



## **Australian Education Union submission to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria**

### **Executive summary and recommendations**

The Victorian Branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee *Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria*. The AEU represents employees in public schools and is uniquely placed to contribute insights and make recommendations about public education in Victoria.

Victorian public school communities currently face a range of interrelated challenges which governments must address to ensure that the promise we make to our children and young people to be able to access a high quality public education is properly fulfilled.

With a replacement for the current National School Reform Agreement to be negotiated between the Commonwealth and Victorian governments and to be signed in 2024, it is vital that Victoria takes the opportunity to ensure that public schools in this state reach at least 100% of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). Every year that the basic standard of funding is delayed continues the failure of governments to provide resources to the level which they themselves have set. This exacerbates the negative impact that a lack of resources has on every Victorian government school student, teacher, educational support employee, assistant principal, and principal, as well as the consequential impact on the wider community.

Victorian public schools are currently in the grip of a severe staff shortage. As detailed in the union's submission, staffing shortages, especially teacher shortages, are having a devastating impact on staff and students, particularly for schools with relative disadvantage. A range of the recommendations that follow can be found in the AEU's *Ten Year Plan for Staffing in Public Education*.<sup>1</sup> The AEU recognises that the State Government has taken some steps towards addressing teacher shortages, but further urgent and bold action and investment is needed.

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<sup>1</sup> AEU Victoria (2022). *A Ten-Year Plan for Staffing in Public Education*.  
<https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/Public%20Files/AEU%20Victoria%2010%20year%20plan.pdf>

The desire for some politicians and bureaucrats, as well as some media outlets, to have simplistic student learning achievement measures as the basis on which to judge student and school performance undermines the provision of public schooling in Victoria. System measurements all too often lack the necessary nuance to capture a genuine picture of effective practice and the relationship to addressing the manifold needs of public school students.

Victoria should review its reporting regime and move beyond the simplistic achievement measures captured by NAPLAN. Reporting needs to refocus on identifying and rectifying growing equity gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students and schools, to ensure that we achieve both equity of outcomes and excellence in public education. Geoffrey Robertson KC correctly argues that “a real revolution in education will only come when a government ensures that its state schools set the standard of excellence. Then and only then will we have equity.” The idea of equality draws on notions that all people in our society are of equal value. This democratic principle is crucial to underpinning the provision of public schooling. Only through proper and fair funding of our schools and a system focused on supporting school staff to provide the best teaching and learning programs that then we can achieve equity.

There are well-founded concerns about the mental health of students in schools and young people in general, and an increased number of acute instances of mental illness. The AEU welcomes the government’s commitment to enact all recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System and notes that many of the initiatives already introduced have been effective. However, more work needs to be done, and greater investment is needed to ensure that the recommendations are properly addressed, with many of the existing programs in need of expansion. While schools can be well placed to provide mental health supports to students, it would be unwise for government to assume that schools are the main platform for such services. A community wide, whole of government approach is critical so that schools are not required to be a provider of programs beyond those relevant to education provision and avoid the current situation where they are often left scrambling to find specialist healthcare professionals to meet student needs, particularly in regional rural areas where access to such support is even more difficult.

Much more needs to be done to elevate the status of the teaching profession, especially by government. For too long real improvements to salaries and conditions which reflect the important work of school employees, and which properly respects their central contribution to our community have been ignored. Not enough Victorian’s want to become a teacher, and too many of those that do leave mid-career. Excessive workloads and ever expanding administrative burdens are the main cause of increasing attrition rates, and for fewer school staff seeking leadership positions. Salaries need to be more competitive with other

professions over the course of a teacher's career, whilst education support staff need the value of their work better recognised by improved pay.

The opportunities that Victoria affords itself can be directly measured by the investment that is made in teachers – a well-supported and remunerated profession will directly lead to improved student learning and welfare, and consequential positive impacts in our community and the economy – in the shorter and longer terms. Respect for teachers, support staff, and school leaders must be at the heart of any meaningful support for public schools, not least as student needs become more complex, and staff confront more instances of inappropriate and harmful behaviour from some students and families.

Despite the challenges and the areas where there must be much need improvement, Victorian public schools deliver outcomes well above the level of investment that is made. The dedication of school employees, and their commitment to high quality education for their students ensures this, often despite funding and provision arrangements which do not provide what is needed for our public schools to thrive.

The recommendations outlined below, and supported by the evidence compiled in this submission, provide a clear set of steps to enable improved support for public education.

## Recommendations

1. To address staff shortages and consistent with the AEU's *Ten-Year Plan for Staffing in Public Education*, the AEU recommends:
  - 1.1. Retention payments for existing school employees.
  - 1.2. Supporting workload reductions by increasing the number of support staff.
  - 1.3. Reducing the number of administrative and compliance demands.
  - 1.4. Restricting or delaying new initiatives until the associated workload can be managed.
  - 1.5. Allocating work within the terms of industrial agreements to ensure it can be completed within paid hours.
  - 1.6. Expanding and fully funding the reduction of face-to-face teaching hours for all early career teachers and their mentors across all schools.
  - 1.7. Access to financial support for existing Victorian Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students, including paid practicum placements.
  - 1.8. Extension of the scholarships for secondary teaching degrees to primary teaching degrees.
  - 1.9. Offers of employment in a government school for all Victorian ITE students, prioritising rural, regional, or hard-to-staff areas.
2. The government should not attempt to address teaching shortages by accrediting fast-tracked ITE courses that undermine qualification standards.

3. The government should review the *Education State* targets and reporting against those targets. Currently there is too much focus on simplistic measures of achievement and not enough emphasis on addressing disadvantage and student wellbeing.
4. The government should take the necessary steps to replace NAPLAN with assessment arrangements that are fit for purpose, including teacher professional judgements, and that properly support high quality teaching and student learning.
5. To further support student health and wellbeing, the AEU recommends:
  - 5.1. Full SRS funding to enable further support in addition to the existing funding provided for student wellbeing and for students with disability.
  - 5.2. A comprehensive review of the current provision of school student access to mental health services.
  - 5.3. A Mental Health Service Access Guarantee for Victorian students as a part of a whole of government initiative which stipulates the right for Victorian students in public schools to access the support they need. The Guarantee would ensure availability, timely provision, and ongoing provision of mental health services where required.
  - 5.4. A ratio of government school students to psychologists, mental health professionals, and social workers and student welfare coordinators/staff to be established to determine the allocation of resources based on the needs identified in the proposed review outlined in recommendation 5.2.
  - 5.5. Any new programs for schools to be assessed before they are implemented against a set of student wellbeing criteria based on principles that aim to safeguard the wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. The teaching profession should play a pivotal role in developing the criteria and be central to providing advice about the potential impact of the proposed program. Where concerns have been raised about existing programs, they should also be subject to a similar review.
  - 5.6. Professional development to help educators to identify and support students with mental health issues should be provided within paid hours with replacement staff costs allocated to schools. Professional development should enable educators and mental health professionals to come together to enhance mutual understanding of their respective roles. This could include an immediate expansion of the Mental Health in Primary Schools program and its extension to all schools.
  - 5.7. There should be a funded research program to better understand the impact of student mental health on learning and the curriculum and pedagogical support schools need to provide.
  - 5.8. All initial teacher education courses should include compulsory content covering the knowledge and skills teachers need to support student wellbeing and mental health. Teachers in their early years of teaching should be provided with additional support and time to build on what is learnt through ITE.
  - 5.9. The present NAPLAN whole cohort testing program should be abolished. Standardised testing of primary and secondary students for system quality assurance should be on a sample basis only. Schools should have the authority to make decisions around the types of assessments used with their students.

Similarly, schools should be empowered to implement reporting policies appropriate for their school communities, in line with the AEU's *Assessment and Reporting Policy*<sup>2</sup>.

- 5.10. The Department of Education should conduct a review of the VCE and the ATAR system to recommend ways in which the negative impacts of the senior years certificate and tertiary entrance rankings on the wellbeing and mental health of students can be alleviated.
  - 5.11. The Department of Education should further increase resources to support students from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds who have mental health issues and do so in ways which support indigenous self-determination, sovereignty, culture, and ways of knowing.
  - 5.12. The Department of Education should expand programs to support young people with a greater likelihood of developing mental health issues, including young people who identify as LGBTIQ+; in 'out of home' care; with a disability; and living in rural Victoria.
  - 5.13. A significant source of support for students experiencing mental health concerns are teachers. The Department of Education should employ additional teachers in order to support their capacity to carry out this role.
  - 5.14. The unsustainable workloads of staff in schools, resulting in high levels of stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues, needs to be addressed. Measures including investment in additional staff are critical to ensure the capacity of education professionals to carry out their work effectively and safely.
  - 5.15. Significantly expand support for students with additional needs, including those with disability. Timely access to assessment and prompt delivery of supports are essential to improve outcomes for those students. Additional Early Intervention support in Early Childhood would mean more students will commence school with the support they need. Early intervention is critical to ensuring improved outcomes for students, both at kindergarten, but also throughout their ongoing education.
6. To ease administrative and other workload burdens on government school staff, the following actions are recommended:
    - 6.1. Government and Department of Education proactively reduce school employee workloads and take concrete actions to limit top down interventions which increase administrative and compliance work. This will help to address declines in teacher and school leader wellbeing to enable a focus on core teaching and learning programs and student welfare. Such measures will also curb the extremely high levels of teacher attrition.
    - 6.2. Principals and assistant principals are to be provided with additional resources to reduce their administration and compliance workload to enable a proper focus on educational leadership. The roles and work expected of school leaders needs to be reviewed, with a view to streamlining job requirements and reducing workload.

