



# Parent Payments in Victorian Government Schools

- Essential education items
- Optional extras
- Voluntary financial contributions

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# Contents

1. Introduction
2. Context
3. Categories of parent payments
4. Requirements of school councils and principals
  - School-level policy
  - Implementation and administration
  - Communication with parents
  - Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)
5. Essential education items and optional extras
  - Essential education items
  - Optional extras
6. Voluntary financial contributions
7. Support options
8. Payment arrangements and non-payment
9. Further DEECD information and resources

## 1. Introduction

This policy provides information for school councils and principals regarding parent payments in government schools. The policy covers payments for essential education items, optional extras and voluntary financial contributions that schools may request, and the parameters, terms and conditions within which these requests may be made.

## 2. Context

The *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* ensures the provision of free instruction in the standard curriculum program, and empowers school councils to charge for goods and services used in the course of instruction and to raise funds.

Free instruction includes learning and teaching, instructional supports, materials and resources, administration and facilities associated with the provision of the standard curriculum program. The standard curriculum program includes core learning and teaching activities associated with the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) and senior secondary certificates (VCE and VCAL, including VET programs).

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) provides funding to schools through the Student Resource Package (SRP) and various programs. This includes funding for the standard curriculum program and associated education items, equipment and operational costs which are an integral part of the SRP.

School councils have the responsibility to develop policy and plans to allocate their overall resources – human, financial and physical – in accordance with the goals, targets and strategies outlined in their strategic plan. This includes the allocation of funding provided under the SRP, any other funding provided by DEECD and locally-raised funds.

## 3. Categories of parent payments

In summary, school councils can request payments from parents for student materials and services charges, and for voluntary financial contributions. These payments fall into three categories:

1. **essential education items** which parents and guardians are **required** to provide or pay the school to provide for their child (e.g. stationery, text books and school uniforms where required)
2. **optional extras** which are offered on a user-pays basis and which parents and guardians may **choose** whether their child accesses or participates in (e.g. school magazines, extra curricular programs or activities)
3. **voluntary financial contributions** which parents and guardians may be **invited** to donate to the school (e.g. grounds beautification, additional computers).

More details on these categories are provided in sections 5 and 6 below.

## 4. Requirements of school councils and principals

### School-level policy

School councils are responsible for developing a school-level policy which covers essential education items, optional extras and voluntary financial contributions. This school-level policy must meet the community's expectations and be available to parents and guardians upon request. The school-level policy must keep parent payments to a minimum and must not exceed the cost of the relevant materials or services to the student.

**Principals, as executive officers of school councils, must ensure that the school-level policy complies with the requirements of this DEECD policy.**

### Implementation and administration

Principals are responsible for the implementation and administration of school-level policy developed by the school council. This includes ensuring that the school-level policy is communicated within the school and that all staff are familiar with and adhere to it.

The school-level policy on essential education items, optional extras and voluntary financial contributions should:

- provide parents and guardians with early notice of requests for payment of essential education items, optional extras and voluntary financial contributions. A minimum of six weeks notice should be given to allow parents and guardians sufficient planning time. Payment may be requested but not required prior to the commencement of the year in which the materials and services are to be used
- payment arrangements should coincide with the timing of the availability of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) support for eligible parents/guardians and parents should not be pressured to sign over their portion of the EMA cheque
- not withhold access to enrolment or advancement to the next year level as a condition of payment of essential education items, optional extras or voluntary financial contributions (see also section 8 below on payment arrangements and non-payment)
- ensure that the status and details of any payments or non-payments by parents and guardians are confidential.

## Communication with parents

The school-level policy must ensure that all communication with parents about education items, including requests for payment, is fair and reasonable. Payment requests, letters or CASES 21 invoices for student materials and services charges must be accompanied by the following information:

- parent/guardians are required to provide essential education items for their students, and they have the option of purchasing these through the school or through a local supplier, where appropriate
- the availability of alternative payment options and an invitation to contact the principal if the parent wishes to discuss these
- details of how payments or contributions will be spent by the school
- a copy of the school-level policy is available upon request.

Payment requests or letters to parents must clearly identify which category the items fall into, i.e. essential education items, optional education items or voluntary financial contributions.

