



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Submission to the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Brotherhood of St. Laurence

October 2023

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is a social justice organisation working alongside people experiencing disadvantage to address the fundamental causes of poverty in Australia. Our mission is to pursue lasting change, to create a more compassionate and just society where everyone can thrive. Our approach is informed directly by the people experiencing disadvantage and uses evidence drawn from our research, together with insights from our programs and services, to develop practical solutions that work. For more information visit <www.bsl.org.au>.

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Summary

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) welcomes the Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria (the Inquiry).

This submission draws on BSL's experience working with children, young people and their families across Australia, including through the delivery of educational support programs, partnerships with a range of schools in disadvantaged communities, and the lessons drawn from our own re-engagement program, the David Scott School – a senior secondary specialist education program in Melbourne.

“It is my biggest hope to challenge the current education system and introduce a positive change in the way high schools operate where school becomes a place where students feel valued, heard, respected, safe, seen, understood and equal. Where students can connect to others safely and feel hopeful about their futures.” – Letter from David Scott School student – see attachment A

Recommendations

Our recommendations against selected Terms of Reference (TOR) are summarised below:

Student learning outcomes (TOR 1)

1. Target improved student outcomes as a core objective of the education system – particularly for students experiencing disadvantage – and reduce the concentration of disadvantage in schools to promote positive effects among students.
2. Develop wider metrics to assess student achievement.
3. Develop, trial and scale-up interventions to improve outcomes for at-risk cohorts including reduced class size, diversified milestones and measures of success and targeted professional development for teachers.
4. Support schools to collect and share data to assist in identifying priority at-risk groups, design interventions and programs, and measure and evaluate progress.

Teaching profession (TOR 2)

5. Review and reform barriers to the recruitment and retention of teachers from diverse backgrounds – particularly from Indigenous communities, low SES settings, people with disability, neuro-diversity, linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, and rural contexts.
6. Strengthen the appropriateness and consistency of behavioural and student management policies across schools.
7. Adopt competitive salaries and benefits for teachers, particularly as career progression unfolds.
8. Reallocate teacher workloads to increase the time available for teachers to target needs of students experiencing disadvantage.

9. Ensure a pipeline of qualified specialist vocational, technical education and applied learning teachers for the senior secondary system.

Student wellbeing (TOR 3)

10. Promote greater use of wellbeing measures that recognise the diversity of Victorian school populations and that different young people have different barometers of their own health and wellbeing, shaped by their social and cultural backgrounds and circumstances.
11. Increase availability and resourcing of qualified allied health practitioners in schools to enable point-of-need services for children and young people.
12. Increase the skills and knowledge of pre-service teachers in trauma-informed education practice through initial teacher education (ITE).
13. Review core curriculum to strengthen inclusivity in areas including cultural sensitivity, practical application, personalised learning, social-emotional learning, and extra-curricular activities to foster student belonging and connection.

School funding (TOR 6)

14. Increase funding for Victorian government schools to bring them to 100% of the School Resourcing Standard (SRS).
15. Sequence and target this funding increase toward government schools in lower socioeconomic status (SES) areas that have larger populations of students experiencing disadvantage and larger resourcing gaps.

Introduction

The Victorian education and training system contributes to important economic and social outcomes for students, families, communities and workplaces. A high-performing education and training system supports students to progress to further learning, enter the workforce, take advantage of future opportunities and adapt to labour market shocks. In addition, education provides important social benefits including increased personal wellbeing and achievement, community and social participation and inclusion, and family and child health.

This submission draws on BSL's experience working with children, young people and their families across Australia, including through the delivery of educational support programs, and partnerships with a range of schools in disadvantaged communities. This includes insights drawn from our own re-engagement offer, the David Scott School – a senior secondary specialist education program in Melbourne.

David Scott School practice and service design is underpinned by a belief that all children and young people should be genuinely included and valued in mainstream education settings, regardless of ability, cultural background or family circumstance. From the young people, children and families BSL works with, we hear too often of children and young people who do not feel included or safe at school, of schools and teachers struggling to access the additional supports for disability inclusion, or for parents having to advocate to extreme lengths to get children the additional supports they need, noting that some parents do not have the capacity to advocate equally.

This submission also includes a letter from a senior student from the David Scott School. The student recently wrote to BSL's Executive Director to describe their lived experience in mainstream education and offer a perspective on how schools and the education system need to change to meet the needs of students facing mental-health and other challenges. The letter is referenced through the submission and attached in full (with permission) at attachment A.