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<sup>2</sup> AEU Victoria (2022). *Assessment and Reporting Policy*.  
<https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/AEU%20Vic%20Branch%20Assessment%20and%20reporting%20policy%20Joint%20Council%202021.pdf>

- 6.3. Employee communication including email, phone, social media, and school intranets to be explicitly recognised as educator work and subjected to agreed parameters about its use, in recognition that this has added to the administrative work and workload required of staff within school hours as well as encroaching on out-of-school time during evenings, early mornings, and weekends. This includes implementing policies which ensure the 'right to disconnect' after hours.
- 6.4. Schools and the AEU to be consulted during the design, development, and implementation of any new or changed technologies, systems or initiatives that are intended to alleviate administrative and compliance burden.
- 6.5. A commitment by governments to ensure that no new initiatives in relation to assessment, reporting, evaluation, and accountability are imposed on teachers and principals, and that any new initiatives are not introduced without extensive prior consultation and negotiation with the profession via the AEU. We will not realise the benefits of attracting new staff if we continue to lose excessive numbers of existing staff due to issues such as stress and burnout.
7. The Victorian Government must commit to achieving at least 100% of the SRS by 2028 at the latest. Many of the issues identified in this submission would be alleviated with additional funding. The state government's contribution should not include the current four percent depreciation which effectively reduces the funding allocated to public schools and results in public schools bearing the cost of services, such as the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, which private schools also utilise.
8. The Victorian Government must abolish or amend section 2.7 of the Education and Training Reform Act which guarantees non-government schools a set proportion of government school funding regardless of relative levels of need.

## 1. Trends in student learning outcomes from Prep to Year 12

Whilst there is some evidence of declining scores on some measures of student achievement based on standardised, large scale testing programs, these are not uniform across all groups of Victorian students in all subject domains. Issues around test reliability and validity also arise when the objectives of these tests are not clearly articulated.<sup>3</sup> When the results of these tests are discussed widely in the media there is often a lack of understanding or agreement about what these tests are actually measuring and the accuracy of the results. What these tests can reliably reveal are growing equity gaps between groups of students, not only in measures of achievement, but also for indicators of motivation and wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> Such outcomes are largely the result of perverse funding arrangements that fail to equitably and efficiently allocate resources to where they are needed most.

It should be recognised that Victorian students often out-perform other states in large-scale standardised tests and that it is not true to say that Victorian students' achievement levels are declining across the board. Such discourses are all too often taken up by some politicians and ideologically driven commentators to further their own political ends. These discourses can be disparaging towards the work of schools, demoralising for staff, and can purposefully seek to undermine the community's confidence in public education and the status of the teaching profession.

Results in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) show that the proportion of Year 8 students attaining the National Proficient Standard for mathematics had increased slightly between 1995 and 2019. Over the same period, the proportion of "Very high performers" doubled whilst there was a small decline in the proportion of "Very low performers".<sup>5</sup>

Average achievement in Year 8 science results improved significantly in Victoria between 1995 and 2019 whilst there was also a significant increase in the proportion of students attaining the National Proficient Standard in science over this period.<sup>6</sup> Between 1995 and 2019 the proportion of "Very high performers" in science increased significantly whilst there was a statistically significant reduction in the proportion of "Very low performers" over this period.

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<sup>3</sup> Wilson, R., Piccoli, A., Hargreaves, A., Ng, P. T., & Sahlberg, P. (2021). *Putting students first: Moving on from NAPLAN to a new educational assessment system*.

[https://www.gie.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Putting%20Students%20First\\_final.pdf](https://www.gie.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Putting%20Students%20First_final.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Thomson, S. (2022). What does PISA tell us about Australia's school sectors? *Teacher*.

[https://www.teachermagazine.com/au\\_en/articles/what-does-pisa-tell-us-about-australias-school-sectors](https://www.teachermagazine.com/au_en/articles/what-does-pisa-tell-us-about-australias-school-sectors)

<sup>5</sup> Thomson, S., Wernert, N., Rodrigues, S., & O'Grady, E. (2020). *TIMSS 2019 Australia. Volume 1: Student performance*, @ [https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=timss\\_2019](https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=timss_2019)

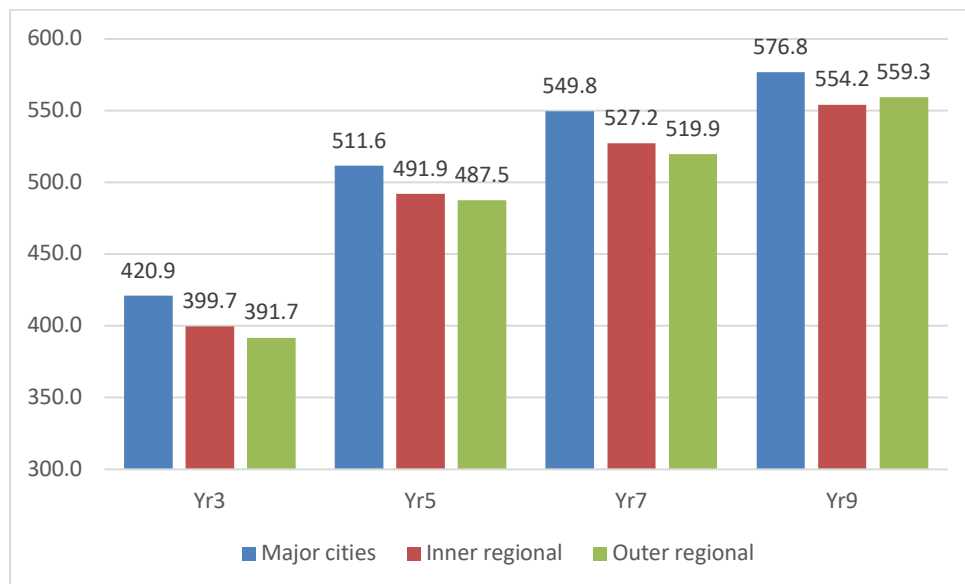
<sup>6</sup> Ibid

Analysis of standardised test results should be considered in light of the fact that there has been a deterioration in the proportion of Victorian first year (prep) students assessed as being “on track” in language and cognitive skills between 2009 and 2021 in Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data. The proportion of students assessed as being “vulnerable” in this domain has increased by 12.5% between 2018 and 2021.<sup>7</sup> As will be shown below, there has also been a deterioration in mental health outcomes for young Victorians over recent years.

The IEA also conducts the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) which showed that Year 4 reading scores had improved in Victoria between 2011 and 2021 despite the impact on school provision as a result of the response to the pandemic which were associated with a decline between 2016 and 2021. Analysis presented by Hillman et al. suggests that this decline was temporary.<sup>8</sup>

The 2021 PIRLS data also reveals the extent to which geographic location influences Year 4 reading with national data showing students in major cities scoring on average, “19 points higher than students in provincial areas, and 62 points, on average, higher than students who attended schools in remote areas.”<sup>9</sup> NAPLAN results for 2023 show that a similar gap exists in Victoria with Year 5 students in major cities achieving significantly higher reading scores than students in inner and outer regional schools for all year levels (Figure 1).

Figure 1. 2023 NAPLAN reading scores by geographic location for Victorian students<sup>10</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, (2021). *Australian Early Development Census*. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data>

<sup>8</sup> Hillman, K., O’Grady, E., Rodrigues, S., Schmid, M., & Thomson, S. (2023). *Progress in Reading Literacy Study: Australia’s results from PIRLS 2021*.

<https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=pirls>

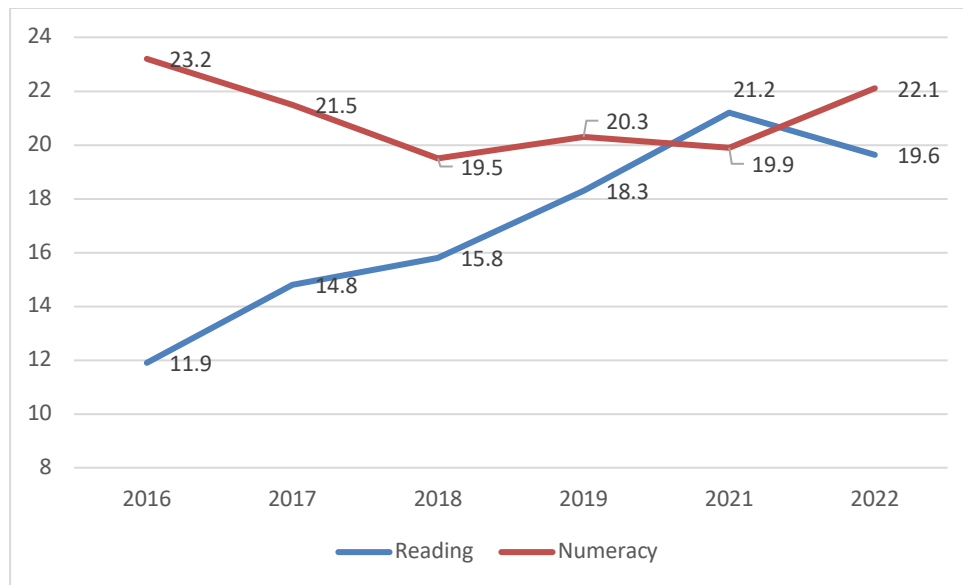
<sup>9</sup> Hillman et al., p.38

<sup>10</sup> ACARA (2023). *NAPLAN Results*. <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-results>



Figure 2 shows the gap between average reading scores for Victorian Year 9 students from major cities and inner regional schools 2016 to 2022. These gaps range between one fifth and just less than a third of a standard deviation of the overall Victorian Year 9 reading score. It can be seen that the reading achievement gap between students in major cities and in inner regional schools has been growing since 2016.

*Figure 2. Gap between Victorian Year 9 reading and numeracy scores for students in major cities and inner regional schools.<sup>11</sup>*



For numeracy, the gap between scores in major cities and inner regional schools was marginally smaller than in 2016 although it was still substantial in 2022 at around 36% of the standard deviation of all Victorian Year 9 mathematics scores. Roughly similar achievement gaps also existed for writing, which grew between from 20.2 points to 26 points over this period and for spelling which grew from 25 to 27.4 points between 2016 and 2022. The score gap between Victorian Year 9 students in major cities and inner regional schools grew from 17.8 in 2016 to 27.4 in 2022. In summary, in the final year of NAPLAN testing there has been no reduction in the achievement gap between 2016 and 2022; for some domains this gap has grown.

