Protective Schools Ministerial Taskforce Statement

Recommendations for the Minister for Education on preventing and reducing violence and aggression in schools

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We want to acknowledge, as many of our stakeholders have, that Victorian government schools are overwhelmingly safe and positive spaces, where students are supported to reach their potential and students, staff, parents and school community members afford each other respect. In fact, many of our schools operate as a central point for positive community engagement, promoting and nurturing the relationships that are central to cohesive and safe communities.

We would like to forewarn that, in focusing on issues relating to violence and aggression, we risk painting an inaccurate picture of Victoria's government schools. We have made efforts to redress this. Portraying Victorian government schools in general as 'unsafe' is unhelpful and inaccurate. Balanced analysis is vital, as there should be community confidence in Victoria's currently safe and positive government school system. The establishment of the Taskforce is evidence of a commitment to continuous improvement and the need to develop more comprehensive and targeted approaches to strengthening safety.

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A message from the Chair

This report reflects the findings over the past year from a dedicated Taskforce and secretariat focused on safety in Victorian Government schools. As Chair it is my privilege to present the recommendations that will strengthen what is already a strong and caring system. The wellbeing and safety of children, young people and our educators is of paramount importance in every learning environment – this was profoundly endorsed by over 500 passionate members of our school communities, and stakeholders that we consulted. There is already an incredible amount of effort, investment and effective practice across our system, evidenced in the predominantly positive reflections from stakeholders about their experiences of Victorian government schools and their perceptions of safety.

I am grateful for the honest and open insights from our stakeholders and the expertise and commitment of our Taskforce members. This has enabled us to illuminate where there is a need or an opportunity to do more to reduce, prevent and respond to violence and aggression in our schools.

We have unpacked the highly complex risk factors that can underpin violent behaviours, interrogated the available data, reviewed the literature and tenaciously explored solutions from the classroom to the system wide level. We need trauma informed, integrated systems of support to prevent and respond to aggression. We have also reflected on the ways in which violence and discriminatory attitudes within our communities can permeate into our schools. We recommend earlier intervention when children experience family violence and the continuation of the excellent innovations in our schools that tackle the structural inequalities that contribute to violence, including gender inequality, racism, disability discrimination, homophobia and transphobia. As the key educators of our next generations, schools have incredible capacity to drive change within our community and to support and protect individuals and families.

On behalf of the Taskforce members, I welcome Minister Merlino to consider our Report and recommendations. I hope that our insights enable the State to provide additional support to our workforces, students and families, and help in building an even safer and more positive government school education system. I would like to thank in particular our talented consultant Shannon Tyrer and the many Departmental leaders who have informed and supported the Taskforce over the past year.

We are grateful for this opportunity.

Dr Robyn Miller

Taskforce Chair and CEO MacKillop Family Services

The Taskforce

On the 15th February 2018, Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, the Hon. James Merlino announced that the Government would establish a Protective Schools Ministerial Taskforce, as part of the Protective Schools initiative.

The Protective Schools initiative was established "to support schools to better respond to incidents as they occur and address underlying issues to prevent future violence and aggression [in schools]." [1] The Taskforce was established to provide expert advice to the Minister on preventing and reducing violence and aggression in schools, by undertaking an exploration into:

- the causal factors of violent and aggressive behaviour in schools
- what is best practice in the prevention and reduction of violent and aggressive behaviours in schools.

This is a statement of our recommendations.

1   Minister for Education (2017), *New Support To Better Protect Our Teachers And Students*, Premier of Victoria Media Release,

Chair

Dr Robyn Miller

CEO, Mackillop Family Services

Dr Robyn Miller, PhD, is a social worker and family therapist with over thirty years experience in the community sector, local government and child protection. She was a senior clinician and teacher for fourteen years at the Bouverie Family Therapy Centre, La Trobe University, and part of an innovative team working with families who have experienced trauma and sexual abuse.

Robyn has practiced in the public and private sectors as a therapist, clinical supervisor, consultant and lecturer and was a member of the Victorian Child Death Review Committee for ten years. She was the recipient of the inaugural Robin Clark memorial PhD scholarship in 2004 and the Victorian statewide award for Inspirational Leadership in 2010. From 2006-15 she provided professional leadership as the Chief Practitioner within the Department of Human Services in Victoria. She has also worked as a consultant with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Robyn is currently the CEO of MacKillop Family Services, one of the largest providers of specialist services to vulnerable and disadvantaged children, young people and their families in Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia. Robyn serves as a Board Director of Catholic Professional Standards Ltd and Catholic Social Services Australia.