This submission focuses on selected terms of reference including the following:

- Terms of Reference 1 – Student learning outcomes
- Terms of Reference 2 – The teaching profession
- Terms of Reference 3 – Student wellbeing
- Terms of Reference 6 – School funding

Student Learning Outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind (TOR 1)

Education improves future life prospects of students and delivers broader benefits to society. However, both domestic and international data indicate areas of concern, including:

- The performance of Australian school students in national and international assessments of literacy and numeracy has largely stagnated over the past decade.
- There are persistent gaps in education outcomes for particular cohorts of students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students in outer regional and remote areas, students with experience of trauma, and students with parents with low educational attainment. Education outcomes for these groups are consistently below outcomes for the general student population. For example, Year 9 results from the 2022 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) reveal that:
 - in reading, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have an average score lower than other students equivalent to 3.4 years of schooling
 - in numeracy, the equivalent gap is 2.5 years of schooling.
- Education gaps for some cohorts are difficult to measure accurately due to a lack of rigorous and consistent outcomes data, including students with disability, migrant and refugee students, and students in out-of-home care.

Results across States and Territories have not materially deviated from these national trends (Productivity Commission 2022).

1. Targeting outcomes and reducing the concentration of disadvantage in schools.

The current objectives for the Victorian education and training system include the following (DET 2023):

- Achievement – raise standards of learning and development achieved by Victorians using education and training.
- Engagement – increase the number of Victorians actively participating in education and training.
- Wellbeing – increase the contribution education and training make to quality of life for all Victorians, particularly children and young people.

BSL considers that improving student outcomes should be an explicit objective for the Victorian system – particularly for students experiencing disadvantage. An important component of this will include increasing the ability of students experiencing disadvantage to attend school and learn with peers from socioeconomically mixed backgrounds and feel safe, valued and enjoy a sense of belonging. Mixed and diverse educational settings can generate positive effects for students – including more effective student effort, increased student aspiration and increased parental time investment (Gendre and Salamanca 2020).

Recommendation 1: Improving student outcomes should be an explicit objective for the Victorian system – and particularly for students experiencing disadvantage.

School funding is a key component in improving outcomes – both increasing the level of funding and targeting funding to areas where student learning, health and wellbeing outcomes are lowest. Further discussion of funding is included below at Terms of Reference No. 6.

2. Wider metrics and systems for recognising student achievement

Building traditional academic skills (e.g. literacy and numeracy) is an important student outcome. However – informed by BSL’s experience with a diverse student population – wider skills (e.g. life skills and relational skills) are also important to enable students to flourish and transition to further study or work and participate in their communities.

“At my old, mainstream, high school if you didn’t fit the stereotype of what a ‘successful’ student should be, or what they expected you to be, you just got left in the dark to fall through the cracks.”

– Letter from David Scott School student – see attachment A

“I hope ... other schools can also learn strategies like the ones my school uses to empower students and support them to live the lives the students want to live and help them reach their potential.

Help them to feel valued and show them their school believes in them and knows that they can succeed. Success doesn’t always look like a grade on a paper.” – Letter from David Scott School student – see attachment A

BSL considers that wider metrics and systems are required for recognising student achievement and informing improvements to teaching practice. How learning is recognised at the end of schooling (for example, the current ATAR), is important for determining post-school pathways and determines what we teach and assess. However, student achievement is more complex and varied than an ATAR measure alone can capture. More comprehensive education metrics can consider the capabilities students need to thrive in the community and workplace. Some innovative approaches are currently being used/trialled in Australian schools, including, but not limited to, the following:

- [The Mastery Transcript \(Mastery Transcript Consortium Australia\)](#)
- [New Metrics \(University of Melbourne\)](#)
- [Edapt \(Edapt Education, Melbourne\)](#).

Recommendation 2: Develop wider metrics and systems for recognising and assessing student achievement.

3. Interventions to improve student outcomes

In addition to adopting a wider understanding of student progress (above), BSL’s experience with David Scott School suggests that specific interventions at a school level can improve student outcomes for at-risk cohorts. These include adjusting class size, milestones and measures of success, and professional development for teachers. For example, at David Scott School smaller class sizes (of 15 to 16) have been implemented to support more effective targeting of need and allow students to feel seen and heard. Class sizes in the range of 8–15 can deliver further benefits, however funding can be a limiting factor. BSL also considers there is merit in developing and trialling these interventions more broadly and scaling them to a system-wide level.

Table 1 Example practices to improve student outcomes, by level of implementation

Practice	Description	Level of implementation
Adjusting class size as a lever for responding to the needs of at-risk cohorts	Responding to class needs – for example larger classes for self-directed, research-based, upper-level students. Smaller classes for students requiring more structured, externally motivated learning opportunities.	System and school level intervention
Wider menu of milestones/measures of success and attainment	Students, teachers, families, tertiary sector and industry have all described current success measures and certificates as insufficient indicators of attainment and success. A wider menu of milestones – beyond transcripts – are needed to describe what students ‘know’ and ‘can do’.	System level intervention
Professional development for teachers and school leaders	Mandatory inclusion of trauma-informed practice and understanding of social and class-based systems of learning should be embedded in the ITE curriculum. This should be complemented by regular, meaningful professional development for teaching staff within schools to ensure school practice is predictable and consistent for all students. This will support more effective teaching strategies for students with trauma histories, enabling student achievement, reducing classroom behavioural management needs and increasing teacher satisfaction.	System level intervention

Recommendation 3: Develop, trial and scale-up interventions including reduced class size as a lever for responding to the needs of at-risk cohorts.

