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Early Childhood Development

Victoria as a Learning Community

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Victoria as a Learning Community

The following is an extended version of a lecture presented by
The Hon. Martin Dixon, MP, Minister for Education, on
Tuesday 29 November 2011 at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education,
The University of Melbourne.

Preface

Thank you all for coming here today.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet - the Wurundjeri people - and pay my respects to their elders past and present and to any elders here with us today.

I also want to begin by paying tribute to all of you and to your work. Educating our young people and preparing them for life is one of the most important and challenging jobs a person can do. It's also a team effort – we are all working together to build the best future for our children and young people – and it's in that spirit of collaboration that I speak with you today.

Victoria's school system is just one part of a broad spectrum of education experiences available to our children, young people and their families.

The interconnectedness between early childhood services, schools and the higher education and skills sectors is why it is so important to have all of these functions together in one Department – the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

My colleagues, Minister Lovell (Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development) and Minister Hall (Minister for Higher Education and Skills and Minister responsible for the Teaching Profession) are pursuing improvements in their portfolios that complement my work with schools.

I am here today to talk to you about what I believe are the key directions for school education.

Over the last twelve months, this Government has sought to establish a new dynamic based on consultation, collaboration and professional trust. We've been renewing our partnership with the Catholic and independent school sectors.

At the core of this dynamic has been a discussion about how we can best serve children and their families, and how we can respect the critical place of parents in school education.

We have achieved much that supports our vision. I recently released *The Victorian Government's Vision for Languages Education*, which articulates the importance of languages learning for increasing each student's global perspective through collaboration with a range of partners. We have funded 100 Primary Mathematics and Science Specialists to increase content expertise among our professionals. I am proud to note we have made the largest single investment in capital works for special and autistic schools in over a decade. And, we have made common sense reforms, such as returning the authority to schedule pupil-free days to schools.

We have had to work within a challenging fiscal context. Yet, we know that we must continue to reform. We must drive our performance to the level of the highest performing jurisdictions and maintain Victoria's competitive edge or risk not meeting our economic and social goals. We must also recognise that we cannot solve every problem by throwing money at it.

It's time for a new approach to education reform and I am committed to the pursuit of excellence across every aspect of our system. Having spent more than 30 years in education, I know the strong impact that *the right reforms* can make. The right reforms will improve student outcomes, provide employment opportunities for our children and young people into the future, and give our economy its competitive edge. We are, and will continue to be, a knowledge economy reliant on the skills and capabilities of our greatest asset, our people.

We understand the benefits of parental engagement and the important role that parents and families can play in supporting excellence in our schools. We know that schools that are served and owned by their community thrive.

I believe that working together as a learning community, comprising school leaders, teachers, students, parents, business and local communities, we can lay the foundations for meaningful reform over the next 10–20 years. Together, we can achieve much more. Ensuring our children and young people are ready to engage and contribute to an ever-changing world is no small task. Today's students will need to be flexible, adaptable, outward looking, active, confident and creative if they are to thrive in the 21st century. I believe that working together we're up to the task – this is what I mean by *Victoria as a Learning Community*.

The foundations for our reforms

Before detailing this Government's vision for the future, I want to reflect on the education reform path Victoria has travelled. An effective reform agenda must build upon the foundations that are already in place.

Victoria has experienced two significant waves of reform in the last two decades – a focus on devolution of decision-making to the school level, followed by a central focus on capacity building.

We now stand on the threshold of a third wave. This wave of reform will focus on professional trust and support. In this third wave, I want Victorian schools to reap the rewards of past reform.

The first wave

The first wave of reform revolved around the *Schools of the Future* policy, implemented in the 1990s. This policy devolved educational, financial and management responsibility to schools. At the same time, curriculum, resources and accountability frameworks were established to support schools in this more autonomous environment.

These changes marked a move towards schools as the key management unit of education. This view of our schools has remained until today and Victoria's system continues to be among the most devolved in the world. Indeed, our system is still quoted, researched, visited from across the world, and the work of our school leaders is of interest globally.

We want schools to be connected with their communities and able to make decisions based on local needs. Victoria's devolved system is a strong foundation for future reform.

The second wave

The second wave took place in the 2000s and can be described as a period of *capacity building*. In this period there was a strong emphasis on:

- the impact of strong leaders and teachers
- developing common language around school improvement.

This was achieved through initiatives such as the:

- Developmental Learning Framework for School Leaders
- Effective Schools Model
- Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership.

The second wave added to the capacity of our principals and teachers to drive school improvement and to enhance education outcomes. This wave has added to the strong foundation for future reform.

The third wave

We stand now on the threshold of a third wave of reform, underpinned by *professional trust and support*.

If we have succeeded in articulating a vision for effective schools, effective teaching and effective leadership over the last decade, then it is time to trust our school leaders and school communities to make that vision a reality at the local level.

Professional trust and support is about empowering school leaders and teachers, working with their communities, to be the drivers of change and to determine the local approaches that will achieve improvement. We trust our school leaders and teachers, we believe in their professionalism, we recognise and respect their expertise – and this will be reflected across our reform agenda.

We know that in some of the world's leading education jurisdictions, such as Finland and Singapore, great emphasis has been placed on professional trust and support.

Michael Fullan (2011) notes that 'when Finland and Singapore began their reforms 40 years ago they did not have a profession that warranted respect, but they set about to build such a system' (p17). Indeed, Finland and Singapore committed to respecting and trusting their profession as a matter of principle, without, in the first instance, making this trust conditional on performance or behaviour. Rather than giving teachers and schools the message that 'we won't trust you until you prove to us that we should,' these systems put their trust in teachers and leaders as a starting point.

