

# 2021 EDUCATION STATE FORUM: SCHOOLS DAY

12 AUGUST 2021

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The Education State Forum – Schools Day, themed **Learning from the best: Building for the future**, was held on 12 August 2021. Some 160 participants came together from across Victoria to attend the online event. Participants included members of the Education State in Schools Guiding Coalition, principals, teachers, students, parents, education sector partners and Department colleagues.

The Forum was an opportunity for participants from across the school system to connect, share ideas, problem solve and build a shared understanding of the 2021-2022 priority reforms to give every Victorian child the chance to succeed. The Deputy Premier and Minister for Education opened the day with an acknowledgement of the exceptional work of school principals, teachers and support staff in moving to and from on-site and remote and flexible learning.

In the opening plenary **How many cooks does it take to bake a cake?** David Howes introduced the revised Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) and discussed how FISO 2.0 sets out the core elements that realise the goals of excellence and equity through developing the learning and wellbeing of every student. The workshops allowed participants to examine and discuss the priority reforms, to hear articulate, honest and authentic student voices, and be reminded of the importance of placing the student at the centre of education policy.

The objectives of the day were to:

- Reflect on and discuss the three interconnected reforms of differentiated learning – tutor learning and student excellence, health and wellbeing and inclusive education.
- Create a shared commitment to work together to strengthen student learning and wellbeing.
- Commit to action and leave the forum with a clear determination to be an ambassador and an advocate for these reforms.

## Workshop one: A learning entitlement for all students

The first workshop provided an overview of the Tutor Learning Initiative and Student Excellence Program. Liz Darwish and son Awdel's opening was poignant, Liz spoke about the benefits of the Tutor Learning Initiative and seeing her son go from being scared to making mistakes to increasing in confidence with the support of a tutor provided by Melton West Primary School. Liz commented that "[Awdel] previously wouldn't attempt new things, but now he can read, write and will sound out words".

During small group discussions attendees considered the following questions:

- Where are the gaps in the existing offering to high-ability students?
- What could be the next big thing in high-ability education?
- What is your experience of the Tutor Learning Initiative and its value for students, teachers, schools and communities?
- Is there anything missing in the current approach and/or anything that could be strengthened?

### Key messages / overarching themes from workshop conversations

#### Tutor Learning Initiative

- **Impact:** The Tutor Learning Initiative has been well received by schools and parents, and has had a positive impact on students. Participants acknowledged the resources directed to delivering the program and encouraged DET to consider extending the initiative beyond 2021. Co-learning and sharing between schools should continue.
- **Recruitment/funding:** Participants discussed the implications and challenges of staffing, particularly in rural and remote areas. Suggested solutions include funding Casual Relief Teaching (CRT) to enable existing teachers to participate in the program, sharing teachers across schools and considering other models to allow variability across schools.

- **Mental health:** Participants spoke about the health and wellbeing benefits of the initiative, including increased student confidence. Is there an opportunity for the health and wellbeing reforms to better align with and inform the initiative?
- **Opportunities:** Future opportunities for the initiative include collecting evidence of what intervention models work best to share across the system, developing a more streamlined student selection process and refining messaging to manage expectations from families. Evaluation of the initiative should consider the teacher experience.

### Participant comments:

*The Initiative has been great, getting the workforce to support it has been a challenge, in our more remote communities, there is no access to CRTs.*

*What is the teacher experience of TLI? There is such complexity to teaching a full classroom of 25 kids or composite classes of several year levels. What can we learn about what a classroom looks like and should look like?*

*Can we think about how the classroom could be structured differently to meet the needs of all students?  
We need to collect data to hear about exactly what schools are doing with their funding and what model schools are using, or if it's been adapted to their own context. What works best?*

*Teachers need to be given tools to notice and enquire about students and refer on to mental health professionals.*

### Student Excellence Program

- **Access:** Participants noted the need to ensure access for all high-ability students (particularly disengaged high ability students). Program enhancements could include broadening the program beyond literacy and numeracy (e.g. Creative subjects, STEAM, Sports etc) and expanding the program beyond years 5-8.
- **Teacher support:** Programs like SEP and TLI are important, as teacher workload can prevent teachers from planning rigorous, flexible, differentiated lessons that target every student at their point of learning need. The success of such programs relies on teacher expertise, capacity, workload and wellbeing.
- **Equity and wellbeing:** Attempts should be made to reduce segregation and stigma and bridge the gap between high-ability/ low-ability students. Gaps exist in how we support high-ability students to form interpersonal relationships and support student wellbeing and social engagement.
- **Real world and life learning:** There exist opportunities for broader community engagement, promotion and partnerships to enhance real-world learning and build an entrepreneurial mindset, deeper agency and inquiry. Students could share their learning in a public forum, mixed ability groups could solve real problems within their community and students could be given access to experts in their field.