Members

Mr Lionel Bamblett

CEO, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.

A Wiradjuri/Yorta Yorta/Bangerang man, Lionel has been involved in Koorie education for over 30 years. He was appointed the first General Manager of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated in 1985.

Lionel has played a prominent role in promoting Indigenous education at a local, state and national level, and was a member of the National Aboriginal Reference Group, who played a key role in the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) in 1989, a policy that is still current today. Lionel has seen VAEAI established as the peak body for Koorie education and training in Victoria, as the Victorian Department of Education and Training's (DET) Principal Partner in Koorie education and training.

Ms Sue Bell

President, Victorian Association Of State Secondary Principals

Sue Bell has been involved in education for 40 years. She has taught and been a leader in tech schools, academic high schools and pathway colleges. Sue was Executive Principal of Monash College, the pathway college for Monash University, for 5 years. She had campuses on the Clayton, Caulfield and Peninsula campus of Monash University, and four overseas campuses in Singapore, Guangzhou, Sri Lanka and Jakarta. Prior to this she was Assistant Principal at Melbourne High School for 10 years, filling the role of Acting Principal for 2 years.

Sue's passion has always been about improving learning outcomes for students through understanding how they learn best. Sue was then Principal of Wantirna College, where she was working with her staff and the local community to use data and research to maximise the learning of individuals. From the beginning of 2018, Sue has been supporting the work of secondary Principals across the State and promoting public education through her role as President of Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals.

Mr Andrew Bruun

CEO, Youth Support And Advocacy Service

Andrew Bruun (Hon Fellow, Dept Psychiatry, Uni of Melb) is Chief Executive Officer at YSAS, the Director of The Centre for Youth AOD Practice Development and an honorary fellow at the University of Melbourne, Department of Psychiatry.

Andrew has worked in the field of adolescent health as practitioner, educator and researcher since the mid-1980s. His special interest is in young people and families experiencing alcohol and drug-related problems. He is committed to enabling service providers and policy makers to better understand and respond to their needs.

Mr Andrew Fuller

Clinical Psychologist

Andrew is a Clinical Psychologist, Family Therapist, an Hon. Fellow at the University of Melbourne and has been a scientific consultant for the ABC. He is an ambassador for Adolescent Success, the Lion's Club Alcohol and Drug Awareness Foundation and Mind Matters.

Andrew has also been a principal consultant to the Dept. Education Bully Stoppers initiative and the national drug prevention strategy REDI, and is a regular presenter on Radio National.

Andrew's research on neuro-developmental differentiation takes the research on resilience and positive education back into the classroom where it can make the most difference. As Andrew describes, resilience is "*the happy knack of being able to bungy jump through the pitfalls of life - to rise above adversity and obstacles.*"

Ms Meredith Peace

President, Australian Education Union

Meredith Peace is President of the Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch) and has worked in full-time elected roles for the AEU since 2001. She is also a member of the AEU Federal Executive and is currently a Vice President of the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC).

Meredith is a registered secondary teacher (science, biology, geography, maths, environmental science), and has taught in both country and metropolitan schools during her career. Meredith believes governments have a responsibility to provide a high quality, well-resourced public education system accessible to all and to ensure all students are able to achieve to the best of their ability.

Assoc. Prof. Alessandra Radovini

Director, Mindful

Associate Professor Radovini is in the Department of Psychiatry at The University of Melbourne and is the Director of Mindful – the Victorian state-wide teaching and training unit, hosting postgraduate courses, professional forums, workshops, short courses for professionals working with children, young people and families.

She has held a number of leadership positions in mental health as the inaugural Clinical Director of Headspace – National Youth Mental Health Foundation [2011-2016], From 2009 – 2011, Associate Professor Radovini was the inaugural Chief Child Psychiatrist in the Office of the Chief Psychiatrist, in the Victorian Government Department of Health. She was also the Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist with Orygen Youth Health, Intensive Mobile Youth Outreach Service (IMYOS) team for nine years and has co-authored several papers describing the IMYOS model of care.

