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Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the potential for developing opportunities for schools to become a focus for promoting healthy community living.

AEU RESPONSE

The Australian Education Union (Vic) welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to this Inquiry by the Education and Training Committee of the Victorian Parliament. Our submission covers particular issues of concern and relevance to the union and its members.

Schools play a key role in the promotion of healthy living. Schooling is the most important institution, outside of the family, where children and adolescents learn about healthy living and develop behaviours which lay the foundations for healthy lives. The compulsory nature of schooling makes schools the ideal setting to promote long term public health priorities and implement forward-looking strategies to address major health problems.

The promotion of healthy living through schools should be integrated into an overall school health program. The major components of such a program should comprise:

- health education;
- physical education and sport;
- a healthy school environment (physical and psycho-social climate and culture);
- school nutrition program;
- school health services;
- counselling, psychological and social services;
- health promotion programs for staff; and
- family and community involvement.

The Government's responsibility is to ensure that it adequately

resources and supports all of the elements of public school health programs. This support should include:

- relevant curriculum resources linked into the mandated curriculum (eg VELs);
- appropriate staff-student ratios for program implementation;
- employment of staff qualified in the different areas of the program;
- school-based student welfare coordinators;
- accessible and timely professional development for staff;
- adequately funded specialist support services;
- clear guidelines, procedures and policies; and
- provision of necessary physical facilities.

This support should be provided to all public schools regardless of their location.

Within their overall health program, public schools already play an important role in promoting healthy community living. The health education strategies used in public schools have flow-on effects into the community as a whole because of the close relationships between schools, families and the local community.

A good example of the relationship between healthy community living and school health education programs is the role schools play in addressing largely preventable health-risk behaviours that can detrimentally affect the health of students at school as well as undermine their health in later life. These health-risk behaviours are linked to the leading causes of death among adults such as cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes. Health-risk behaviours which fall into this category include:

- tobacco use,
- alcohol and other drug use,
- inadequate physical activity,
- unhealthy dietary behaviours,
- excessive exposure to the sun,
- behaviours which may result in intentional injuries (violence and suicide) and unintentional injuries (eg motor vehicle accidents) and
- sexual behaviours which may result in HIV infection, other sexually transmitted diseases, or unintended pregnancy.

The range of strategies which are used in public schools to address these behaviours are framed by health policies and initiatives affecting

the wider community and serve to further inform the community about specific health issues and what can be done to tackle them. Examples include:

- Sun smart awareness
- Healthy eating guidelines for school canteens
- Drug education programs
- Safe schools program to address bullying
- Cybersafe classrooms policy
- VELS P-10 courses in the Physical, Personal and Social Learning strand which includes Health and Physical Education

The school role in promoting healthy community living could be enhanced by expanding partnerships between schools and other services. The idea of schools being part of a 'community hub' where they are co-located with early childhood centres and various family and children's services, health providers and community agencies is a promising direction to take. Opportunities to move in this direction are presented by the development of education precincts, school regeneration projects and new school construction in population growth areas.

Any increase in the responsibilities of schools to promote healthy community living must be accompanied by an appropriate increase in resourcing so that staff workloads are not further increased and the same school resources are not just spread more thinly.