

# AEU STATE BUDGET SUBMISSION

2011-2012

AEU Victorian Branch

Submission paper

December 2010







The AEU Victorian Branch welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the annual State Government budget process. Our submission focuses on high-level policy issues that we believe the Government should consider not only in the context of the 2011-2012 budget but also in developing policy for the next term of government.

Our submission takes a whole-of-government focus: education underpins the prosperity of all Victorian citizens and is key to a cohesive society. We submit that a government can be judged by its investment in public education.

### **The state we're in**

Our public education system is a cornerstone of our society, welcoming all and aiming to provide a high quality education for all. From preschool to primary, secondary to TAFE it must be dedicated to the educational needs and pastoral care of each and every student. It must ensure that every student's needs are met and that their individual interests are engaged and extended. It must also equip them with the skills needed to participate meaningfully in both working and community life.

The Productivity Commission "Report on Government Services" 2010 was released on January 29. The report, covering the 2007/2008 budget period, confirmed again that Victoria spent the least per student/student hour in every category.

The combined recurrent Commonwealth and state/territory government expenditure on government schools was:

- \$10,225 per FTE primary school student
- \$13,122 per FTE secondary school student

For VET, Commonwealth and State expenditure in Victoria was \$12.02 per annual hour of delivery.

	<i>NSW</i>	<i>Vic</i>	<i>Qld</i>	<i>WA</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>Tas</i>	<i>ACT</i>	<i>NT</i>	<i>Aust</i>
Govt primary (\$)	11 148	10 225	11 633	14 309	11 627	11 450	14 964	16 432	11 557
Funding-national average (%)	-3.5	-11.5	0.7	23.8	0.6	-0.9	29.5	42.2	
Govt secondary (\$)	13 977	13 122	13 855	18 749	13 916	13 560	17 374	21 837	14 306
Funding-national average (%)	-2.3	-8.3	-3.2	31.1	-2.7	-5.2	21.5	52.6	
VET funding per hour (\$)	12.54	12.02	14.83	12.93	13.99	14.12	16.85	21.75	13.10
Funding-national average (%)	-4.3	-8.2	13.2	-1.3	6.8	7.8	28.6	66.0	

Table 1: Government recurrent per capita expenditure on public education and percentage difference from the national average.

It can be seen that in 2007/2008 Victoria spent:

- \$923 less per student than NSW and more than 11 per cent (\$1,332 per student) less than the national average for primary
- \$855 less per student than NSW and more than 8 per cent (\$1,184 per student) less than the national average for secondary
- 50¢ less per hour in VET institutions than NSW and more than 8 per cent (\$1.08) less than the national average. It was the lowest level of expenditure over the last five years in real terms.



The focus of our concern at this point in time is equity. It is a fundamental principle that governments have a primary responsibility to provide a high quality education for all. This is essential for a cohesive and democratic society where all citizens are valued and have the opportunity to contribute to our shared future. Investment in education also delivers significant economic and social benefits to our shared community.

For years now this notion has been unfashionable, driven by efforts to shift attention to anything but the increasing gap in life opportunities between the wealthiest and poorest members of our community at a time when disadvantage, social dislocation and family crisis are growing trends.

This gap has again been underlined by the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report. The difference in average scores between Australian students from low socio-economic status (SES) families and those from high SES families increased in reading, maths and science between 2006 and 2009.

The performance gap between students of the same age is the equivalent of up to three years of schooling.

As the report on Australia's PISA results says, that gap "places an unacceptable proportion of 15-year-old students at serious risk of not achieving levels sufficient for them to effectively participate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century work force and to contribute to Australia as productive citizens".

Victoria in particular has much to address in this regard. We hope the State Budget will provide further funding to address inequity that results in differing educational outcomes.

### **Getting it right for everyone**

We call for investment from combined government infrastructure funds and to continue the process of co-locating sporting and community facilities and services as well as early childhood education and care services within public school precincts. Further, we welcome the establishment of collaborative partnerships between schools and other services where co-location is not feasible. The strengths and benefits that can be derived from an integrated system of education and care will be facilitated by this relationship.

Education is a lifelong process and children and their families need to access various levels of services and to be connected to relevant community programs. It makes sense to place schools at the centre of community life.

