023—and obviously over coming budgets we will have more to say about that.

And to your point regarding the Minor Capital Works Fund, we have now allocated \$70 million to this fund. We announced an initial \$20 million as part of the building works package and then a further \$50 million on top of this in this budget, \$10 million in output and \$40 million in asset. We did this because of the overwhelming interest in this program. You know, it is not just the massive vertical school projects that are important, it is the small projects as well. In total 328 schools will receive funding: 58 to upgrade existing ovals and other sporting facilities; 58 to provide new, or upgrade existing, playgrounds or sensory gardens; 43 projects to refurbish school toilet facilities to improve amenity, cleanliness and hygiene; 24 projects to upgrade and refurbish roofs and other external building works; 30 to upgrade fences; and 15 projects to provide greater shade and outdoor covered areas at schools. Through our \$3 billion investment in school infrastructure funding in this budget we are funding everything from new schools and major upgrades to toilets and new school fences, and as every one of the committee members knows, sometimes even those smallest of infrastructure projects can have a huge impact on a local school. Thanks, Mr Maas.

Mr D O'BRIEN: A point of order, Chair. Sorry, Minister, I just did not quite hear you in all the excitement. The North Melbourne vertical school, was that \$122.4 million, did you say?

Mr MERLINO: It is \$122 million, Mr O'Brien, for the vertical school as well as the next stage of funding for four other new schools as well. So that is the cost estimate that Mr Keating referred to and will go out to tender.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Four other new schools in the same vicinity, or—

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, I would remind you that the call is with Mr Maas, MP.

Mr MERLINO: I am happy to come back to you, Mr O'Brien.

Mr MAAS: Still referring to those same budget paper references previously, just a direct question: are we building enough classrooms, Deputy Premier, for future growth?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Maas. Our \$3 billion investment includes an unprecedented investment in new schools, school expansions, land for future schools and relocatable classrooms. They all play a part in delivering that capacity. The Victorian government is well on its way to meeting the growth challenge, with the total school-aged population expected to increase by 110 000 over the next five years. This \$3 billion investment in school infrastructure will create space, as I said, for 22 700 students. This investment in new schools means the Victorian government will now open 69 schools between 2017 and 2022, 48 as part of our commitment to open 100 schools and that one further school funded to open in 2023. So in 2016 not one new school opened its doors, and as I said, that is a reflection of the investment of the previous government, because it takes a couple of years. In 2017 we opened 10 new schools; 2018, 11; 2019, 9; 2020, 11; 2021, 14 schools; 2022, 14 new schools; and this budget has our first school for 2023. And for clarity, during the election we committed to open 45 new schools between 2019 and 2022. I am pleased that we are now on target to open 48 new schools in this same period, three ahead of schedule. Our \$3 billion package includes 10 new schools to open in 2022 and further in 2023 and funding to acquire land for 11 new schools. The 10 new schools in 2022: Melton, Bridge Road, a couple in Clyde North, Endeavour Hills special school, Gisborne South Primary, Grasslands Primary, Greater Shepparton Secondary, Greenvale Secondary, Kalkallo Common Primary School, Wollert East, North Melbourne. I have got a long list. I will not take up the committee's time, but I am happy to provide the list across all of those schools.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. We understand that the other major infrastructure challenge we have across our schools is ensuring that we are upgrading those that are in poor condition or that are not fit for purpose any longer. Would you be able to outline for the committee what has been funded in this budget to address the condition of our schools?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. Thanks Mr Maas, and that is right, the funding envelope always goes towards growth, enrolment pressure, condition—so the state of the school—as well as functionality. So you could have a school that is pretty well maintained in okay condition but it is a bunch of boxes, so poor functionality, poor condition and growth.

The number of school upgrades in this budget is truly unprecedented. As part of our \$3 billion investment, \$388.8 million for 56 upgrades in the building works package and a further \$1.28 billion for 162 upgrades—in

total \$1.7 billion for 218 school upgrades. This is in addition to the \$70 million planned maintenance program and the \$70 million for the minor capital works fund. I am also pleased that these upgrades include upgrades at 43 special schools: \$35.6 million for four special school upgrades announced in building works back in May and funded in the budget and a further \$388.8 billion for 39. Examples include Marnebek School in Cranbourne, \$38.8 million, Ms Richards, a great school; \$22.5 million for a major upgrade of Coburg Special Development School, Chair, in your community; or as I mentioned earlier, \$15.4 million to rebuild Colac Specialist School; \$11.8 million for Hampden Specialist School and Terang—

The CHAIR: Sorry to cut you off there, Minister, on such an important point. The call is with Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Chair.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair, and thank you, Minister and your team for appearing today. I want to first ask about something that we have had previous discussions about in previous hearings, and that is about the provision of laptops and devices to students throughout the pandemic and whether they would be able to keep them afterwards. I notice in the budget there is the ‘bridging the digital divide and supporting connected learners’ initiative. Can I get some detail of exactly what that is for, because obviously there were a number of devices loaned, some from schools, some from the government? Who actually gets to keep their device, and what type of device do they actually get to keep?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. This is a really important initiative, and we thought long and hard about the best way to support our students. As we have seen across a number of aspects of our society, the pandemic has really highlighted areas of inequality in our society, and that was reflected in our schools in terms of the move to remote and flexible learning and the students that had devices at home and the students that did not. So the most important thing, as we quickly moved to remote and flexible learning, was to grab those devices from wherever we could, and it was a combination of laptops and devices that were held within the department and also laptops and devices held within schools. In total across the two periods of lockdown that was more than 71 000 devices. We also supported students and families in other ways in regard to technology. There were a number of dongles to provide internet access at home, assistance with telecommunications companies and creating that connection, and I might ask Mr Bates to add to my answer.

We also expanded the use of the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, so we provided advice to schools that for families in need they can access that funding through the camps, sports and excursions to assist with the cost of technology. So what we have announced in this budget is \$24.5 million so any student who was loaned a device can keep that device—

Mr HIBBINS: Regardless of whether it is the school’s—

Mr MERLINO: Regardless. So if the device was loaned from the school to the student, this funding will go to the school to replace that equipment, but the students themselves can keep them. We sent a message out, I think around the middle of the year, to schools that students who have a device should keep it, and they should keep it for the rest of the year. What we are doing through this budget is saying that they can keep those devices permanently. I am really proud of this outcome. It is much needed, and it fills a really important equality gap that was identified. Mr Bates, can you just add further in terms of the dongles and the internet access?

