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# Inquiry into State Schools Faculty of Education Response



The Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to provide recommendations to the Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria. We commend the department for its commitment to enhancing the quality of education in our state.

This submission opens with an executive summary stating our position on the themes of the inquiry, before focusing on items pertaining to terms of reference (1) trends in student learning outcomes, (2) the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, (3) student wellbeing, (4) administrative burden on teachers and (6) school funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes.

## Executive summary

- Current school funding arrangements are notably inadequate, reflecting a direct correlation between educational inequalities and student outcomes.
- Early career teachers often in contract roles are increasingly compelled to ascent to leadership roles as they strive to secure a permanent position. This exacerbates their workload and the pressures of adjusting to the profession.
- Career-change teachers require specific funding to aid their transition and retention in schools.
- School refusal and disengagement stem from emotional distress associated with school, requiring multi-tiered supports, as well as comprehensive data collection and targeted, ongoing interventions.
- Post-pandemic, schools face heightened mental health issues. Disadvantaged students in state schools are disproportionately affected. Integrated well-being and social and emotional learning reforms are necessary and will benefit all students.
- Despite the perceived potential of new digital technologies to reduce administrative burdens for teachers, research indicates that while certain tasks become semi-automated, the overall workload for educators remains largely unaffected; investigations into how technology intersects with policy interventions that target the root causes of increased teacher workloads and their consequences are needed.

## Response to the Terms of Reference

### 1. Trends in student learning

Funding disparities contribute to educational inequalities, impacting student outcomes and worsening socio-economic gaps. As detailed further below in response to reference item (6), recent data, including the Better and Fairer review (Department of Education, 2023) highlights Australia's global prominence in concentrated

advantage for private schools and disadvantage for public schools. Pronounced learning gaps are evident between students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Concerning trends around school refusal also require urgent attention (McKay-Brown & Melvin, 2023). The recent Senate Inquiry's findings into national school refusal highlight the need for a unified, national response to the escalating problem of school refusal, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19 lockdowns. Acknowledging the substantial increase in students experiencing an inability to return to school, the inquiry proposes a comprehensive approach involving improved data collection methods, targeted research initiatives, and interventions within a multi-tiered system of support. It is important to remember that school refusal should not be conflated with truancy: refusal stems from emotional distress associated with attending school, and these factors must be addressed at a school-wide level (McKay-Brown & Melvin, 2023).

Relatedly, a recent industry report from the Faculty, '[Those Who Disappear: The Australian Education Problem Nobody Wants to Talk About](#)', highlights the national crisis and concerning absence of information regarding the location and reasons for detachment of young Australians of compulsory school age who are no longer engaged in formal education (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019). Although there is no national data set, conservative estimates suggest that over 50,000 detached students may exist across the country. There is an urgent need for the State Government to work collaboratively with schools across all sectors to:

- improve tracking systems and data sharing; provide funding and long-term support for accessible tailored programs and alternative and/or flexible schools for at-risk children and young people;
- identify and support children who are detached from education to re-enter the education system;
- provide greater investments in psychology, mental health and allied support services;
- remove systemic barriers that construct school success as achievement scores in literacy and numeracy, rather than a more holistic view of physical, social and emotional health and well-being; and
- prepare students for post-school pathways alongside cross-curriculum academic achievement. (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019).

## 2. The state of the teaching profession in Victoria

The role of initial teacher education has become highly politicised with challenges in attracting and retaining teachers and declining student outcomes regularly attributed to initial teacher preparation. The complexity of this context is such that initial teacher education has become a key policy area, often sparking system-level reviews and reforms resulting in heavy scrutiny about what constitutes best practice teacher preparation (Acquaro & Gurr, 2022; McLean Davies, forthcoming). Support for teachers must begin with high-quality, comprehensive initial teacher education (ITE). The University of Melbourne has a strong history of evidence-based programs aimed at improving graduate teacher preparedness. Noteworthy among these are clinical praxis exams (Kameniar et al., 2017; McLean Davies et al., 2015), the Assessment for Graduate Teaching (AfGT) (Kriewaldt et al., 2021; McGraw et al., 2021; Stacey et al., 2020), and the Teacher Capability Assessment Tool (TCAT) (Clinton, 2016; Clinton & Dawson, 2018).

While initial teacher education is charged with ensuring that teacher graduates are classroom-ready, their work extends well beyond independent practice in a teacher's classroom (Acquaro & Gurr, 2022). The practice of leadership learning within initial teacher education is gaining momentum with leading initial teacher education providers globally now highlighting links to leadership knowledge and skill development within their teacher preparation courses and the opportunities for this in creating a more highly skilled workforce (Acquaro, 2019). With respect to school leadership and teacher retention, recent research has revealed substantial pressures on early career teachers to transition into leadership roles as a pathway to securing permanent positions (Acquaro, 2019; Acquaro & Gurr, 2022; Gurr et al., forthcoming; De Nobile, 2012). Although there are supports available for

aspirant middle leaders and senior leaders, more needs to be done to support graduate and early career teachers both in terms of job security and professional learning. Therefore, we suggest that i) initial teacher education programs include leadership preparation, ii) more permanent roles be made available to early career teachers to make teaching a more attractive profession, and iii) support is provided to schools for dedicated professional learning and mentorship opportunities for early career teachers.

A tailored response for career change teachers, who now constitute about one-third of the teaching workforce internationally, is also required in terms of recruitment and retention. The MGSE Industry Report 'Career Changers: Keeping Career-Change Teachers in the Profession' (Dadvand, Dawborn-Gundlach, van Driel & Speldewinde, 2021) makes the following recommendations:

- Universities must support career-change teachers through tailored induction, transition and adjustment to teaching programs.
- Funding is required to research the motivation, transition, and retention of career-change teachers.
- Schools should provide school-based mentors to offer pedagogical advice and develop the social-professional networks of career-change teachers.
- School leaders should assist in the integration of new teachers into the collegial context of schools and support their adjustment to school work.