It may be of interest that average achievement scores are often higher in outer regional areas than in inner regional schools, particularly for Year 9 students. One possible explanation for this difference could be staff ratios. School profile data from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) reveals that in 2022 the student to teacher ratios were smallest in these areas both for primary and secondary schools. Student to teacher ratios were 10.3 for outer regional secondary schools, 11.6 for inner

<sup>11</sup> ACARA (2022). *NAPLAN Results*. <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-report-archive>

regional secondary schools and 12.5 in major cities.<sup>12</sup> In a survey conducted in 2019 by the AEU, it was found that staff from larger regional cities were more likely to report that student wellbeing issues negatively impacted student learning than those from metropolitan areas, small towns and in remote areas. The same survey also found that student wellbeing issues were also identified more commonly in low-socioeconomic (SES) schools.<sup>13</sup>

Persistent achievement gaps based on geographic location have long been recognised and have been outlined in the Commonwealth's *Independent review into regional, rural and remote education*.<sup>14</sup> One possible explanation of persistent differences in test results is cultural bias in the test items themselves that disadvantage non-urban students as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Dobrescu et al found that re-framed test items that took local contexts into account closed "the rural-urban reading gap by 33% and the Indigenous-non-Indigenous gap by 50%."<sup>15</sup> These findings undermine the validity of NAPLAN tests, on the basis that it appears that tests like NAPLAN may not be measuring real aptitudes but instead students' access to specific types of cultural capital.

It is not surprising that NAPLAN data also reveals few real reductions in other longstanding achievement gaps between specific groups of students. For example, students of parents whose highest level of education was a bachelor's degree scored 76.4 points higher on average than Victorian Year 9 students whose parents' highest level of education was Year 11. This gap was the highest it has ever been in Victoria in 2022. For numeracy, the Year 9 parental education achievement gap was 68.8 in 2022 and 65.8 in 2016.

Parental occupation also exhibits an effect on NAPLAN achievement scores with Year 9 children of Occupation Group 1 parents (senior management and qualified professional roles) scoring 55.1 points higher on average than children of Group 4 parents (machine operators, assistants, labourers, and related workers) for NAPLAN reading tests. This gap was similar to that reported in 2016 (56.7). A similar story is revealed for Year 9 numeracy results with the gap between occupation groups reducing slightly from 53.3 in 2016 to 49.8 in 2022.

Similar achievement gaps exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous Year 9 students. In 2023, around one in four Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were identified as needing additional support in Year 9 numeracy

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<sup>12</sup> ACARA (2023b). *ACARA Data Access Program*. <https://acara.edu.au/contact-us/acara-data-access>

<sup>13</sup> AEU Victoria (2019). *Australian Education Union (Vic) Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System*.

<https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/Royal%20Commission%20into%20Mental%20Health%20AEU%20Submission.pdf?t=1614744067>, p.15

<sup>14</sup> Halsey, J. (2018). *Independent review into regional, rural and remote education*. Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/resources/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education-final-report>

<sup>15</sup> Dobrescu, L., Holden, R., Motta, A., Piccoli, A., Roberts, P., & Walker, S. (2021). *Cultural context in standardized tests*. <http://research.economics.unsw.edu.au/RePEc/papers/2021-08.pdf>, p. 5

tests compared to around one in 13 Non-Indigenous students. Around one in five Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were identified as needing additional support for Year 9 reading compared to around one in 13 Non-Indigenous students.<sup>16</sup> The proportion of Year 9 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students at or above national minimum standards in Victoria fell slightly between 2016 and 2022 for both reading and numeracy.<sup>17</sup>

There are other student and school variables that are associated with persistent differences in achievement on standardised tests, and only a few contrasts have been highlighted here. None of these variables by themselves fully determine outcomes for an individual student and will intersect with each other in different ways in different contexts. However, the results presented here do not reflect an equitable education system as defined by the *Gonski Report* where “personal and social circumstances are not an obstacle to achieving educational potential.”<sup>18</sup>

As observed by Wilson et al. (2021): “Although NAPLAN is designed to identify students not meeting minimum national benchmarks, trends show that it is not driving improvement for those disadvantaged students”.<sup>19</sup> They also note that NAPLAN is not fit for purpose to support its overly broad aims of both system monitoring, and meaningful student assessment. In relation to the *Mparntwe Education Declaration’s* goals, NAPLAN currently contributes little to support the goal of promoting excellence and equity, nor does it contribute substantially to the second goal: “All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community”.<sup>20</sup>

Current reporting against Victoria’s *Education State* targets also has little focus on the goals of the *Mparntwe Education Declaration* and consists mainly of NAPLAN achievement results. Whilst one of the *Education State* targets is “breaking the link between disadvantage and outcomes for students”, reporting against this and other targets appears to have ceased in 2019.<sup>21</sup> There is little reporting on the *Education State’s* ambitions for equity in documents like the *State Budget Papers* or Department of Education’s (DE) annual reports. Whilst the annual reports include the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students meeting some NAPLAN benchmarks, there is no other reporting on demographically aligned achievement gaps, or levels of wellbeing for disadvantaged students. For this reason, it is recommended that Victoria should review its reporting regime and move beyond the simplistic achievement measures captured by NAPLAN. Reporting needs to refocus on

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<sup>16</sup> ACARA (2023)

<sup>17</sup> ACARA (2022)

<sup>18</sup> Gonski, D., Greiner, K., Boston, K., Lawrence, C., Tannock, P., & Scales, P. (2011). *Review of funding for schooling: final report*. Commonwealth of Australia. <https://apo.org.au/node/28263>, p.105

<sup>19</sup> Wilson et al., p.30

<sup>20</sup> Council of Australian Governments. Education Council (2019). *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) education declaration*. Education Council, Carlton South, VIC, p.5

<sup>21</sup> Victorian State Government (2022). *Education State Targets*. <https://www.vic.gov.au/node/22831/>

identifying and rectifying growing equity gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students and schools.

Wilson et al. note that NAPLAN's inability to meet its overly broad ambitions, particularly with regards to teaching and learning, has caused frustration amongst teachers. Sixty-eight percent of the teachers and principals surveyed by the AEU in 2023 reported that NAPLAN was not helpful in identifying the needs of individual students whilst 85% felt that it contributed to student stress and anxiety. It has also been found that externally imposed standardised tests have negatively impacted teachers' workloads and professional autonomy.<sup>22</sup> Victoria should advocate for the replacement of NAPLAN with a model more in line with that proposed by Wilson et al. Their model includes sample-based testing for system accountability and teacher-led formative assessments to ensure that they actually contribute to student learning. The model aligns with the AEU's *Assessment and Reporting Policy* which states:

Meeting statewide quality assurance processes and identifying the progress of targeted student groups over time should be achieved through assessment processes which are integrated into the curriculum, promote student learning and do not have a negative impact on schools, the curriculum, pedagogy, or student welfare.<sup>23</sup>

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

Data from the Department of Education shows extremely high advertised vacancy rates in Victorian government schools in 2023 reflecting a severe shortage of teaching staff nationally.<sup>24</sup> At the time of writing there was in excess of 2,750 advertised vacancies for positions in public schools, including over 1800 classroom teacher jobs. AEU members surveyed in 2023 revealed that staff shortages were having a range of highly detrimental effects in their schools. For example, 96% of the respondents from primary schools reported that their school often had difficulty in accessing casual relief teachers this year, and 90% reported that staff shortages had caused an increase in grade splitting and/or the combining of classes. More than 60% of respondents from secondary schools reported that staff shortages had caused a reduction in the programs or subjects delivered by their school in

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<sup>22</sup> Keddie, A., MacDonald, K., Blackmore, J., Gobby, B., Wilkinson, J., Eacott, S., & Niesche, R. (2023). *School Autonomy reform and social Justice in Australian public education: Final Report*. D. University. <https://www.schoolautonomyandsocialjustice.org/>

<sup>23</sup> AEU Victoria (2022). *Assessment and Reporting Policy*.

<https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/AEU%20Vic%20Branch%20Assessment%20and%20reporting%20policy%20Joint%20Council%202021.pdf>, p.5

<sup>24</sup> Paul, M. (2023, January 28). Victorian schools dealing with hundreds of vacant teacher positions. ABC News Online. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-28/victorias-teacher-shortage-reaches-crisis-point/101902888>; Cassidy, C. (2023, September 23). Australian students shun education degrees as fears grow over 'unprecedented' teacher shortage. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/23/australia-teacher-shortage-education-degrees>

2023. Respondents from more than two-thirds of all schools reported that staff shortages had forced school leadership to cover classes when a teacher is not available.

Whilst the Victorian Government has announced some initiatives to address staff shortages in the previous State Budget and in subsequent announcements, many of these are focused on attracting students to initial teacher education (ITE) and will take a long time to have any effect in schools. Because of this it is vital that the State Government has better oversight of data affecting current and future supply and retention of school staff. So far, the *Teacher Supply and Demand* reports produced by the DE have failed to predict shortages and the data that they contain is usually out of date by the time they are published. The AEU recommends that the Victorian government publicly releases quarterly updates on the supply of and demand for teachers, including information about attrition rates and associated demographic information, the number of ITE students and expected numbers of graduates in a given year, and the effect of supply and demand in harder to staff schools.

It is vitally important that policies are enacted to improve the retention of school staff. Research has shown that high staff turnover in schools negatively affects both students and the remaining staff.<sup>25</sup> Forty-five percent of teachers surveyed by the AEU intended to leave the government school sector within ten years. Disturbingly, the proportion of early career teachers intending to leave the government sector within 10 years was similar at 44.7%. This reinforces the importance of providing workload relief, properly resourced mentors for early career teachers, and salaries which reflect the high value and status of the profession. It also signifies that retention payments are vital as an immediate action Government can take to retain staff in schools. Teachers intending to leave within 10 years overwhelmingly nominated excessive workloads as one of their top three reasons for leaving (77%) followed by student behaviour (48%) and poor salary (40%).

Both supply and demand issues are addressed in the AEU's *Ten Year Plan for Staffing in Public Education*<sup>26</sup> and are summarised in Recommendations 1.1 to 1.7, above.