Mr BATES: Yes. Thanks, Minister. So in terms of the devices, I will just check. It was about 15 000 tablets/iPads, and they tended to go to lower primary students. They are more comfortable with those sorts of devices. And so that left us with I think about 56 000 laptops. And in addition to that, as the minister mentioned, we put out about 25 000 dongles, although a lot of the iPads that we got were 4G-enabled, so we put a SIM card into those things. But effectively there are 25 000, 26 000 internet access devices. So they will stay with the students. As the minister said, 25 000 were iPads and laptops that were purchased by the department and distributed out to schools to give to students. There were about 46 000 that were school-owned, so across the whole 71 000 the funding will ensure that all the students who have been given a device can retain the device.

Mr HIBBINS: Fantastic. I guess the next question really is now looking towards the long term, given that great, we have got a great cohort of students who got them throughout the pandemic and they are allowed to keep them, but now for the future provision of digital devices for students.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. That is an issue that I am currently putting a lot of thought to. So I think the importance through this budget is that immediate need that was identified, and that is why we have made the commitment that every student that needed a device can now keep them permanently, but you are right to highlight the longer term.

We address this in a number of ways. We have a really firm policy for schools. You know, schools operate in different ways. They might have a 'bring your own device' policy, they might have class sets that they provide or they might provide the devices themselves. So schools do different things, but we have got a policy that applies to every single government school: it is that no student can miss out. You must ensure that students who cannot bring their own—if you have got a BYOD policy, no student can miss out. So you need to provide that support. But you are right to acknowledge the need for longer term thinking, and that is exactly what we are doing. I do not have any announcements to make today or in the budget papers, but I am giving this a lot of thought in terms of the changes in technology, what we need to do in the future.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. Great. Thanks, Minister. You obviously signed a new school funding agreement with the federal government, which relates to the SRS. In terms of how that relates to the actual output initiatives within the budget, do all the output initiatives sit within that SRS funding envelope, or are some things in and some things additional, like, for example, the disability initiative? Does that sit within the envelope of the SRS funding agreement?

Mr MERLINO: The overwhelming amount does, yes, Mr Hibbins. So we have made a commitment as part of that national agreement. We have made a commitment to increase the state's investment in education to 75 per cent of the SRS over a period of 10 years. That equates, Mr Hibbins, to \$7 billion over five years, so that is a massive, massive commitment by the Andrews government. So overwhelmingly investment in education reflects commitments to the SRS.

The remaining hurdle in regard to the SRS model is non-government versus government schools. So under the commonwealth's funding model, non-government schools can get to 100 per cent and beyond the SRS, but there is a cap, an artificial cap, of 95 per cent for government schools.

Mr HIBBINS: I guess I just wanted to clarify. You have made the commitment, the overall funding commitment, towards schools. It is just a case of then allocating that funding each budget to specific line items.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, essentially that is right. We made a commitment to get to 75 per cent of the SRS, and every budget we determine what are the priorities within the education system. So for this year the massive priority for us is around disability, but there are also the reforms around VCE and VCAL and other investments.

Mr HIBBINS: Great, thank you. I did notice 'School enrolment-based funding' as a line item within the budget, which goes to I think the increased enrolment for government and non-government schools. Is that a usual budget line item?

Mr MERLINO: I might ask Mr Bates to answer that question, Mr Hibbins.

Mr BATES: Yes, Mr Hibbins. There is a memorandum of understanding between the department and Treasury. There are two enrolment census dates every year: one in the first term—sort of end of February, early March—and then another one in August. So basically every year we have an investment of around similar numbers to what you have seen—that sort of \$130 million each year—which mainly goes into the government system but also gives us a bit of expansion for non-government enrolments as well. So it is a very standard thing. So it is in every year's budget. Next year with the close-down of international migration those numbers will probably be a little bit smaller, but the numbers you see reflect the growth that we saw in the system at the start of this year, 2020.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, and usually listed in the budget papers? All right. Thank you.

I just wanted to turn now to increasing the availability of outside school hours care. In terms of the provision for that, will that be school-run services or third-party provider-run services?

Mr MERLINO: Mr Hibbins that is a local school-based decision. So schools can choose whether it is something that they operate or whether it is via a third party. This funding provides additional funding for a further up to 400 new OSH care services in Victoria, and combined with the existing number of OSH care providers in our primary schools this funding, up to 400, will deliver around 95 per cent of provision across our primary schools. So there will be a very small number of very, very small schools, perhaps in rural Victoria, where it is not viable or needed to offer an OSH care, but it will deliver across 95 per cent of our primary schools.

Mr HIBBINS: Great, thanks. And what oversight will you have, particularly around the cost controls?

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you there, Mr Hibbins, but your time has expired, and I will pass the call to Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Morning, Minister and team. Can I just go to the bilateral agreement with the commonwealth, which I think you were just talking about with Mr Hibbins. That is referred to on budget paper 2, page 81, as a risk to the budget given some of the uncertainties there. But following on from what you were just talking about, the Victorian contributions are as a percentage the minimum state contribution shares in the bilateral agreements. Victoria from 2018 to 2023 is second-lowest only to the Northern Territory. Why is that?

Mr MERLINO: It is historic, Mr O'Brien—so for a long period of time, and this often reflects also the geographic size of the state, the cost of delivering education is different in Victoria than it is, for example, in Queensland or WA or the Northern Territory—in nature in terms of that comparison of state investment in education compared to the SRS. That is why the commitment of the Andrews government to increase our share to 75 per cent of the SRS is so fundamentally important and significant—\$7 billion over the next five years—and you are seeing that reflected in the investment through this budget and recent budgets.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So we will get to 75 per cent by 2025—is that the target?

Mr MERLINO: It is 2028, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: It is 2028?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. So if you go back to that agreement, yes, it is 10 years, and that will conclude in 2028. Over the next five years—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Given the massive investments in this budget across the whole budget, including in education, why are we not getting that earlier?

Mr MERLINO: Why are we not getting that earlier?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Like I said, we are still second worst in the country in terms of minimum input.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, and we are increasing and investing at a greater rate than any other state or territory. The investment in education, whether it is output or asset, is the greatest of any jurisdiction in our nation. It is absolutely correct to say that if you did the comparison of the SRS over a long, long period of time, we had a bigger step to take, and that is exactly what we are doing. Do not underestimate the importance of our commitment to get to 75 per cent of the SRS. We are moving as hard and as fast as we can.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Given the increase in investment, I would like to take you to budget paper 3, starting around page 171. It lists the targets that the department has particularly with respect to NAPLAN—and I know you have had issues with NAPLAN, but this is what is in the budget—and for both primary and secondary students, the 2019 targets versus the actuals, we have only hit two out of eight, for both primary and secondary, of those targets. Given the amount of money we are putting in and additional money going in, why aren't we getting better outcomes?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. Of the 24 NAPLAN measures reported in BP 3, on final 2019 assessment data and confidence intervals, four of the eight—that is, above the bottom three bands—targets were met relating to numeracy in years 5 and 7, reading in years 7 and 9; five of the eight, which are the top two band measures, targets were met relating to numeracy in years 3, 5 and 7 and reading in years 7 and 9;

seven of the all-student measures were below target: numeracy above bottom three bands in years 3 and 9, reading above bottom three bands in years 3 and 5—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am not sure where you are reading from, Minister, but if you read page 171 about primary schools and pages 176 and 177 on secondary schools, on the NAPLAN results with respect to reading and numeracy, Victoria is only meeting two out of eight in each of them, so four out of 16.