4. Identifying priority at-risk groups to target early intervention and measure progress

Specific population groups face barriers and increased risks of exclusion in schooling. These include children and young people with experience of:

- out-of-home care
- incarceration (self or family)
- social and emotional disability
- caring responsibilities
- intergenerational early school leaving
- mental health challenges (self or family)
- geographical transience
- family violence and/or trauma
- institutional violence or distrust (self or family)

- neurodiversity or atypical cognitive development (self or family).

“The education system is structured so that the things that matter aren’t valued, the teachers don’t have time to care about who students are and what students need and mental health feel like they have no importance” – Letter from David Scott School student – see attachment A

Schools and teachers need support to identify at-risk students and groups, and then to design and implement appropriate interventions. Different responses are often needed for different levels of student need, maturity and development of students, that may not align tightly with the age brackets/year levels currently used in schools. Such responses need to provide for differing student social, cognitive, cultural and emotional development. BSL considers that there is scope for DET to support schools to collect and share data to assist in identifying priority groups, design interventions and programs, measure and evaluate progress and implement change according to evidence.

Recommendation 4: Support schools to collect and share data to assist in identifying priority at-risk groups, design interventions and programs, and measure and evaluate progress.

The teaching profession (TOR 2)

Teachers are the most influential in-school factor in student outcomes, and ensuring an adequate supply of effective teachers is critical to improving student outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of falling behind (Expert Panel 2023, p. 27). BSL considers a number of measures can strengthen the recruitment, retention and capability of teachers.

5. Diversifying the teaching workforce by addressing structural barriers to entry and retention

The current teacher workforce in Australia does not adequately reflect the diversity of the population, with under-representation of Indigenous peoples, people with disability, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. BSL welcomes a recent Victorian government pilot program to support people with a disability to enter teaching (Rice, Garner and Graham 2023), and supports further initiatives to increase diversity.

Diversity is important to strengthen student – teacher connection and role modelling. Diversity is also important because teachers often seek employment at schools where student backgrounds and upbringing are similar to their own. Teachers from diverse backgrounds (e.g. across SES settings, from Indigenous families or rural settings) are more likely to be effective teachers of students from similar contexts, and more likely – with the right support – to remain at schools in similar contexts. Diversity can support student aspiration, improve student achievement and increase future supply into the teaching workforce (Rice, Garner and Graham 2023).

BSL acknowledges the difficulty schools have in attracting and retaining a teacher workforce and, importantly, a workforce that reflects the diversity of Victorian communities, schools and student populations. Increasing diversity in the teaching population offers multiple benefits for the education system, teacher collaboration, student connectedness and educational learning opportunities, by widening the expertise, points of view and lived experiences that shape practices within schools.

Measures to increase teacher diversity include addressing cultural bias in the curriculum through consulting with diverse populations, addressing hiring practices that can be exclusive, cultivating inclusive whole-school practices including staff development, and ensuring diversity in leadership roles for decision making, mentoring and representation.

The Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE), for example, has been found to be a significant barrier for potential teachers from linguistically or culturally diverse backgrounds, those from first-in-family to attend university and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander populations applying to undertake teacher training (Hilton & Saunders 2023). BSL considers the LANTITE test should be shifted from a barrier to entry to a component of the development of teachers. This would involve using the testing to identify where pre-service teachers need additional development and support within their ITE courses and where adjustments could be made in specific in-school roles to ensure cultural inclusion and to ultimately broaden teacher diversity within schools.

Recommendation 5: Review and reform barriers to the recruitment and retention of teachers from diverse backgrounds – particularly from Indigenous communities, different SES settings, people with disability, linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, and rural contexts.

6. Strengthening the appropriateness and consistency of behavioural and student management policies

Teacher retention (and student outcomes and wellbeing) can be enhanced by more supportive behavioural and student management policies and support. This can assist teachers and school staff by creating environments that promote learning, engagement, empathy, understanding and emotional support. Ensuring that schools and teachers are adequately resourced to meet wellbeing and engagement needs is required for these systems to be successful in school (Patti et al. 2015). In-school and classroom-based interventions such as restorative practices, trauma informed classrooms, explicit wellbeing programs and culturally inclusive and responsive pedagogies are already in use to varying degrees in some schools. For example, David Scott School trains staff in models and frameworks (e.g. the Dynamic Maturation Model) that recognise that students who have faced trauma and danger can develop strategies and responses for self-protection and survival. However, these strategies may no longer be serving them well in a school context. Staff at David Scott School work with students in a supportive manner to build new strategies before releasing existing strategies. Scaling up these interventions and monitoring the impact of these practices at the system level could contribute to improving outcomes and addressing challenges faced by at-risk learners.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen the appropriateness and consistency of behavioural and student management policies across schools and scale-up successful interventions.

