

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release #1081

How Free are Victorian Public Schools?

Since 1872, the catchcry for Victorian Public Schools has been “Free Secular and Compulsory”.

Sadly, in 2025, 154 years later, all three words in this description remain an aspiration rather than a reality. And this means that children of poor parents are at risk of discrimination, or even denial of a school education at all. For basic facilities are still funded by parents’ “voluntary contributions”.

In spite of the fact that public education is legally ‘free’,

[Families paid \\$410.3 million to Victorian government schools in voluntary fees, charges, and contributions.](#) Here are the facts and figures:

- **Total contributions:** Families in Victoria contributed \$410.3 million, which is the highest total amount of any Australian state or territory.
- **Per-student average:** Parents paid an average of **\$620 per student** (the second-highest average in Australia after South Australia at \$686).
- **High-cost schools:** Certain public schools collected significantly more per student, with [Melbourne High School](#) asking for \$2,884 per student (taking in over \$4 million) and [Albert Park College](#) averaging \$2,726 per student.

There is obvious concern about these figures in the Labor ranks prior to the upcoming election . It has become glaringly obvious that public schools are grossly publicly underfunded in comparison with their private competitors.

So, lip service to the idea of a “free” education has been given in a Departmental Memo. And desperate Principals responsible for balancing their books are reacting. According to the ABC:

[Victoria's Department of Education has directed state schools to remind families financial contributions to schools are voluntary.](#)

Education Minister Gabrielle Williams a graduate from the Catholic system herself, says access to state schools "has always been free".

But the principals' association says the advice will reduce payments and put schools under extra financial pressure.

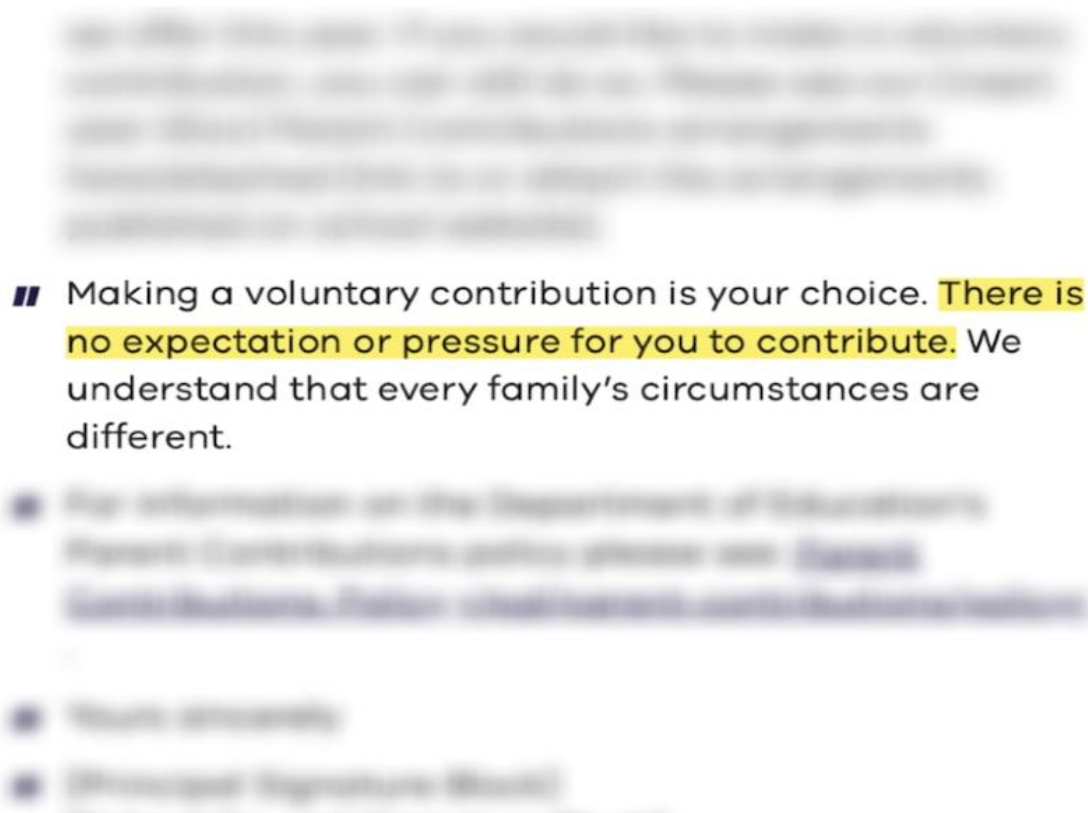
Victorian principals are concerned new advice on parent contributions will leave public schools short of funding.

The Department of Education has told schools they must tell parents that all curriculum-based instruction and resources, including textbooks, are free.

"Victorian government schools provide free instruction. This means all students have free access to all items, activities and services that schools use to deliver the curriculum, including reasonable adjustments to support students with disability," a template letter seen by the ABC says.

It says there is "no expectation or pressure for families to contribute" voluntarily.

Similar advice has been posted on the department's website.



Australian Principals Federation president Andrew Cock believes fewer parents will make voluntary contributions as a result.

He said many principals preparing for next year had sent out letters calling for parent contributions.

"It's caused a great deal of angst and consternation," Mr Cock said.

He said schools would always ensure families without the means to make contributions were supported, but that schools relied on extra payments.

"If there's less money available in schools, then principals are going to be forced to consider what are the programs, resources, experiences that they can afford," Mr Cock said.

"Ultimately they are going to have to make cuts."

Education Minister Gabrielle Williams defended the guidance and said access to public schools had "always been free" under Labor.

"With the cost of living hitting families extra hard right now, the Parent Contributions policy was updated to make it absolutely clear that school contributions are voluntary," she said in a statement.

Schools can still request voluntary contributions for learning items for children to take home, or extra-curricular activities such as sports carnivals.

Ms Williams said the government was also offering dental and eye checks, breakfasts, uniforms and period products to help reduce costs for families.

Schools will no longer rent out devices

From next year schools will be unable to invite or allow primary students to provide, buy or rent a laptop or tablet for students to use at school.

The department said schools would give children free access to a device when needed to fulfil the curriculum requirements.

Mr Cock said this would be challenging for some schools.

"That's going to add some additional conversations in schools about how we provide digital learning to our students," he said.

The department said secondary students who use their own devices are to ensure at least one nominated device option costs no more than \$980.

Mr Cock said public schools did not have the money to pay for anything more than they already do.

"I think it's going to highlight the funding gap and the underfunding of our Victorian government schools," he said.

"Parents have traditionally helped fill some of that gap."

DOGS note that Public Education should be free and fully funded from taxpayer funds. The current situation has been exacerbated by the funding, indeed the overfunding of the private system which duplicates public school facilities. Australia could afford one free public system open to all. It cannot afford a dual system of public schools open to all regardless of class cash and creed and a parasitic private system which discriminates on all those grounds.

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