The Hon James Merlino MP

Deputy Premier
Minister for Education
Minister for Mental Health

1 Treasury Place
East Melbourne Victoria 3002
Telephone: +61 3 9651 1222

COR 2063245

Gail McHardy (on behalf of Parents Victoria Conference 2020 attendees)
Executive Officer
Parents Victoria
office@parentsvictoria.asn.au

Dear Ms McHardy and Parents Victoria Conference 2020 attendees

Thank you for your correspondence providing additional questions submitted by attendees at the Parents Victoria 2020 Virtual Conference. I apologise for the delay in responding to you.

Congratulations to your team on hosting another successful annual conference. The event showcased Parents Victoria's vital role providing support and reassurance to families, students and the broader Victorian school community. Thank you also for once again allowing me to deliver the opening address and to respond to your member queries.

Please find attached responses to the additional questions submitted by attendees that participated in the Parents Victoria 2020 Virtual Conference.

I have provided a list of weblinks for all resources and information referenced in the document for Parents Victoria to share with members. Further resources and support are available at: www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/Pages/default.aspx or by calling 1800 338 663.

Yours sincerely

The Hon James Merlino MP
Deputy Premier
Minister for Education
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Question 1 submitted by Patricia ████

I am a single parent of three primary school age children; one in Grade 2; and a set of twins in Grade 4. I have also been fortunate to be able to work from home during the COVID-19 shutdown. I have had significant challenges in full time work with providing sufficient support for my children with remote learning. Acknowledging that the children have lost two full terms as well as the two most intense learning terms in 2020:

- *How will the Education Department support schools to ensure that the children catch up on missed learning?*

- *How will the Education Department support schools to ensure that mental well-being of students, and the impact of COVID-19, is addressed?*

- *How in 2021 do we plan for the potential of further remote learning periods?*

Response

Mental health and wellbeing

On 7 August 2020, the Andrews Government announced a two-year $28.5 million package to support student mental health and engagement that includes:

- expansion of the Mental Health Practitioners program to 85 specialist schools
- continuation and expansion of the Mental Health in Primary Schools Pilot to 25 schools in 2021
- increased headspace mental health training programs to train an extra 1,500 school staff.

The Department is now working to finalise implementation plans for the Mental Health in Primary Schools Pilot beginning in 2021 across selected schools, in both metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria.

Every Victorian government school has been allocated a Health and Wellbeing Key Contact to support schools to identify, plan and respond to the needs of students whose learning progression may have been impacted and require additional support. This is in addition to health and wellbeing workforces that continue to provide existing supports to our students.

The Department continued to provide principals, teachers and school staff with the resources needed to support student mental health and wellbeing while delivering remote and flexible learning.

Additionally, the Department's health and wellbeing workforces have adapted to remote delivery, offering access to Student Support Service psychologists, social workers, speech pathologists, behaviour coaches, school nurses, the Koorie Education Workforce and visiting teachers by telephone and online.

Students and school communities have clearly voiced that mental health and wellbeing support for students is critical, particularly given the impact of physical distancing and isolation during remote and flexible learning. This remains critical as we assist student transition back to on-site learning.

Student mental health and wellbeing resources for teachers, students and parents are available on the Department website as part of the Department's online Mental Health Toolkit and include:

- videos on resilience, managing stress and staying active
- activities and conversation starters to promote positive wellbeing
- Smiling Mind mindfulness online resources focused on health and wellbeing
- the Raising Children's Network podcasts.

Catch up learning

On 13 October2020, the Government announced the $250 million Tutor Learning initiative that will enable all Victorian government schools and non-government schools that need support, to engage approximately 4,100 teachers to provide students with extra individual learning support. This initiative will make sure any student who may have fallen behind or become disengaged gets the help they deserve. The funding will also provide support for family engagement in learning.

Every government school across the State – whether primary or secondary, large, small, metro, rural, regional or specialist – will receive funding to engage tutors to support the students that need it most. Eligible independent and Catholic schools will also receive funding to support their most disadvantaged students. More than 200,000 Victorian students will have access to these additional supports.