The AEU believes that the challenge is to provide equality of opportunity for all our children to lead successful lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by:

- Continuing to increase participation in preschool education
- Reducing school class sizes
- Addressing the needs of the increasing number of students with behavioural and emotional issues
- Ensuring high quality teaching, supported by quality professional development



- 
- Continued rebuilding of school and preschool infrastructure
  - Identifying and addressing the needs of students not achieving benchmark literacy and numeracy standards through the years P-12
  - Keeping students engaged in the middle years
  - Meeting every student's needs in Years 11 and 12
  - Addressing the skills shortage and the need for lifelong learning and training.

In addition, we believe there is a case to be made for a special focus on secondary education, the years when students run the greatest risk of becoming disengaged, where public confidence in our government schools is at its lowest and where the pressure particularly in small and rural schools to provide a broad and engaging curriculum is greatest.

### **The importance of universal preschool provision**

The AEU welcomes the Coalition's commitment to the full implementation of the COAG National Quality Reform Agenda.

Implementation of the universal access policy outlined in the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood education, improved staff/child ratios for children aged 3 and older, and the introduction of regulatory requirements for a qualified teacher in all standard licensed early childhood services will place a greater strain on the supply of qualified early childhood teachers.

Workforce strategies aimed at supporting National Partnership goals will be required. However, effective workforce strategies need to be supported by reliable workforce data. Currently the lack of such data due to the employment structures within the sector hamstrings the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in many of its endeavours to implement policy effectively.

Achieving the COAG targets of 15 hours of preschool in the year before primary school by the start of 2013 will also require a substantial investment in preschool infrastructure. Much of the existing infrastructure is ageing and straining to accommodate increased enrolments flowing on from elevated birth rates.

We believe that:

- The Government should provide preschool education on a free and universal basis for all 4-year-olds, as well as 3-year-old children from disadvantaged backgrounds as a first step towards universal provision of preschool programs for 3-year-olds
- Funded (free) access for children with additional needs and integration support services is an important equity initiative
- All early childhood teachers should be registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching and early childhood assistants should be certified
- A long-term plan to address capacity and ageing preschool infrastructure needs to be developed in conjunction with local government and other relevant groups
- Funding for professional development and resources should be provided to support the ongoing implementation of the VEYLDF and transition to school policy.

## Looking after vulnerable students

### ***Preschool***

Research provides strong indications that early intervention and support can help families to remain intact and assist children with special needs to thrive. It also acknowledges that some children with additional needs miss out on early intervention services. The AEU recognises the Coalition's commitment to increase funding for Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services, but the burgeoning birthrate alone requires this support to be substantial and prompt.

### ***Disengaged students***

Higher youth unemployment demands increased support for schools and TAFE:

- 15-19 year old unemployment was estimated to be 18.2% in Victoria in October 2010
- An estimated 14,000 15-19-year-olds in Victoria were unemployed and not in full-time education (*both figures from ABS labour force data, October 2010*).

Dealing with disengaged students in the context of high youth unemployment and with a higher school leaving age poses extra challenges for teachers and students in Victorian public secondary schools. In 2009, the OECD reported that Australian teachers were already spending more time than their international colleagues maintaining classroom order. The Commonwealth's "earn or learn" Youth Allowance policy also adds to the number of disengaged students and classroom disruptions.

Secondary student populations also bring increasingly diverse needs. Only a sufficiently broad range of courses and specialist programs, opening up valued pathways into education, training and future employment, can meet these needs.

Faced with these challenges, public secondary schools and TAFEs require special resources and appropriate infrastructure, particularly to enable students from our poorest socio-economic and rural areas to complete Year 12 or an equivalent qualification.

An adequate and reliable stream of funding for VET in Schools courses is crucial for the goal of student engagement and to enable the increasing number of students enrolling in VET courses to continue.

Resources directed to smaller class sizes and targeted engagement programs would also help to ameliorate the effects of disengagement and go some way to fostering re-engagement.

### ***Students with behavioural and emotional problems***

It is essential that the government expand the provision of special settings for students with behavioural and emotional problems.