Schools may issue only one request for voluntary financial contributions and one reminder notice.

It is not acceptable to use coercion or to harass parents and guardians to obtain payment.

## Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)

Principals must advise parents and guardians in receipt of the Victorian Government's Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) that, where relevant, they have the option of providing essential education items themselves or authorising the school to direct part of the school's portion of the family's EMA towards particular items. Upon request, the principal should also advise parents and guardians of the cost of student materials and services charges on which they propose to spend the EMA.

Families in receipt of the EMA must not be pressured to sign over their portion of the EMA cheque.

The school's portion of the EMA cannot be used to offset voluntary financial contributions.

Any portion of the EMA not expended by the end of the year must be returned to the parent/guardian unless there is agreement by the parent/guardian that this money can be carried over into the next year.

## 5. Essential education items and optional extras

School councils may request payments for two types of essential education items or optional extras used in the course of instruction, as detailed below.

Parents and guardians must be given the option of purchasing equivalent materials from other sources. If parents and guardians choose to provide equivalent materials, this should be done in consultation with the school, and items should meet the specifications provided by the school. However, there are some items (e.g. food provisions for home economics) which, due to their nature, may only be provided by the school.

Where principals or school councils are uncertain as to whether parents and guardians can reasonably be expected to pay for education items or services, advice should be sought from their respective DEECD regional office.

## Essential education items

Essential education items are those items used in the course of instruction in the standard curriculum program that parents and guardians are responsible for and may choose to either provide or pay the school to provide.

These items include:

- materials that the individual student takes possession of, including text books and student stationery
- materials for learning and teaching where the student consumes or takes possession of the finalised articles (e.g. home economics, ceramics, photography, catering);
- school uniform (where applicable)
- essential services associated with, but not considered to be a part of, instruction in the standard curriculum program, such as costs associated with camps and excursions which all students are expected to attend (e.g. transport and entrance costs).

## Optional extras

Optional extras (or non-essential materials and services) are those that are provided in addition to the standard curriculum program, and which are offered to all students. These optional extras are provided on a user-pays basis and if parents and guardians choose to access them for students, they will be required to pay for them.

These items include:

- instructional support material, resources and administration beyond the provision of the standard curriculum program (e.g. student computer printing for personal use, internet access for recreational or non-school use, and religious education materials)
- extra-curricular programs or activities offered in addition to the standard curriculum program (e.g. instrumental music tuition)
- school-based performances, productions and events
- materials for subjects where the payment sought is the difference between the basic materials/services required for access to the standard curriculum program and higher cost alternatives which may be more desirable (e.g. the use of more expensive materials)

- materials and services offered in addition to the standard curriculum program (e.g. school magazines)
- school facilities and equipment not associated with provision of the standard curriculum program, and not otherwise provided for through the SRP (e.g. student accident insurance, and hire or lease of equipment such as musical instruments).

## 6. Voluntary financial contributions

School councils may invite parents and guardians of a student enrolled at the school, or anyone else, to make a donation in the form of a voluntary financial contribution to the school. Schools may invite voluntary financial contributions for the following purposes:

- contributions to a building trust fund or contributions to a library trust fund (these trust funds are approved by the Australian Taxation Office and are tax deductible)
- contributions for a specific purpose identified by the school (e.g. equipment, materials or services) in addition to those funded through the SRP. This may include additional computers or student-related services
- general voluntary financial contributions or donations to the school.

Section 4 above outlines specific communication requirements which apply to voluntary financial contributions.

Where principals or school councils are uncertain if voluntary financial contributions can reasonably be invited from parents and guardians, they should seek advice from their DEECD regional office.

## 7. Support options

Parents who have difficulty paying for essential items can access a range of support options including:

- The **Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)** is provided by the Victorian Government to low income families to assist with the cost of educating their children. One half of the EMA is paid directly to the parents and guardians through the school, and the other half of the EMA is paid to the school to expend on behalf of the student following consultation with the parent/guardian. For more information, see <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/ema/schools.htm>
- The **School Start Bonus** was introduced by the Victorian Government in 2006 to assist parents and guardians of Prep and Year 7 students in meeting the start-up costs of sending their child to school. The initiative provides financial assistance to families for expenditure on school and sporting uniforms, school bags, books and related expenses. For more information, see <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/lifeatschool/financialservices.htm>

- Access to **State Schools Relief Committee** support via the principal to assist with clothing/uniforms.