For staff attraction, the *Ten Year Plan* contains recommendations aimed at increasing the number of suitable ITE enrolments and providing more support for ITE students, particularly when they are undertaking placements. Paid placements are a critical component to attract teachers to the profession; they also support ITE students to complete their studies without deferring or leaving the course. Fewer than 20% of the early career teachers surveyed by

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<sup>25</sup> Gibbons, S., Scrutinio, V., & Telhaj, S. (2021). Teacher turnover: Effects, mechanisms and organisational responses. *Labour Economics*, 73, 102079. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2021.102079> ; Heffernan, A., Bright, D., Kim, M., Longmuir, F., & Magyar, B. (2022). 'I cannot sustain the workload and the emotional toll': Reasons behind Australian teachers' intentions to leave the profession. *Australian Journal of Education*, 66(2), 196-209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00049441221086654>

<sup>26</sup> AEU Victoria (2022). *A ten-year plan for staffing in public education*. <https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/Public%20Files/AEU%20Victoria%2010%20year%20plan.pdf>

the AEU in 2023 were ‘unconcerned’ about financial stress during their ITE; more than 44% were ‘very concerned’.

As well as removing barriers to ITE for appropriate students, the overall status of the profession is a key factor for attracting ITE students, and ultimately staff, to public schools. Reducing workloads and significantly lifting salaries are key measures which need to be adopted by the Victorian government. De-professionalising teaching by accrediting fast-tracked ITE courses for teacher registration does not improve the status of the profession, nor does it support effective practice. The need to intensively mentor and supervise graduates from these courses also has resource impacts for the schools in which they are placed.<sup>27</sup>

Research has substantiated a positive relationship between teachers’ wellbeing and student achievement.<sup>28</sup> In other words, improving the status of the teaching profession is required to improve student outcomes. It is concerning that only 15% of teachers surveyed by the AEU felt that their profession was valued in society, and less than half felt that the advantages of being a teacher clearly outweighed the disadvantages (39%). Nearly 30% of teachers reported that they experienced “quite a bit” of stress in their work, whilst 46% said that they experienced “a lot” of stress. Fifty-seven percent of teachers surveyed reported that their job affected their mental health “quite a bit” (26%) or “a lot” (31%).

There is a serious imperative for the State Government to improve the status of teachers to support attraction and retention. Survey respondents indicated that greater support for student management (80%), higher salaries (78%) and reduced workloads (75%) as being “very effective” measures to attract and retain teachers in Victorian government schools.

School leaders play a vital role in promoting the wellbeing of staff and students, but evidence suggests that they, too, are not being well enough supported in Victorian public schools. A report from the Victorian Auditor General’s Office (VAGO) in 2023 found that the DE is “not effectively protecting the health and wellbeing of its school principals” and that it “needs to do more to reduce principal workload if it is to achieve better outcomes.”<sup>29</sup> Principal job application data presented by VAGO suggests that the attractiveness of school leadership positions is also falling with a decline in applications per vacancy of around 45% between 2015 and 2022.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Dadvand, B., van Driel, J., Speldewinde, C., & Dawborn-Gundlach, M. (2023). Career change teachers in hard-to-staff schools: should I stay or leave? *The Australian Educational Researcher*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-023-00609-9>

<sup>28</sup> Granziera, H., Martin, A. J., & Collie, R. J. (2023, 2023/04/01). Teacher well-being and student achievement: A multilevel analysis. *Social Psychology of Education*, 26(2), 279-291. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-022-09751-1>

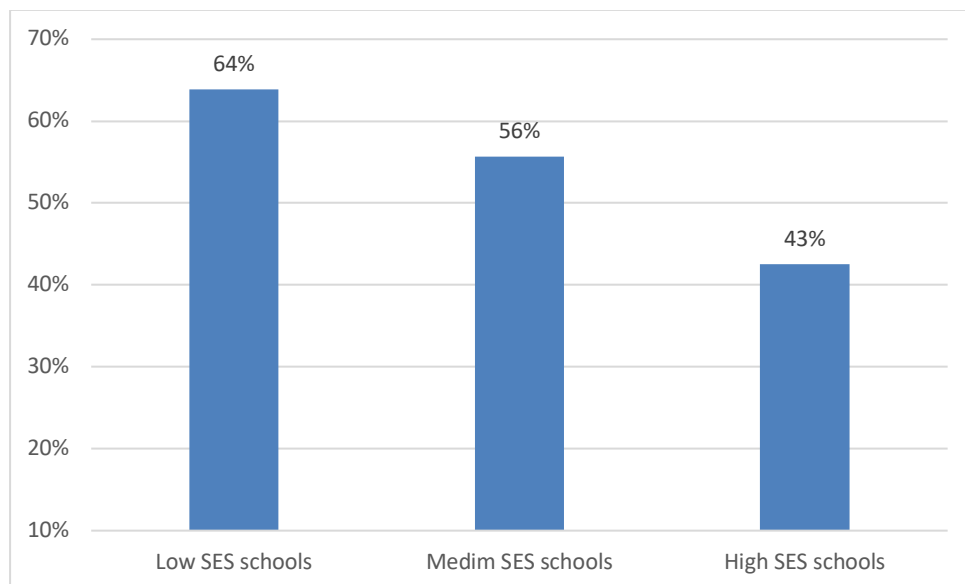
<sup>29</sup> VAGO (2023). *Principal health and wellbeing*. <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/principal-health-and-wellbeing?section=>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

As with equity gaps in educational outcomes for students, two of the main factors affecting the status of public education professionals are funding and the measures employed by the state and federal governments in the name of accountability, particularly in an enrolment system driven by parental choice and competition.<sup>31</sup> Workload, and remuneration are both determined by resource levels, whilst professional autonomy is often hampered by accountability measures which have little if any benefit to teachers and students, and are also often accompanied by extra compliance tasks, further adding to workloads. Simplistic accountability measures and inequitable funding structures work together to drive social segregation in schools which also make the attraction and retention of staff more difficult in the schools with the highest levels of need.

PISA data from 2018 shows that the extent to which staff shortages correlated with levels of secondary school disadvantage was larger in Australia than in any other OECD country.<sup>32</sup> The inequitable distribution of school staffing resources is still prominent in Victoria. Figure 3 shows data from 198 Victorian Principal Class staff surveyed by the AEU Federal Office in early 2023 for the *State of Our Schools Survey*.<sup>33</sup> It can be seen that substantially fewer respondents from schools with higher SES enrolment profiles reported having unfilled teacher vacancies at the start of 2023 than respondents from low-SES schools. This means that staff and students in those more disadvantaged schools are more likely to be struggling with the negative effects of staff shortages.

Figure 3. “Did you have unfilled teaching positions at the beginning of 2023?” – Yes



<sup>31</sup> MacDonald, K., Keddie, A., Blackmore, J., Mahoney, C., Wilkinson, J., Gobby, B., Niesche, R., & Eacott, S. (2023). School autonomy reform and social justice: a policy overview of Australian public education (1970s to present). *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 50(2), 307-327. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00482-4> ; Eacott, S., & Baldry, E. (2022). *Building education systems for equity and inclusion*. [https://socialsciences.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2022\\_Eacott\\_WorkshopFindingsReport.pdf](https://socialsciences.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2022_Eacott_WorkshopFindingsReport.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> OECD. (2019). *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II)*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en> , p.116

<sup>33</sup> AEU Federal (2023a). *State of Our Schools Survey*. [Unpublished data]

The Commonwealth Department of Education’s Initial Consultation Surveys for the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* have also revealed sectoral differences in the ability to attract and retain staff.<sup>34</sup> In those national surveys it was also found that educators in independent and catholic schools reported that it was easier to both retain current staff and attract new staff than educators in government schools. The inequitable and inefficient funding model and policies that drive staffing pressures and harms the status of the teaching profession will be discussed in greater detail below.

### 3. The current state of student wellbeing in Victoria

It is becoming increasingly complex to support the wellbeing needs of students within schools and broader society. Research shows that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, child and youth mental health in Victoria has been gradually deteriorating over time, with this trend exacerbated by the pandemic. Mission Australia’s 2022 youth survey found that 27% of Victorian 15-19 year old respondents said they are experiencing mental health challenges<sup>35</sup>, growing from 18.7% in 2012 and 24.2% in 2018.<sup>36</sup> Also in 2022, a study of Victorian child mental health found that 52% of parents reported their child was experiencing mental health problems. 26% reported their child was just struggling to cope with or not coping with life, a small but marginal improvement compared to 29% in late 2021.<sup>37</sup> Over the longer-term, estimates based on previous emergencies and natural disasters suggest that up to three in 10 children and young people will experience lasting negative mental health and wellbeing effects for many years post-pandemic.<sup>38</sup>

The wellbeing of students has a direct impact on their engagement in education and the results they achieve. When students experience significant wellbeing and mental health challenges, school engagement declines, and learning is diminished.<sup>39</sup> This makes the provision of well-resourced teaching and learning programs critical. In the AEU’s *State of Our Schools Survey 2023*, principals and teachers were asked to identify the extent to which student wellbeing had changed over the past year. Of the 2285 Victorian teachers, over 70% reported a decline in student wellbeing and engagement in the past 12 months, with 31% of

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<sup>34</sup> Australian Department of Education (2023). *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System – Initial Consultation Surveys - Summary Report*. <https://www.education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/resources/initial-consultation-surveys-summary-report>

<sup>35</sup> Includes low mental health, stress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem or self-harm

<sup>36</sup> Mission Australia (2022). *Youth Survey 2022*. [https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey/state-reports-2022?direction=asc&sort=created\\_on](https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey/state-reports-2022?direction=asc&sort=created_on)

<sup>37</sup> Measey, M.-A., Rhodes, A., Rudkin, A., & Hoq, M. (2022). *Report 2: Mental health of children and parents in Victoria during the COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://www.rchpoll.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/NCHP-Report2-Mental-health-during-COVID-19-Dec22.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Cahill, H., Dadvand, B., Shlezinger, K., Romei, K., Farrelly, A., (2020). *Natural disasters and pandemics: Supporting student and teacher wellbeing post emergency*. Melbourne: Youth Research Centre. [https://education.unimelb.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/3453036/UoM-MGSE-Industry-Report-Post-Emergency\\_Web\\_FA.pdf](https://education.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/3453036/UoM-MGSE-Industry-Report-Post-Emergency_Web_FA.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Korpershoek, H., Canninus, E. T., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & de Boer, H. (2020). The relationships between school belonging and students’ motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: a meta-analytic review. *Research Papers in Education*, 35(6), 641-680. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1615116>