The vast majority of Victorian students spent much of Term 2 and 3 learning remotely and schools and teachers have made exceptional efforts to provide continuity of teaching and learning during this time.

While some students excelled, we recognise some struggled – particularly those in disadvantaged cohorts, those with low levels of English, those already at risk of disengaging from school, or those with home environments not conducive to remote learning.

This package recognises that, while regular high-quality classroom teaching will be enough for some students to catch up, others will require additional intensive learning support and intervention to address gaps due to lost learning.

Our teachers have done a remarkable job this year and with the additional support of on-site tutors, these teaching teams can ensure students have dedicated and individualised support throughout 2021.

Schools will determine the specific areas for tutors to work with students. As literacy and numeracy are foundational skills, it is anticipated most schools will focus on these areas.

Disaster preparedness for 2021

The Department is drawing on the experience and lessons from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, as well as the summer bushfires, to continually inform mental health and wellbeing supports available for students, their families/communities and our staff.

The Department has assessed remote learning experiences for students, schools and parents from Terms 2 and 3. The capturing of this important feedback and the lessons gleaned from the period of remote and flexible learning will inform approaches that will continue to help shape a responsive and progressive education system beyond the return to onsite learning.

The Department is also developing a natural disaster resource that emphasises preparedness, psychosocial supports and wellbeing response and recovery – aligned to the National Principles for Disaster Recovery.

How do we get schools on board to be accountable for Education Needs Analysis (ENA)'s for students in out of home care as per the partnership agreement?

We are met with so many barriers that as Case Managers we spend time fighting the system just so our children can be assessed, yet we find they continue to fly under the radar, with little to no accountability from the schools. This happens with Student Support Groups (SSG)'s and Individual Education Programs (IEP)'s.

Response

The LOOKOUT program works closely with schools to improve their understanding of responsibilities under the Out of Home Care Education Commitment – the Partnering Agreement.

Under the Partnering Agreement, school principals and leadership teams are responsible for ensuring that students in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), a Student Support Group (SSG) and a Learning Mentor. The Agreement also states that an Educational Needs Analysis (ENA) is required for every child or young person who has been in OOHC for at least three months.

These supports are provided in recognition of the need to ensure that school is a welcoming and supportive environment for children and young people in care, and that their individual needs are understood and reflected in their Individual Education Plan.

LOOKOUT Centres provide advice, support and training for schools to ensure that students in OOHC are provided with the best available resources and opportunities to learn and succeed.

As part of the LOOKOUT supports, Victorian schools have a designated teacher, nominated by their principal and trained by LOOKOUT Centres, to be the advocate for OOHC students at their school. The designated teacher monitors all elements of the Partnering Agreement and supports their colleagues at the school to understand their obligations to support children and young people in OOHC.

In addition, the Department undertakes a survey of all schools twice per year, to assess that Partnering Agreement supports have been provided to students in OOHC. The results of this survey assist LOOKOUT Centres to understand areas of need and hold the system accountable for implementation of the Partnering Agreement.

The Andrews Government has recently announced $5.35 million of additional funding over two years to enable LOOKOUT Centres to engage additional Learning Advisors and specialist practitioners to:

- increase the capacity of schools to support students in OOHC and enable their full engagement in education
- support carers and case managers to engage young people in OOHC with education.

The funding also includes positions for:

- the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare
- the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
- the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance.

The positions support case managers and carers to better understand the Partnering Agreement and the education system. The $5.35 million funding is part of the Government's $28.5 million mental health and student engagement package.

Currently government funded screening of children for developmental delays ends when children exit the Maternal and Child Health program at age 4. However, Learning Difficulties are frequently not identified until after children start school. The Mandatory English Online Interview is not a screening tool able to identify children at risk of learning difficulties.

- *Does the Minister acknowledge the link between poor mental health in the student population and delays in identification or indeed the total failure of the system to identify children at risk of learning failure due to unidentified learning difficulties such as dyslexia?*

- *Is the Minister aware that approximately 20% of the student population is impacted by learning difficulties?*

- *Is the Minister aware that the average cost of private assessment for learning disabilities is $1,800 which is out of reach of many families?*

- *Will the Minister continue to push for compulsory use of the Year One Phonics Check in Victoria which can be useful as an initial screening check?*

Delays in identification and dependence on a "let's wait and see" approach lead to poor mental health outcomes. Thanks for your consideration of this issue.