7. Competitive salaries and benefits for teachers

Ensuring competitive salaries and benefits is one important factor in attracting and retaining qualified educators. In particular, starting salaries for teachers are generally competitive, however teacher pay rapidly falls behind that of other professionals as teachers progress in their careers. This limits the ability of the schools and the education system to compete with other industries and professions to attract and retain high-quality candidates (Grattan Institute 2019). More

competitive salaries can also raise the public profile and community standing of the teaching profession, which can contribute to attracting high-quality candidates.

Adequate compensation for the physical hours, emotional load, associated risks and complexity of the role would appropriately recognise the value of teachers' work and can reduce the incentive to leave the profession for higher-paying jobs. Access to flexible work opportunities (including part-time work) is also increasingly important in a post COVID-19 hybrid work world. While many other industries have become more flexible, teaching has not.

Recommendation 7: Adopt competitive salaries and benefits for teachers, particularly as career progression unfolds.

8. Reallocate teacher workloads to improve teacher capacity to target the needs of students experiencing disadvantage

Teachers report feeling unable to adequately cater for high numbers of students – particularly students experiencing disadvantage – requiring individual learning plans, individual adjustments, behaviour modification plans, intense relationship building and more face-to-face support, due to heavy workloads.

To address teacher attrition and burnout, the administrative expectations of classroom teachers needs to change. Streamlining administrative tasks and paperwork can free up teachers' time to focus on teaching and connecting with students. This can be achieved by investing in technology and in administrative support staff, reviewing data collecting and response measures, increasing the trust in professional teacher judgement, creating and maintaining reasonable expectations of communication both internally and externally around student learning – including reducing standardised testing and ensuring all assessments are meaningful for the teacher and/or student. A more streamlined reporting process that reduces modes of assessment that measure narrow notions of success can provide opportunities for both reduced workload and deeper learning.

Trusting professional teacher judgment can lead to a reduction in teacher administrative burden and improve the assessment and reporting mechanisms available in schools while improving teacher workloads. Teacher judgments can also inform equitable and timely allocation of resources to meet student needs.

Additionally, teacher workloads can be managed through the provision of support services – such as counsellors, social workers, and special education professionals – to address students' non-academic needs. Support services for teachers could include mentors and professional development, with appropriate time release.

Teachers should be enabled to direct their efforts where they will have the most significant impact on student outcomes. Measures to target effort can include:

- diagnostic use of engagement and achievement data to identify learners in need of additional support
- timely professional development to build skills for working with priority groups and addressing specific learning needs (such as culturally responsive teaching and inclusive practices)
- differentiated instruction.

For example, at David Scott School each student at commencement participates in a diagnostic conversation over the course of a day with their teacher or teacher aid to understand the students current knowledge of ‘traditional’ skills (e.g. numeracy and literacy), as well as the student’s background, experience in previous schools, challenges, motivation and current perception of their future. This may lead to further formalised testing where relevant, and also informs the development of individualised learning plans for each student. Alongside this, teachers participate in professional development that supports them to address diverse student needs. All David Scott School staff undertake full training in two specific professional development frameworks – one aimed at educators working with young people with lived experience of poverty, homelessness and trauma; and a second to build understanding of how young people exposed to danger can develop behaviours and strategies that may be harmful or not fit for purpose. Staff at David Scott School need to work with students to develop new strategies before releasing existing strategies.

“I later went to my Headspace doctor who referred me to the David Scott School. I ended up applying for a position at the school after doing heaps of research about what they offer there ... it was the best decision I’ve ever made in my life. Immediately since moving to this school I felt safe, and my mental health improved significantly. I received the help I needed from the wellbeing team who talked to me, asked me questions, gave me time and let me lead the conversations that helped me.” – Letter from David Scott School student – see attachment A

Recommendation 8: Reduce teacher workloads and improve the ability of teachers to target the needs of students experiencing disadvantage.

9. Ensuring a pipeline of qualified vocational education and technical education teachers for the diversifying senior secondary system

Within the wider challenge of ensuring a pipeline of suitably qualified teachers, the supply of qualified VET in schools and technology education teachers is particularly important to the educational opportunities and experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These young people make up the majority of students reliant on vocational pathways to support their completion of Year 12 (Clarke & Polesel 2013; Van Dyke & Jackson 2019).