Mr MERLINO: There is a really important point here, Mr O'Brien, and for the committee, in terms of confidence intervals and data. So, for example, six of the eight Aboriginal student targets were met for the 2019–20 reporting year with a 95 per cent confidence interval: reading above the bottom three bands in years 5, 7 and 9. I might ask Mr Howes to talk about confidence intervals and the important role that they play.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, just as you do, for example, for the percentage of students above the bottom three bands for numeracy in year 3 the target was 73.4 and we only hit 71.8—and you can go down the column. I guess the question really for the committee and the Parliament is: how are we actually going to get better outcomes other than just by shovelling money at education? We actually want to see results for that money.

Mr MERLINO: Yes. First of all, I will ask Mr Howes to talk about confidence intervals, because when you address that we are meeting a number of the targets, and then I will talk more broadly.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I can perhaps short-circuit that. Yes, that is reflected in the budget papers too—plus or minus 0.9 per cent, plus or minus 1.02 per cent.

Mr MERLINO: It is not an insignificant point, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, when some of them are four and five percentage points out, Minister, it is still relevant. Percentage points of course can be misleading, because we are talking thousands and thousands of students when we are talking 1 or 2 per cent.

Mr MERLINO: Obviously we did not go ahead with NAPLAN this year because of the pandemic, so we have gone on the 2019 results. If you look at both 2018 and 2019 overall, Mr O'Brien, we are one of the leading jurisdictions in the nation when you compare our performance on NAPLAN with other jurisdictions, particularly in primary schools. I might ask Mr Howes to talk a bit further in terms of our performance in NAPLAN compared to other jurisdictions.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well—

Mr MERLINO: Well, you have asked me a question about performance targets; you have asked me a question about NAPLAN. I am endeavouring to answer your questions, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I actually asked: how are we going to deliver the better outcomes? If Mr Howes has that answer, then that is good.

Mr HOWES: Two points—thank you, Mr O'Brien. On confidence intervals, these ensure that year-on-year comparisons are accurate. Always with educational measurement there is a confidence interval. In this case it was 95 per cent, and when you take that into account then the figures for the targets that we have met are much higher. The last NAPLAN results had Victoria leading the country on seven out of 10 measures, and that is a key indicator for us of our progress, because that is the one, if you like, apples-by-apples comparison that we have got in terms of what our performance is, because of course the Education State targets that we hold ourselves to account on are very ambitious. So they keep us to account, but having the state-by-state and jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction comparisons gives us an important point of reference as well. We are confident with the measures that we have put in place for school improvement that we will continue to see those improvement measures rise. We are confident, for example, that the effort that we are putting into supporting students whose learning was most impacted by COVID-19 this year through the tutors program will ensure that that contributes to a lift in performance as well as the investments that are being made in professional development and school leadership.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay, thank you. I am running out of time. Just a quick one: Minister, you talked about the \$70 million minor capital works project that was announced this morning. Are you able to provide today a copy of the breakdown by school?

Mr MERLINO: Absolutely, yes. We can definitely provide that to the committee.

Mr D O'BRIEN: If that can be provided, that would be great. Thank you. I have another question. Budget paper 3, page 174, says there are 157 partner schools aligned with or with access to one of the new tech schools—or newish tech schools. How many days did each child at those partner schools attend the tech schools?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Just bear with me. I will see if I have that information on hand. Otherwise we will take it on notice.

Mr D O'BRIEN: If you do not, a couple of follow-up questions: how many days per year are the tech schools fully utilised, and how are outcomes measured for these tech schools?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you. Mr O'Brien, if you are happy, I can provide that detail on notice.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Can I ask a more general question from my own perspective in Gippsland. We have got the Gippsland Tech School in the valley, but kids from Leongatha, Mirboo North, Sale and Bairnsdale do not access it. What are the criteria? How are those kids going to get access to what you would argue is a good outcome for tech school education when it is only available at a certain number of schools?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, thanks. I might ask Mr Burrage to add to my comments.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I have got 20 seconds left, just so you are aware.

Mr MERLINO: It is a two-part answer. So, what is geographically close? You do not want to drive for hours and hours to get to the tech school, so what is a reasonable distance to the tech schools? We have 10 tech schools. That covers about a third—I think, Mr Burrage?—of our schools.

Mr BURRAGE: Yes.

Mr MERLINO: A third of our secondary schools. I am keen to further expand tech schools, Mr O'Brien, but these will be future budget decisions that we may take.

The CHAIR: I am sorry to cut you off there, but the call has expired. I will pass the call to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Deputy Premier and your officials, for what will be a marathon for many of you today. In your presentation you outlined the Andrews government's disability inclusion package, and it is also in budget paper 3, table 1.9. I am interested in having you explain and perhaps expand a bit on why the government decided to make this particular investment.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Richards, for the question. This is one of the highlights not just of the education budget but of the 2020–21 budget overall. The disability inclusion package is life-changing reform and has been literally years in the making. It goes back to consultations that I was a part of as shadow education minister, with Colin Brooks as the shadow parliamentary secretary and Daniel Andrews when he was Leader of the Opposition. There has been a lot of work, with Mr Richardson as parliamentary secretary engaging with our disability stakeholders.

Back in those opposition days we met with parents, teachers, students, listening to their experiences regarding students with disabilities in government schools. We heard about the lottery—you know, if your local school was inclusive and welcoming of students with additional needs—and we heard about the real challenge with the funding program as it is, the program for students with disabilities. By that approach students with disabilities are assessed against very strict medical criteria to prove that they cannot learn and participate in school to the same extent as a child without disabilities. It is what is known as a deficit-based approach. This is reflected in the PSD student needs assessment, which does not consider sufficiently, in my view, a student's strengths and their functional needs. The process relies heavily on diagnosis and does not provide the rich information about student need in the educational setting and how we can support the student to learn best.

So in Victorian schools approximately 20 per cent of kids, one in five, are identified as requiring some level of adjustment in the school due to their disability. While the current PSD funding approach focuses attention and

resources towards the students within this group with the most complex and highest needs, it does not appropriately recognise and support schools to respond to the needs of the broader cohort of kids.