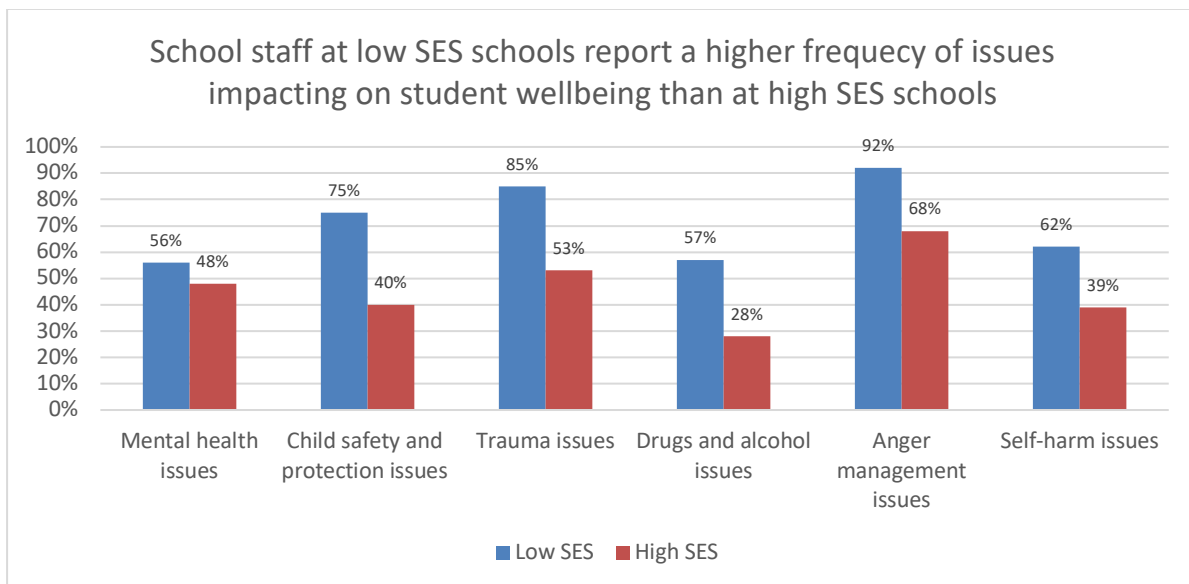


teachers saying there has been a significant decline in engagement and 27% in student wellbeing.<sup>40</sup>

Particular student cohorts are more at-risk

Research shows that student wellbeing issues are higher in disadvantaged schools and schools in rural and regional areas. For example, Victorian government data for public schools reveals that school refusal is on the rise and is occurring more in disadvantaged schools and rural and regional areas, with school refusal increasing across all years from 1.2% in 2018 to 1.8% in 2021 and impacting 11,825 students.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, a 2019 AEU mental health survey of 2,972 Victorian school staff reveals stark differences between the wellbeing of students in low SES and high SES schools (Figure 4).<sup>42</sup>

Figure 4: Percentage of school staff who report issues have affected student wellbeing by school SES



Disadvantage and remoteness are more concentrated in public schools than in the non-government sector.<sup>43</sup> In Victoria, and Australia more broadly, data shows that public schools have a disproportionate share of socially and academically disadvantaged students.<sup>44</sup> For example, in 2021 Victorian public schools had 27.5% of students in the lowest SES quartile, while non-government schools had 13% in the lowest quartile.<sup>45</sup> Over 80% of all

<sup>40</sup> AEU Federal (2023a)

<sup>41</sup> Senate Education and Employment References Committee (2023). *The national trend of school refusal and related matters*. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000090/toc\\_pdf/TheNationalTrendOfSchoolRefusalAndRelatedMatters.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000090/toc_pdf/TheNationalTrendOfSchoolRefusalAndRelatedMatters.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> AEU Victoria (2019)

<sup>43</sup> Teese, R. (2011). *From Opportunity to Outcomes: The changing role of public schooling in Australia and national funding arrangements*. Centre for Research on Education Systems, University of Melbourne. <https://apo.org.au/node/27999>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Productivity Commission (2021). *Report on Government Services*, Table 4A.6

disadvantaged students attended public schools in 2019.<sup>46</sup> Increasingly, compared to private schools, public schools are educating populations of educationally disadvantaged students, with relatively fewer resources to properly support their learning, and deal with the associated challenges.<sup>47</sup> Equitable funding is needed across the government and non-government school sectors– with more funding directed to the public schools due to higher levels of need. The needs of children and young people in public schools are growing but the funding from governments for public education has not kept up.

The learning and wellbeing of students with disability was also particularly hard-hit during the pandemic, complicated by the significant levels of individual support required by some students and by the fact that many of these students were potentially medically vulnerable to adverse effects of infection with COVID-19. A survey conducted by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) found that social supports, supervision, and individual support declined markedly during the first period of remote learning.<sup>48</sup> In 2020, around 90% of Australian government school principals reported reallocating funds from other areas to cover shortfalls in disability funding for their students.<sup>49</sup> Although Victorian funding for students with disability has increased in recent years, accessing 100% of the SRS allocation would significantly increase the amounts available for these students. Nationally, it is estimated that students with disability in public schools were short-changed by \$598 million in 2021 due to funding levels being well below 100% of the SRS.<sup>50</sup> Public schools are also disadvantaged due to a lack of resources for undertaking the assessments required to access disability funding, especially in comparison to non-government schools.

Specific groups of vulnerable children and young people are also at greater risk of poor wellbeing and mental health outcomes than others, and they experience greater challenges to their mental health and wellbeing.<sup>51</sup> This includes young people who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTQIA+); in out-of-home care; experiencing family violence; from culturally and linguistically diverse and refugee backgrounds; and young people living in rural and remote areas, among others. The risk factors that result in poorer health and wellbeing outcomes include the way they are treated by others and the systemic barriers they face, including social disadvantage,

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<sup>46</sup> Cobbold, T. (2021). Public schools do more than private schools with fewer resources. *SOS Australia*. <https://saveourschools.com.au/equity-in-education/public-schools-do-more-than-private-schools-with-fewer-resources/>

<sup>47</sup> Reid, A. (2015). *Building Our Nation Through Public Education*. Australian Government Primary Principals Association. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2015-11/apo-nid60542.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> Manjula, M., Smith, F., Kiefel-Johnson, Smith, C., Harrison, M., Devine, A., & Gibbs, L. (2022). *The Impact of Remote Learning on Students with Disability during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Victoria*.

[https://disability.unimelb.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/4618229/ImpactReport.pdf](https://disability.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/4618229/ImpactReport.pdf); Dickinson, H., Smith, C., Yates, S., & Bertuol, M. (2020). *Not even remotely fair. Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19*. [https://cyda.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/not\\_even\\_remotely\\_fair\\_cyda\\_education\\_report.pdf](https://cyda.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/not_even_remotely_fair_cyda_education_report.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> AEU (2020). *Students with disability need additional funding support*. <https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/students-disability-need-additional-funding-support>

<sup>50</sup> Morton, R. (August 6, 2022). Private schools win million in disability funding. *The Saturday Paper*.

<sup>51</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2015). *10-year mental health plan technical paper*, Victorian Government, pp.1-2

bullying, harassment and discrimination, as well as barriers to accessing the care and supports they need.<sup>52</sup>

Initiatives by the Victorian government to specifically support the inclusion, engagement and wellbeing of vulnerable cohorts are welcomed by the AEU, including the 2023 budget allocations for School Breakfast Clubs program, targeted investments in refugee supports, and the Safe Schools Program, among others. However, the pressures on these vulnerable groups are growing, for example the increase in access to mental health services needed after the toxic anti-trans rally, 'Let Women Speak'<sup>53</sup>, and predictions by Indigenous mental health advocates that the Voice referendum debate will have negative effects on First Nations wellbeing.<sup>54</sup> The mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable students needs to be supported by properly resourcing in-school support, and ensuring that there are external support services to provide appropriate support for children, young people and their families. This is particularly important for students who may be targeted by groups espousing the politics of "ethnonationalism, authoritarianism, anti-immigration, sexism [and] transphobia."<sup>55</sup>

### NAPLAN and VCE exam stress

There are a number of specific negative school-based experiences which have also been linked to student mental health issues.<sup>56</sup> Of particular concern is the performance stress created by high stakes testing and examinations. The impact of high stakes whole cohort testing (NAPLAN) in primary (Years 3 and 5) and secondary schools (Years 7 and 9) has negatively affected the wellbeing of many students. The high stakes nature of the testing relates to the use of test results to publicly identify 'good' and 'bad' schools through such mechanisms as the government website 'My School' and in the media. NAPLAN has also become the tool for the management of schools, influencing funding, school reviews and planning. This is despite the fact that NAPLAN test results are unlikely to be reliable or valid indicators of a school's performance.<sup>57</sup> NAPLAN is a test to feed the accountability regimes for the benefit of politicians and bureaucrats dressed up as if it is of benefit to students, their families, and the profession.