There is a lack of detailed data about the extent of the supply shortage of VET teachers for schools, however an indication of the shortage can be inferred from the fact that 84% of VET teaching in schools is being conducted by out-of-field teachers (AITSL 2021a).

Within the broader system action on teacher supply, specific action is needed to address the shortage of VET in schools of teachers who are industry, vocationally and teacher qualified. A key barrier to building a supply of qualified VET teachers in schools is the lack of a stream for VET in schools within mainstream university teacher education courses.

Recommendation 9: Ensure a pipeline of qualified specialist vocational, technical education and applied learning teachers for the senior secondary system.

Improving student wellbeing (TOR 3)

10. Measuring student wellbeing consistently across the system while responding to the diversity of children and young people in schools

Student wellbeing is an important contributor to academic and social outcomes, and good student outcomes can, in turn, enhance wellbeing. The more traditional focus on academic outcomes and achievements alone needs to shift toward a whole-child approach in school and education settings. This approach prioritises the full scope of a child’s needs and capacities, including social, emotional, cognitive, physical, ethical and psychological development, as well as academic growth, to ensure that all children are able to reach their full potential.

At David Scott School, 94% of students report that mental health challenges impact their lives daily (compared with a nationwide average for this age group of 15%). Most of the students indicate that mental health challenges are/were a prominent factor in their inability to maintain a place in mainstream school.

“My wellbeing support person didn’t let me fall through the cracks. Because of the experiences I had I was hesitant at first to trust school staff, but she persisted with me and took time to let me get more comfortable and able to communicate with her. She could see the fear in my eyes, but she let me lead the sessions, she let me decide what was right for me, she challenged me when I needed it and eventually my fear got smaller as I learnt to trust her and feel safe.” – Letter from David Scott School student – see attachment A

Challenges exist in measuring student wellbeing across a diverse student population and responding to identified needs. Nuanced and adaptable instruments need to be created to ensure that measurements are meaningful and practical. Survey tools are useful to provide a ‘snapshot’ of a student experience, however they must be complemented by resources to implement support or change where needed. In the absence of such resourcing, the surveys can increase teacher and student workloads without meaningful outcomes. For measures of wellbeing to be meaningful in schools, they must lead to action. Simply put, if young people take the risk to disclose mental health or other concerns and there is no action from the school, their existing mental health challenges can be exacerbated, and they can develop long-term resistance to seeking help. Feedback through BSL’s education, child and youth programs reveals that students are reporting wellbeing concerns in schoolwide surveys without follow-up or intervention. This can leave students feeling invalidated and less likely to report these concerns in the future (Foulkes & Andrews 2023).

Recommendation 10: Promote greater use of wellbeing measures that recognise the diversity of Victorian school populations and how different young people have different barometers of their own health and wellbeing, shaped by their social and cultural backgrounds and circumstances.

11. Timely access to qualified allied health practitioners

Schools play a key role in enabling access to allied health services and can create connections to community services for both students and families. David Scott School functions as a ‘hub’ that promotes and enables connections between school and family, community, and the broader

supports children and families need to thrive. This can be seen with allied health professionals and support services including the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) and child protection professionals. Students may have histories that contribute to distrust of services, and the location and delivery of services at the school site can aid in bridging these trust and service gaps. David Scott School staff also accompany students to off-site meetings with health providers and support staff, which in-turn builds confidence and supports students to engage more independently over time.

For at-risk children and young people, contact with health and community services at the school site can also build confidence and relationships that create pathways to new services outside the school gate. The Smith Family has also emphasised the importance of connecting children and their families with allied health and other services and the importance of ‘putting children and young people at the centre and moving towards enabling educational systems to more effectively work with the wider service systems which impact children’ (The Smith Family 2023).

Schools can also act as an advocate for some young people when parents or family are unable to perform this role, via school connections to allied health services (such as school nurses, paediatricians, occupational therapists, psychologists). Importantly, appropriate information sharing protocols are required to build students’ trust of allied health services.

“I’ve been able to overcome so many hard times and mental health issues by being connected at this school and being understood by my mental health person. Together we came up with strategies to support my mental health inside and outside of school.” – Letter from David Scott School student – see attachment A

Effective partnerships between schools and allied health services require geographic proximity, timely access to qualified practitioners and resourcing for school staff to maintain the partnership. The current nationwide shortage of allied health practitioners affects different cohorts of children and young people unequally. BSL supports expansion of allied health services and staffing – particularly for disadvantaged schools. This could include resourcing for staff to accompany vulnerable students to appointments when guardians/parents are unable to do so. Students at David Scott School commonly report that parents or caregivers have had to choose between purchasing medications and paying for specialist support services.

Recommendation 11: Increase availability and resourcing of qualified allied health practitioners in schools to enable point-of-need services for children and young people.