So we had consultations in opposition, then in 2015 we had a comprehensive review of the PSD led by the former federal national disability discrimination commissioner, Graeme Innes. The review made 25 recommendations to increase the participation and achievement of students with disabilities in government schools, including recommendations to deliver a brand new approach to funding and support for students with disabilities. There has also been the 2016 government schools funding review in Victoria—that was the Bracks review—and the 2017 parliamentary *Inquiry into Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder* report, both of which identified the need for Victoria to shift to a more contemporary and inclusive approach to support students with disability in our government schools.

The findings of all those reports was that making schools more inclusive benefits all students as well as the wider community. These reviews and other research have also identified a range of critical and persistent system challenges that prevent inclusive education in every school. This includes gaps in knowledge; expertise, skills and confidence of the workforce to identify and meet the needs of students with disability and a diverse range of needs; staff that require additional support to build their capability to deliver evidence-based inclusive practices in classrooms in every school; and cultural and attitudinal barriers to inclusion that contribute to low expectations for the achievements of students with a disability.

Since then the government has been committed to continuing to research and develop new funding and support models to better understand and respond to the needs of students with a disability. In 2018 the department ran a pilot of the new disability inclusion profile. The pilot ran in 109 mainstream and specialist schools across Victoria, and 930 students and 4300 teachers, education support staff and family members participated. The pilot tested the key features of the approach. It showed the disability inclusion profile can identify the need for educational adjustments of students with disability across a variety of school settings, and the participants importantly had a high satisfaction with the assessment process and the role of the facilitator. We tested and retested this.

This has been, as I said, years in the making. This is complex work and life-changing reform. Now it is ready to be rolled out across the state, and again it will take us time to roll it out. It is an almost \$1.6 billion initiative, which will double the number of children with complex and high needs receiving support to approximately 55 000 students. It is a world-leading approach. In fact it is the first in the Southern Hemisphere, so something Victoria can be really proud of. The new profile and funding approach will be supported by significant investment in the skills and knowledge of our school workforces through new training and professional learning, scholarships, frontline coaches and extra staff to help schools implement inclusive practices. Thanks, Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Deputy Premier. It is something that makes all our hearts sing, but despite the mask on I think we can see the joy from Mr Richardson's heart perhaps bursting out here in the committee particularly. Will this be available to all government schools from next year, from 2021?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. It is a really important question because the rollout of the funding model—so the change of practice from a deficit funding model to a strength-based model, requiring an additional 1730 staff—is going to take time. So just like the rollout of three-year-old kinder, we will do so area by area across the coming years. But it is really important that every single school see the difference in terms of this reform package from next year, from 2021. So the government will provide more than \$100 million over four years and \$43.6 million ongoing to introduce a suite of resources and initiatives as part of the disability inclusion package. From mid-2021 all Victorian schools will be able to access the resources, additional support and guidance made available through these initiatives. That will include 16 new coaching roles to support school leaders and staff. This coaching will benefit all students but will have a focus on particular needs of students with diagnosed and undiagnosed neurodevelopmental differences, such as characteristics associated with autism, dyslexia, developmental coordination disorder and dyscalculia.

New blended online courses and e-learning modules will also be introduced by 2021, and by 2025 this will include eight new blended learning courses and 12 new e-learning modules for teachers and support staff across the state. In addition, disability inclusion continues the masters scholarships in inclusive education and applied

behaviour analysis and introduces a new graduate certificate in education with a focus on learning difficulties from 2022. Once developed, this initiative will provide 150 scholarships per year.

The first tranche of an estimated 80 new specialist school outreach roles—so we are going to have outreach from 80 specialist schools going out and engaging with the mainstream to support mainstream schools in implementing inclusive education practices—will be introduced. These roles will support schools through coaching, collaboration, professional learning and peer support. Lastly, the package includes more information, advice and resources to support parents statewide to engage effectively with schools and student learning and in understanding the learning needs of students in the classroom and evidence-based teaching practice. So while the rollout of the funding model will be progressive over the next few years, there will be real change at every school, supporting staff, students and parents, from next year.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you again, Minister. I suppose it is interesting for the committee to have some sort of understanding in the couple of minutes I have left of the rationale for the staged rollout, and if you could perhaps provide some insight into why everything cannot be rolled out from day 1, term 1, that would really help us as well.

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Richards, and it goes to what I have been talking about there—what are the immediate things that we can do universally across our 1500 government schools? Rolling out the new disability inclusion profile and funding model will require significant preparation and will change longstanding systems, processes and practices. We want to make sure every student, every parent and every school has adequate time to transition to this new approach. We want to do it right, and that takes time. That was identified in the Innes review, the PSD review—take steady steps towards what is a fundamental reform.

Critical to that is the new facilitator workforce. So these are facilitators that come in, engage with the student, having the student at the centre—parents, school staff, medical practitioners. That facilitator role is the critical element. It is not this cold, calculated, ‘If you’re below 70 you’re okay, if you’re above 70 you’re out and you get nothing’. We are doing away with that cold, medical-focused approach and replacing it with this facilitator role, and that is a large workforce that will bring all those people together. These are high-quality people. Once they are recruited, facilitators will need to be trained to ensure they are able to drive a positive and collaborative process as well as provide guidance and support to schools and families.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister, but the member’s time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Deputy Premier and team, for your presentation today. I would like to ask a couple of questions starting around the tutoring program. In the budget papers it says that—this is in budget paper 2, page 49:

... recruitment of more than 4 100 tutors to help students catch up in 2021 ...

Can you please describe how this program is going to work, because ‘catch up’ sort of seems to imply that it is a temporary thing, and yet it looks like the schools are actually directly employing tutors. Is this going to be a long-term thing, or how is this going to work?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Limbrick, for your question. This is a massive, massive investment in individual learning as a direct response to the pandemic. This is an absolute focus on what we can do in the 2021 calendar year, because a number of students thrived during remote and flexible learning but there is absolutely no doubt that a number of students really struggled. What we have found is that students that had struggled most or are at most risk of disengaging as students return to face to face are students particularly from low socioeconomic disadvantage—vulnerable kids are most at risk. Particularly once we went into that second round of remote and flexible learning, we knew we had to do something significant in the 2021 calendar year.

Mr LIMBRICK: So that implies that it is just like a one-year thing?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. This is absolutely a massive focus in the 2021 calendar year for students who need support to catch up—individualised learning. We may go to these matters later in the day, but in term 4, as students return to face to face, the number one priority is students’ mental health and wellbeing. But the other key thing that is happening this term is teachers are engaging with students. There are a number of assessment tools that are being utilised to find out exactly where kids are at so that when students return to face to face at

the start of term next year and through the year there are going to be these additional teachers supporting those kids. Once we made the announcement—the \$250 million, 4100 tutors—we immediately allowed people to put in an expression of interest. I am just absolutely delighted to report to you and the committee we have had well over 18 000 people—retired teachers, pre-service teachers, casual relief teachers, teachers who might be on extended leave—nominate and say, ‘I’m here to help next year’. They will be paid, and that is what the funding is all about, obviously. And what I am hoping, Mr Limbrick, is that out of those more than 18 000 people that have expressed an interest in being part of the tutor program a number of them will get back into education.