Principals must exercise sensitivity to the differing financial circumstances of individual students and their families. Principals are encouraged to make decisions about how to manage non-payment of essential education items or optional extras on a case-by-case basis.

Where families have difficulty making payments, principals are expected to discuss the range of support options available, and to negotiate an appropriate alternative arrangement, such as payment by instalments.

Principals are encouraged to explore ways to make quality second-hand books and uniforms available to parents in need.

Parents and guardians who experience difficulties providing or paying the school to provide essential education items, should be encouraged to make an appointment with the principal or other nominated senior staff member to discuss alternative payment methods.

## 8. Payment arrangements and non-payment

The school-level policy should ensure that:

- students are not treated differently, denied access to the standard curriculum program, or refused instruction on the basis of payments not being made for education items, services or voluntary financial contributions
- all students have access to the standard curriculum program
- parents and guardians are provided with an alternative option for their children if they choose not to participate in an excursion or camp
- invoices for unpaid essential education items or optional items accepted by parents are generated and distributed on a regular basis, but not more than once a month
- only the initial invitation for voluntary financial contributions and one reminder notice is sent to all parents and guardians
- under no circumstances can collectors of any type, including debt collectors, be used by schools to obtain any funds from parents and guardians.

Principals must ensure any record of payments or contributions by parents and guardians is kept confidential. The public identification of students or their parents and guardians who have or have not made a payment or financial contribution is unacceptable and must not occur in any circumstances.

## 9. Further DEECD information and resources

Regional offices can provide additional advice to school councils and principals as required. Additional information and support is also available from the following websites:

- further information and support for schools and school councils regarding the implementation of this policy is available at:  
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schooloperations/schoolcharges.htm>
- school councils are encouraged to access the support materials available at:  
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/governance/schoolcouncils/default.htm>
- support regarding school-based communication is available at:  
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schooloperations/commstoolkitresource.htm>
- guidelines for parent/guardian complaints processes are available at:  
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/parentcomplaint.htm>

# Parent payments in Victorian government schools – summary of requirements

School councils are responsible for developing a school-level policy which covers essential education items, optional extras and voluntary financial contributions. This policy must meet the community's expectations and be available to parents and guardians upon request. The school-level policy must keep parent payments to a minimum and must not exceed the cost of the relevant materials or services to the student.

**Principals, as executive officers of school councils, need to ensure that the school-level policy complies with the requirements of this DEECD policy and is communicated within the school and that staff adhere to the requirements.**

## Essential education items and optional extras

School principals need to ensure that:

- all students have access to the standard curriculum program
- parents and guardians are provided with early notice of requests for payment of essential education items and optional extras
- payment arrangements coincide with the timing of the availability of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for eligible parents/guardians
- the status and details of any payments or non-payments by parents and guardians are confidential
- parents are informed of alternative payment options and invited to contact the principal if the parent wishes to discuss these options
- details of how payments will be spent are provided by the school
- payment requests or letters to parents clearly identify whether the items are essential education items or optional extras
- all requests for payment are fair and reasonable.

## Voluntary financial contributions

School councils may invite voluntary financial contributions for:

- a building trust fund or contributions to a library trust fund (these trust funds are approved by the Australian Taxation Office and are tax deductible)
- a specific purpose identified by the school (e.g. equipment, materials or services such as additional computers) in addition to those funded through the SRP
- donations or general voluntary financial contributions to the school

School councils and principals need to clearly identify that this is a voluntary financial contribution and can only be requested once, with one reminder.

For any of these parent payments or voluntary financial contributions, school councils must not:

- insist on payment prior to the commencement of the year in which the materials and services are to be used
- pressure parents to sign over their portion of the EMA cheque
- withhold access to enrolment or advancement to the next year level as a condition of payment of essential education items, optional extras or voluntary financial contributions
- issue more than one request for voluntary financial contributions and one reminder notice
- coerce or harass parents and guardians to obtain payment
- send invoices for unpaid essential education items or optional items accepted by parents more than once a month
- under any circumstances use collectors of any type, including debt collectors, to obtain any funds from parents and guardians.