

Better schools and early childhood education

Significant initiatives

Early childhood education

- **Best Start, Best Life**
\$160.3m in 2025-26 (\$1957.5m/4 yrs) to continue the rollout of the Best Start, Best Life reforms, including Free Kinder, Pre-Prep, 50 government-owned Early Learning and Care Centres and Three-Year-Old Kindergarten.
- **Self-determination for Aboriginal early childhood education**
\$0.7m in 2025-26 (\$5.4m/4 yrs) is provided for kindergartens and other early years services run by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to support self-determination through implementing culturally sensitive and flexible approaches to kindergarten curriculum and service delivery.
- **Supporting equal participation in early education and care**
\$3.9m in 2025-26 (\$16.3m/4 yrs) to continue delivery of tailored programs to support vulnerable children to access early childhood education. This includes: the Access to Early Learning program, flexible support packages helping up to 135 children and families overcome barriers to regular kindergarten attendance, specialist LOOKOUT staff who support children in vulnerable circumstances to access early learning, and Yalingbu Yirramboi – The Royal Children’s Hospital School – ensuring children with complex medical needs stay connected to, and engaged in, early learning.
- **Early childhood intervention services for non-permanent residents**
\$3.1m in 2025-26 to deliver early childhood intervention services, such as inclusive education and therapy supports, to children with disability or developmental delay who are not eligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme due to residency status.
- **Supporting settlement outcomes in Victoria**
\$1.8m in 2025-26 (\$3.6m/2 yrs) is provided to support newly-arrived migrant communities, particularly in regional Victoria. Part of this funding is for the Supported

Playgroups initiative, which will promote pathways to kindergarten and primary school.

School education

- **Increasing the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund**
\$38.1m in 2025-26 (\$152.4m/4 yrs) is provided to increase payments from the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund to \$400 for eligible government and non-government school students. This targeted payment will assist families with the cost of camps, sporting activities and excursions at schools.
- **Free public transport for kids**
\$40.9m in 2025-26 (\$318.2m/4 yrs) to make all public transport travel in Victoria free for children aged under 18. This includes all train, tram and bus travel across public transport in metropolitan and regional Victoria, commencing from 1 January 2026. Ahead of this, free travel on public transport for students in crisis will continue to be available during 2025 to ensure they can travel to school and support services.
- **Excellence in mathematics education and Excellence in reading and writing education**
 - \$15.3m in 2025-26 (\$46.5m/4 yrs) to enhance the delivery of numeracy curriculum in Victorian schools.
 - \$10.7m in 2025-26 (\$34.6m/4 yrs) to enhance the delivery of literacy curriculum in Victorian schools.
- **Koorie literacy and numeracy program**
\$4.1m in 2025-26 (\$18.5m/4 yrs) to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Victorian government schools.
- **English as an Additional Language**
\$28.3m in 2025-26 (\$56.6m/2 yrs) to increase the number of students supported by the English as an Additional Language program for the 2026 school year, in line with growth in enrolments. The program supports government school students who do not speak English as their first language at home to become proficient in English, including Australian-born students, newly-arrived migrants and students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds.
- **Statewide rollout of Disability Inclusion**

\$237.3m in 2025-26 (\$319.8m/4 yrs) to continue the rollout of improved disability and inclusion practices in Victorian government schools.