So the tutor program is an absolute emphasis on the 2021 calendar year, but we will be working—and I might ask Mr Howes to add to my comments—with that entire cohort of people who have expressed an interest in helping. There will be many, many, perhaps thousands, that will choose to come back on a more permanent basis—whether that is permanent part-time or full-time—into education.

Mr LIMBRICK: So they are going to be working within the school? Because there are lots of private tutors as well that people get to come to their house, or they go to a tutoring school or this sort of thing. So students will get taken out of their class to be with the tutor? Is that how it works?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. It will be a school-based decision. I might ask Mr Howes to speak in a moment, but the strong advice we got was—particularly if I go back to that the students that have been most impacted by remote and flexible learning are vulnerable kids, disadvantaged kids—you grab them during the school day. It would be very, very hard if we were only providing the tutoring program outside of school hours. So it will be a local decision. It may be before and after school, it may be during lunch and recess or it may well be grabbing three, four or five students during a classroom setting and having the tutor or having their classroom teacher give that individualised learning support. I might ask Mr Howes to add to my comments.

Mr HOWES: Thanks, Minister. Mr Limbrick, it is a really important question about how this will operate, because as you would know, one of the issues with providing this kind of support in the past has been the stigmatisation of students who feel that they are being singled out. So one of the ways that that will be avoided will be a plan that many schools are putting in place to have the tutor work in the class, team-teaching with the teacher but working with small groups who might need additional support. And the other crucial thing to point out is that, as the minister said, this is targeted at those students whose learning was most impacted—and disadvantaged students and vulnerable students are disproportionately represented in that, but they can be students who are high achievers as well as students who struggled before the pandemic, so a young person who has really got high aspirations but who struggled for whatever reason because of their home circumstances through remote learning will have the chance to catch up back to that high performance—as well as supporting the students who have experienced learning difficulties. And this will be done in school time, both with the model of team-teaching in the class and where if the school decides that a group of students will most benefit from being withdrawn they have got that capacity to make that decision, and that could just be for a few weeks or over a term or over the year.

Mr LIMBRICK: So why was this model chosen over other types of models? Because I know that lots of parents are already engaging with private tutors for this exact purpose—to help their children catch up—or they are sending them to private cram school type things to help them catch up. Will this sort of be in competition with what is happening in the private sector? Other models could have been to provide some sort of voucher or something to parents—I could think of a number of different models. Why was this particular model chosen to roll this out?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Limbrick. There is some research, particularly out of the UK—I might ask Mr Howes if he can find it while I am talking—that shows that small group tutoring can have a massive impact on learning outcomes. We thought long and hard about the best way to support students who need that catch-up. So it is a combination of the research that shows that small group tutoring has the biggest bang for your buck, if you like, and the second reason we went for this model is because we are particularly focused on disadvantaged and vulnerable children. We know that you have to make the intervention during the school day. And Mr Howes might add to that.

Mr HOWES: If I could add a point, Mr Limbrick, we are also very conscious of the importance of this being applied across the state, and those commercial tutoring programs are often not available in rural Victoria in the most remote schools. This ensures that schools are able to engage a tutor as part of their workforce. It

ensures that that person is a fully qualified tutor or has got permission to teach. So this was the model that we thought guaranteed the most consistent approach across rural and regional Victoria as well as metropolitan Melbourne.

Mr LIMBRICK: Understood.

Mr MERLINO: Sorry, Mr Limbrick, just to quickly add for the benefit of the committee, it was research and evidence through the Education Endowment Fund in the United Kingdom and also the Grattan Institute which showed that small group tutoring can provide an additional five months of learning in just 20 weeks. That intensive work with small groups of children can have a really lasting and significant impact.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Minister. You might need to take this next question on notice, because I do not expect you to be able to provide it immediately, but some of the things in the education budget appear to be to remedy problems that have happened during the pandemic and other things are normal and new initiatives. Would it be possible to provide a breakdown of what parts of the budget are remedies, or how much of the budget is for remedies, and how much of it is not—is normal things?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, I am happy to provide that, to break down the budget in a different way to give you a sense of that, Mr Limbrick. Happy to do that.

Mr LIMBRICK: I acknowledge it would be fairly rough. And in the short time I have got left, when I spoke to the Treasurer this week I asked the question, ‘If we’re investing all this money, why don’t we invest more?’, right? And the response was, ‘Because there are capacity constraints’—like for construction you need workers and buildings and materials and all these sorts of things. How are you going to manage those capacity constraints when doing these school upgrades and ensure that you are not sort of competing with other government projects or raising prices in the sector? How are you going to manage that?

Mr MERLINO: Yeah, it is a challenge, and we have got to make sure that we have got as strong a program as we can but that it does not run too fast or too far ahead of what industry can provide. I might ask Mr Keating to add to my comments, but we engage deeply with industry and we push them. There has been significant increasing capability and engagement. We have got the benefit, Mr Limbrick, of focusing on tier 2 and 3 builders so the spread is broader, whether it is architects or whether it is the builders themselves. But I might ask Mr Keating in terms of how we strike that balance.

Mr KEATING: So over the last five years particularly we have really worked to bring new builders in. Traditionally government uses very large builders, but in schools, often in regional Victoria, we are using a lot of smaller builders as well, so it is spread very widely. Actually straight after this PAEC session today we have our briefing session for all our builders where we bring them in and we train them up and we explain what their opportunities are in the local areas. So what we are really doing is working across the whole of the construction industry to make sure we have got the broader spread, that they understand the work required. But then also the phasing of projects—we have got a big spread of smaller projects for which we go to the smaller builders, but also then the larger projects, like the new schools or other vertical schools—

The CHAIR: I am sorry to cut you off there, Mr Keating, but the member’s time has expired and I will pass the call to Mr Tim Richardson, MP.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Deputy Premier and department representatives for joining us today. I want to take you back to the disability inclusion package, but before I do I just want to say that the comments from the Deputy Chair around attendance being a turn-up exercise this year trivialise the efforts of teachers and education support staff. It is not the view of this committee and certainly of members, and I think it undermines all that effort that has been put in this year.

Mr RIORDAN: A point of order, Chair. Mr Richardson has been able to editorialise on my comments, and it has been your ruling all along that when people editorialise the other person gets some comeback. My point, Mr Richardson, was before—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, there is no point of order.