12. Teacher–student relationship capabilities

Evidence shows that teachers knowing students, and the relationship between students and their teachers, are significant determining factors for strengthening student wellbeing (Kotiw 2017). However, there is inconsistent, often limited, focus on teacher–student relationship management within current ITE courses.

“This school is completely different to my old school. The teachers here go by their first name and there is a huge sense of equality between the students and staff. The staff members here know everyone’s name and talk to all the students when they have the chance. I believe this is how all schools should try to be like, where the teachers feel more supportive and interested in helping you achieve your goals.” – Letter from David Scott School student – see attachment A

An important consideration is the growing prevalence of students affected by complex trauma. Addressing this requires increasing the knowledge and skill of pre-service teachers in trauma-informed education practice through initial teacher education (Estrange and Howard 2022). Overall, the education and teacher training system needs to aim for and enable relationship practices that are less ad-hoc and not reliant on the goodwill of teachers to pursue student wellbeing as an ‘extra interest’ on top of their standard teaching load.

Recommendation 12: Increase the skills and knowledge of pre-service teachers in trauma-informed education practice through initial teacher training.

13. The importance of curriculum in children and young people feeling connected to school

There is well documented evidence regarding the interdependence between academic capacity, capability, aspiration, and engagement and student wellbeing (Dix et al. 2020; Evans-Whipp et al. 2017; White & Kern 2018). School curriculum can promote students’ sense of belonging at school or contribute to a sense of exclusion. An inclusive curriculum has features including (but not limited to):

- a culturally sensitive curriculum that ensures students from diverse and non-dominant backgrounds can find meaning and connection within school. A curriculum that includes diverse histories, broad recognition and is relevant to students’ lives and interests increases both engagement and alignment between school and lived experience. This benefits all students by increasing collective capabilities
- real-world examples, project-based learning and practical applications are maximised which makes the learning experience more meaningful for young people, supporting them to feel connected to their learning and, consequently, to the school environment. This supports collaboration and connection, and also supports vulnerable students during the recognised high-risk period of the life course between education and employment
- personalised student learning which helps students to feel ‘seen’ and supports strong mutually respectful relationships between students and their teachers. A more tailored curriculum can be effective in meeting individual student needs. This supports vulnerable students to build or maintain connection to school; however, it requires staff resourcing and time allocation
- social-emotional learning (SEL) components are embedded in the curriculum to help students develop self-awareness, emotional regulation and interpersonal skills. This approach also supports students who are out of alignment with the ‘hidden rules of school’ to develop confidence and school connection. An integrated SEL curriculum has been consistently found to improve students’ emotional wellbeing and positively impact whole school culture, leading to a stronger sense of safety and engagement

- a simplified traditional curriculum and ensuring ‘extracurricular’ activities are incorporated into the school week to cater to diverse interests and talents and disrupt the privilege of extracurricular activities. These activities can provide vulnerable students with opportunities to explore their interests, demonstrate broader capacities, build friendships and develop a sense of belonging in the classroom.

The mainstream curriculum applied by the current education system, created for a different time, a different population and different required outcomes, can be exclusionary and divisive for some students. School curriculum can be a transformative tool that shares and generates diverse knowledge systems and fosters a sense of belonging, engagement and support for all students, including those with a tenuous school connection.

Recommendation 13: Review core curriculum to strengthen inclusivity in areas including cultural sensitivity, practical application, personalised learning, social-emotional learning and extra-curricular activities, to foster student belonging and connection.

School funding (TOR 6)

Adequate and well-targeted school funding is critical to provide the resources to enable improved student outcomes. As noted, students experiencing disadvantage are significantly behind more advantaged students in education outcomes. Disparate access to resources may explain part of this gap – including shortages of material and suitable staff. This resourcing gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools is wider in Australia than in comparator OECD countries (Hunter 2022).

Under the Gonski funding agreement, a School Resourcing Standard (SRS) was developed to establish a base rate of funding per student, plus loadings for student and school attributes to meet student educational needs. The SRS would determine the required funding for each school – both government and non-government. In 2019 the Victorian Government agreed to increase its contribution towards the SRS for government schools from 67% (the lowest in Australia) to 75% over 10 years. This will still leave government schools at only 95% of the SRS (once federal government funding is added to state funding). By contrast, the target for non-government schools is to provide sufficient funding (both Victorian Government and federal government) to achieve 100% of the SRS (Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office 2020).

Recommendation 14: Increased funding for Victorian Government schools to bring them to 100% of the SRS.

Recommendation 15: Sequence and target this funding increase toward government schools in lower SES areas that have larger populations of students experiencing disadvantage and larger resourcing gaps.

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Attachment A – Letter from David Scott School Student

I am an 18 year old VCE student at the David Scott School.