Response

The Andrews Government is committed to ensuring that Victorian government schools are equipped to identify and respond to the educational needs and aspirations of students with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, including support for their mental health and wellbeing.

That is why we are investing nearly $1.6 Billion in Disability Inclusion, a package that will provide additional resources and a range of supports, tools, guidance and training to ensure schools can provide an inclusive learning environment for all students.

Early identification and support

Key elements of Disability Inclusion will be available to all schools and families across Victoria from the middle of 2021. This will include:

- training and professional learning

- scholarships

- front-line coaches for school leaders

- information for parents and families.

Supports will increase over the coming years as the Disability Inclusion Profile and new funding approach is progressively introduced and will include the establishment of a new Diverse Learners Hub.

The Hub will provide capability-building support to all schools to assist staff meet the educational needs of children and young people with a range of neurodevelopmental differences, including dyslexia, dyscalculia, and autism.

These resources and initiatives aim to build the system-wide capability of education workforces to improve support for the estimated one in five students receiving an adjustment due to a disability in Victorian government schools.

Disability Inclusion will support schools to improve their understanding of the needs of students with learning difficulties, enabling schools to intervene early with appropriate adjustments to support student learning and participation ensuring students with learning difficulties are given the best chance to succeed and are not left behind. Disability Inclusion will introduce a new tiered funding model, with additional funding for schools to better support students with learning difficulties, boosting school capacity to respond to the needs of all students.

Disability Inclusion builds on supports and resources already available to schools to support the early identification of students with learning difficulties, including:

- Teachers have access to a range of tools such as the English Online Interview and Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English (DATE) to assess the early reading, writing and speaking and listening development of their students, including students with learning difficulties. Teachers can use the data provided by these and other assessments to identify each student's point of need and monitor student progress.

- Student Support Services (SSS) can also assist students who face barriers to learning and provide a range of strategies and specialised support, including cognitive, language and achievement tests at no cost to families. The SSS Referral Process identifies children and young people most in need and matches the needs of students with the expertise of SSS team members.

- The Commonwealth Government's online Literacy Hub, including the Year 1 Phonics Check, which are available to all Victorian teachers to support their classroom teaching and assessment as required.

Mental health support

- The Andrews Government recently announced a two-year $28.5 million package to support students' mental health and engagement. This builds on investment announced in 2018 of $51.2 million over four years and $31 million ongoing to support all government secondary school campuses to directly employ mental health professionals.

- These professionals can provide counselling and early intervention services, as well as coordinating support for students with complex needs including learning difficulties and linking to broader community and allied health services.

Question 4 submitted by HT

How might we create the space for our children to discover new interests and to learn, in light of the addictive dopamine feedback loops of social media and other apps that they use?

How might we help our children develop critical thinking and media literacy in light of the profit-driven, AI-powered, attention-seeking algorithms of YouTube and Instagram?

Response

The Department promotes a balanced approach to the use of technology in classrooms, recognising that digital literacy is a key skill that will support students in school and in life, but also acknowledging that overuse and misuse of technologies can have serious consequences.

Technology use in classrooms is guided by the Victorian Curriculum Foundation to Level 10, which requires teachers to develop students' digital literacy. This includes using technology across all learning areas to support inquiry, creation, communication and collaboration, and developing students' competency in their safe, responsible and ethical use.

The Department takes an active role in educating and building the capacity of government school leaders and teachers in the discerning use of technology in Victorian classrooms. This is supported through the provision of state-wide workshops, online tools and support resources.

It is also supported by policies like the Mobile Phones – Student Use Ministerial policy, which bans mobile phones in schools with only a small number of exceptions, and the new Social Media Use to Support Student Learning policy, which restricts social media to uses that benefit student learning and that are not be able to be met in face-to-face contexts or through the use of other technologies.

Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT) is one of four capabilities of the Victorian Curriculum Foundation to Level 10 that must be taught in every Victorian government school. Through CCT, students learn to question, reason and recognise thinking strategies that would support them to understand, unpack and make sense of information.

There are a range of resources available to schools to support the development of critical thinking and media literacy. For example:

- the Department's FUSE repository of curriculum-aligned resources currently houses 92 resources aligned to Foundation to Level 6 of CCT and 82 resources aligned to Level 7 to Level 10 of CCT

- the Department's licensing agreement with ClickView currently provides all Victorian government schools with access to a large suite of video resources aligned to CCT, as well as some new resources on 'fake news' and how to recognise and respond to this

- the Alannah and Madeleine Foundation has recently released the eSmart Media Literacy Lab to build student's essential media knowledge and skills.

Question 5 submitted by Uday █████

Given the outstanding performance by the teachers and principals (even before COVID-19) at ours and other schools, do you think politicians should ever argue if teachers need to be paid more?

Response

Teachers and school staff have done a remarkable job supporting students throughout the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The matter of teacher pay in Victorian government schools is an industrial issue, which will be the subject of discussion as part of the enterprise agreement negotiations for the Government teaching service that are expected to commence shortly between the Department and relevant unions. In this regard, it would be inappropriate to comment further at this time.

Question 6 submitted by Tracey

If it is okay to have all students attend school for Year 12 exams and General Achievement Test (GAT) why can't they have a full year level graduation ceremony at school?

Response

End of year assemblies, graduations and other gatherings (e.g. school sports events)

If an event is held with external guests (e.g. parents/carers/visitors) then the overall attendee limit (inclusive of guests, staff and students) must be based on available floor space of the venue; with the density limit of 1 person per 2 square metres applied.

If an event is held exclusively with students and staff from a single school, density limits do not apply to the venue or dancefloor, regardless of whether the event is held on school or at a hospitality venue, entertainment facility or community facilities.

School formals

School formals are permitted to resume.

If held on school premises and attended exclusively by students and staff from a single school, venue density limits do not apply to the venue or dance floor.

If held at an external hospitality venue, entertainment facility or community facility the school will need to abide by the restrictions on the type of venue, including restrictions on dancing - dance floors can operate with a maximum of 50 people or a density limit of 1 person per 4 square metres, whichever is less.

Public events on school premises

A public event is defined as an organised public gathering for a common purpose, which is conducted on a one-off or periodic basis, open to members of the public, publicly announced or advertised, and may be subject to specific license, approvals or permits.

Any activity that meets this definition may be required to comply with the Public Events Framework.

Question 7 submitted by Donna

The Disability Royal Commission hearing that commenced in early October and the National and State surveys undertaken throughout the COVID-19 have extensively spoken to the intersectional and complex disadvantages that families face when supporting and providing educational outcomes for children with disabilities.

For us personally, and after years of failed attempts, we now enjoy enormous success with our daughter using the Virtual School Victoria platform of educational delivery. Unfortunately, this means that for me personally, any aspirations I held of returning to my professional career is forsaken, ensuring that we continue to struggle as a single income family in a dual income society. My question Mr Merlino is:

Why should I be forced to choose between providing for my daughter's education and my career?

Response

Virtual School Victoria (VSV) provides remote learning and engagement for students, including students with disability. VSV's model is designed to meet the educational needs of Victorian students whose circumstances prevent them from accessing regular schooling.

Parents who care for a child who has a severe disability or illness are encouraged to contact Carers Vic Australia or call 1800 514 845. Carers Vic Australia provide income support and resources for carers and work to ensure that caring is a shared responsibility of family, community and government.

Question 8 submitted by Donna

Minister Merlino, are you able to please clarify Victoria's position regarding the changes underway in NSW to shift the oversight of the Schools Behaviour Strategy Policy from the Department and into schools?

This policy focuses on suspension and expulsion and surely even with a significant boost to resources, infrastructure and diversion programs and supports, this concerning change has the potential to weight additional disadvantage on schools, staff and local communities.