These settings provide an opportunity for an extended "time out" in a constructive and caring environment. They are the best means of giving students who are disengaged, or at risk of becoming disengaged from school, effective early

intervention support, enabling them to get back on track. The students return, where possible, to mainstream schools or on to other pathways such as employment or further training.

While the purpose of such settings is to provide the necessary support and environment for students to alter behaviour, improve wellbeing and experience academic success, there are also benefits for both teachers and other students, allowing a more productive teaching and learning environment. Every student and every teacher deserves the right to be safe and in an environment free of disruption.

***Sustained intervention: students requiring support***

There is a need to focus effort early on those students who need support, and for that support to be closely monitored and sustained as they progress through school. This focus is needed for both low-socio-economic status (SES) schools and for low-achieving students in higher SES schools.

The National Report on Schooling showed a widening gap in student performance as students progress through primary school. The AEU believes this gap widens because resources are not available to sustain the intervention through upper primary; learning problems cannot be sorted out with short sharp intervention in Year 1.

The AEU believes that resources should be provided to the upper primary school grades to sustain intervention programs and close the achievement gap. While literacy has received significant investment since 1998 the same cannot be said of numeracy.

Our position is supported by the findings and recommendations of the Victorian Auditor-General's report in February 2009, which concluded that the gains in student outcomes arising from investment in initiatives in the early years of primary were not sustained as students progressed throughout school, especially in numeracy.<sup>1</sup>

The report recommended that:

*DEECD should adopt a stronger focus on numeracy by introducing an early intervention strategy for students struggling with numeracy and strengthening support for mathematics reading (Recommendation 6.1).*

*DEECD should improve targeting of and sustained support for students achieving well below the expected level in literacy and numeracy (Recommendation 6.4).*

The introduction of mathematic specialists in primary schools in 2010 was a step in the right direction. The AEU welcomes the Coalition's commitment to provide 100 extra maths and science teachers for Victorian primary schools but would seek assurances that their services were directed to schools with students most in need.

The social problems that confront disadvantaged students are complex and there is no single, simple strategy to address them all; but research shows that resources invested in children's education and wellbeing reaps long-term rewards for the

<sup>1</sup> VAGO, 2009, *Auditor-General's Report: Literacy and Numeracy Achievement In Brief*

individual and for society. The AEU supports a number of measures to address the needs of disadvantaged students:

- Increasing funding to early intervention programs to employ early childhood teachers to ensure every child has access to an early childhood education which best meets their needs and supports their participation in universal early childhood education and care programs
- Increasing school funding with a particular focus on schools with students most in need. In particular, we propose that the equity component of the Student Resource Package (SRP) be increased to 5% to target schools most in need
- Continuing assistance in literacy and numeracy programs for students facing difficulties beyond the early years
- Bringing forward the introduction of 150 primary welfare officers and making these positions ongoing
- Linking schools with community services to provide counselling and support for families under stress
- An early warning system for parents relating to absenteeism, disruptive behaviour, bullying or poor academic results so that parents can be part of the solution; expanding the role and numbers of secondary teacher assistants, including the introduction of home–school liaison officers, would be most beneficial here. (See attachment on the role of home–school liaison officers.)

#### ***Secondary education: a special case***

The recent PISA results provide a cautionary tale. While we remain in the second highest group of countries, Australia was the only high-performing nation to show a statistically significant decline in reading literacy between 2000, when PISA began, and 2009. There has also been a decline in our maths score since 2003 and we have dropped out of the top ten nations in this subject area.

We need to:

- Increase per capita student investment in this sector to at least the national average by 2012 and further significantly increase funding over the next four years
- Increase the range and quality of offerings in secondary schools and the quality of infrastructure to provide those offerings to keep young people engaged in education
- Expand arrangements for student welfare and pastoral support, including providing specialist settings and programs for students with learning and/or behavioural difficulties and for others needing alternative education
- Accelerate the buildings and grounds development programs in secondary schools. This should include the provision within the facilities schedule of a “baseroom” to provide for some special needs students, including those with behavioural or family problems in mainstream schools
- A major expansion to the VET in schools program.

Investment in secondary education is critical to our economic future and a cohesive society.

### ***Indigenous education***

The continuing educational disadvantage faced by Indigenous students is reflected by low participation in preschool education, poor retention rates throughout formal schooling, limited involvement in post-compulsory education and by poor literacy and numeracy skills.