Mr RIORDAN: The extraordinary circumstances of this year are by no way—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you please not speak over the top of the Chair. There is absolutely no point of order, and the ruling I have made previously is that if committee members put a proposition to the witness—not to each other but to the witness—then the witness should have an opportunity to respond. Mr Richardson is entitled to have a preamble, and given your love of preambles I would have thought you would appreciate it. Thank you, Mr Riordan.

Mr Riordan interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, there is no point of order and the call is with Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Taking you back to the disability inclusion package, Deputy Premier, I am wondering for the benefit of the committee if you could outline: how does the disability inclusion differ from the program for students with disability?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Mr Richardson, for that important question. There is a fundamental difference between what we are going to roll out through disability inclusion and what currently happens through the PSD. As I indicated to Ms Richards, one of the elements is the facilitator role, which is completely different. At the moment it is a laborious, cold and medical process—documentation—to see whether a child will receive funding through PSD or miss out. So the new facilitator role will be created to identify individual student strengths and educational needs. It brings families, health professionals and schools together to guide the types of tailored support the child needs. Facilitators will bring schools, families and health professionals together to implement this world-leading approach. They will guide—and this has been the experience through the pilot—a productive, positive discussion with school staff and with parents or carers; provide guidance to help attendees identify and discuss the student's needs and required adjustments; and build capacity in schools to identify needs and adjustments. They will also support schools through the broader process, including providing information about how schools can best prepare for the meeting and follow up as needed to provide or request further information.

This will take place during a student supports group meeting with the school, parent, student and facilitator. This disability inclusion profile and new facilitator role embed a new strengths-based approach for how schools identify and respond to student needs. This approach focuses on what an individual student can do, identifying what they need support to do rather than assuming that this is based on their disability. It involves asking the right questions and putting the student at the centre of that conversation and collaborative process.

The next element that is very, very different is the tiered approach to the funding, and this again goes back to the Graeme Innes review of PSD. The new funding model introduces two new supplementary funding allocations for students with a disability. So as with PSD, the new funding model provides schools with funding to support students with disability who have complex and high needs. It also provides funding at a school level to support students to provide adjustments through adapted teaching, targeted support and school-level adjustments for students with a disability. So if you can picture direct funding to students, but also that second tier, which is funding to the school, because every single school, every classroom, has students with additional needs, has students that are requiring some level of adjustment. The tiered funding model is the mechanism that allocates supplementary additional funding to government schools in Victoria to support students with a disability.

So as I said, tier 1 is the core universal funding tier for all students attending government schools, and this reform does not change how this funding is determined. Tier 2 is a school-level allocation that will be able to support a broad number of students with disability through adapted teaching, targeted support, school-level adjustments. That funding is formula-based, and that will provide schools with sustainable and predictable funding, because often at the moment one year you have a student that receives PSD, the next year that student might have left for another school or gone into year 7 and that funding is gone. So we will have this predictable level of funding, and then there is the additional tier 3 student-level funding, which is the highest level.

In contrast, the PSD allocates funding to schools through the educational needs questionnaire and defined eligibility criteria. The PSD currently supports 4 per cent of the government school population with high needs. Tier 2 is intended to be used flexibly by schools in ways that suit their student needs. It might be to provide schools leaders and staff with additional training, it might be to increase access to specialist expertise, it might

be to employ additional teachers and other staff, it might be the purchase of equipment and resources to support learning.

Mr RICHARDSON: Deputy Premier, can I take you then to the strengths-based approach, and this is probably one of the biggest hallmarks or changes particularly in culture and an element of the disability inclusion space. You say the focus is on student strengths rather than what they cannot do—the deficit model. I am wondering if you can detail what that practically means. What difference does that make?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Mr Richardson. A strength-based approach focuses on what an individual student can do and identifying what they need support to do rather than assuming, as I said, that this is based on their disability. Fundamentally it is about asking the right questions and putting the student at the centre of that collaborative process. The disability inclusion profile is a strength-based process to help schools and families identify the strengths, needs and adjustments schools can make to support students with a disability.

In contrast, currently students with a disability are assessed against that strict criteria to prove they cannot learn and participate in school to the same extent. It was interesting—I do not know if you saw some of the media and a comment from a parent in regard to the current PSD. She talked about how she had to describe her child's worst day, you know, and she said how that is such a negative approach. Rather than looking at her son and what he can do, what his strengths are, what his functional needs are and what the adjustments are, it is about putting down on paper on his worst day how bad he is, basically. And that is the difference between the two approaches. It is about a child's capacity to achieve their learning potential. This is putting it in a much better frame, and I think ultimately it will deliver exactly that.

Mr RICHARDSON: It changes that lobbyist requirement that parents, guardians and grandparents have had to confront, and it is a massive change, and it will really make a difference for so many people. In the final moments that I have got, Deputy Premier, with the kinds of disabilities and additional needs and complex behaviours that will get additional support where they would not previously get that support, I am wondering if you can outline some of those changes and what that support will bring.

Mr MERLINO: Yes, it is an important question, and you think about how everyone would have spoken to parents of children with dyslexia, with autism, that have missed out on PSD funding. And that is again what this reform goes to. So, all schools will benefit from the change as they will be better able to support students who may have previously been ineligible for targeted funding support, including students with autism, students with dyslexia or students with complex behaviours.

In addition, disability inclusion will introduce a range of initiatives that will build capability in schools to respond to the needs of diverse learners. This includes the establishment of a new diverse learners hub. The hub will provide capability-building support to all schools to help their staff meet the educational needs of children and young people with a range of neurodevelopmental differences, including autism, attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Asperger's disorder, dyspraxia, dyslexia, dyscalculia and Tourette's syndrome. The hub will be a virtual centre of excellence which will progressively provide online professional learning, resources and guidance in partnership with research and practice experts and provide more intensive coaching support to school leaders to help them strengthen their inclusive practices at the whole school level. This coaching will benefit all students but will have a focus on the particular needs of students with diagnosed and undiagnosed neurodevelopmental differences.

This builds on some of the changes we have made over the years. You know, we made special needs compulsory for ITE students. So, for a student going through their university course previously it was an elective; we have now made it compulsory. We have made it compulsory in terms of professional development for teachers. This change is a massive step forward in terms of the broad capability of the workforce and normalising what is absolutely normal. As I said, in every classroom there are students that require adjustments, and we need every classroom and every single school to be truly inclusive.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Premier, and I will pass the call to Ms Bridget Vallenge, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Minister, at budget paper 3, pages 27 to 28, in terms of the tutoring program, the \$250 million tutoring program which the government is needing to spend to employ tutors to help

students catch up—those students that need it. Can you advise how much tutoring time each student will actually get?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Vallenge, for your question. It will differ across schools. So, for example, there will be a base level of funding for every single school but a large secondary school with a high SFOE might be in the order of \$1 million additional funding—so base level of funding, but significant additional funding. If we average it out across all our schools, we have based it on three 45-minute sessions—so small group tutoring of three 45-minute sessions in a week. Now, some schools will do a bit more, some schools will do that differently, but that is the average that we have taken in terms of the costing and the approach.