The AEU's 2023 survey of Victorian teacher and principal members found that:

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<sup>52</sup>Lau, W., & Thomas, T. (2008, Jul). Research into the psychological well-being of young refugees. *Int Psychiatry*, 5(3), 60-62., Victorian Aboriginal Children & Young People's Alliance (2019). *Submission to Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health*. [https://www.pc.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/240679/sub240-mental-health.pdf](https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/240679/sub240-mental-health.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> Premier of Victoria (2023, March 29). *Standing with Victoria's Gender Diverse Communities* [Press release]. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/standing-victorias-gender-diverse-communities>

<sup>54</sup> Black Dog Institute (2023, September 6). *Indigenous Mental Health Groups Call on Politicians to Champion Respectful Referendum* [Press release]. <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media-releases/indigenous-mental-health-groups-call-on-politicians-to-champion-respectful-referendum/>

<sup>55</sup> Gerrard, J. (2023). Populism, teachers and schooling. *Professional Voice*, 14(3.3). <https://www.aevic.asn.au/professional-voice-1433>

<sup>56</sup> Orygen (2023). *A review of secondary school-based mental health prevention programs*. [https://www.orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/Depression/Evidence-summary/A-review-of-secondary-school-based-mental-health-p/orygen-schools-evidence-summary-pdf.aspx?ext=.](https://www.orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/Depression/Evidence-summary/A-review-of-secondary-school-based-mental-health-p/orygen-schools-evidence-summary-pdf.aspx?ext=)

<sup>57</sup> Wu, M., & Hornsby, D. (2014). Inappropriate uses of NAPLAN results. *Practically Primary*, 19(2). 6

- 46% said NAPLAN ‘greatly’ contributes to the stress and anxiety of students, 38% felt that it ‘somewhat’ contributed
- 16% said NAPLAN ‘greatly’ increases their workload, and 47% indicated ‘somewhat’
- 81% said NAPLAN has negative or no effects on student outcomes

The impact of the VCE examination system on student wellbeing and mental health has also been an ongoing concern of teachers, parents, and mental health professionals for a long time. Psychologists have pointed out the link between the timing of final exams and the age when teenagers are at their most vulnerable and often struggling with their mental health for the first time. For example, Associate Professor Chris Davey from Orygen, the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health noted:

“We know that if someone already has mental health issues that acute stress can precipitate even more serious mental illness or a deterioration in their mental health. So, it would be great to see a consideration of other methods of assessment that reduces a really acute period of stress around exam times.”<sup>58</sup>

The rates of Victorian students completing year 12 without an ATAR score, has also been increasing over time, rising from 4% of all students in 2018 to 8.3% in 2020 and to 11% in 2021.<sup>59</sup> One VCE teacher responding to the 2019 AEU mental health survey commented on the dilemma that they faced which had implications for their own mental health as well as that of the students in the class:

“Last year, in one VCE class, I had 16 out of 20 kids on recognised mental health plans. It was overwhelming to deal with the volume of these students during a 'stressful' year. I nearly left teaching and for the first time in my career (28 years) was diagnosed with anxiety. Teaching is such a different landscape and mental health issues are appearing in far greater numbers than ever before.”<sup>60</sup>

Students’ mental health needs are likely to have only increased since the responses gathered in this survey. As noted in the AEU Federal submission to the *Review to Inform a Better a Better and Fairer Education System* the “declines in student wellbeing and engagement recorded in 2023 exceed those recorded in the 2021 survey, conducted during term 3, at the height of COVID disruption and when NSW, Victoria and the ACT were engaged in extended periods of remote learning.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Wells, R. (2019, May 7). Stressful VCE could be making depression, anxiety worse among kids: psychologist. *The Age*. <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/stressful-vce-exams-could-be-making-depression-and-anxiety-worse-among-kids-20190507-p51l0e.html>

<sup>59</sup> Heffernan, M., Carey, A., & Precel, N. (2022, July 17). 'Contagion effect': Students choose unscored VCE in record numbers. *Ibid*. <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/contagion-effect-students-choose-unscored-vce-in-record-numbers-20220713-p5b1ca.html>

<sup>60</sup> AEU Victoria (2019)

<sup>61</sup> AEU Federal Office (2023b). *Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*. <https://www.aeufederal.org.au/about/publications-library/submissions>, p.28

## Existing approaches are helping but are not enough in an underfunded system

The Victorian Government's investments in the Mental Health Practitioners initiative for secondary and specialist schools, the Mental Health in Primary Schools program, and the Schools Mental Health Menu, are welcomed by the profession and are being used to boost existing wellbeing supports at schools that have received them so far. However, concerns have been raised about potential workforce shortages of appropriately qualified mental health practitioners in schools. The Productivity Commission's Mental Health inquiry found there is a national shortage of school psychologists or counsellors, particularly in rural and remote areas.<sup>62</sup> Where employed, the demand placed on mental health services in schools is high and increasing once student issues are identified.<sup>63</sup> The Australian Psychological Society notes there are only approximately 700 school psychologists in Victorian schools in 2023, representing around 1 per every 1500 student, falling short of the ratio of 1:500 they recommend.<sup>64</sup> This is resulting in long waiting lists for assessment of students, while external wait times to access mental health support have also blown out to 6-12 months.<sup>65</sup> The current provision and shortage of qualified school mental health practitioners also means that students are going without the supports that these practitioners provide.

As a result, staff in all roles in schools are often required to devote significant additional time and resources to meet the diverse needs of their students and their families and to attempt to find ways to provide support that are well outside of any educational role. With limited time and resources, schools are forced to choose between ensuring wellbeing and the work required to implement high quality teaching.

## Role of staff in student wellbeing

Classroom teachers play a crucial role in the lives of the children and young people they work with on a day-to-day basis. They become a source of support for their students through relationship development and the building of trust and, particularly at the primary level, have a knowledge of and links to their families. They form the front-line in terms of identifying and supporting students with mental health issues at both primary and secondary schools. The Mission Australia/Black Dog Institute 2022 survey of 15-19 year-olds found that 1 in 3 would go for help to a teacher and 1 in 4 to a school counsellor.<sup>66</sup> The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System found that schools play an important role in identifying children with mental health challenges who can then be referred to treatment, care and support if needed.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Productivity Commission (2020). *Mental health inquiry report*.

[https://www.aefederal.org.au/application/files/3816/9274/8574/SUB\\_23\\_08\\_07\\_Review\\_to\\_Inform\\_a\\_Better\\_and\\_Fairer\\_Education\\_System.pdf](https://www.aefederal.org.au/application/files/3816/9274/8574/SUB_23_08_07_Review_to_Inform_a_Better_and_Fairer_Education_System.pdf) <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report>

<sup>63</sup> Black Dog Institute (2019). *Submission to the Productivity Commission into the Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health*. [https://www.pc.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/240850/sub306-mental-health.pdf](https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/240850/sub306-mental-health.pdf)

<sup>64</sup> School psych battle. (2023, Apr 10). *Herald Sun*.

<sup>65</sup> Wachsmuth, L. (2022, Nov 26). Shortage of NSW school counsellors leaving many students without the help they require. *The Daily Telegraph (Online)*.

<sup>66</sup> Mission Australia (2022)

<sup>67</sup> State of Victoria (2021). *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Final Report*. <https://finalreport.rcvmhs.vic.gov.au/>

Health and wellbeing studies, irrespective of whether about teachers or leaders, highlight that there are common, long-standing issues faced by school employees that have been exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The release of findings from the Victorian Auditor General's report<sup>68</sup> in June and a national survey<sup>69</sup> in March this year on principal health and wellbeing revealed they are grappling with unmanageable workloads, worsening student mental health and wellbeing, and increasing staff shortages. A Black Dog Institute survey of over 4,000 teachers released in February 2023, found that teachers experience substantially higher levels of stress, anxiety and other mental health issues compared to the general population.<sup>70</sup> A large majority (70%) report having unmanageable workloads, whilst their intentions to leave the profession within the next 12 months are at an all-time high (47%, up 14% compared to 2021). The *Australian Teachers' Perceptions of their Work* survey of almost 5,500 teachers released in October 2022, found a significant drop in teachers' satisfaction with their jobs when compared to 2019 (from 66% to 46% feeling satisfied).<sup>71</sup> Core issues challenging teacher health and wellbeing, identified in the survey, include excessive workloads, feeling unsafe in the workplace, the complex needs of students, and an overloaded curriculum. WorkSafe data presented by VAGO shows that the proportion of mental health compensation claims (as a share of all types of compensation claims) from school staff was higher than for the general Victorian population in 2021 which was at 14%.<sup>72</sup> The proportion in schools was 19% for non-teaching staff, 29% for teachers, and 55% for principals.<sup>73</sup>

Supporting students as their wellbeing needs grow has intensified the workload placed on public school staff, who form the front-line in terms of identifying and supporting students with mental health issues at both primary and secondary school. Too many students continue to miss out on the support they need. This lack of support contributes to the pressure experienced by staff in public education and drives burnout, which causes employees to leave the profession. Poor teacher and school leader health and wellbeing also adversely affects students' experiences, development, and achievement by impacting their schools' teaching and learning environments.<sup>74</sup>

Investing in school staff so they can work in professional teams will lead to improvements in student learning and wellbeing. Additional time and resources for teachers, principals, and education support staff – within and across schools – to collaborate will allow them to develop even more effective approaches to teaching, learning and student wellbeing. Principals are best placed to lead their communities when they are supported by well-

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<sup>68</sup> VAGO (2023)

<sup>69</sup> See, S-M., Kidson, P., Marsh, H., & Dicke, T. (2023). *The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey (IPPE Report)*. Sydney: Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, Australian Catholic University. [https://www.healthandwellbeing.org/reports/AU/2022\\_ACU\\_Principals\\_HWB\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://www.healthandwellbeing.org/reports/AU/2022_ACU_Principals_HWB_Final_Report.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> Black Dog Institute (2023, February 27). *Teacher mental health and burnout could halve workforce, new data by Black Dog Institute* [Press release]. <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media-releases/teacher-mental-health-and-burnout-could-halve-workforce-new-data-by-black-dog-institute/>

<sup>71</sup> Longmuir, F., Gallo Cordoba, B., Phillips, M., Allen, K.A. & Moharami, M. (2022). *Australian Teachers' Perceptions of their Work in 2022*. Monash University. <https://doi.org/10.26180/21212891>

<sup>72</sup> Worksafe (2023). *Claims statistical report by calendar year*. <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/claims-statistical-report-calendar-year>

<sup>73</sup> VAGO (2023)

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

resourced regional and central offices which have the expertise to meet the complex range of needs of schools.

The mental health, wellbeing, and engagement of students in schools is as important as their physical health and there is a clear connection between student wellbeing and learning progress. This means that public education institutions should be safe, supportive, and inclusive learning communities with the necessary resources to effectively carry out this role.

Recommendations 5.1 to 5.15, above, will go some way to addressing issues around student wellbeing.

#### 4. The administrative burden on school employees

Excessive administration is a key factor that contributes to the unsustainable workloads of public school leaders (principals and assistant principals), education support staff and teachers. It is a long-standing issue that pre-dates the significant impact of the pandemic and was exacerbated by it. It includes unnecessary and unrealistic administrative tasks and accountability which does not positively impact student learning. It has broad ramifications for school staff, including negative impacts on their wellbeing, affecting both those working in the profession and its attractiveness to those outside it.<sup>75</sup> Some improvements and investment have been achieved through industrial processes, which is welcome to help alleviate workload – however, government and the Department must continue to address excessive workloads, including the administrative burden on teachers and leaders.