The AEU applauds the current restructure of the Koorie support workforce, which has begun to address what has been an undervalued and casualised workforce by giving access to improved salaries, professional learning and ongoing employment.

The system still needs to provide and support professional learning opportunities for principals and teachers (across all sectors) to increase their understanding of Indigenous culture, language and social inclusion. The introduction of a number of home-school liaison officers would have great benefits for some Indigenous students and could foster engagement between families and schools that do not rely on punitive measures like fines for non-attendance.

Further initiatives need to be developed to increase the number of Koorie teachers and assistants.

### **Reduce class sizes**

We must reduce class sizes in upper primary and secondary to ensure all students remain engaged as they progress through school and receive the individual attention they need.

Research in Australia and overseas has linked smaller class sizes in upper primary and secondary levels to:

- A greater engagement of students in learning, particularly for the lowest-achieving students in secondary schools
- Improved student achievement throughout their schooling
- Improved student behaviour and human relations skills
- More positive interactions between teachers and students.

### **Strengthening the profession: supporting our teachers and education support staff**

High quality teaching is an essential part of our public education system. We must ensure that every class within preschool programs, schools and TAFE is led by a qualified teacher.

#### ***Teaching assistants and home-school liaison officers***

Teacher quality can be strengthened by removing routine administrative tasks and letting teachers focus on their most important work: teaching. The introduction of 300 secondary teacher assistants (STAs) has been extremely effective in reducing the administrative burden on teachers. The AEU therefore calls for the program to be expanded and further positions to be created in both primary and secondary schools.



The AEU also calls for the introduction of home–school liaison officers to support students at risk of disengagement. Combined with the expansion of STAs, this would further increase productive contact with parents, monitor attendance, reduce follow-up work with students outside the classroom, enter data, and prepare materials and other logistical tasks.

Home-school liaison officers would allow schools and parents to form an important partnership to ensure that parents are aware of how their child is performing academically and socially at school, and a dialogue can take place about the child's individual needs as well as how parents can support them.

School personnel and parents who have had access to this form of support have consistently welcomed their role and noted increased engagement of students at risk. The AEU strongly recommends a pilot program.

***Professional development***

Teachers and education support staff need consistently to develop their skills. Frequent innovations in the curriculum and the technologies employed by modern pedagogy increase the requirements for teachers' professional development (PD). However, the current Student Resource Package allocation for PD, including CRT replacement, is inadequate and needs to be increased to allow schools to address this growing need.

We recommend:

- Funding and time release for enhanced PD opportunities for preschool teachers and early childhood assistants, delivered separately and also in conjunction with primary teacher colleagues. The introduction of the Victorian Early Learning and Development Framework and transition statements make it imperative that provisions are made for networking opportunities to support the ongoing engagement of early years staff across the sectors
- Increased funding for ICT resources and training for early childhood teachers and assistants
- Enhanced PD opportunities for all school teachers, including casual relief teachers, supported by addition time and CRT release
- Enhanced PD including mentoring to support principals in their leadership roles
- Expansion of places in the professional leave program, with a capacity to undertake projects in line with individual school improvement plans, rather than being restricted to the current central DEECD priority
- Additional support for rural schools to participate in PD, currently difficult due to distance from major centres (travel, accommodation costs) and CRT replacement
- Appropriate PD to support new technologies such as the Ultranet, with corresponding CRT replacement
- The currency of TAFE teachers' industry and professional knowledge and experience be maintained.

***Special needs and teacher aides***

Teachers in mainstream schools increasingly find students with a range of disabilities and special learning difficulties assigned to their classes. They need targeted support to maximise the potential of these students and ensure their participation in all aspects of school life.



---

Around 15% (81,000) of Victorian government school students have additional needs, according to the Office of School Education Strategic Plan for 2006-07; but there is clear evidence that the resources and funding required to ensure quality education for students with disabilities/special needs has long been inadequate. An inclusive education system requires all students to have real access to a quality education to meet their disparate, and often complex needs.