Mr Peter Wright

Former Principal, Koonung Secondary College

Peter Wright was principal of Koonung Secondary college from 2008 to 2016.

He is currently President of the Australian Council for Health Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) Victorian branch and a board member of School Sport Victoria (SSV).

Peter is also the Chairperson of the SSV Sports Excellence Scholarship Fund.

Executive Summary

As set out in **Figure 1**, our recommendations are based on our analysis of the:

- **key literature** into the risk factors for violent behaviours and the factors and strategies that mitigate against violence (a full reference list is available on page 23)
- **key themes arising from our consultations**
- **current Victorian education system response and data** on the system's performance.

We consulted widely to ensure that our recommendations reflect the experiences, aspirations and voices of our stakeholders. In total we spoke to:

- over 500 individuals, including over 250 principals, teachers and education support staff
- 65 parents and parent advocates,
- 40 students, executives and staff members from seven separate community support service providers
- over 10 different government services and agencies.

Figure 1: Our approach

The current Victorian education system response and data on performance

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key themes arising from our consultations

Key literature
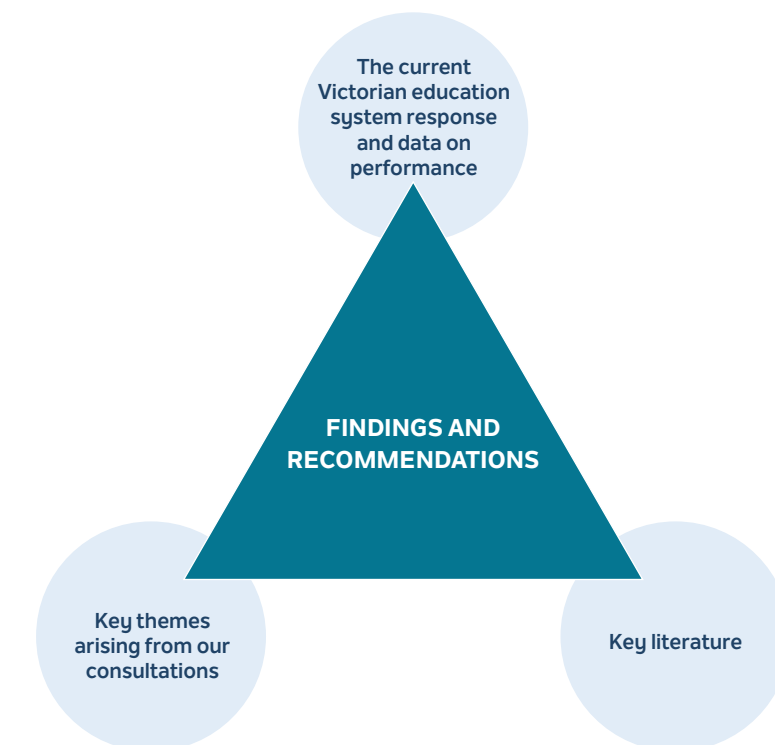
We have focussed on the prevention and reduction of violent behaviours within the school setting and on the critical educative role schools play in supporting children and young people to be contributing, respectful and non-violent community members. However, we acknowledge that a holistic approach to addressing and reducing violence requires a broader lens and consideration of violence within communities and families.

A breakdown of the numbers of reported incidents from 2015-2018 shows that the number of reported incidents compared to the Victorian school population is relatively low. For example, in 2018, the total number of reported incidents of violent or aggressive behaviours equated to an average of between one and two incident reports per school for the year.

We have reflected on the patterns and history of violent behaviour in Australia, and the ongoing impacts of this on our school communities. We acknowledge that:

- **women and children** are significantly over represented as victims of violence and aggression[2]

- **Aboriginal communities** are also over represented in national statistics as being victim to assault, and face the ongoing impacts of trauma, racism and dispossession [3]

- **children and young people in the LGBTIQ+ community** are over represented as being victims of verbal abuse and violence[4]

- **people with a disability** are over represented as being victims of violence and aggression[5]

- **children and young people in Out of Home Care** have often experienced significant and ongoing trauma, including exposure to family violence and other forms of child abuse and neglect[6]

- **refugees and asylum seekers** with varied exposure to significant trauma, experiences of displacement, loss and racism.[7]

In acknowledging these experiences, we also recognised that practitioners in schools must have the tools, capabilities and resources available to them in order to understand and respond holistically to complex needs and risk factors.