There is a growing body of evidence that indicates school leaders and teachers are spending increasing amounts of time on compliance and administrative tasks. For school leaders, the 2023 Victorian Auditor General's Office report on Principal Health and Wellbeing identifies that principals' workload is increasing, due in part to increasing compliance requirements relating to OHS and workers compensation and general administration. The report notes that the Victorian Department of Education acknowledges:

that the number and complexity of incidents principals are required to report and manage has 'increased vastly' in recent years...at the same time, the administrative time associated with being accountable for staff and student health and safety has 'increased exponentially' for principals.<sup>76</sup>

Department-commissioned research cited by VAGO revealed that in 2019, principals spent more time on administrative tasks than on curriculum, teaching and performance, budget, strategy and planning, and governance and policy activities. In 2021, the Department advised government that the volume of administrative and compliance activities managed by schools was presenting challenges at the local school level. Feedback from principals

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<sup>75</sup> AITSL (2020). *Shifting the balance: Increasing the focus on teaching and learning by reducing the burden of compliance and administration Review to reduce red tape for teachers and school leaders.*

[https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/red-tape/review-to-reduce-red-tape-for-teachers-and-school-leaders.pdf?sfvrsn=7cb3d93c%7B%5C\\_%7D2](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/red-tape/review-to-reduce-red-tape-for-teachers-and-school-leaders.pdf?sfvrsn=7cb3d93c%7B%5C_%7D2)

<sup>76</sup> VAGO (2023)

shows that “there is still a massive need to reduce the system-level admin that just grows and grows”.<sup>77</sup>

For teachers, the 2023 AEU *State of Our Schools* survey of 2285 Victorian teachers revealed eight out of 10 said they spend too much time on general administration. This is an increase from three quarters in 2018.<sup>78</sup> In 2023, seven out of 10 also reported spending too much time on data entry to ensure compliance. These findings are supported by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership’s (AITSL) 2023 Australian Teacher Workforce Data survey results which show an increase in the number of teachers who are spending over 10 hours or more per week on administration, increasing from 9% in 2020 to 16% in 2022.<sup>79</sup> Longmuir et al also found an increase in the intensification and extension of work expectations over recent years, particularly relating to administration.<sup>80</sup> As reported in the AEU’s submission to the Commonwealth Review to Inform a Better and Fairer system: “Teachers consistently tell the AEU that their ability to provide the individual support that students need is held back by a lack of support and the increasing administrative demands on their time.”<sup>81</sup>

The excessive administration and compliance burden on school staff is a key contributor to why they are considering or decide to leave the profession. In the 2023 AEU *State of Our Schools* survey, teachers were asked the three most important factors in their decision to leave teaching permanently before retirement. For Victorian teachers, 64.2% chose workload, 37.3% chose salaries, and 36.5% chose the amount of administration and compliance work. This survey data confirms the TALIS 2018 results, which show that Australian teachers are more likely to report experiencing a lot of stress from their work than their peers in other OECD countries, with the most common source of stress being too much administrative work.<sup>82</sup> Australian teachers spend the third highest number of hours on management and administration in the OECD, far more than higher performing systems such as Finland and Estonia.

The administration burden has also been found to be higher for public schools than private schools. The TALIS 2018 findings reveal that in Australia, nine out of 10 government school principals report experiencing administrative work as a source of stress quite a bit or a lot, compared to only six out of 10 in private schools. TALIS findings also show that 87% of principals at schools with a high concentration of students with additional needs report administrative work as a source of stress, compared to 66% in schools with a low concentration. This reflects the differing student profiles between the private and public sectors, as it is public schools that enrol disproportionately higher numbers of students with additional needs, students that experience disadvantage and students with disability.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> AEU Federal (2023a)

<sup>79</sup> AITSL (2023). *ATWD Key Metrics Dashboard*. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/australian-teacher-workforce-data/key-metrics-dashboard/>

<sup>80</sup> Longmuir et al. (2022)

<sup>81</sup> AEU Federal (2023a)

<sup>82</sup> Thomson, S. (2020, August 18). TALIS: Stress levels among Australian teachers. *Teacher*. [https://www.teachermagazine.com/au\\_en/articles/talis-stress-levels-among-australian-teachers](https://www.teachermagazine.com/au_en/articles/talis-stress-levels-among-australian-teachers)



Student outcomes are negatively impacted where more time is spent by teachers and leaders on administrative tasks. In the TALIS 2018 results, a negative link was found between Australian students' reading and science scores and the frequency of leaders' reviews of school administration procedures and reports. Where reviews occurred more frequently, reading and science scores were lower. According to the VAGO report on principal health and wellbeing, between 2019 and 2022, Victorian public schools were scheduled to undergo more than 7,000 reviews or audits, equivalent to 1.2 audits or reviews per school each year. Each individual review or audit can potentially take months to prepare for and close off, providing a significant workload for principals and their staff.

Teachers and leaders need time to do their jobs well and achieve positive student outcomes. In a 2023 Victorian AEU survey of school staff, 74.5% agreed that more support for administrative tasks is a very effective measure to lift student outcomes, rated third highest only behind additional support for students with behavioural issues and more time for curriculum planning, assessment and reporting within paid hours. They also identified it as a key measure to reduce staff attrition.

We need our principals to be educational leaders, working with teachers and education support staff on the core work of teaching and learning. We need our teachers to be engaging in what matters most – working with students. Too much time is spent on administration and compliance, which could be undertaken by others at the school, regional or central level. This limits school leaders' ability to provide the educational leadership needed for the delivery of high-quality educational programs to their community. It limits teachers' capacity to undertake their core work, which should be focused on their classroom preparation, planning and assessment. Further investment is needed to relieve our school leaders and teachers of duties and tasks that take their focus away from improving student learning.

#### Existing approaches to fixing the problem aren't working

While the Victorian Department of Education has taken a number of steps to alleviate workload and reduce administrative and compliance requirements on school principals, the VAGO report on principal health and wellbeing found that "the department's initiatives have had little to no effect on working hours". They found that current initiatives, rather than reducing the overall volume of work, focus instead on supporting principals to do the same amount of work more efficiently. Any time savings were found to have marginal impact, as they were either not addressing the source of the administrative load or only saving a small fraction of the time needed to complete tasks. Many of these initiatives are focused on responding to issues that principals confront, rather than being proactive or preventative, thus not dealing with the core issues impacting on workload.

The AEU has long called for more support for school leaders and teachers to reduce administrative tasks. In 2005, the AEU stated:

...much has been made of the idea of complementing teachers' work roles with a variety of assistants who can support teachers by undertaking various clerical and administrative tasks, whilst also providing a higher level of individual support to

students. This promised revolution in the mix of staff requires the provision of sufficient resources to enable it to occur, and thereby free teachers to concentrate on their core responsibilities.<sup>83</sup>

Again in 2018, the AEU called for “now more than ever, public schools need this type of investment”, yet the evidence continues to show increasing rather than decreasing administrative burdens.<sup>84</sup> More funding and resources – and less red-tape and unnecessary accountability - are sorely needed in the public education system to alleviate the administrative load on staff and reduce compliance requirements.

However, increasing the number of administrative staff is only part of the solution and draws attention to excessive red-tape and the chronic underfunding of the public education system. A 2020 analysis of national ABS data shows that between 2002 to 2019 there was a far greater increase in the number of administrative staff at the system and school levels than the increase in teachers or student numbers.<sup>85</sup> This ‘soaked up’ almost half of the increase in government funding for public schools, adjusted for inflation, for the same time period. Accountability requirements imposed on schools have led to a significant misallocation of resources, diverting much needed funding from directly supporting teaching and learning. These include accountabilities, among others, for financial management, student well-being, behaviour management and safety, teacher appraisal, compliance training, school review processes, curriculum standards, student progress based on standardised test results, workplace health and safety, and auditing. More recently, schools are increasingly being asked to provide data-driven evidence of their impact on student outcomes, despite the fact that increasing government accountability requirements over the past few decades have not improved outcomes and are increasingly taking educators away from high impact activities.<sup>86</sup>

A number of workload management initiatives have been implemented in New South Wales in recent months, including the NSW government’s Quality Time Program that aimed to reduce school administrative burden by 20% by 2022.<sup>87</sup> While helpful, they constitute only an important first step and much more will be required to comprehensively address teacher workloads. It is essential in these types of initiatives that consideration is given to how additional support staff can be best utilised in schools to support student learning and staff workload, as simply providing additional staff without any clear guidance on how they should be allocated could result in little difference being made. In addition to removing unnecessary administrative requirements and genuinely listening to teachers’ views about the workload challenges and what work needs to be simplified and/or removed, new and

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<sup>83</sup> AEU (2018). *Investing in Victoria’s public schools for our future*. <https://puteducationfirst.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/PE1-School-policy.pdf>

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Cobbold, T. (2020). The Bureaucratisation of public education in Australia, *Save Our Schools Australia*. <https://saveourschools.com.au/public-education/the-bureaucratisation-of-public-education-in-australia/#:~:text=Bureaucratisation%20has%20increased%20throughout%20the,increase%20in%20teachers%20and%20students>.

<sup>86</sup> Eacott & Baldry (2022)

<sup>87</sup> NSW Department of Education (2023). *Quality Time*. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/strategies-and-reports/our-reports-and-reviews/quality-time-action-plan>

increased funding to provide additional release time to teachers on an ongoing permanent basis and employ additional administration and support staff will be essential.

Efforts by governments to save teachers time are also turning to reducing unnecessary tasks in core teaching work, in addition to reducing administration activities. As one respondent to AEU Victoria's survey noted, there is "too much admin and compliance related work for teachers. Let our focus be on preparing classes and teaching the kids and remove excess demands." Efforts to streamline teachers' work by mandating the use of specific pre-prepared materials and lesson plans has the potential to add "another layer of compliance activity."<sup>88</sup>

Efforts to reduce the burden of compliance and administration have also incorporated technological solutions<sup>89</sup>. These aim to link systems to reduce manual data entry, provide templates, generate reports and/or streamline systems and processes. Examples in Victoria include eduSafe Plus, the Return to Work Coordinator Portal, and the School Policy Templates Portal.<sup>90</sup> However, AITSL's 2020 review to reduce red tape for teachers and school leaders warns that when introducing new technologies to reduce the administrative load, this also introduces additional time and accessibility requirements on staff. They note "the implementation process needs to include initial training and ongoing maintenance and improvement of not only the system but also the skills of those that use it". Another issue is the size and geographic spread of schools, which can limit the reliability of online access and staff training in regional locations.

