The Secondary School Nursing Program (SSNP) was established in 1999 to reduce risks to young people and promote better health in school communities.

School nurses work collaboratively with school communities and community health and welfare providers to promote a preventative and early intervention approach to adolescent health and social issues that can be addressed in the school setting.

There are 100 nurses currently located in 199 targeted government secondary schools across Victoria. They provide health expertise to secondary schools in the areas of:

- health promotion and primary prevention
- early intervention, and
- interventions with students, which may include short-term counselling or referral and facilitation of access to community services.

I want to acknowledge the contribution school nurses have made to their school communities.

School nurses support the health and wellbeing needs of vulnerable young people through the delivery of health programs; building partnerships with health and youth services to better connect with schools and provide health counselling to young people.

The establishment of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in 2007 resulted in the transfer of the Program from the Department of Human Services (DHS). This move, combined with the release of the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development in September 2008, placed the Secondary School Nurses Program within the context of a strong policy environment, enabling stronger ties with health, welfare and community providers and initiatives to build the resilience and capacity of young people in Victorian schools.

As the program had been operating for nine years, it was timely for me to endorse a review to determine the best way forward, especially given the new environment and new opportunities presented to support young people through their adolescent years. The review included consultation with key stakeholders, young people, nurses, teachers, community agencies, school principals, student wellbeing teams, program managers and departmental policy staff.

The review identified a strong level of support from schools, community agencies and students for their school nurses. Young people were clear that one of the most important aspects of the service was having a trusted adult with whom they could talk about personal issues in a confidential environment.

A supportive relationship with a trusted adult is important for ensuring healthy adolescent development, as it can provide a young people with support and encourages healthy and pro-social behaviour. This concept is increasingly recognised as important, given that young people who lack supportive relationships with a trusted adult are at an increased risk of delinquency, substance use, conduct problems, poor academic performance, emotional problems and suicide.

The review also identified barriers and challenges for the program in working with disadvantaged children and young people to build their resilience and to promote healthy lifestyles.
The Government response has been prepared to support the implementation of actions identified in the review designed to strengthen the program. A strengthened Secondary School Nursing Program will also support the delivery of an integrated health and wellbeing service for young people in disadvantaged schools and their communities.

The Government has considered each of the 28 individual recommendations made in the report and endorsed the four broad areas of action to strengthen the:

- management and integration with education-based services
- nursing workforce capacity and professional support
- service planning and the delivery of evidence-based health promotion activities
- approaches to allocating nurses to disadvantaged schools.

The Government recognises the importance of the Secondary School Nursing Program and the need to strengthen our response to improving the health, development and wellbeing of our young people. The review confirmed the value of the program to young people; and the challenge is to strengthen the service so that we improve outcomes for our young people.

School nurses are ideally placed to provide advice and confidential support to young people in schools, particularly those most vulnerable, and have experience and skills to drive the delivery of key health messages in school communities.

Recently, school nurses have made a significant contribution to the public health of Victorians. During the emergencies of the bushfires and the H1N1 influenza pandemic, nurses were the health workforce mobilised by government to support vulnerable people.

I look forward to the continuous improvement of the Secondary School Nursing Program that will continue the support of young Victorians into the future.

Maxine Morand MP
Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development