

Early childhood, education and skills

Significant initiatives

Early Childhood

- **Best Start, Best Life**
\$1.8 billion in 2023-24 to continue the delivery of high-quality, free kindergarten programs for three- and four-year olds.
\$1.2 billion to expand early learning infrastructure through the landmark Best Start, Best Life reform package.

Primary and Secondary Schools

- **Providing Victorian students with the essentials to support their engagement in learning**
\$21.2m in 2023-24 (\$105.5m/5 yrs) to continue programs that provide schools with the essentials they need to engage students in learning. This includes the School Breakfast Clubs Program, Affordable School Uniforms and the Glasses for Kids program.
- **Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund**
\$40.6m in 2023-24 (\$209.3m/4 yrs) to continue targeted support for eligible students experiencing financial disadvantage to help cover the costs of sporting activities, camps and excursions.
- **Our Place partnership and place-based education plans**
\$1.8m in 2023-24 (\$19.3m/4 yrs) to continue and expand the Our Place hub model, which supports the education, health and development of children and families in disadvantaged communities, using the universal platform of schools. This investment specifically supports work in Shepparton, Doveton and Frankston North.
- **Free period products in all government schools**
\$3.7m in 2023-24 (\$19.1m/4 yrs) to continue providing menstrual products free-of-charge at all government schools, develop resources and education materials for schools, and deliver pelvic pain education programs to 100 government schools a year.
- **Refugee education supports**
\$2.9m in 2023-23 (\$20.1m/4 yrs) to continue and expand a suite of refugee education support programs that are designed to build the capacity of schools and early childhood services to respond to the needs of children, young people and families from refugee backgrounds.

Support for Children and Young People with Disabilities

- **Additional Supports for Students with Disabilities**
\$29.6m in 2023-24 (\$177.4m/4 yrs) improving support for students with a disability in specialist schools and their families by increasing access to initiatives such as Out of Hours Care, specialist NDIS Navigators, incentives to attract occupational therapists to rural and regional specialist schools, supporting the engagement of TAFE Disability Transition Officers, and increasing access to extracurricular activities and hydrotherapy.
- **Supporting inclusion in kindergarten for children with additional needs**
\$4.5m for 2023-24 (\$18.1m/4 yrs) funding to support inclusion in kindergarten for children with additional needs.

- **Students with Disabilities Transport program**
\$3.9m for 2023-24 to continue funding the Students with Disabilities Transport program, which provides transport assistance for students with disabilities to attend specialist schools.
- **Accessible Buildings Program**
\$5m for 2023-24 (\$10m/2 yrs) for an Accessible Buildings Program to continue to improve access to school facilities for students with disabilities and additional needs. Facility modifications may include ramps and handrails, alterations to toilet and shower facilities and adjustments for students with vision or hearing impairments.

Training and Skills

- **Building Better TAFE Fund**
\$26.1m in 2023-24 (\$170.1m/4 yrs) through the Building Better TAFE Fund for a Disability Services Hub and Student Hub at The Gordon TAFE Geelong.
- **Backing TAFE for the skills Victoria needs**
\$91.8m in 2023-24 (\$143.7m/2 yrs) to amend training subsidy eligibility criteria to make subsidised training courses, including Free TAFE, more widely available to people returning to study. This also includes a change to the once-in-a-lifetime limit on enrolling in a Free TAFE course, to allow students to access multiple Free TAFE courses along priority training pathways.
- **Free TAFE and skills demand**
\$30.9m in 2023-24 (\$90.5m/2 yrs) to meet expected demand for subsidised accredited training, including Free TAFE. It also includes additional literacy, numeracy and digital literacy support for Free TAFE students, support for pre-accredited learners and to transition to a new national system for reporting training activity.
- **Supporting TAFEs to meet priority skills demand**
\$47.4m in 2023-24 (\$89.7m/2 yrs) is provided for TAFEs to continue delivering services for Victorian students, employers and communities, including student support services, Jobs and Skills Centres, support for broad access to training including in regional Victoria, and coordinating practical placements.
- **Apprentice mental health training program**
\$0.7m in 2023-24 (\$3.9m/4 yrs) to develop and deliver an apprentice mental health training program. This includes support for apprentices at smaller employers to access employee assistance programs and support for employers to improve their mental health and suicide prevention literacy.

What's good

VCOSS welcomes significant investments in the learning and wellbeing of children and young people through the education system and across the major ages and stages of their lives – starting with early childhood. This Budget advances the Government's flagship 'Best Start, Best Life' initiative, which will be implemented over 10 years. Best Start, Best Life is a game changer for children and their families. The provision of Free Kinder removes financial barriers to accessing early childhood education. The continued expansion of three-year-old kinder brings forward the window for participation in high-quality early learning, and the introduction of a Pre-Prep year will set children up for success as they transition to

What's missing

In schools:

- While the Budget invests in several initiatives that provide students who are experiencing disadvantage with access to material items they need to engage in education, we are disappointed that it does not advance VCOSS's call to include digital devices, textbooks and stationery as part of the standard curriculum. Looking ahead, future budgets should allocate additional money to schools to cover these essential items. Given the growing cost-of-living pressures on families, we'd also like to see material support extended to providing free

primary school. Best Start, Best Life also includes the establishment of 50 new Government-owned and operated low-fee childcare centres in ‘childcare deserts’, which will support women’s participation in employment and their financial security. This Budget provides funding to get started on the development of the first of these.