Ms VALLENCE: Three 45-minute sessions. With the funding that you have allocated, how many students do you expect will be receiving this tutoring?

Mr MERLINO: The assessment, Ms Vallenge, was that around 200 000 students will require additional support in terms of their catch-up, and again this will vary school to school based on their level of disadvantage.

Ms VALLENCE: So two to three sessions of around 45 minutes in small group sessions, and we know that our students had around six to seven months of homeschooling and you have mentioned that a lot need catch up. That is only just over two additional hours of tutoring per student for around six months of being out of in-classroom education. Do you really think that just over 2 hours extra tutoring catch-up is enough?

Mr MERLINO: Yes, I do. That is based on research and evidence. As I mentioned before, the Grattan Institute and the evidence out of the UK show that small group tutoring over a period of 20 weeks or so—and we will be doing more than that—could make a five-month difference in the learning level achieved by those students who are engaging it. This is absolutely significant and it is based on research and evidence.

Ms VALLENCE: So your data is telling you that only just over 2 hours of additional tutoring will allow these kids to catch up?

Mr MERLINO: These are additional teachers in the classroom setting focused—

Ms VALLENCE: I appreciate they are additional teachers and I think that that is a great opportunity for that, but what I am asking about are the outcomes. We have heard before in this committee around outcomes. I just want to know: do you think that these students who have been, as you said, the most disadvantaged and whose learning outcomes have been set back—we even know that this committee heard at the last hearings that the teachers union said that it was almost a write-off this year—that just over 2 hours of additional tutoring will be enough to catch these students up, as you said, for those students who need it most?

Mr MERLINO: Yes. Yes, Ms Vallenge. The research shows that small group tutoring can provide an additional five months of learning in just 20 weeks. This is a massive investment. This is the single biggest investment in individual learning that the state—the nation—has ever seen. So this tutoring of 4100 additional teachers in our schools through 2021 will make a massive difference, and I can advise this committee that other jurisdictions—New South Wales—have picked up our approach and will deliver a similar program. This will make a huge impact and if you talk to your local prims in your communities, Ms Vallenge, I am sure they will back up what I have told you. There will be many, many additional teachers providing that individual support for students to catch up.

Ms VALLENCE: On that, Minister—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Vallenge. Just for the record, the education union has not given any evidence in these estimates hearings.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, well, I can show you the transcript. Minister—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Vallenge. This is the consideration of budget estimates and the union has not appeared at this inquiry, so you may be confusing your inquiries, but the union is not at this one.

Ms VALLENCE: Minister, on what you just said there about the New South Wales government, we know that our students have lost around six or seven months of education or—

Mr MERLINO: No, that is incorrect, Ms Vallence.

Ms VALLENCE: All right, I will rephrase that. Our students have been doing homeschooling for around six to seven months. In New South Wales we know that that was around one month. The New South Wales government has allocated around \$337 million for tutoring around 5000 students, on your point referring to the New South Wales government, whereas you are only putting in around \$250 million. Can you take us through how that comparison is good enough for Victorian students who have been set back?

Mr MERLINO: Thanks, Ms Vallence. That is not an apples-with-apples comparison. New South Wales is a bigger system. They have got more schools. This is a massive investment in individual learning in our schools. It will make a massive, massive difference. Can I tell you that with remote and flexible learning students continue to learn and students continue to engage in the curriculum. Teachers have made an extraordinary effort. I have seen that firsthand with my kids, both primary and secondary, the engagement, the learning. Yes, it was different. Yes, it was difficult. Yes, some days were better than others. But students continued to learn, and I am confident that will be reflected in outcomes over coming years. So yes, it has been difficult, but I would absolutely, categorically not agree that this has been a lost period.

Ms VALLENCE: You mentioned I think to Mr Limbrick that there are around 18 000 people who have expressed interest in becoming a tutor. Of those 18 000 how many are suitable or meet an acceptable standard or criteria to engage?

Mr MERLINO: Well, that will be a process that we work through with the VIT, Ms Vallence, the institute of teaching. All of the tutors that will be employed will be registered teachers or have been given permission to teach via the VIT. This was an important part of the program. The program was always about getting qualified people to do this intensive work, and that is why it is focused on only retired teachers, casual relief teachers, preservice teachers or teachers on leave. But every one of them will be registered by the VIT.

Ms VALLENCE: A question to you, Secretary. We know that in education there is employment of a lot of casual staff for a range of needs. How many casual staff are there across the state school network, and do you expect the department will be included as part of the government's new secure work scheme?

Ms ATTA: Excuse me, Ms Vallence. I may have to follow up with you around whether we have actual numbers of casual FTE across the school workforce.

Ms VALLENCE: I presume you would be paying them, so in terms of payment to casual staff you would have their bank details to pay them. Could you provide that perhaps on notice if you do not have it today?

Ms ATTA: Sure. I can look at what we can provide on notice. It is important just to note that, while we do report total FTE in terms of our school workforce—the schools employ their teaching workforce; all of the teaching workforce we have specific data on—they do through local payroll employ other supplementary staff, some of whom might be part time or casual. But I am very happy to take that away and see what level of breakdown we can provide.

Ms VALLENCE: And do you expect that with those casual staff the department will be subject to the new secure work scheme?

Ms ATTA: Sorry, Ms Vallence. If you could just clarify—the secure—

Ms VALLENCE: The government's secure work scheme to pay casual staff for carers and sick leave.

Ms ATTA: I can certainly assure you that the school system complies with all required processes and meets all legal obligations et cetera in relation to our workforce.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you. And, Minister, page 167 of budget paper 3 refers to primary school students meeting standards of literacy and numeracy. You announced the other day about a ban on banking in schools. Minister, does the government have any plans to set up or use its own state-owned deposit saving schemes for primary school students to deposit money into?

Mr MERLINO: No.

Ms VALLENCE: No? That is good. And in terms of the financial literacy, how much does that cost, that scheme? Will you take that on notice?

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Vallence, your time has expired.

Ms VALLENCE: The minister just nodded yes.