I'm writing this letter to spread awareness about my experience at a mainstream school and to hopefully create a positive change in the education system. I'm advocating for the mental health and schools' values to improve. I am strongly passionate about being a voice for the thousands of young people who feel so alone, powerless and dismissed in the mainstream system. I'm hoping that sharing my story and experience will give the education system an insight of what it really feels like to be at a school where you don't fit in.

I'm hoping this letter will improve the wellbeing of future students in the education system and that they feel cared for and heard.

I was the quiet kid. I was the one that asked to go to the bathroom all the time. I was the one that had their head down and didn't speak. I was the one who had a look of fear on their face. I was the one who was too anxious to participate but always listened. I was the one who could fade into the background and the one that's easy to ignore.

I attended a mainstream high school for four years and it was one of the most daunting experiences of my life.

During those four years, every day I felt scared, disregarded, invisible and powerless. I felt that the school only saw me as a 'quiet kid', who had bad attendance. What they didn't see was a girl who felt so unsafe and terrified being at school. A girl that would hide in the bathroom crying wishing she wasn't here anymore.

I remember the mornings before getting up for school were the worst. It felt as though I would wake up feeling sick to my stomach, and no matter what I tried I couldn't get up.

The emotions I felt were so unbearable and uncomfortable it eventually consumed me to a point where I lost my sense of self. I couldn't bear to feel like this every day, I was so alone.

At my old, mainstream high school, if you didn't fit the stereotype of what a 'successful' student should be, or what they expected you to be, you just got left in the dark to fall through the cracks.

I felt unseen and unheard at school. There was a sense of inequality and a huge power imbalance between teachers and staff compared to students. Teachers often talked down to us. It felt like students' best interests were never talked about and we were never heard. This made me feel so alone in my experience of school, like my feelings weren't valid and I was just easy to dismiss.

I understand that school during Covid was hard for a lot of people including me, but it was the days I was at school that were the worst. The constant anxiety, fear and loneliness I felt while going to school wouldn't go away. I constantly felt like that every single day. Many of my peers and friends felt the same way. Many of us all ended up leaving in year ten because it felt very much like there was no care, let alone any help!

The education system failed us, it is an archaic system that needs to change so that it works better for all students.

At school I'd sit alone in most of my classes and barely talk or participate. Teachers didn't speak to me or check in on me, it felt like they only cared if I was doing the schoolwork or not. When I wasn't I would be punished and interrogated instead of being given the help I needed. I felt so intimidated.

I was miserable. It was clear that I was not okay, but no one at school seemed to care enough to ask. Everyone was so busy. Nobody knew me and nobody took the time to understand me. What I really needed was for just one person to listen and talk to me and put in the effort to get to know me and to be there for me while I was struggling with my mental health. I needed someone to help me work out why

school was breaking me and how I could start to feel safe and therefore be able to get to school. I needed a safe place to go to when my days were so unbearable, but no one offered me that safe place. I had nowhere to go – geographically and mentally.

I had to find my own place and that ended up being a bathroom stall. While being in the bathroom my feelings were so overwhelming, I would be drowning in my tears. The only way I believed I could cope on my own was to harm myself to escape those feelings. So, I did. Over and over again. I ended up going to the bathroom almost every class. School was not a safe place at all for me it just made everything worse.

To me, it seemed that my old high school values were mostly about getting good grades instead of being about the holistic care of the student's well-being. They curated their image around their values to the public, but the real values were felt. They were felt by me. They strove for their idea of the 'perfect' student who got good grades, but I just felt like a number at the bottom of the list who was given no help to catch up to the rest of the numbers and no acknowledgment of who I was and what I was struggling with.

I eventually reached out for help at school but received nothing that seemed usable or relevant to me. One of the strategies I was given was an exit card, however, I was too scared to even use it and I still didn't have a safe place to go to. When I did get the strength to ask to leave a classroom, I would end up just going to the bathroom which as I've said – was not a safe or helpful space for me.

I was instructed to go to the coordinator's office with the exit card. There I found myself in a small, poorly lit room alongside teachers that had literally just gone around yelling and interrogating me and other students for our uniform. They missed the point of the challenges I was facing and why I had the need for the exit card they never had the time to get to know me to find out what would work for me.

The only thing I could think of that could help to block everything out was music. Music is a temporary distraction from any mental health issues and research shows it helps reduce anxiety and depression. But I wasn't allowed to listen to music at school. My only available strategy for safety was not considered important. It feels like schools don't listen to students' voices or even care to hear what they have to say, and students are the ones who are mandated to go there every day regardless of their experience of school.

The first day of term four, year ten, was the last day I attended my old school. I vaguely remember sitting in class dissociating and feeling so alone and almost like I wasn't there. It felt like no one else saw me, but I saw them. I saw them breathing, laughing, smiling, and talking while I was sitting in the exact same room as them, but felt like I was suffocating.