We have explored the use of disciplinary measures in response to violent behaviours (e.g. detention, suspension or expulsion). Whilst a singular reliance on these approaches may have intuitive appeal due to their 'get tough' focus, there is a growing body of research showing that, used on their own, disciplinary approaches can worsen behaviour and have other unintended consequences. For example, Australian-led longitudinal research has shown that a student suspended from school is 70% more likely to engage in violent behaviour at their 12-month follow-up. This effect was found as being independent of other risk factors.[8]

We note, through consultation, that suspensions are commonly used in response to aggressive and violent behaviours, and in response to "pressures from teachers and parents on school leadership to do something." We acknowledge that these are real stressors. In order to curb the use of suspensions, teachers and students require additional options so that suspension does not present as the only available option. Given this we have made a series of recommendations on up-skilling teachers and enhancing access to timely supports for students with complex needs.

As a Taskforce we have unpacked the highly complex risk factors that can underpin violent behaviours. We share a strong view that the key to designing effective prevention and intervention strategies is understanding:

- that violent and aggressive behaviours can be indicators of underlying abuse or exposure to family violence, or other factors that require protective intervention

- the developmental factors that influence behaviour and the impact of trauma

- the range of risk and protective factors that can increase the likelihood or mitigate against violent and aggressive behaviours

- contemporary theory and research into the nature of violence and behaviour, and using this to inform interventions.

2   Child Family Community Australia (2015), *Children's exposure to domestic and family violence*

3   Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2018), *Victims of crime, Indigenous Status*

4   Hillier, Jones, Monagle, Overton, Gahan, Blackman, and Mitchell (2010), *Writing themselves in 3: The third national study of the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people*

5   Victorian Equal Opportunities and Human Rights Commission (2004), *Beyond doubt: the experiences of people with disabilities reporting crime*

6   Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry Panel (2012), *Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry*

7   Shawyer, Enticott, Block, Cheng, and Meadows (2017), *The mental health status of refugees and asylum seekers attending a refugee health clinic including comparisons with a matched sample of Australian-born residents*

8   Hemphill, Plenty, Herrenkohl, Toumnourour and Caralano (2014), *Student and school factors associated with school suspension: A multilevel analysis of students in Victoria, Australia and Washington State, United States*
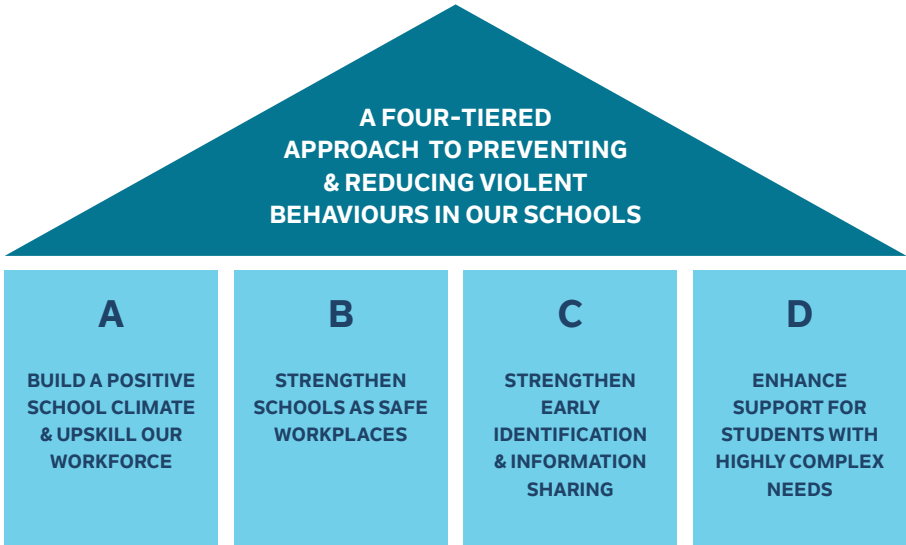
Our recommendations

We have made a total of **12 recommendations**, in recognition that preventing and reducing violence in schools requires a sustained and multifaceted approach.