At the moment I see a system in which our principals, teachers and school communities are distanced from decision-making because of progressive layers of hierarchy. This system has its origins in the reform agenda of the previous government.

I believe that professional trust is the missing ingredient in Victoria's improvement journey. To those educational leaders in the room I say to you, that we as politicians will always be held responsible for the performance of the system. I do not hide from that responsibility.

But the real drive for reform, for higher standards and improved student outcomes, will come from you as highly skilled professionals who know and understand your local context and are best placed to lead improvement. We know that in efficiency and productivity terms, when the leaders on the ground buy-in, the return on investment is greatest. This is what I mean by professional trust.

In simple terms, we are in this together like never before.

But the creation of a culture of professional trust also requires a clear articulation of expectations, responsibilities and relationships.

To that end, I propose developing a compact between my Department and government schools. This compact will be developed in negotiation with you, as the co-signers.

The compact will outline respective roles and responsibilities including:

- support for schools to determine the best approaches to drive school improvement and to achieve best outcomes for their students in their local context
- expectations of priority activities for schools (for example, curriculum planning, local reporting and accountability to school community, systemic leadership and responsibility for all students)
- clarity about the absolute core requirements (those that are legislative, regulatory and/or fundamental policy expectations).

This compact will signal a new way of working – a collaborative partnership that will put into practice professional trust. For the first time, we will have clarity of our mutual expectations and responsibilities.

In implementing our commitment to professional trust, this Government will also be empowering principals to pool their resources, for example, in managing their own use of Student Support Service Officers (SSSOs), such as psychologists, social workers and speech pathologists.

We will enable students to bring their Student Resource Package (SRP) funding with them when they move to specified alternative settings. And, we will work with you to reform Victoria's network model, so that networks are locally owned and facilitated.

These key commitments are central to the day-to-day business of schools and illustrate our new way of working. I will speak in more detail about each of these reforms later in this speech.

Core principles

We have considered the foundations on which we will build our reform agenda. Now I want to turn to the fundamental principles on which we stand in education policy and which we will pursue throughout our stewardship of the Victorian Learning Community.

This Government has three, non-negotiable education principles. These are:

1. choice
2. local decision-making
3. school–community integration.

Choice: all students, all schools

The Minister for Education is the Minister for all Victorian students – in government, Catholic and independent schools.

While I have particular responsibility for the delivery of a strong and high-performing government school system, I want to support all schools to respond to the choices made by students and their parents and to provide high-quality options that students and parents want to select.

We must build confidence and engage parents and students in the shared enterprise of providing consistently high-quality education for all Victorian students, regardless of the school they attend or the sector it is in.

We know that the results of Victorian students are among the highest in Australia. The latest NAPLAN results confirm that while improvement is patchy, we do perform above the national average on most measures and equal the national average on the rest. This reflects the combined contribution of all Victorian schools and I am pleased to be Minister for such a diverse and high-performing system.

In the context of our principle of choice, I also want to point out that many government schools are achieving impressive results in NAPLAN. Doncaster Primary School, Fish Creek Primary School and Donald Primary School, among many others, are achieving NAPLAN results that are amongst the highest in the nation.

Schools are adopting innovative approaches to education, like open learning spaces and new technologies, and working with communities to provide early childhood services.

In addition, we have world-class specialist government schools, like the John Monash Science School and Maribyrnong Sports School, and four selective entry secondary schools. This diversity is something we will continue to foster.

In September we announced a \$2.5 million grants program to enable more government schools to develop a specialisation in a field of their choice.

We also recently announced the establishment of the new Bio21 science school in Parkville, and earlier this year we supported Werribee Secondary College to become the first government secondary school to offer the senior International Baccalaureate Diploma.

Our commitment to a high quality and increasingly diverse government school education system is clear. This is because we believe that specialisation and diversity not only promote choice, but enable schools to develop their strengths and that this supports higher standards and better outcomes for all students.

Complementing these reforms is our commitment to lift non-government school funding to 25 per cent of the recurrent cost of educating a student in a government school. We understand the sacrifices that parents have made to ensure their children participate in

a high-quality education. This commitment characterises quality education systems and we want to foster this.

We have also recently contributed to the Commonwealth's (Gonski) review of funding for schooling, articulating the importance of choice, coherence and need. This included questioning why the Commonwealth provides 10 per cent of the cost of schooling for a government school student – less than it provides for those students in high socioeconomic status non-government schools. It sets out our position to move, over time, to more coherent funding conditions and to enhance Commonwealth funding to all schools – not reducing the funds available now or in the future.

Many of you will have been through several changes to funding and recognise the importance of transitional fairness. Any move from old to new arrangements must enable stable planning for schools. I recognise the significant opportunity for sustainable reform of Commonwealth school funding arrangements and I intend to represent the interests of all students and all schools as that debate continues.

Whether a government or non-government school, our goal is to ensure that every parent has a choice of high-quality education.

Local decision-making

The second non-negotiable for this Government is local decision-making.

Local decision-making means freeing schools to make decisions and pursue goals which are in the best interests of their students. Capable school leaders will always make better decisions at the local level, by virtue of their relationship to the students and school community.

Schools must not be forced to prove, day after day, why they deserve to have local control. Instead, I want to establish default autonomy for schools, with progressive levels of any intervention based on demonstrated lack of capacity against clearly identified and agreed requirements.

This focus will require an altered role for the bureaucracy as it transitions from management to support. The structure of the Department is currently being redesigned to reflect this focus.