Response

The Andrews Government has supports in place to help schools use positive approaches to keep students engaged in their education experience. Schools are expected to consider, explore and implement positive and non-punitive interventions to support student behaviour before considering disciplinary measures such as suspensions and expulsions.

Expulsion

Since 2017 the Government has introduced a range of changes to expulsions, including:

- higher level departmental approval of all expulsions for student aged 8 years or less

- more support and oversight of expulsions through Regional Engagement Officers, who work with principals and teachers to intervene early for those at risk of expulsion

- an overhaul of the Department of Education Training data collection, analysis, record keeping and reporting, to make sure that expulsions are monitored appropriately.

Expulsions are a serious disciplinary measure in Victorian government schools and are an option of last resort when all other disciplinary measures, interventions, supports and options have been exhausted.

The Expulsion policy ensures that when a behavioural incident is of such magnitude that expulsion is considered, a transparent, fair and supportive process is in place for all parties involved, with appropriate checks and balances at each stage.

Suspension

Suspension is a serious disciplinary measure and is best reserved for incidents when other measures have not produced a satisfactory response. Principals must consider alternative interventions and supports that can be provided to the student to address the reasons for the behaviour before proceeding to suspension.

The policy provides protections to oversight the length of time students may be suspended. A student cannot be suspended for longer than 5 days at any given time, unless the principal has implemented an immediate suspension and a longer period of suspension is approved in writing by the Regional Director for the purpose of undertaking expulsion procedures.

Additionally, a student cannot be suspended for more than 15 school days in a school year without the written approval of the relevant Regional Director. If parents wish to seek addition information on expulsion and suspension policy, they are encouraged to contact their local regional education office or call 1800 338 663.

I'm writing about the teachers, relief teachers and cleaners who work in multiple schools. Which policies have been put in place for COVID-19 so no cross contamination would occur due to an outbreak?

Also is there is a maximum amount of attendance hours the schools can ask of students?

At the moment one day starts at 8am till 3.15pm, then the students are asked to sit a practical exam at 4.30pm till 6pm. So that would be 8am till 6pm, a 10-hour day. Is that something a school is allowed to do?

Response

Staff working across multiple sites

The Department has developed comprehensive health and safety measures and advice that apply to all Victorian schools, government and non-government. This helps to keep all staff, students and visitors safe, including staff working across multiple sites.

The measures follow the advice of the Victorian Chief Health Officer and bring together Victoria's COVIDSafe principles for business while acknowledging that schools are both, working and learning environments. A combination of strategies is therefore required to minimise transmission risk as no single strategy completely reduces risk and not every measure will always be feasible and applicable. Importantly, strategies will continue to change over time in line with the changing risk of transmission in the community.

COVIDSafe principles for schools include four main pillars:

- reinforce COVIDSafe behaviours
- create COVIDSafe spaces
- promote COVIDSafe activities
- respond to COVID-19 risk.

Strategies include good hygiene, physical distancing, cleaning, air ventilation, record keeping to support contact tracing and personal protective equipment.

Schools also require a COVIDSafe Plan to ensure a safe learning and working environment. Staff training reinforces this approach, with all Department staff working onsite in schools required to complete an eLearn module on infection prevention and control. The module is also available for preservice teachers, casual relief teachers and other staff including those in non-government schools. The Department's Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Service and Support Officers can also assist schools and their staff.

Attendance

The Department's policies for Attendance and School Hours broadly cover the responsibilities of parents/carers and schools regarding enrolment, attendance and hours of operation. Within overall requirements, the policies allow operational flexibility and decision making by individual schools to enable them to meet local circumstance and need. This flexibility is important in meeting the needs of all students, including senior school students during their critical assessment and exam periods. It allows for continuity of student learning and classes and minimal disruption across the school, as well as balancing health and safety needs and any other student and staff requirements (for example, industrial agreements).

The School Hours policy states that while the school day is generally between 8.30am and 3.30pm, specific times are determined locally, that is by individual schools, based on several factors including organisation of the school day. The policy specifies minimum hours of student instruction (generally 25 hours per week), however, maximum hours of attendance for students are not specified by either the Attendance or School Hours policies or in legislation (the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 or ETRA). Such an approach may disrupt the scheduling of other school activities or extra-curricular activities held outside of 'usual' school hours.