We acknowledge, as many stakeholders did, that Victorian Government schools are overwhelmingly safe and positive places where students are supported to reach their potential and students, staff, parents and school community members afford each other respect.

However, through our consultation, system analysis and research we have concluded that incidents of violence and aggression in schools have significant impact on the health, wellbeing of students, staff and families and can negatively affect student learning outcomes. Even more can be done to support Victorian schools become safer, more positive and inclusive.

As illustrated in **Figure 2**, our recommendations are organised into four inter-related themes, which are key to preventing and reducing violent and aggressive behaviours in our schools.

Figure 2: A four-tiered approach

A FOUR-TIERED APPROACH TO PREVENTING & REDUCING VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS IN OUR SCHOOLS

A	B	C	D
BUILD A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE & UPSKILL OUR WORKFORCE	STRENGTHEN SCHOOLS AS SAFE WORKPLACES	STRENGTHEN EARLY IDENTIFICATION & INFORMATION SHARING	ENHANCE SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH HIGHLY COMPLEX NEEDS

A: BUILD A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE & UPSKILL OUR WORKFORCE

1. To strengthen positive climates in schools we recommend that the Department:

    1.1 support schools to develop student engagement policies in alignment with the *Australian Student Wellbeing Framework*; and promote exemplar school based policies and approaches across the state

    1.2 continue to roll-out *Respectful Relationships* and evaluate and report on its impact on student attitudes to violence and capacity for emotional regulation

    1.3 strengthen the *School Wide Positive Behaviour Support* (SWPBS) framework by:

      ■ further embedding approaches to addressing trauma into SWPBS and evaluate their impact on reducing violence

      ■ enhancing its capacity to address racism and build cultural safety and ensuring that key elements of the Koorie Inclusive SWPBS pilot are embedded within the state-wide model

    1.4 build on existing resources, and develop new resources where needed, to address racism and disability related bullying

    1.5 continue the implementation of the *Safe Schools program*, and work with schools to ensure available resources are best able to support schools in preventing and reducing homophobic and transphobic bullying and violence.

2. To build the capabilities of our workforce to prevent and de-escalate violent and aggressive behaviours we recommend that the Department:

    2.1 strengthen state-wide access to professional learning and coaching opportunities for teachers and education support staff to build skills in trauma informed education strategies

    2.2 engage with the Victorian Institute of Teaching and the Deans of Education Committee to ensure pre-service training includes a greater focus on behaviour support and relationship building

    2.3 draw on the expertise of Independent Office for School Dispute Resolution to build the capability of Regional and Area staff and school staff (including education support and office staff) to adopt 'third wave' dispute resolution techniques

    2.4 strengthen professional learning and coaching opportunities to build the capacity of school Principals and leaders to drive positive changes to school climate and behaviour support

    2.5 provide further support, guidance and training to enable schools to better identify and respond to student harmful sexual behaviours, in line with the recommendations from the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.*

B: STRENGTHEN SCHOOLS AS SAFE WORKPLACES

3. In order to support effective reporting and enhance support following an incident we recommend that the Department:

    3.1 ensure the new Employee Wellbeing and Operational Policy Reforms:

      ■ are informed by ongoing consultations with school staff and stakeholder representatives (including those impacted by incidents of violence) to identify needs and current gaps in support

      ■ build on the significant evidence base of strategies that help to reduce psychological harm following experiences of violence

      ■ provide enhanced support for prevention, incident response and recovery, guidance and support for Occupational Violence risk management and planning and support for injured workers.

    3.2 continue to strengthen its data collection and reporting, ensuring that there is greater integration and coherence across systems

    3.3 continue the promising roll out of the Incident Support and Operations Centre and the "*Report for Support*" model, and work with schools to evaluate the effectiveness of the model

    3.4 explore options for providing enhanced workplace data and analysis directly to school leaders and SEILs through a centralised system.

4. In order to promote the rights of school staff to be safe we recommend that the Minister consider:

    4.1 developing a state-wide communication strategy to promote schools as safe places (this would include the importance of a positive school climate that acknowledges the rights of everyone to be safe, as well as the shared responsibility to behave respectfully)

    4.2 the benefits and risks of legislative change that enables harsher penalties for threatening or aggressive conduct towards school staff

    4.3 developing an organisational health checklist that focuses on the mitigation of violence and draws on the key findings from this Report.