With respect to time pressures and pragmatic challenges faced by teachers in government schools, the initiative to reduce face-to-face teaching hours for primary, secondary and specialist school teachers (by one hour in 2023 and a further 30 minutes in 2024) does provide more time that teachers need to plan and collaborate. However, it should be acknowledged that a more nuanced and differentiated approach to both time requirements and funding allocations is essential for effectively supporting the diverse needs of teachers and schools.

### 3. Student wellbeing

Post-pandemic, schools are dealing with the increased prevalence of mental and social health problems affecting children and young people. The [Mission Australia 2022 survey](#) of 15 to 19-year-olds showed that a concerning proportion of young people are extremely or very concerned about their mental health, including 45.8% of females; 21.5 % of males and 66% of gender-diverse young people.

Disadvantaged populations are disproportionately affected by health problems, including mental health. The second [Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) (Lawrence et al., 2015) shows higher rates of mental disorders for children and young people from families with low household incomes.

More than one in five children and adolescents had a mental disorder in families with low household incomes compared with one in ten from those not in low-income households. Nearly 30% of children living in sole carer families who were unemployed had a mental illness, compared with one in ten children in families where both carers were employed.

As state schools cater for the greatest proportion of students affected by disadvantage, they require further investment to assist them to respond effectively. However, all students stand to benefit from school reform approaches which integrate wellbeing with learning (Avery et al., 2021; Cahill et al., 2021).

At a prevention level, a [substantial body of research](#) shows that well-implemented social and emotional learning (SEL) programs lead to improved mental health (Wang et al., 2016), improved social capabilities and respectful regard (Cahill et al., 2023), improved academic attainment (Cipriano et al., 2023), and reductions in bullying and gender-based violence (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Social and emotional learning programs have also been found to be beneficial for students returning to school post-disaster (Cahill et al., 2020). However, curriculum crowding and lack of access to professional learning means that the provision of SEL programs tends to be neglected, particularly in secondary schools (Ercikan et al., 2015). Implementation research shows that teachers need professional learning, and conducive policy and curriculum frameworks, along with resourcing and in-school leadership support if they are to implement effectively (Cahill & Dadvand, 2020; Dadvant & Cahill, 2020). They also benefit from support in the use of positive approaches to managing student behaviour (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Taken together, the prevalence of mental and social health problems, and the strong evidence about effective approaches to prevention, provide a clear imperative to boost the capacity and resourcing of state schools to provide social and emotional learning.

#### 4. Administrative burden on teachers and new technologies

Educational technology, including LMS, edtech apps and now generative AI, are increasingly commonplace. Yet, the impact of AI on teaching, specifically around administrative burden, is currently under researched, although more insights are expected from ongoing or [forthcoming Australian work](#). Despite the potential benefits these digital tools may provide for teachers and educational staff, without addressing underlying structural issues, the use of these technologies may be counterproductive, as they introduce new complexities. As educational technology continues to evolve, it is crucial to explore how teacher-technology interactions, especially involving AI, can be integrated into policy interventions that target the root causes of increased workloads and their consequences, namely burnout and low retention.

#### 6. School funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing

The current state of school funding in Australia is widely acknowledged as inadequate (Goss, 2019) with significant inconsistencies and inequities evident in the [National School Reform Agreement and bilateral agreements](#). Private schools typically receive 100% of the recommended funding under the schooling resource standard while government schools fall short in every state. This is because the federal government contributes 20% of the schooling resource standard for government schools, leaving the remaining 80% up to the states and territories. Recent figures suggest that government schools end up with only around 91% of combined funding due to a capital depreciation "loophole" (Karp, 2022). Not taking into account the aforementioned loophole, [Victoria's bilateral agreement](#) highlights a substantial funding gap, with government schools funded at 90.43% of the recommended amount under the SRS, compared to 100% for private schools (see image from bilateral agreement below).

25. The funding contributions for the government and non-government sectors required in the Act and agreed in this bilateral agreement are outlined in the table below for each year from 2017 to 2023. The minimum funding contributions are expressed as a percentage of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) as defined in Part 3 of the Act and take into account clauses 32 and 40 of this bilateral agreement.

Table 2

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Government SRS	67.80%	67.80%	68.02%	68.42%	68.99%	69.68%	70.43%
Non-government SRS	19.70%	19.70%	19.76%	19.08%	19.17%	19.94%	20.00%

26. The SRS is an estimate of how much total public funding a school requires to meet the educational needs of its students. Over the term of this agreement both Commonwealth and Victorian funding for government and non-government schools in Victoria will make progress towards, and not away from, the SRS.

These funding disparities contribute to educational inequalities, impacting student outcomes and exacerbating socio-economic gaps. As [the Better and Fairer review](#) (Department of Education, 2023) has shown, Australia has some of the highest levels of concentrated advantage and disadvantage globally, with private schools experiencing concentrated advantage and public schools facing concentrated disadvantage. By the time students reach year 3, the 'achievement gap' between young people from high and low socio-economic backgrounds is already equivalent to 2.3 years of learning in reading and this balloons to a staggering 5.1 years of learning by year 9.

This disparity is mirrored in recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, revealing significant achievement gaps in reading, science, and math between students of different socio-economic and indigenous backgrounds. This translates directly into unequal outcomes for young people from different backgrounds, including a direct link to post-school outcomes and opportunities.

To address these issues and promote equitable outcomes, it is recommended that the Gonski funding model (School Resource Standard) is implemented in full. Schools must be adequately funded to achieve higher quality outcomes and improved equity indicators.

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