I want to reduce the number of mandates for schools and increase the precision in those that remain. Setting direction and priorities will remain my responsibility, as Minister for Education. These directions will be based on a system level perspective, enhanced by engaging with others nationally and internationally, examining research and data and through feedback from you.

Together we must tackle head-on a reduction in red-tape, which clears the way for educational leaders to focus on agreed priorities to enhance student learning. This will be central to our work with you on the compact. The decisions about how directions and priorities are implemented will remain with you. This is the basis of local decision-making and of default autonomy.

I believe that a default autonomy model will produce a range of benefits for our schools. The World Bank (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009) has shown, for example, that autonomy for schools can lead to:

- reduced repetition and dropout rates
- better learning outcomes
- more effective use of resources
- increased participation of all local stakeholders in decision-making

- more collegial relationships and increased satisfaction for the workforce.¹

Whether because local decision-making better reflects the needs of each student, garners the insights of skilled professionals or generates practitioner buy-in to education reform, shifting the locus of decision-making to schools are core to how we will build the Victorian Learning Community.

School—community integration

In addition to choice and local decision-making, the final non-negotiable principle that will drive our reform approach is school—community integration.

Schools cannot fix all the problems of society.

And, no school can prosper without drawing guidance and strength from the capabilities and needs of its community. Effective interaction, support and working together to find solutions (or co-production) must go beyond the school gates, to the communities in which our schools operate.

Through integration with parents, the local community, business, government and community organisations, schools can lift outcomes for their students. They can tap into expertise, facilities, resources and ideas, and open up pathways for students. Engaging with our schools also presents a wide range of opportunities for community partnerships.

School—community integration can increase ownership within the community. The bonds which are formed have the potential to both spread the load of support for schools while reinforcing the critical importance of education within our communities, in turn lifting expectations and driving increased pride and effort among young people.

Our core education principles of choice, local decision-making and school—community integration run through everything we will do in education.

Reform areas

There are five key reforms areas which I wish to address today:

1. supporting improved **student outcomes** – this is our goal
2. creating **order and inclusion in schools** – the foundation for all our work
3. **school innovation** – which is a critical driver of systemic excellence
4. **school partnerships** – a critical facilitator for improvement
5. **internationalising education** – the context for our work now and into the future.

¹ This report is a multi-system analysis. Other analyses also suggest school autonomy is associated with a range of benefits. See OECD (2011), PISA in Focus, vol. 9. On the relationship between school self-management and student learning in the Victorian context, see Caldwell, B.J and Spinks, J. M (1998), *Beyond the Self-Managing School*, London: Falmer.

The Goal: Student Outcomes

Improving student outcomes is about equipping our children and young people so that they can thrive throughout their lives. Any consideration of student outcomes then begs the question, who do we want our students to be as adults?

In a world of changing technologies and increased mobility our young people must be adaptable and have readily transferable skills. I also want our students to have the capacity for highly specialised work without losing their inherent creativity.

Preparing our students for life in the 21st century requires an education system that is strong in the following areas:

- core academic skills based on sound literacy and numeracy, and ICT skills
- self-motivated learning and the capacity for leadership and decision-making
- integrity and responsibility to one's community
- health and wellbeing as part of a positive outlook on life
- creativity and problem-solving capacity
- intercultural and language capabilities.

As educators we must accept responsibility for providing an education which is focused on the whole child.

This Government is committed to improving student outcomes in this broad sense of the term.

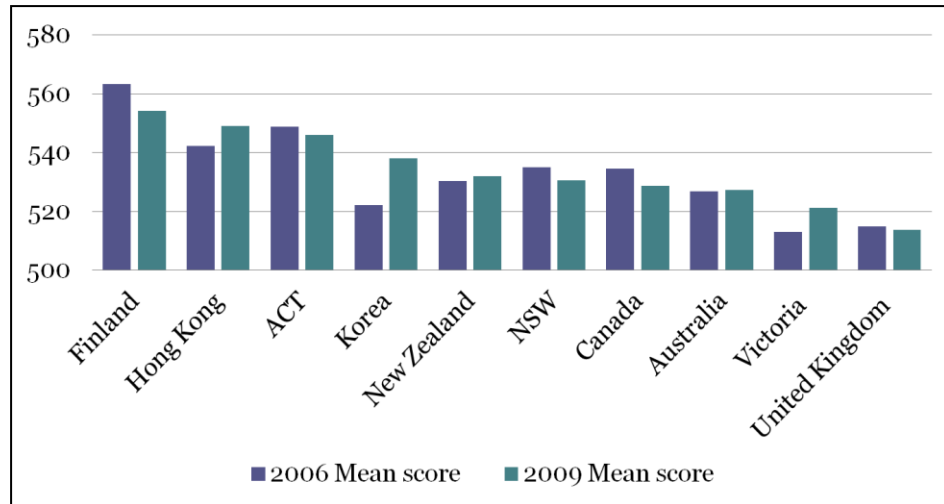
Let's focus, for a moment, on the current picture of student outcomes in areas such as literacy, numeracy, science and civics.

Currently, national and international testing demonstrates that Victorian students continue to perform well in many respects.

However, while we remain competitive against our national counterparts, Victoria has not registered significant improvement in student outcomes. We have been flat-lining in many areas, with other jurisdictions such as Hong Kong, Shanghai and Korea jumping ahead of us in reading, numeracy and science results. In particular, our data show that we must do more to assist high-achieving students as well as students with a passion for different ideas and activities.

The PISA Scientific literacy data (see Figure 1), for example, show that while the mean scores of our students improved between 2006 and 2009, other jurisdictions, both internationally and nationally, continue to outperform us.