For compulsory school age children (from 6 to 17 years of age), it is the parent's responsibility under ETRA to enrol their child at a registered school (either government or non-government) and ensure the child attends the school at all times when the school is open for the child's instruction.

The scheduling of practical exams for senior students outside of 'usual' school hours, for example 4.30-6pm might be due to a number of factors including:

- access to and/or availability of required equipment, other facilities and space which may be timetabled for use by other students or classes during the day

- availability of teachers, examiners or any other staff required to conduct and oversee the exam

- the benefits to senior and other students of maintaining usual classes and learning during the day.

The nature and timetabling of classes for senior students and school level discretion, particularly during exam and assessment periods, can allow for extra 'breaks' to be scheduled during the day. A school may allow senior students to have a 'late start' or 'early finish' if there has been a particularly long day. Some offerings outside of 'usual' school hours may be optional rather than compulsory. Parents/carers are always encouraged to contact their school/school principal directly to discuss or clarify any matters relating to their child's schooling, including scheduling and attendance.

I remain very concerned regarding the blanket mobile phone ban across Victorian high schools. My concern is mostly due to the mental health benefits - in particular for those teenagers that privately and discreetly manage their mental health using different apps - calm, breathing, mindfulness - that are recommended by their GP or treating psychologist or even that they are aware of through peer discussion.

Many kids use these apps at break times in private when they may feel the starting of their own anxiety responses, and this enables them to very quietly manage these triggers and successfully get through their day.

The general argument that this should be notified to the school is agreed, where possible, however not every teacher is part of this notification process (nor should they be from a privacy perspective) and therefore the very real likelihood is that a teacher could confront a student utilising their phone in this way, and that this discretion would no longer exist.

Many teachers in our experience at our High School have a no talk back policy on the mobile phone rule, and on sighting any student using a mobile phone they immediately confiscate it with no discussion possible. This flies in the face of enabling students to explain they have approval, and in many cases, if they are students to require these apps, the chances are that this conversation or explanation would be very confronting and detrimental to the student.

Not all teachers should need to know the personal details of students not in their remit, and this rule and disclosure means this privacy is compromised. In addition, many students who perhaps would have approval on mental health grounds would then have to disclose in front of their peers WHY they are allowed to use their phone, and this again is an unnecessary disclosure and just serves to add to the stigma around mental health. I raised this by email to the Victorian Education Department earlier this year and did not get any response. I have other concerns around children who may need - again at break times – to contact their parents or caregivers around mental health issues, even if minor – 7 children for whom this quick conversation would allay their concerns and enable them to get through their day with success and effective learning. To say that teenagers should be able to do this without calling their parents is to entirely dismiss those who have minor mental health bubbles, for whom this is a short stage, which when managed and supported, does not last for very long. My other concern is the in class option for those students for whom taking photos of notes / the white board in class is a vital part of their learning process, for whatever reason, but in particular those students with mental health issues for whom the processing of information presented in class is sometimes compromised. These children again are disadvantaged by this blanket ban and should not be forced to disclose their situation to all teachers if they do not feel comfortable. Having the option to photograph notes is key to these students.

My final concern is around changes to pick up timings and locations - which is commonplace for many senior classes. To not allow students to advise last minute changes to parents is extremely inconvenient and frustrating for busy families trying to juggle many children with various pickups.

I would appreciate contact or response to these concerns and am happy to discuss my concerns further. My personal experience of this is that my Year 12 student last year would not have got through without having consistent access to her mobile phone for pretty much all the reasons above, and I am so glad this ban was not in place prior to this year. There would have to be other children and families for whom this negatively affects. I am in no way suggesting phones in class and at school is not an issue to be managed, but I am concerned at the flow on effect of a blanket ban for those kids who use their phones properly and discretely and to best advantage for both their mental health and their education.

Response

The new mobile phone policy was introduced at the start of Term 1, 2020 to assist students to stay focussed in class, reduce cyberbullying during school hours and encourage students to play and chat with one another at recess and lunchtime.