A substantial concern with the introduction of any new technologies into schools, or changes to existing technologies, is the impact this can have on the workload of teachers, principals, and other educators. Consultation is needed with employees and the AEU before any major new technologies are introduced into the workplace, with staff involved in the design and development of appropriate ICT for school administrative purposes, as well as for teaching and learning.

### Recommendations

It is the responsibility of governments to ensure that schools have enough resources and the capacity to complete the administrative and bureaucratic requirements that the system demands, while meeting the learning and wellbeing needs of their students. It is also the responsibility of governments to ensure that schools are not overburdened with unnecessary red-tape and that the wellbeing of staff is upheld by addressing the root causes of excessive workloads. Staff stress and attrition could be decreased by reducing the demands of compliance and administration work that is required of them.

Recommendations 6.1 to 6.5 (above) address these issues.

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<sup>88</sup> AEU Federal (2023b), p.22

<sup>89</sup> AITSL (2022)

<sup>90</sup> VAGO (2023)

## 5. Examples of best practice to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing

The AEU acknowledges that the State Government has implemented a range of initiatives to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing, which have been well received by schools. Some of these have been introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Tutor Learning Initiative (TLI), and others have been in response to recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. Industrial arrangements introduced through the Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2022 are also beneficial to students by ensuring that staff workload is better managed. Unfortunately, current funding levels mean that many of these initiatives cannot be implemented to their full extent. This also significantly restricts the capacity of schools and the system to introduce further supports that are needed and would make a difference to student outcomes. Staffing shortages and an adherence to standardised testing for the monitoring of schools and staff also impede practices that would improve outcomes for Victorian students.

### Tutor Learning Initiative

The Tutor Learning Initiative (TLI) was introduced to support students at risk of being affected by remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The TLI provided small group and targeted learning for these students and is an example of the benefits that can be gained by instituting targeted, personalised teaching and reduced student to staff ratios, especially for disadvantaged students. One qualified teacher engaged as a tutor under the TLI reported that "The post-COVID tutoring has been very helpful for students with additional needs who suffered badly from the lockdowns...The tutoring funding made a huge difference to those vulnerable students."<sup>91</sup> This is consistent with research cited by the Grattan Institute which found strong learning growth resulting from small group tuition.<sup>92</sup> Delgadillo and Kelly also found that the TLI had benefits for student engagement and student-teacher relationships. They also found that "both teachers and tutors involved within the program benefited from the implicit and informal observations which occurred organically whilst engaging students in learning activities with additional assistance."<sup>93</sup>

The maintenance of the TLI by the Victorian government until the end of 2025 is welcome, albeit this type of approach needs to be expanded and permanently embedded in our schools. However, it is more difficult to maintain and expand practices that allow a more intensive engagement between individual students and teachers in an environment characterised by staff shortages. For this reason, it is vital that Victoria strengthens its measures to attract and retain school staff.

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<sup>91</sup> AEU Federal (2023b), p.45

<sup>92</sup> Sonnemann, J., and Hunter, J. (2023). *Tracking under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools*. <https://grattan.edu.au/report/tackling-under-achievement/>

<sup>93</sup> Delgadillo, R., & Kelly, J. (2022). Teacher and tutor perceived benefits from the tutor learning initiative. *Idiom*, 58(2), 39-42.

## Mental health and wellbeing initiatives

The extent of mental health and wellbeing concerns for Victorian children has been discussed above. To its credit, the State Government has introduced a range of initiatives to address these issues, some of which are responses to the Royal Commission into Mental Health. Steps to ensure that schools have roles dedicated to mental health such as the Mental Health in Primary Schools are welcomed. Similarly, the provision of mental health practitioners and specialists in every secondary and specialist schools is also welcome as is the introduction of the Mental Health Fund and its associated menu of supports for schools. However, as mentioned above, there is still a shortage of psychologists within schools and staff in low-SES schools have been found to be less likely to agree that students had timely access to mental health services than staff from high-SES schools.<sup>94</sup> This reinforces the need for a Mental Health Service Access Guarantee as recommended above.

Another successful initiative has been the introduction of Respectful Relationships Education to prevent gender-based violence. An evaluation of the initial pilot program found that it had been effective in modifying gendered stereotypes amongst students and has contributed to student wellbeing.<sup>95</sup> It is vital that funding for Respectful Relationships Education is maintained and that dedicated regional office staff are available to support it.

## International examples of best practice

Whilst the transplantation of educational practices and policies from different systems is often inappropriate, McGaw et al summarise assessment practices in seven international education systems. They conclude that there “are no common assessment practices in high-performing countries. In the end, each will need to develop its own policies and practices while, examining the practices of others.”<sup>96</sup> However, they also cite Pasi Sahlberg’s list of a range of policies to be resisted for systems trying to emulate the success of Finland in international large-scale tests: “– 1), competition among schools for enrolment, –2) standardisation of teaching and learning, – 3) increased emphasis on reading literacy, mathematics and science, – 4) borrowing change models from the corporate world, – and 5) test-based accountability policies.”<sup>97</sup>

One thing that all higher-performing countries (and almost all OECD countries) do better than Australia is allocate educational resources according to need. According to 2018 PISA

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<sup>94</sup> AEU Victoria (2019). *Australian Education Union (Vic) Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System*.

<https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/Royal%20Commission%20into%20Mental%20Health%20AEU%20Submission.pdf?t=1614744067>

<sup>95</sup> Our Watch (2021). *Respectful relationships education to prevent gender-based violence: Lessons from a multi-year pilot in primary schools*. <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/04/28133853/RREiPS-evaluation-report-accessible-280421.pdf>

<sup>96</sup> McGaw, B., Loudon, W., & Wyatt-Smith, C. *NAPLAN Review Final Report*.

<https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2020-08/apo-nid308016.pdf>, p.56

<sup>97</sup> Ibid

data, only in seven OECD countries was the negative correlation between an index measuring a lack of material resources and school SES lower than in Australia. All countries with higher reading scores than Australia had a more equitable distribution of material resources according to school principals surveyed by the OECD.<sup>98</sup> This situation and the high level of social segregation in Australian schools, as well as the strong correlation between school disadvantage and staff shortages described above, are all largely due to inefficient and inequitable funding arrangements in Australia and Victoria.

## 6. School funding adequacy

The OECD's most recent *Education at a Glance Report* showed that whilst total expenditure on education was high in Australia in 2020, this was due to an abnormally large share of funding from private sources with Australia ranking fourth-highest out of 39 countries for all levels below tertiary education.<sup>99</sup> This is one of the main explanations for the highly inequitable distribution of resources in schools in Australia and Victoria: parents with the means to do so are able to leverage and benefit from generous subsidies to non-government schools. In Victoria, as in most of the rest of Australia (the ACT is the exception), students in government schools are funded well below the level that has been determined as the minimum funding standard: The Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). In 2023 in Victoria, public school students are only funded at 90.43% of the SRS whilst non-government school students are attracting 102.5% of the SRS overall.<sup>100</sup>

In Victoria, government per student funding (federal and state) for non-government schools grew by 31% over the 10 years to 2021 whilst funding for government schools grew by only 27.1%.<sup>101</sup> Despite the funding advantage for non-government schools in Victoria, the Education and Training Reform Act (ETRA) still contains Part 2.7 stipulating that Victorian funding for non-government schools must be a minimum of 25% of the recurrent per-student funding rate of government school students. As the Victorian Government must spend proportionally more to meet its SRS requirements for government schools, this anomaly in the ETRA represents an unwarranted bonus for non-government schools and, as such, is inherently inequitable. This section of the ETRA must be amended or removed.

Victoria also needs to commit to achieving 100% of SRS by 2028 at the latest. Each year of delay means hundreds of thousands of Victorian government school students are missing

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<sup>98</sup> OECD. (2020). *PISA 2018 Results (Volume V): Effective Policies, Successful Schools*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1787/ca768d40-en>.

<sup>99</sup> OECD (2023). *Australia: Overview of the education system (EAG 2023)*. <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=AUS&treshold=10&topic=EO#:~:text=Expenditure%20per%20student%20is%20equivalent,the%20OECD%20average%20of%2027%25>.

<sup>100</sup> Beazley, J. (2023, July 24). Australian public school funding falls behind private schools as states fail to meet targets. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jul/24/australian-public-school-funding-falls-behind-as-states-fail-to-meet-targets>

<sup>101</sup> Heffernan, M. (2023, February 7). Victorian school students remain among lowest funded in the country. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/victorian-school-students-remain-among-lowest-funded-in-the-country-20230206-p5ci5n.html>

out on the opportunities they deserve. AEU members were asked which students at their schools would benefit most from the additional funds that would be provided if they were funded at 100% of the SRS. Three-quarters or more of the 587 respondents indicated that extra funding would support students who have fallen behind in literacy or numeracy, students with disability, and students who are disengaged or at risk of dropping out of school.

There is also a whole range of economic and social benefits that are associated with increased funding for public schools. Littleton et al estimate that the economic benefit of increasing public school funding to the level of the SRS would be “two to four times larger than the annual fiscal costs”.<sup>102</sup> More importantly, they note: “The primary motivations for adequately and properly funding public schools are to enhance the life chances of the students who attend them, to reduce economic inequality and segregation, and to ensure that young people’s trajectories are less predetermined by the socio-economic status of their parents than is presently the case.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Littleton, E., Macdonald, F., & Stanford, J. (2023). *The Case for Investing in Public Schools: The Economic and Social Benefits of Public Schooling in Australia*. The Centre for Future Work. <https://futurework.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/08/Economic-and-Social-Benefits-of-Public-Schools-Aug2023-FINAL.pdf>, p.6

<sup>103</sup> Ibid