I nervously asked to leave to go to the bathroom, holding back my tears, knowing exactly what I was going to do in there. While facing those overwhelming emotions, I resorted to the only coping mechanism I knew back then: self-harm.

I was so emotional and out of control that I cut so deep and the wound wouldn't stop bleeding. There was blood dripping everywhere. I tried to stop the bleeding quickly so I could return back to class without getting in trouble for being out of class too long.

I stayed at school for three hours after the incident, still bleeding. I attended class barely able to walk and feeling lightheaded from the blood loss. I sat, leaning against the classroom wall unable to participate in class and was left alone by the teacher. She just walked past me and didn't check in on me. She didn't even acknowledge me. I eventually went to the coordinators office and broke down into tears, begging them to let me go home. They called my mum and let me go home. It took a while for me to explain to my mum about what happened, but realised I had to reach out to her. I was terrified. I was still bleeding and needed stitches that day, which I received.

My mum called the school and told them what happened, and they set up a meeting with the head of coordinators, my mum, and the wellbeing lady and me. The meeting was short, and I didn't trust that they would follow through with the suggestions they were making. It felt like there wasn't anything they could do to accommodate my needs and that I was too much of a problem to deal with due to my mental health.

I later went to my Headspace Doctor who referred me to The David Scott School. I ended up applying for a position at the school after doing heaps of research about what they offer there. I was eventually accepted into the school; it was the best decision I've ever made in my life.

David Scott School was so welcoming towards me, and I felt seen for the first time in my whole schooling experience. Immediately since moving to this school I felt safe, and my mental health improved significantly. I received the help I needed from the wellbeing team who talked to me, asked me questions, gave me time, and let me lead the conversations that helped me.

The school has values that make sense to me, and I can see them being lived out. Their values are equality, individuality and knowledge seeking. I hope that by writing this letter, other schools can also learn strategies like the ones my school use to empower students and support them to live the lives the students want to live and help them reach their potential. Help them to feel valued and show them their school believes in them and knows that they can succeed. Success doesn't always look like a grade on a paper.

My wellbeing support person didn't let me fall through the cracks. Because of the experiences I had I was hesitant at first to trust school staff, but she persisted with me and took time to let me get more comfortable and able to communicate with her. She could see the fear in my eyes, but she let me lead the sessions, she let me decide what was right for me, she challenged me when I needed it and eventually my fear got smaller as I learnt to trust her and feel safe. I was able to talk to her about the things I'd been hiding from everybody else. I've been able to overcome so many hard times and mental health issues by being connected at this school and being understood by my wellbeing support person. Together we came up with strategies to support my mental health inside and outside of school.

My classroom teacher and teacher aid always have my best interest at heart, they let me work at my own pace. I feel comfortable to communicate with them if I'm unsure of anything or need help. I was never able to before at my old school because I was always terrified to put my hand up or ask for help. At school now I feel confident to tell them if I'm just having a bad day. They'll understand and ask what I need or if I just need to rest for the day. But they'll also challenge me if they think I need it! I regularly get checked up on, I feel seen and cared for here. I feel safe to communicate to staff and other teachers here too because everyone is so welcoming and kind, whereas I could never speak to teachers at my old school because they never put in the effort to try and get to know the students.

This school is completely different to my old school. The teachers here go by their first name and there is a huge sense of equality between the students and staff. The staff members here know everyone's name and talk to all the students when they have the chance. I believe this is how all schools should try to be like, where the teachers feel more supportive and interested in helping you achieve your goals. If the power imbalance goes away students would feel less intimidated and scared to communicate with their teachers and staff.

Think about how much more constructive and positive a school environment would be if students could speak their mind and aren't terrified to ask for help.

I have developed a strong connection to this school and to the staff and students in it. I managed to get my voice and laughter back through the help and love I was given here. After being here for a year I was able to reflect on my traumatic time at my old school and realised how awful it was and that I never should have been made to feel that way and no one else ever should!

If the education system just did a better job and cared for the student's wellbeing this wouldn't happen. The education system is structured so that the things that matter aren't valued, the teachers don't have time to care about who students are and what students need and mental health feel like they have no importance.

I implore you to recognise the significant impact that the mainstream system has had not only my life, but many other students lives, and I want you to learn from this and hear our story.

It is my biggest hope to challenge the current education system and introduce a positive change in the way high schools operate where school becomes a place where students feel valued, heard, respected, safe, seen, understood and equal. Where students can connect to others safely and feel hopeful about their futures.

I ask you to think about students like me - the quiet kid who needed help, and think about what you will do differently, and how you might change and save their life.

I believe in a better schooling approach that creates positive change because I have lived it, and I wish for your school to do the same.

Kind regards

[Name withheld].