Research on the impact of mobile phone use on students' learning, health and wellbeing shows that mobile phones can weaken students' ability to think, remember, pay attention, and manage emotions when their use is not linked to classroom learning activities. The research is available at mobile phones in schools.

The Department acknowledges that change often comes with a period of adjustment. However, the benefits of this policy are considered to outweigh any disadvantages. We have already seen positive results in many schools in Victoria that had similar policies in place prior to this year.

The new mobile phone policy does allow for learning-related exceptions for specific, class-based educational purposes where a student may need to access their mobile phone. Teachers can grant these exceptions where appropriate. Health and wellbeing-related exceptions are also available, as are exceptions related to managing risk when students are offsite.

Parents can also still contact their children through the school's administration office in emergencies. Students who are unwell are encouraged to follow the school's localised process to seek medical support, with the school's administration office contacting parents/carers as needed.

Focus groups and an online survey targeting Victorian government school students have been undertaken in 2020 to ascertain whether the policy supports its intended outcomes. More consultations with principals, teachers and students and parents are planned for early 2021 to ensure that the voices of schools and their communities are heard.

The Department notes the implementation challenges raised in your correspondence, including around disclosure of sensitive information and coordinating school pick-up, and will feed this into 2021 consultations.

The new mobile phone policy supports schools to manage implementation challenges at the local level, so a further suggestion may be to table your concerns directly with the school.

Children at VSV or on shared enrolment with Virtual School Victoria (VSV) on medical grounds (social/emotional) must re -enrol each year as a means to confirm they still qualify to attend on these grounds. For many students, their goal is to move to increased hours or full attendance in a face to face learning environment.

As VSV is a mainstream school, my question is why doesn't PSD funding travel with the student to VSV when it could be put to incredible use there? Remote learning and telehealth have demonstrated that aides can work with students online, as can allied professionals. Under shared enrolment a division of funding could greatly benefit these students in building their capacity to participate in face to face learning.

Response

Virtual School Victoria (VSV) provides remote learning and engagement for students, including students with disabilities. VSV's model is designed to meet the educational needs of Victorian students whose circumstances prevent them from accessing regular schooling.

The Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) is specifically designed to supplement the Student Resource Package (SRP) to support onsite school attendance and participation of students with disability.

The VSV has a bespoke SRP funding model. This funding model is tailored to consider the remote learning nature of the school, including the need for individualisation of student programs and supports.

Parents and carers play a vital role working in partnership with the school to plan supports and adjustments. A focus for this partnership is to keep track of student progress, and make changes as required.

The SRP model for VSV enables the school to make adjustments for students with disability as part of their operating model, just as any school uses their SRP flexibly to meet student needs. This can include using different staffing arrangements, including Education Support staff, to support VSV's delivery of students' educational programs.

I encourage families and VSV educators to work together, to ensure students' educational programs are supported by staffing arrangements that promote strong engagement, access and participation in learning.

In addition, the new Disability Inclusion approach will improve the supports available to all students with disability in Victorian government schools, through:

- improved supports for students with disability in schools

- an approach that puts the needs of the student at the centre of our response

- more specialist expertise in disability across the system

- more training, professional development and guidance on disability and personalised approaches to support students with disability.

To achieve the aims for Disability Inclusion, it vital that all students and schools are a part of this journey.

All schools, including those with different SRP models will be included in this process.

Weblinks to Resources and Information

Carers Vic Australia

www.carersvictoria.org.au/about-us/contact-us

Contact the Department of Education and Training

www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/Pages/default.aspx

Mental Health Toolkit Information and Resources

www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/mentalhealth/Pages/mentalhealthtoolkit.aspx

Mobile Phones in Schools

www.education.vic.gov.au/parents/going-to-school/Pages/Mobile-phones-in-schools.aspx

Mobile Phone Policy – Student Use

www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/students-using-mobile-phones/policy

Public Events Framework

https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/public-events-information-for-organisers

School Attendance Policy

www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/attendance/policy

School Hours Policy

www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/attendance/policy

Social Media Use to Support Student Learning

www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/students-using-mobile-phones/policy