Figure 1: Scientific Literacy Data – PISA 2006-2009

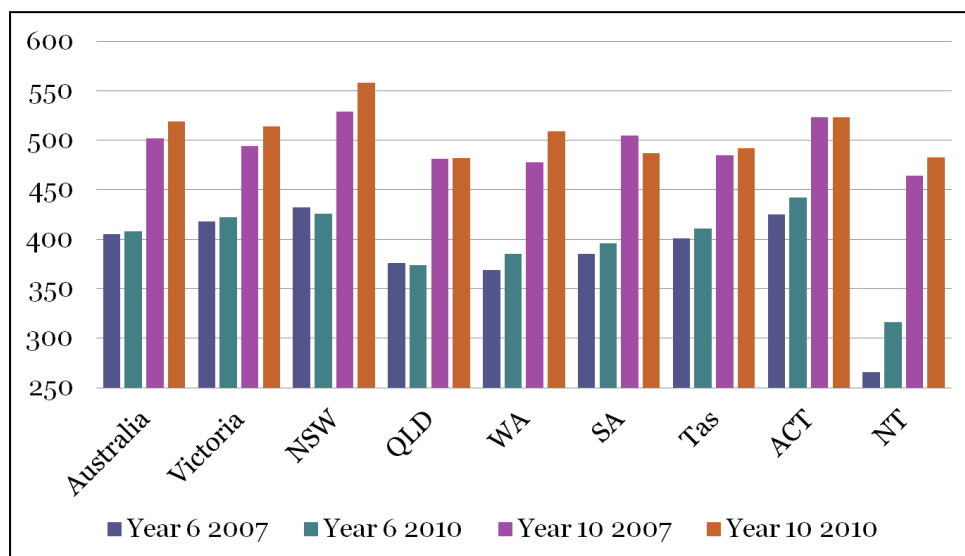


Source: OECD, PISA 2009 database

Science and maths capabilities are critical to our students’ ability to access a wide range of pathways to work and to succeed in a globally competitive future. Our investment in 100 Primary Maths and Science Specialists is an investment in increasing subject expertise.

Our students also need to be well-rounded citizens and we need to know how they are performing in a range of areas outside literacy and numeracy. Our performance in Civics shows that, while Victoria does well, our performance is behind that of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. It also demonstrates that Western Australia is improving more rapidly than Victoria (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship



Source: ACARA, 2011, National Assessment Program Civics and Citizenship Years 6 and 10 Report 2010

Civics complements foundation skills and high levels of scientific literacy to support a well-functioning democracy. We must continue to monitor our performance in these areas.

Addressing student outcomes is a complex task. It spans curriculum, the quality of our teaching workforce, assessment and accountability.

To achieve improved outcomes, I want to work with you, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) and the Department to determine what it is essential for every young Victorian to learn through the formal school curriculum.

Too often we confuse what is desirable with what is essential. Wherever possible, I want our demands on schools to be precise and limited in scope, increasing the flexibility and autonomy of schools to develop their own programs while ensuring every student has access to the learning that is essential for citizenship.

I want to propose the following model as a structure to guide our thinking on the essential curriculum: Foundation, Breadth and Pathways. This is not necessarily new, but as we face the increasingly complex demands and expectations placed on the school curriculum, in my view it provides a very important frame of reference.

In the Foundation Years of Prep–3 the curriculum must focus on developing the fundamental knowledge, skills and behaviours in literacy, numeracy, ICT and physical and social capacities, which underpin all future learning. We know, of course, that these fundamental skills are best acquired in a school program that engages students and provides rich experiences in music, art, languages and the environment in which students live.

In the Breadth Years of 4–8, the focus of the curriculum must be on providing access to a wide range of learning so that students can fully develop their full range of intellectual, physical, aesthetic, moral and social capacities.

Beginning in Years 9–10 and continuing through to Years 11 and 12, the curriculum must provide clear pathways to excellence for all students. This includes the opportunity to begin to specialise in the Arts; Design, Creativity and Technology; Science; Sport; the Humanities, Languages and other areas.

To this end, I have asked the Department and the VCAA to commence a process of consultation, with the Victorian Learning Community, to determine how this vision of the stages of schooling might best be reflected in new curriculum provision and reporting requirements. I want the VCAA to ensure that we implement the Australian Curriculum in a way that maintains and strengthens the high standards of Victorian students.

I am determined to lift our current standards of achievement and, in particular, to provide new pathways to excellence for our best performing students.

I have asked the VCAA to accelerate the development of a new VCE study that will provide students with the opportunity to conduct independent extended research and to work with our universities to investigate new forms of extension studies for our brightest students.

I would like to see us introduce new forms of recognition for high levels of achievement both in specialist areas and across a breadth of learning. The VCAA, in consultation with you, will investigate options for my consideration, including the introduction of a Victorian Baccalaureate that would support and encourage students to achieve new levels of excellence in a program of study characterised by breadth, including the learning of languages.

We have committed \$32 million over the next four years to VET in Schools funding to expand student pathways. This is imperative if we are to support students to participate in productive employment. Our unique Victorian certificate, VCAL, already plays a central role in building pathways for students. I have asked the VCAA and the Department to work closely with industry groups to develop new industry pathways for students. This will help us build a coherent, flexible pathways model that allows us to keep every student engaged and give them every chance at future success.

Ultimately, I want a more sustainable and predictable funding model for all schools that allows real flexibility. This is why we are currently engaged in reviews of funding which will maximise the learning opportunities for students.

Turning from curriculum to teaching, it is now widely accepted that teaching is the single greatest identifiable in-school factor that impacts on a child's learning outcomes. Professor John Hattie (2009), among others, has demonstrated that 30 per cent of the variance in student learning can be attributed to the quality of teaching.