The Budget includes a suite of targeted initiatives for children and families with additional support needs.

In the early childhood space:

VCOSS particularly welcomes funding to strengthen inclusion support for children with a disability to access kindergarten. In our submission to the 2023-24 Budget, VCOSS called on the Government to refine and expand access to the existing Kindergarten Inclusion Support and Preschool Field Officer programs. We are thrilled that this Budget delivers funding to strengthen and modernise these existing supports, as well as funding to design and pilot new approaches.

A [2019 Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry](#) described barriers into early childhood engagement for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. VCOSS is pleased this Budget will support the establishment of 10 bilingual kindergartens, continue the early childhood language program in more than 200 kindergartens, and provide specialist support programs for refugee families.

In schools:

VCOSS welcomes funding for a range of education and training services that will strengthen inclusion and improve learning and wellbeing outcomes for all school students with disabilities.

Victoria is already rolling out a new funding and support model and other disability inclusion measures in government schools (the \$1.6 billion Disability Inclusion Package). This Budget delivers additional investment into supports in specialist schools.

The ‘Fighting for students with disability and their families’ Budget line includes (but is not limited to):

- Expanded out-of-hours care for 30 specialist schools
- Increased extracurricular activities

access to public transport all year for students experiencing disadvantage.

- VCOSS is seeking an assurance from Government that it will continue to fund the Tutor Learning Initiative (TLI) beyond the 2023 school year. TLI provides school-based small-group tutoring to students who need extra help. While it was stood up in the context of COVID-19, it is a model of support first touted to government well before the pandemic. Its relevance, value and need transcends COVID. The Grattan Institute has found that this model of targeted, school-based support reduces learning gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers – learning gaps that have drivers other than the impacts of COVID lockdowns. From 2024 onwards, it should transition to a recurrently-funded program in our school system.
- We welcome the significant new funding to support children and young people with a disability who attend specialist schools, note continued investment to build capability in implementing school-wide positive behaviour support, and recognise existing investment in the implementation of the Mental Health Royal Commission recommendations as well as the continued rollout of the Disability Reform Package in mainstream schools. However, we would have liked to have seen dedicated investment in specific measures that support the increasing number of students and families experiencing school refusal (also known as “school can’t”).
- Finally, we note that the current National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) is in the process of being renegotiated and is due to be released later in the year. We understand that this will likely involve a significant financial investment in the State’s education system that is not reflected in the current Budget. We look forward to understanding how the bi-lateral agreement between the Federal and State Governments will further strengthen the State’s current work to support student learning and achievement and positive health and wellbeing outcomes.

- More speech pathologists and occupational therapists
- The introduction of NDIS Navigators into each government specialist school to help students and their families get the support they need.
- VCOSS also welcomes the continuation of programs for children and young people experiencing financial hardship to be able to access extracurricular activities such as sport, attend school camps and excursions, and to fund essential items that support student engagement (including school uniforms and glasses). And, in the context of a growing food security and cost-of-living crisis in Victoria, we are thrilled that this Budget continues Schools Breakfast Clubs and provides period products in all government schools to ensure that students are not missing out on learning due to hunger or period poverty.
- The funds provided in the Budget to continue and expand the Our Place model – which provides tailored education, health and wellbeing services from a single location, using the universal platform of schools – support a great example of how co-located services can provide wrap-around support to children, young people and families in communities experiencing place-based disadvantage, improving learning and wellbeing. We are pleased to see this program extend to include a second site in Shepparton, as well as continuing work in Doveton and Frankston North.

In TAFE:

VCOSS is pleased to see funding to support students to access multiple Free TAFE courses in priority training pathways (moving away from the limit on enrolling in one Free TAFE course). This will enable more students to access the skills they need to get a job and help support the Victorian economy.

Funding for additional literacy, numeracy and digital literacy support for Free TAFE students will also help set up students for success, by providing them with the support they need to complete their qualifications and get the job they want, whilst better meeting current and future needs of industry

In TAFE and higher education:

- Since Free TAFE began in 2019, more than 137,000 students have enrolled in over 70 courses on the free TAFE list and saved \$340 million in course fees. Whilst fee-free TAFE has helped many students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups to enrol, there is more work to do to lift completion rates. This Budget – and past Budgets – **have** included a range of positive measures (for example, the new ‘Fighting for students and families with disabilities’ package includes intensive support for students transitioning to TAFE). However, the Government can build on this – for example, by providing scholarships and bursaries to learners on low incomes.

We note this Budget introduces allowances for pre-service teachers who undertake placements at regional, rural and remote schools to cover costs such as accommodation, meals and travel. This model of support should be expanded beyond pre-service teachers. VCOSS’s submission to the 2023/24 Budget advocated for targeted financial and practical support for students on placement. This support would provide payment in lieu of lost ordinary income for those who’ve had to reduce hours at a paid job or quit a job to undertake a placement. It would also incorporate flexible wraparound support for those who need it – for example, access to coaching and mentoring.

and business for stronger basic literacy, numeracy
and digital literacy skills in new graduates.