Teacher aides provide the special assistance that students need to participate fully in educational activities and achieve learning outcomes. There are not enough aides for the many students needing support: more are needed in both special settings and mainstream schools

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are becoming more prevalent. It is essential to strengthen the ASD expertise for teachers and the education support workforce by providing targeted training for staff working with ASD students.

In addition to supporting teachers in specialist schools to gain their special education qualifications we need initiatives to encourage teachers in mainstream schools also to gain special education qualifications. The rural retraining program and scholarships need to continue to target places for special education.

#### ***Implementing the Ultranet***

The need to equip our students with skills so they can experience success throughout their lives will be enhanced by the implementation of the Ultranet. However, linking 1.5 million users to schools provides tremendous challenges for schools and staff. The AEU calls on the government to:

- Provide extensive and ongoing PD to enable staff to implement the Ultranet, as well as additional resources to enable staff to incorporate Ultranet functionality into the daily operation of their school and into teaching and learning within the classroom
- Provide increased funding for ICT hardware and technical support for schools to ensure they are able to maintain fully operational networks to enable the smooth integration of the Ultranet.

#### ***Supporting minimum qualifications in early childhood***

The Children's Service Centres Regulations 2009 introduced the requirement for all early childhood staff to have as a minimum a Certificate III in Children's Services. The AEU endorses this objective. However it is imperative that assistance and support are provided to staff to enable this to occur. The scholarships provided so far are a start, however, we also recommend the following additional initiatives:

- Funding to facilitate the availability of sufficient Certificate III courses, geographically accessible to all staff
- Funding to support the time and resources (such as time release, relief staff and assistance with course costs) to support their participation
- Funding for current unqualified staff covered by the grandparenting provisions of the Regulations to undertake the required PD.

---

## **Continue the restoration of school infrastructure**

Our research tells us that a major factor in parents' decisions in choosing a school is the quality of its buildings and facilities. We welcomed the former government's commitment to rebuild or modernise every government school by 2015.

We acknowledge the Coalition's repeated pre-election statements that a Baillieu government would continue this commitment.

We note the \$255m in capital commitments pledge in the election campaign ("The Victorian Liberal Nationals Coalition Plan for Education", p16). However it is critical that the government recommit to the rebuilding program and give school communities confidence that investment will continue.

The Federal Government's BER funding has provided additional stimulus and has seen strong investment in primary school infrastructure. Accordingly, in the next two years we urge a particular (but not exclusive) focus on secondary schools.

We also strongly recommend that where possible any rebuilding or modernisation be completed as one project with no staging. Staging building works leads to constant disruption to students' education and badly affects the morale of staff.

*New modern learning environments require new teaching practices.* Support and professional learning need to be provided for teachers working in these new settings. Time needs to be provided to enable effective planning in teams, so that teachers can adapt the curriculum and develop teaching strategies best suited to flexible learning spaces.

### ***Support for schools engaged in mergers***

To enhance educational provision in their community some school communities have resolved to merge in order to offer the breadth and depth of curriculum required by both current and future students.

This is a unique and sometimes difficult process, with staff and schools requiring additional support. While agreements have been put in place to give staff greater certainty over their entitlements and employment protections, schools still lack certainty in relation to their SRP allocations. The AEU calls on the Government to provide improved and appropriate support for staff and schools when mergers occur; this is equally important in the following years as it takes time for new buildings to be completed and for new school cultures to be developed.

## **Secondary schools undergoing significant change**

Some secondary schools are experiencing a range of pressures that directly impact on their capacity to offer effective and relevant teaching and learning programs within the constraints of their SRP. In particular some schools have declining enrolments, an experienced staff profile (not funded at actual cost) and serve low socio-economic communities. It is common for such schools, in attempting to address these concerns and improve outcomes for their students, to discuss co-operative arrangements, mergers and/or other projects with neighbouring schools.

These schools are actively changing their structures and practices to improve outcomes for their students. However, they are under considerable budgetary pressure to accommodate what are often significant and costly changes. They cannot reduce their curriculum and/or specialist programs, particularly at the senior level, for fear of furthering their enrolment decline. Nevertheless the limitations of their declining budgets often require such decisions be made. The reduction of post-compulsory curriculum and program choices impacts directly on the capacity for these schools to provide students with the training pathways they need. This exacerbates the rates of students from our poorest socio-economic areas not completing Year 12 or an equivalent certification.