My colleague the Hon. Peter Hall is working to develop a detailed plan for achieving quality teaching, so I will not speak for long on this subject.

We will work to attract, develop and retain the best workforce. We know that rewarding teacher excellence and keeping good teachers in the classroom are essential to improving standards and student outcomes.

This will require world-class pre-service training, a robust performance management system, remuneration that recognises and rewards the work of our teachers, and professional development that addresses each teacher's needs. We will also encourage peer collaboration and accountability, giving teachers the opportunity to learn from each other, from data, research and other stimuli.

We must also make better use of paraprofessionals, and others in our community, who can provide specialised learning experiences for our students.

Assessment is another critical part of the picture when it comes to lifting student outcomes. The Government will focus on creating an environment where feedback, formative and summative assessment is a key part of what our schools do.

I want all involved in the education of our students to reconsider the role and place of standardised testing, and how we can get best value out of this testing approach.

It is likely that we will move from a system that develops and mandates assessment tools to a system that quality assures existing tools and makes a wide variety of tools (beyond literacy and numeracy) available, on-demand, when teachers need them. It is important that we consider assessment in its broadest terms here, including assessment of the progress of the whole child, not just literacy and numeracy performance. This is an area in which we will work closely with our colleagues in the non-government sector.

Over the past year, the Government has commenced development of a new online assessment platform which will allow for a wide variety of tools to be available on demand. From next year, this platform will be developed, providing all schools, regardless of sector, with access to quality-assured tools for assessing student improvement. This will encourage formative assessment to become a part of daily teaching and learning.

A final area that has an important impact on student outcomes is accountability.

Effective use of data is critical if we are to improve our approach to accountability. Victoria currently leads the nation with the quality and breadth of school performance data. However, to maximise their value we need our data, accountability mechanisms and benchmarks to be more precise and relevant to the range of contexts in which our schools are working. Support from the Department to assist schools in their improvement journey should also be more precise and targeted.

When the right set of performance indicators are put together in the right way, we can observe trends over time and develop a powerful picture of how a school is performing. We can also identify clear early warning signs that a school's performance is declining or failing to improve and the need for intervention. We can also monitor and recognise the 'value-add' of individual schools.

Over the coming year, I will work with you to develop a suite of more precise and targeted performance indicators and to enhance support for schools in using data to monitor performance.

In addition, through the development of the compact, this Government will work with you to articulate the accountability requirements of schools and the Department's genuine reciprocal accountabilities to you. While the hallmarks of good accountability – planning, monitoring, reporting and reviewing – will remain, wherever possible, we will empower schools, or groups of schools, to manage accountability and drive improvement at their local level.

This new approach to accountability will drive improved outcomes for Victorian students.

The Foundation: Order and Inclusion in Schools

I now want to speak about the Government's second key reform area: order and inclusion in schools.

The goal of improved student outcomes relies on our schools being safe, engaging and productive places where everyone feels included. That's why order and inclusion are the foundation for everything else we do.

In Victoria, we know that parents expect an education environment which is safe and that is underpinned by a strong ethic of respect.

And we know from PISA (OECD 2011) that:

- disciplinary climate is strongly associated with student performance
- the countries where discipline in the classroom improved between 2000 and 2009 are also the countries in which students reported better relations with their teachers.

In 2010, a Grattan Institute report found that:

25% of Australian teachers lose at least 30% of their class time to factors other than effective teaching and learning ... and that two-thirds of the lost time is taken up with keeping order in the classroom (Jensen 2010, p20).

In Victoria, many principals and teachers are faced with students who pose challenges to maintaining order in the classroom. In addition to the distress this causes, it also creates a complex and significant administrative burden which can impede effective behaviour management.

In these situations we must ensure that schools have the power, the capacity and the resources to ensure their school remains a safe and orderly place. This includes the full range of sanctions and strategies.

Therefore, the Government is committed to restoring greater principal discretion in regard to suspensions and expulsions. At the same time, the Government has moved to ensure principals and staff are protected under the law when forced to remove dangerous items and weapons from students and premises under their charge.

In addition, we will invest in professional development specifically designed to improve teachers' capacity to understand and manage classroom behaviour. We are also investing in a program to support teachers to receive training to better identify children and young people with mental health issues and support their referral to appropriate community services.

To confront one of the newest and most insidious forms of harm among young people, the Government is also rolling out a \$10.5 million cyber safety program to help schools assess, improve and monitor their response to cyber bullying.

Coupled with this initiative, we are investing in a major program to refresh, expand and monitor the work currently done in schools to work proactively against bullying in all its forms.

However, an orderly and inclusive environment requires more than just a focus on student behaviour. If we do not support the most vulnerable in our system we cannot consider ourselves to be truly inclusive. We need to address student wellbeing and engagement, create pathways and learning opportunities that meet the individual needs of all of our students and support students with disabilities and additional learning needs.

For this reason, we have invested \$124 million to retain and expand the number of primary welfare officers working with children in primary schools.

And, perhaps most significantly, we are now returning control of Student Support Service Officers (SSSOs) to schools. SSSOs are the psychologists, speech pathologists, social workers and others who perform vital work in our schools, but whose employment has previously been administered by the Department.

It would have been easy for us to evenly distribute resources under the new SSSO model, hand them back to each school and walk away. But this approach would fail many of our schools, including smaller schools that could not access the diversity of services they need if they had to work in isolation to source SSSOs.