5. In order to build safe and positive physical environments, we recommend that for the 100 schools being newly built, and for schools being upgraded:

    5.1 local teams work closely with students and school community members to co-design spaces that are safe and inclusive, and implement new strategies to engage with children and young people in new school communities, where students have yet to enrol

    5.2 the Victorian School Building Authority develops specific advice on warm and welcoming school entrances, foyers and meeting places for parents and carers

    5.3 the Department's Security Advisors avoid and/or limit the obvious installation of security measures in order to promote trust and respect, but only where this does not compromise safety

    5.4 the Department continue to work with critical experts to develop clear advice to schools on the design and use of quiet sensory spaces.

C: STRENGTHEN EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND INFORMATION SHARING

6. To enable earlier intervention, we recommend that the Department enhance the early identification of risk factors by:

   6.1 promoting the use of the Australian Early Development Census data to identify and respond to vulnerabilities in students within the Foundation year

   6.2 assessing the capacity of key screening tools (e.g. SWPBS screening tools and *Six Star Student Survey*) to identify critical risk factors early and subsequently explore options to systematise, promote their use in schools

   6.3 considering whether any practice aspects from the Geelong Project, or indeed the whole model, can be systematised.

7. To strengthen information sharing, and enhance planning during school transitions for students at increased risk of violent behaviour, we recommend that the Department:

   7.1 ensure that NextGen (the student information management system under development) is designed to support highly effective information sharing

   7.2 utilise the implementation of the *Child Information Sharing Scheme* and *Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme* as opportunity to upskill early childhood and school staff on effective information sharing by incorporating this into planned training and resources

   7.3 review the funding allocated to provide support for students with complex needs who are being considered for expulsion or have been expelled, ensuring that resources enable schools to support effective and positive school engagement.

D: ENHANCE SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

8. We recommend that the Department improve system navigation by:

   8.1 ensuring that the current work to review the *Schools Policy and Advice Guide* includes continued consultation with school leaders to ensure easier navigation and clear referral pathways

   8.2 piloting an extended intake criterion for the Complex Matters Support Team, to enable them to intervene earlier to address matters that have a serious impact on the health and wellbeing of students and school staff, and where regional supports have been exhausted or the case is endorsed by Area Directors as being sufficiently complex as to require central support.

9. We recommend that the Department build the capacity for allied health workers to provide effective early intervention and child focussed family centered practice by:

   9.1 implementing a Student Support Services funding model that is commensurate to population growth and is targeted and responsive to school communities where there are higher rates of violent incidents

   9.2 ensuring that the soon to be introduced Student Support practice model is focussed on family centred practice and early intervention

   9.3 establishing a Student Support Services Chief Practitioner

   9.4 developing an overarching practice model inclusive of the Student Support Services and new mental health workforce, to facilitate coherent and "joined up" allied health responses to children and families most at risk of violence.

10. We recommend that the Department strengthen referral pathways and coordinate support for students and families with highly complex needs by:

    10.1 co-locating health and family services with schools where appropriate (noting that the Government has committed to building 100 new schools with co-located early childhood facilities)

    10.2 ensuring that Area Teams continue their engagement with the new Orange Door Services (Support and Safety Hubs) and continue to establish and sustain referral pathways and provide access to the training school staff need to best protect children within their care

    10.3 strengthening referral pathways from schools into youth substance abuse services, helping students with substance abuse problems to access timely supports before problems escalate.

11. In order to strengthen access to quality alternative settings we recommend that the Department explore options to:

    11.1 promote and systematise best practice operating models, in addition to sharing relevant best practice with mainstream schools

    11.2 deliver a sustainable funding model, that provides state-wide access to quality programs for both primary and secondary aged students, wherever possible.

12. We recommend that the Minister considers the evaluation of the *Functional Needs Assessment pilot* and implementation of the *Program for Students with Disabilities Review* recommendations relating to a functional needs-based disability funding model that:

- promotes positive transitions across a student's education, including into secondary school

- reduces the burden on valuable Student Support Services resources, thereby increasing their capacity to deliver early intervention and child focussed family centred support.

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