These issues are particular prevalent in country Victoria. The economic difficulties facing rural and regional communities due to drought, declining agricultural markets and decreasing populations only serve to exacerbate the educational challenges facing students in these areas. *While Victoria has one of Australia's highest retention rates, this is uneven across the system. Retention rates in rural areas and low socio-economic metropolitan areas are significantly lower.* Retention rates are 81 per cent statewide, but 87.7 per cent for metropolitan Melbourne and 68.5% for non-metropolitan Victoria.

The AEU believes there is a need to address these issues through greater equity funding, targeted to a smaller percentage of schools which are most in need. Apart from resourcing issues, there needs to be an increased understanding of the challenges that face these school communities. This is paramount for any serious attempt to improve the training and future employment prospects of their students. Often school communities can feel unsupported when faced with strict accountability measures and 'one size fits all' budget arrangements.

Consideration also needs to be given to the provision of additional financial assistance to schools with shrinking budgets (due to enrolment decline) and significant work to do in terms of school improvement. The changes that are often required to improve student outcomes can only be achieved in a supportive and positive environment which encourages staff to change their practice and take risks to improve overall school performance. This is difficult, if not impossible, in an environment where staff believe any wrong move could result in budget deficits, reduced curriculum and program offerings and staffing excess processes.

All new initiatives should be fully funded and not reliant almost exclusively on the good will of teachers to see their successful implementation.

## **TAFE and vocational education and training**

Victoria continues to be the most financially productive TAFE system in Australia. However we still lag behind Australia in funding. The previous State Government's Skills Reform Policy claims to make more money available for vocational education and training (VET), but the student contact hourly rate contributed by the government has reduced under this policy. Victoria is falling even further behind the national average.

---

### ***Skills Reform Policy***

The AEU appreciates the Coalition's commitment to review the TAFE fee structure "with a view to reducing all fees where possible and prudent to do so", its promised reintroduction of concession fees for diplomas and advanced diplomas, and the provision of extra funding for eligibility criteria exemptions. The AEU remains vehemently opposed to major aspects of the Skills Reform Policy, in particular:

- Increased fees for government-supported places and the upskilling requirement that has rendered so many Victorians ineligible for that funding
- The introduction of an income contingent loan scheme to accommodate higher fees
- Making public money fully contestable and available to private providers
- Further increasing the number of private RTOs in the system.

In short, the policy has gifted a large quantity of public and student money to private firms who, according to VAGO (2010)<sup>2</sup>, are ineffectively regulated. Increasing fees for TAFE students is not an incentive for them to develop the skills that Victoria needs.

### ***Support for lifelong learning***

To support lifelong learning the Victorian government needs to:

- Lift Victorian student contact hourly funding to TAFE up to the national average within three years to provide more genuine places, more teachers and better facilities
- Improve the range of courses locally available which means increasing the regional funding allocation
- Improve pathways between schools and TAFE, and between TAFE and higher education
- Reduce the casualisation of the TAFE teaching workforce
- Guarantee that no TAFE institute will be worse off financially under the Skills Reform Policy.

### ***Professional development***

The continuing failure of institutes to commit to adequate workforce planning has led to shortages for many categories of teachers. Professional development needs to be managed in a coordinated and objective manner by a central body and the TAFE Development Centre is ideally placed to do so. State government funding needs to be directed there and not to the TAFE institutes who have failed to use such funds to best advantage of the workforce. The AEU should be consulted when determining the PD needs of the teaching workforce.

There continue to be major issues around the renewal of the TAFE teaching workforce particularly in the area of PD and succession planning. The key plank to both these critical issues is the funding of approved TAFE teaching qualifications. It is one thing to attract teachers into the system but the government must provide funding so that every TAFE teacher is fully teacher qualified and supported in achieving that qualification. Clearly the quality of provision in the system relies on qualifications, both at the industry and teaching level.

<sup>2</sup> VAGO, 2010, *Audit Summary of the Victorian Registration and Qualification Authority*



## **Providing for adults with formal educational needs**

The chronic under-funding of the disability day services is well known to all involved in the sector. The AEU shares the opinion of Minister Wooldridge that an increase in funding to improve the wages of staff in this sector is “long overdue” (*The Age*, June 20, 2010). The AEU calls on the Government to honour its pre-election pledge to support this increase by supplying a supportive submission to the Equal Remuneration Case currently being heard by Fair Work Australia, by February 28, 2011.