Instead, we will be asking schools to work in clusters to pool their resources. Each cluster will be responsible for its own governance and for delivering a range of SSSO services directly to the schools within it, with professional and administrative support from the Department.

The formal consultation period for this proposed reform will conclude on 22 December 2011. I strongly encourage you all to actively participate in this process by submitting your comments on the proposed reforms. I am committed to having this new model in place by 30 June 2012. This will allow us to plan together during the first half of next year.

To support order and inclusion in our schools, we have also committed to a fundamental reform in the way we support alternative settings, or flexible learning options for students.

An example of a creative alternative setting is the NETschool in Bendigo, which works with young people (15–20 years old) who are experiencing difficulties with mainstream schooling but who want to get back into learning. The teachers at NETschool work individually with each student. The students themselves, supported by a NETschool mentor, set their learning goals and then work out achievable steps to move forward and return to education.

Historically, alternative settings have operated on the periphery of the education system. Inherited funding arrangements have allowed a select few schools to operate under the auspices of the Department. Instead, what is needed is a wide range of services of various sizes and approaches operating across the system.

To support this, the Government has committed to reform the funding model for students who seek re-engagement outside of mainstream school environments. Under this model students will be able to take their SRP funding with them when they move to specified alternative settings.

Concurrently, we are also investing in pilot programs to trial different models of alternative education. For example, we have established seven demonstration sites as part of the Youth Partnerships initiative, which are trialling collaborative approaches to delivery of youth services and pathways provision for young people who have disengaged.

We have also sought and received advice about the ways we can improve the understanding and culture of mainstream schools in their interactions with alternative providers. To clarify our intentions in this area, we will deliver a policy framework that articulates how alternative settings can be strengthened in Victoria.

It will build on sound research and consultation undertaken in this area. At its core, it is the responsibility of all schools, working together and in partnership with community agencies, to provide the range of alternatives needed to assist all young people to find pathways and engage with education.

The Government has committed to closing the gap in outcomes for all Indigenous Victorians. We know that education is critical to long-term outcomes for all young people, including Koorie students. We also know that preventative approaches are more effective than intervention approaches. To achieve improved outcomes for Koorie students, the Government will identify, promote and support initiatives and programs that the evidence shows are effective in improving outcomes. This will include workforce initiatives, literacy and numeracy programs and engagement programs such as Clontarf and the Wannik Dance Academy.

Another group of students who need specific support are students with a disability. Victoria is a world leader when it comes to the diversity of offerings we provide students with a disability, including 81 special and autism specific schools around the state. To show our commitment to these students and to parental choice, we have committed to the largest single investment in special and autistic schools in over a decade. We have invested an additional \$156 million in funding over the next four years for students with a disability in mainstream schools.

Despite these investments, it is clear that a sustainable model of support is yet to be fully realised. Substantial growth over the past decade in the number of eligible students has placed significant pressure on Victorian schools. That is why my Department will work with the sector and the new Ministerial Advisory Committee for Students with Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs to explore new ways of ensuring consistent, adequate resourcing and educational support for students with a disability. This will ensure that parents have real choice, and students have the support they need.

To better support students with disabilities, we will also:

- improve transitions for children between Early Childhood Intervention Services and the Program for Students with a Disability
- localise provision and strengthen parent choice
- develop a range of assessment tools, curriculum and pedagogy materials
- build workforce capacity, particularly in mainstream schooling
- strengthen quality assurance in programs supporting students with disabilities.

These will be available for all schools, regardless of sector.

Establishing strong foundations of order and inclusion will assist us to achieve our reform agenda.

The Driver: School Innovation

There is much debate about what innovation means. At its simplest level, it means finding new and more effective ways to pursue the same goals. At another level, it means being willing to reconsider all of our existing assumptions about education.

John Hattie (2009) notes that when a teacher innovates, consciously and deliberately, the impact the teacher makes can 'increase markedly', regardless of the outcome of the innovation. This is because, when a teacher undertakes an innovation:

there is heightened attention to its effects ... [it is] searching for what is not working, and those students for whom you are not being successful ... seeking feedback [and paying] increased attention to the principles of evaluation ... that are important (p251).

Local decision-making and professional trust are not disconnected from innovation. McKinsey and Company analysis has shown that once a high-quality teaching workforce is in place, that increased autonomy at the school level can support:

the creativity and innovation of its educators and other stakeholder groups... [by giving] teachers time, resources and the flexibility to reflect upon and try out new ideas to better support student learning (Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber 2010, p42).

We want our teachers to feel confident to trial new approaches based on research, knowledge and evidence, and accept possible failure, as part of this approach. If we try something and it doesn't work as advertised, but we are disciplined enough to gather and share the data, then I believe we can only benefit our students.

Teachers need to test ideas with their colleagues and learn from each other as well as test the boundaries for innovative approaches. Enhancing peer-to-peer accountability is how you as a profession can assist us to support real innovation across all Victorian schools.

We can learn a lot from Shanghai in China in this regard. Teachers there systematically collaborate and conduct action research into approaches that lead to improvement.

I want us to focus on the self-generation of ideas; that is, new ideas and programs that are self-selected and owned by schools. This is demand driven innovation, not the Department mandating that schools must innovate and providing prescriptive measures on how they should do so.

While we want self-generation of ideas to be the norm, the Department has an important role to play in supporting innovation at the school level. It will be the role of the Department to provide data, research, networks of innovators and other stimuli to assist schools to make evidence-based decisions about the approaches they trial. I believe that the new Regional Support Group within the Department will be critical in gathering, harnessing and supporting this culture of innovation, as well as in identifying and supporting the removal of inhibitors.

More effective communication is critical. This will be a part of our compact with you.