The CHAIR: I will give the call to Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. Good morning, Deputy Premier and department officials. I refer to budget paper 3, page 35. Could you please explain why the government commissioned the review into vocational and applied learning pathways in senior secondary schooling, commonly known as the Firth review, and why the government has accepted all of the recommendations of the review?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Ms Taylor, for that question. This is probably the other reform piece that I am really excited about. Victoria has got some real strengths in vocational and applied learning pathways. The Victorian certificate of applied learning is unique in Australia, providing a relatively flexible way of engaging students in vocational learning. Vocational education and training delivered to school students help to build students' technical skills and their understanding of industries and occupations. Students can also commence apprenticeships and traineeships while at school through a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship—SBATs, as we call them—or Head Start apprenticeships and traineeships. However, it is true to say that the quality of these programs varies, and Mr Maas would know this in terms of secondary schools in his electorate. While some schools deliver well-operating and highly regarded vocational pathway programs, other school programs are less successful. Indeed, some schools do not offer much at all in the way of vocational pathways. So this means unfortunately that some students are not receiving the high-quality vocational and applied learning that they deserve. We are aware that some students face barriers to accessing quality vocational education and training at their school.

There are also reports that VCAL certificates are overly complex for schools to deliver and for students to navigate. It is actually more costly for parents and schools as well, and VCAL assessment does not encourage students to excel, as VCAL students receive either an S or an N. They either get a 'satisfactory' or get a 'not yet complete' on their statement of results, meaning that VCAL students are unable to demonstrate higher levels of learning as VCE students are able to. We know—and this is the thing—that vocational education leads to great jobs and fulfilling careers. If you think about Victoria's Big Build, if you think about our investments in early childhood, in family violence, in disability and all of those occupations and careers, a vocational pathway will lead to great careers and well-paying jobs. Yet many students are not choosing a vocational pathway, because it is not seen as a high-achieving option.

We must do something about that, and that is why in the Firth review we asked John Firth, former CEO of the VCAA, to address these questions directly. We are determined to design a clear, consistent and high-quality applied learning system that improves access to and transitions between school, post-secondary education and work for all students. The government has accepted all of the recommendations in principle. The review recommendations taken together provide a transformative reform agenda to directly improve the skills and work readiness of young people by lifting the quality and perception of vocational education, supporting more students to access high-quality programs and providing students with a vocational pathway that gives them the skills they need to move successfully into jobs and further training.

The budget invests \$38.1 million to support students to do just that and develop a new vocational pathway within the Victorian certificate of education. Specific initiatives in the budget will support the development of a new vocational and applied learning pathway within the VCE but, just as importantly, develop a new foundations pathways certificate. So there is foundation VCAL, which is particularly important for students with additional needs, for our special schools, providing a vocational certificate and a pathway to work and training beyond the school—so an applied pathway within the VCE as well as a new foundations pathway certificate—and we will have our first student cohort commencing that in 2023. This is again complex work, detailed engagement across education in terms of all our stakeholders, and you have got the new cohort of VCAL students next year. You have got to deliver this well in advance so students know what the environment is. So VCAL students in years 11 and 12 in 2021–22 are part of the VCAL certificate.

It provides secondary schools with funding in 2021 and 2022, with jobs, skills and pathways coordinators to provide practical support for planning and the administration of vocational and applied learning pathways; and funds new jobs, skills and pathway managers in regions—so the coordinators are in schools, the managers are in our regions—to provide support to schools to help make the delivery of vocational and applied learning easier and promote collaboration across schools. Thanks, Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. So do the changes proposed in the Firth review build on vocational education initiatives and reforms that are already being rolled out across Victoria?

Mr MERLINO: Thank you, Ms Taylor. That is an important question because we are not starting from zero. The government has already made significant investments in vocational and applied learning for secondary students. One of the big ones was \$109 million over four years and \$26.7 million ongoing for the transforming career education initiative—this is about engaging students more deeply and at an earlier age in terms of career opportunities; \$49.8 million over four years for the Head Start apprenticeships and traineeships—that is our new model, providing school students with more time doing paid, on-the-job training while completing their VCE or VCAL; and \$26.2 million to support professional development for VET and VCAL teachers and VET trainers and to retrain industry professionals as VET teachers in Victorian secondary schools.

The recommendations outlined by John Firth will build on this investment by addressing the next key areas for reform: a new high-quality certificate, universal access to quality vocational and applied learning pathways and more in-school support for students. Funding is provided to schools for the jobs, skills and pathways coordinators to provide advice and support for students choosing vocational and applied learning programs and practical support with attending classes, which are sometimes offsite, and monitoring progress.

Behind the scenes, coordinators will work with training providers and employers to ensure that students get the most out of their learning and training and reduce the administration burden on schools so they can get on with the job of delivering high-quality teaching and supporting students. The managers will provide schools with practical support for design and delivery of vocational and applied learning pathways, including making sure students can access a reasonable range of VET courses that meet their strengths and interests and local employers' needs. Managers will support schools to improve quality and delivery through collaboration with other schools, such as forming clusters of delivery of VET and strengthening connections with employers and VET providers. Stronger connections with local employers will ensure students can benefit from work-related learning that helps them put their learning into real-world contexts.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. So what are the benefits of having a single integrated secondary school certificate?

Mr MERLINO: Fundamentally a single certificate will provide students with deeper integration of academic and applied learning that helps bring learning to life. You know, there is almost this artificial separation between the two. You look at other jurisdictions and it is deep and students can follow their passions and their interests and their skills, and that will often be a combination of academic and applied learning. So this means that students will be better engaged, more likely to stay in education and better prepared for post-school pathways with the skills and work readiness that they need. A single certificate will give students more flexibility to combine high-quality academic and applied learning currently undertaken through VCAL with VCE studies in line with their interests, strengths and career aspirations, and this approach will help prepare students for diverse post-school pathways which may involve both university and high-level VET qualifications.

The move to a single certificate will happen in stages. The first is the creation of a new vocational specialist pathway within the VCE, with the first cohort of students starting the new certificate in 2023. The next stage will create a fully integrated senior secondary certificate by 2025. This staged approach will mean that students that are currently enrolled in VCAL and VCE will not be negatively impacted by the changes. The staged approach also means that we can take a measured and consultative approach to implementing the reforms. The department and the VCAA will consult deeply with students, schools, universities, TAFEs, peak bodies, industry and employers and with other service providers. Students, schools, families and employers will be given plenty of notice about what these changes mean for them and will be fully supported in the lead-up to the introduction of changes to the certificate.

Ms TAYLOR: Great. And how will students with additional needs benefit from the changes proposed by the Firth report?

Mr MERLINO: This goes to the foundational pathway, so students with a disability and vulnerable cohorts, including students at risk of disengaging—

The CHAIR: Sorry to cut you off there, Minister, but the time has expired, and the time for consideration of this portfolio has expired. We thank you and your officials for appearing before the committee in this capacity today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a short break, and we will reconvene at 10.35 with you for the consideration of the mental health portfolio.

Witnesses withdrew.