- **Continue education supports for children in out-of-home care**
\$6.2m in 2025-26 (\$30.7m/4 yrs) to continue education supports for children in out-of-home care. This includes the continuation of the Education Support for Children in Care program, the Education Needs Analysis process and the LOOKOUT program.
- **School-wide positive behaviour support**
\$2.3m in 2025-26 (\$10.4m /4 yrs) is provided to expand the delivery of training to schools and staff to promote positive student behaviour. This includes specialist coaches to work with schools to improve teacher capability to effectively manage student behaviour and foster a respectful environment. Funding is also provided to deliver training to school staff to promote Positive Classroom Management Strategies.
- **Address chronic absenteeism and support students to remain in learning**
\$3.0m in 2025-26 (\$25.6m/4 yrs) to continue to address chronic student absenteeism and support disengaged young people to re-engage in education through the Navigator program. Navigator will continue to provide identification, outreach and case management services to schools to improve outcomes for vulnerable students.
- **Locally Driven Education Programs**
\$5.9m in 2025-26 (\$15.6m/4 yrs) is provided for a suite of programs including the School Lawyer Program, delivered by WEstjustice; the Safe Socials Program, a partnership between the Department of Education and Sexual Assault Services Victoria to help prevent the spread of unhealthy forms of masculinity and keep young Victorians safe online; the Passion and Pathways Program (an upper primary school career-related learning program, aligned to the Victorian curriculum and the Australian Blueprint for Career Development); and Learning for Life Program, delivered by the Smith Family.
- **Targeted investment to improve educational outcomes in youth justice**
\$0.7m in 2025-26 (\$1m/2 yrs) to continue targeted support for young people involved in, or at risk of, involvement in the youth justice system. This includes continued funding for Education Early Intervention Support Officers to re-engage young people with their education and facilitate supports to improve educational achievement and outcomes.

- **Supporting rural and regional students**
 \$1.4m in 2025-26 (\$1.7m/2 yrs) for outreach and aspiration programs to continue to address the barriers that contribute to educational performance differences across Victoria.
- **Enabling equitable pathways reform**
 \$11.3m in 2025-26 (\$27m/4 yrs) to continue the delivery of initiatives under the Senior Secondary Pathways Reform agenda, including Jobs, Skills and Pathways Coordination funding and the Victorian Pathways Certificate. Funding will also assist schools to ensure that students who leave school early are supported into alternative pathways in the labour force or further education.
- **Increasing community use of school facilities**
 \$0.6m in 2025-26 (\$1.5m/2 yrs) is provided for a dedicated support team to assist up to 40 recently-opened schools in Melbourne’s west and south-west Victoria to enable community use of their facilities by coordinating local community outreach, brokering agreements and administrative support.

What’s good

- The Victorian Government’s landmark \$14 billion Best Start Best Life reform package represents a historic transformation of early childhood education and care. Children’s participation in high-quality early childhood education benefits everyone – but we are particularly pleased to see this Budget deliver resources to children who have *the most* to gain. As part of this investment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from a refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds, and children who have had contact with Child Protection will be provided with early access to the expanded programs from 2026.
- Excellence in teaching and learning is one of five key Education State pillars. This Budget delivers funding to support excellence in maths education and in reading and writing education. VCOSS particularly welcomes the implementation of a new on-entry literacy test and Year 1 phonics check and a new Year 1 numeracy check. This is smart early investment. VCOSS’ [previous policy work has highlighted Year 1 as an important window for targeted early intervention in literacy and numeracy](#). As we noted in our 2022 state election platform, it’s 75 per cent cheaper to address a literacy problem during Grade 1 than in Grade 4 – and evidence from the Productivity Commission shows the negative lifetime effects of low literacy on labour market participation and productivity if we don’t act early. These two Budget lines

also include funding for small group tutoring for literacy and numeracy in primary schools. This model of support is proven to close learning gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers and has been long championed by VCOSS.

- The Victorian Government’s Disability Inclusion reforms have so far established:
 - A new tiered funding model for school students with a disability, with additional funding for schools to help students with a disability take part in their education on the same basis as their peers.
 - System initiatives that increase access to specialist expertise, coaching, evidence-based guidance and resources to help build knowledge and skills across the school system.

This Budget supports the continued rollout of measures intended to improve disability and inclusion practices in Victorian government schools, plus new funding to improve students’ access to school facilities through the Accessible Buildings Program. It also includes separate investment to strengthen school capability in positive behaviour support.