The Department will also review job descriptions and professional development of departmental staff to determine how innovation can be more effectively included. This includes raising the priority of innovation as a measure of performance of those working within our system.

Undoubtedly, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has transformed the way we think about education, and it will continue to be crucial as we build a culture of innovation in Victoria.

It is important that we use ICT in ways that enhance learning outcomes for students. ICT should be used to build the 21st century capabilities our students will require – to go beyond given information, and to use higher-order thinking skills, real time analysis, and predictive and modelling activities.

There are numerous examples of schools who are transforming the learning experience of students through the innovative use of ICT and in partnership with others.

It is also important that ICT is used to facilitate greater and more frequent interaction between schools and parents, as well as between teachers at one school or many. Collaboration and engagement are key to establishing a Victorian Learning Community. The Ultranet is designed to enable exactly this type of interaction. From troubled beginnings, we need to look at how the Ultranet can best serve parents and school communities.

The challenge now is to complete the functionality to ensure the quality of the Ultranet encourages its widespread use. We have been discussing a partnership agreement with the Catholic sector that would facilitate its wider roll-out. Discussion has now moved into finalising the detail of how the benefits to both sectors can be maximised.

Into the future, I will explore the ways in which ICT can help enhance outcomes through areas such as distance education, technology-based clustering, education provision between schools and online product provision in areas like assessment. Powerful ICT is also the solution for meeting our goals for a range of content areas, such as languages. In time, I am also committed to exploring the possibility for the Government to directly invest in innovative practice in schools which we can all learn from.

Innovation is central to our vision of Victoria as a Learning Community. It is emblematic of our expectation that school leaders and teachers will drive reform for our system, using evidence to determine locally-appropriate approaches and working within a culture of professional trust where exploration and trial and error are integral to improving student learning.

The Facilitator: School Partnerships

The fourth reform area the Government will focus on is school partnerships.

When I speak of school partnerships I am talking about the full gamut of partnerships – those with other schools, between school sectors, with parents, business and industry, the community and the bureaucracy. I have already mentioned the importance of creating one DEECD and the head start we have in creating the critical partnerships with the early childhood development and skills portfolios.

School partnerships can assist schools to:

- broaden the programs, services, facilities and experiences available to students
- support students to see the world beyond their school gate
- tap into the wide range of resources and expertise outside of the school gates
- create opportunities for staff and curriculum development
- support communities to meet their needs and to thrive
- innovate and generate new ideas
- allow the wider community to put back into the schooling system and to create a true learning community in Victoria.

We know that schools cannot address all student issues in isolation. We also know that establishing sustainable partnerships is not easy or quick. It requires significant commitment over the long term by school communities and their partners. School Councils have an important role to play in facilitating partnerships, and the Government will continue to support them in this role. There are many players involved, and developing great partnerships does take work, but the benefits make the sustained effort worthwhile.

In the context of default autonomy, local decision-making and professional trust, schools will have the opportunity to forge partnerships where they see a need or a potential benefit to their students, teachers, schools and/or the community. The following two examples provide a snapshot of the benefits that partnerships can bring to the school and the wider community.

Yuille Park P–8 Community College has a co-located early childhood facility and P–8 school. This supports parents who have children at multiple stages of education and makes transitions to schooling smoother and more effective.

Yuille Park's wide range of facilities, such as computer, woodwork, band, art and function rooms, gym and library, are all open to the community outside of school hours and the take-up by individuals and community groups is huge.

There are also partnerships with a range of education and training providers to offer parents education programs, such as literacy programs and early childhood certification.

A key example of a partnership between government and non-government schools is the positive psychology program developed and implemented by Geelong Grammar School. Recently, Geelong Grammar School extended its professional learning program to 106 government school teachers from the local area. This is a fantastic approach.

Business also has much to offer, and to gain, from a high-performing schooling system. Indeed, business is constantly knocking on my door asking how it can help. Much of this work is going on now. We need to support it, foster it and help it spread. This will be part of the compact with you and an important part of this Government's reform agenda.

The Business Working with Education Foundation has been established to connect business and other partner organisations with Victorian government schools. Partnerships between business and government schools are in their infancy with high potential still to be realised.

School census data tells us that 49 per cent of schools are currently engaged in a school community partnership. We want 100 per cent of schools to explore partnerships that can assist their school communities. Into the future, we need to be clear on what areas we expect cooperation in, why and how.

A key part of the new focus on school partnerships will be moving to a partnership model between schools and the Department.

This will require the Department to change its approach towards facilitating partnerships rather than providing a one-size-fits-all approach to their establishment. In the short-term, I will expect the Department to examine the challenges, barriers and hurdles that schools face in establishing sustainable partnerships and to find solutions to these.

It is in the context of real partnerships that this Government has decided to reconsider our school network model in Victoria. In the latest network survey, principals provided feedback that supports our commitment to have networks locally owned and facilitated. They also indicated that the greatest strengths of networks are that they enable collegiality and peer-to-peer engagement on shared priority work.

To do this, we will support schools to build locally-appropriate networking arrangements, across sectors and with business and the community. We will also support networks or clusters to define their own priorities. Geographically based networks are a good starting point for network models that promote school-led system improvement. However, into the future, I believe that schools will want to engage with their peers in several networks for different purposes, whether they are geographic, curriculum-focused or based on school type.

Within this model, the Department will focus on service provision and support for networks rather than defining network priorities and accountabilities. The Department will also broker partnerships between schools to share expertise and support schools in challenging circumstances.

I commit to having this new model in place by 30 June 2012. This allows for planning for the change in the first half of 2012.