## Appendix

### Home–school liaison officers

#### **Background**

Professor Richard Teese, Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning in the University of Melbourne, has identified<sup>3</sup> that one of the significant issues demonstrated in Victorian school data is that social differences *widen* across stages of schooling because: (a) demands on learning and behaviour become more complex and difficult; (b) the cultural resources of poorer families decline in relative value.

Teese goes on to say: “The task of school is to bridge the gap between the expectations embodied in curriculum frameworks and the resources which children make available to schools in the way of their development and education at home. Failure to bridge this gap leads to manifestations of stress — eg, absences, suspensions, poor behaviour, dropout— and to scholastic failure.”

He continues: “The difficulties that schools face in bridging the gap between normative expectations and cultural preparedness are evident in the growing proportion of children assessed by their teachers at successive stages of schooling as failing.”

#### **Issues to be addressed**

It is imperative that for our education system to provide an “Education For Everyone’s Needs”, we need to address the issues of poor attendance, low retention, poor behaviour and academic failure that are evident to a greater extent in low-SES schools.

Schools can generally identify students at risk with great accuracy and at an early stage. Not only do these students demonstrate some of the behaviours mentioned above, absenteeism, misbehaviour and failure to meet an acceptable academic standard, they are often characterised by low levels of support at home and often strained relationships between parents and teachers and school administrators.

Parents (guardians) of these students frequently have other financial, health and social issues to manage and do not necessarily have the time or the skills to manage their at-risk child’s educational issues. These parents also often had poor experiences at school themselves and so tend to blame the system for failing them and their children.

Schools rarely have the resources to work with parents of at-risk students to enable them to better manage and support their child’s education. There are often simple strategies such as homework programs, medical checks, structured sleep patterns, better nutrition, attendance and behaviour rewards, common messages from parents and teachers that can make a significant improvement in a child’s performance at school.

<sup>3</sup> *Low achievement and social background: patterns, processes and interventions*  
Discussion Paper, Richard Teese and Stephen Lamb, May 2009

***The program***

Home–school liaison officers should be funded as a targeted initiative funding in the SRP of the selected schools. There would need to be a commitment to at least three years of funding.

In its initial stage it would be appropriate to target low-SES schools and to focus on the first two to three years of secondary school. At-risk students are generally well managed at primary school where they work mostly with a key teacher and where that teacher generally has a good working relationship with the parents. This breaks down with the transition to secondary school where the effect of multiple teachers and less personal contact can cause student issues to become much more significant.

In addition, the gap between the expectations of schools and the capacities of families and students to meet those expectations widens as a child progresses through the education system. (Teese)

It would seem likely that home–school liaison officers would be recruited from the local community and would have a high capacity to understand the issues and win the support of local parents. They would also require some training and the support of government and local agencies with whom they would inevitably work.

It is envisaged that these officers would work closely with a number of students and their families over an extended period of time. An indicative caseload would be of the order of 10 students at the one time for a period of one term (10 weeks). New cases would be picked up each term except where individual cases warranted a longer period of support.

The home–school liaison officers would work closely with a student’s class teachers in order to support the student’s behaviour and work in class

A key role of the home–school liaison officers would be to link families and students with other agencies where this is needed.

Home–school liaison officers would have a significant advantage over the traditional withdrawal model for dealing with students at risk in that the child would continue to be at their regular school, attending their usual classes with the support of their familiar teachers.

***Accountability***

Schools would be expected to put in place accountability measures. They would be expected to monitor the attendance, behaviour and academic performance of the students who work with the home–school liaison officer. It should be possible to compare data for each student in the term/s prior to working with the home–school liaison officer with the same information in the term/s following.

Schools would be expected to report on the program in their annual report.

DEECD should also commission a project to monitor the program across all of the participating schools and to report on the success or otherwise of the program based on then accumulated data.

**Mary Bluett**  
AEU Victorian branch president

**Brian Henderson**  
AEU Victorian branch secretary