These investments are welcome; however, further work will be required to address Disability Royal Commission findings and implement recommendations that prevent discrimination and assure safe, high-quality, inclusive education for Victorian students with a disability. VCOSS continues to be concerned about reports of school exclusion from our members and rising rates of “school can’t” because students with disabilities don’t feel safe or included.

- Learning doesn’t just happen in the classroom. School camps, school sports days and school excursions are all part of an enriching education. The boost to the Camps Sports and Excursions Fund will help to put these experiences in reach for families struggling with the cost of living and out-of-pocket school expenses. It will also alleviate pressure on community information and support agencies who have faced unprecedented demand for financial assistance from school families. Outside of school, students will also benefit from a further two years of investment in the \$200 Get Active Kids Voucher. This will help families cover the cost of memberships, registration fees, equipment and uniforms for sport and popular activities.
- The flagship investment in free public transport for under 18s is a highlight of this year’s State Budget. Alongside WEstjustice, VCOSS has advocated strongly for this measure since 2019, when WEstjustice established a pilot Transport Assistance Program in Wyndham. Free public transport is a powerful enabler of educational and wellbeing outcomes for school-age children. Access to free public transport will help improve school attendance and punctuality, and improve wellbeing by increasing

access to support services, opportunities to work, attend sport and visit friends, and eliminate fines for fare evasion.

- This Budget delivers continuing funding to a range of statewide, place-based and cohort-specific initiatives that are targeted to students ‘at risk’ of not realising the benefits of school education. Initiatives like the Education Early Intervention Support Officers recognise that factors “outside the school gate” impact learning and wellbeing. Students experiencing poverty, homelessness or other challenges need additional support to engage in education. A further four years of funding for Navigator will sustain an important partnership between the community services sector and the Department of Education to support students who are at-risk of disengaging from school, or who have already disengaged from school. Navigator is available to 12- to 17-year-olds who have attended 30 per cent or less of the previous school term or are not attending an education setting at all. Future Budgets should explore opportunities to expand the program to support earlier intervention.
- New investment of \$7.4 million from the Department of Education in partnership with Sexual Assault Services Victoria and its members will help support schools to respond to peer-to-peer sexual violence, helping support victim-survivors and respond to harmful sexual behaviour. Refer to ‘Creating a Victoria free from violence’ analysis for more detail.
- We understand that funding for the 31 Local Learning and Employment Networks is in recurrent spending, however we are seeking further confirmation on this.

What’s missing

- The Budget makes strong investment in programs that support students from disadvantaged backgrounds and initiatives from falling behind and disengaging. These are unequivocally great investments. However, the most effective way to achieve excellence and equity in our education system, and ensure schools have the resources they need to break the link between disadvantage and educational outcomes, is to fully fund public schools in line with the school funding model identified in the Gonski review.

While VCOSS welcomed the announcement in January that the Victorian and Commonwealth governments had signed the *Better and Fairer School Funding Agreement*, VCOSS is concerned that Victoria has delayed by three years its commitment to fully fund the Gonski education reforms.

- The Budget does not provide clarity about the status of disability reform stemming from the NDIS Review. A new tier of Foundational Supports will need to be developed for Victorian children aged 0 to 9 with developmental concern, delay or disability, who are not eligible for the NDIS. We look forward to progress being made with the Commonwealth. VCOSS continues to highlight the need for strong investment in co-design with children and families, self-advocates and disability advocates, as well as peak bodies, unions, and service providers. The state must also provide resources that ensure sector readiness, systems transformation and workforce capacity and capability to meet the needs of children and families.
- While we welcome the investment in positive behaviour support, VCOSS notes that growing food stress is resulting in an escalation of classroom behavioural issues, poor focus, and declining mental health. VCOSS will continue to advocate for the Victorian Government to introduce a school lunch program, building on the successful School Breakfast Club initiative. This would ensure that students are ‘clear for learning’ through the whole school day, helping to break the link between disadvantage and educational attainment.