The partnership model between schools and the Department also extends to our approach to the National Partnerships funding for low socioeconomic status (SES) schools. Under this approach, 80 per cent of the funding received goes directly to schools, while 10 per cent is retained for regional support programs and 10 per cent for system-wide initiatives. As part of the implementation of this model, regions will develop plans in consultation with a reference group of principals. The cross-sector collaboration at a central level in the development of an ESL assessment tool reflects the sort of work that may be undertaken as part of the system-wide initiatives.

Parental and family involvement in schooling and learning is a key lever to improving outcomes. We need to explore two key ways of doing this – schools engaging parents in children's learning to improve learning outcomes more effectively, and schools being utilised as a platform to provide greater assistance to children and their families to improve a broader suite of outcomes.

In particular, we want to explore how we can enhance collaboration between schools and families at key transition points and how we can better engage with parents in

ways which are meaningful for them. We know that parents increasingly want greater interaction and information flow between themselves and their schools. To meet this expectation, student and school level reporting should be formal and informal, continuous, useful and easily understood by parents. There is much that the school sectors can learn from each other in this regard. I will ask my Department and the VCAA to find new and more practical reporting mechanisms in the near future.

Schools are also increasingly seeing the opportunity for utilising parent support and skills. To support this, we will explore the ways in which we can build on the strengths of Victoria's school council model and ensure that parents have the confidence and skills to actively participate.

The Context: Internationalising Education

The final specific area of reform I want to focus on is what I think of as the context for our work – the international environment.

Without a doubt, young people of today will live and work in an increasingly globalised, internationally focused world. We will also increasingly need to position our state to compete in a global economy and participate in a global society. For this reason, supporting students to excel in a globalised world is a key focus of this Government.

We have to lift our focus beyond being the best in Australia and toward competition with the best in the world. It's Finland, not Queensland, Singapore, not Sydney, that we need to keep in our view.

We need to value, as a community, cultural intelligence, knowledge of the globe, languages and understandings of interdependence. This will assist our students to succeed into the future.

It's about equipping all of our students to participate and thrive in a society and economy that is increasingly connected. We want our students to go confidently out into the world and to take responsibility as global citizens. We also want to support the development of a more informed democracy and a more resilient economy.

As I stated earlier, this will require our students to have high levels of capabilities in a range of areas, including maths, science, literacy, civics and ICT. It will also require them to be outward looking and globally connected.

To support this, we will launch a new resource for all schools to assist them in offering overseas learning experiences for students. We will also support groups of students from low-SES and/or rural school communities to participate in overseas learning experiences. We will make sure that our students can tap into the numerous opportunities offered by ICT for connecting, communicating and collaborating in real time with people around the globe.

We are exploring ideas for international partnerships that leverage English while positioning Victoria as a centre for linguistic and cultural diversity. There is no reason why, for instance, Victoria cannot become the home for international teachers wanting to become expert English language teachers – and to bring their first language teaching ability to Victorian schools.

Language skills will also be a key element in our students' success because of the important role they play in developing an international, outward-facing, understanding of the world.

In many respects we already have a strong languages program in Victoria. We have, for example, 12 bilingual programs. We also have rich community resources with Community Language Schools and other complementary providers.

In spite of these strengths, the number of students achieving competency in languages is low by world standards. In Europe and Asia, many young people now speak English as well as their native tongue. Many also speak a third language. Our students must not be left behind.

We have made a strong commitment to languages education. On 7 November 2011, we released our *Vision for Languages Education*, which included a commitment to develop a long-term plan to ensure every government school student from Prep to Year 10 is engaged in languages learning.

We must continue to demonstrate the benefits that learning an additional language can have on student literacy in their first language as well the economic and productive capacity of the state.

And we will not hesitate to look to the rest of the world for ideas about how best to teach languages. I understand that this will be challenging, and that there will be some

who are sceptical of this approach, but the benefits are clear in this day and age; being literate in English alone is not enough.

Our agenda for internationalising education is ambitious, but the stakes are high and the world will not sit still and wait for us.

Future work

To support reform across the five areas I have outlined today, we need every part of the system to take ownership of this agenda. That means we need to continue a process of dialogue.

This speech is the first step in that process. After today, I will ensure it is made available to you and the wider community.

From here I will work with my Department to develop a discussion paper based on this speech and framework. The *Victoria as a Learning Community* discussion paper will outline a range of possible strategies to achieve the reforms I have discussed today.

Some of these reforms have been rolled out, some are rolling out now and will be in place during next year, but we are also looking for additional ideas.

I want to hear from you.

As I have outlined, a critical piece of work will be development of a compact with schools that sets out the responsibilities and expectations for each of us. The Government's responsibilities to schools and schools to their communities must be prominent within it. The compact will also need to strike the balance between autonomy and professional trust; and the accountability of schools to their community and the system of which they are a part. We will begin this process, including major consultation, early next year.

I will be rolling out critical reforms to networks, Student Support Service Officers, alternative settings and languages education, as well as contributing to the national schools funding debate.

All of this work will be based on establishing a clear culture of professional trust.

At every stage I will be looking to you for input – because of what you have to offer as skilled professionals and opinion leaders in education and because at the conclusion of this work we will sink or swim based on your commitment to this work.

As I have noted, my fellow Ministers will also be speaking about key reforms in their portfolios of children and early childhood, higher education and skills and the teaching profession.

We are committed to education reform. We have a vision, and we will work with you to refine our plan. These are exciting times. We have a unique opportunity to engage, empower and reinvigorate every part of our education system. This is the only path to a genuine Victorian Learning Community and I want and need you all to be part of it.

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