### Participant comments:

*Targeted programs are great at building confidence and engaging students, this also relates to teacher expertise. Teachers need to lead this work - pathways to leadership need to be rigorous and far-reaching.*

*During year 6 to 7 transition we need to give students extra confidence – to motivate high-ability students to continue to achieve.*

*If we can get our students into STEAM subjects, how do we give more students across the state the skills to become critical thinkers and problem solvers?*

*What's the role of the community sector as a partner to support and facilitate the relationship with the student and school as well as the role of community of practice between primary/ secondary to build capacity of our teachers to understand and support these students?*

## Workshop two: Health and wellbeing – the expanded role of schools

Anne-Maree Kliman presented on the move to universal provision of wellbeing services alongside learning and the need for DET and schools to work together to drive school's expanded role in health and wellbeing. Anne-Maree described the *Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu* and *Mental Health in Primary Schools* expansion.

Students Prabh Sandhu from Mansfield Secondary College, Keely Griffiths from Tyrrell College and Aakriti Malhotra from Suzanne Cory High School provided articulate, considered and valuable perspectives.

During small group discussions attendees considered the following questions:

- How can we support schools in their expanded wellbeing role?
- What services should be included in the 2023 Mental Health Menu?
- How can we ensure student voice and agency influences the implementation of the Mental Health in Schools Reform?

### Key messages / overarching themes from workshop conversations

- **Mental health first aid training:** Participants noted the demand for mental health first aid training to provide wellbeing assistance, advice, guidance and knowledge to enable students to help their peers and improve friendships.
- **Staff wellbeing:** A consistent approach across schools is needed to support staff wellbeing, linked to professional learning and development. Most teachers are not mental health specialists, and some students require on-going support. It is important to support parents, students, teachers and the whole school community to have a stronger focus and understanding of mental health and wellbeing. We should not duplicate the role of other existing and specialised staff in schools.
- **Access:** There is a need to provide multiple ways for students to access services. There is a need to enable access to school-brokered, qualified mental health practitioners in schools, to normalise mental health struggles, reduce stigma and build resilience. Ensure schools have the funds/ budget to support implementation and ensure that student raised issues of confidentiality are addressed.
- **Additions to the 2023 Mental Health Menu:** Additions include targeted support on body positivity and eating disorders, suicide prevention programs, LGBTIQ+ supports and services for primary school aged children and staff. Adopt evidence-based practices that have been proven to be successful and build on what is already successfully happening in schools. Maintain the integrity of providers to ensure they can scale for demand and cater for diversity of settings and students. Further suggestions include supports for staff to help avoid burnout and to build the capability of teachers.
- **Student voice and agency:** Participants spoke about the need for schools to normalise mental health to reduce stigma for students. Identify opportunities to co-design with students, and ensure the underrepresented students are included and consulted. Build true student-teacher partnerships, ensure decision-making follows student consultation and that processes are made visible to students.

### Participants comments:

*We need to work with our higher education colleagues to ensure that students entering the workforce have a focus on mental health and wellbeing.*

*We need preventative, root cause analysis around wellbeing – not students and teachers in isolation, but shared goals.*

*From my experience running a forum with student input and ownership focuses the agenda to specific issues most important to the student base. We need to co-design forums and methods of engagement with student input.*

*Student coalitions are great, however how do we engage with the most vulnerable students who may not have the confidence to speak out?*

### Workshop three: Inclusive Education – a new vision

The third workshop covered the key components of Disability Inclusion and described a new vision for inclusive education. The workshop provided an overview of the Diverse Learners Hub which led to a panel discussion where participants shared their experience of being, or educating, a diverse learner. Thank you to panel members Chris Varney, Chief Enabling Officer, I CAN Network; Sarah Astone, Assistant Principal, Bentleigh West Primary School; and students Cassie Patten and Lenny Burt for their honest and valuable perspectives.

During small group discussions attendees considered the following questions:

- How can the Hub best support our schools to meet the educational needs of our diverse learners?

### Key messages / overarching themes from workshop conversations

- **Access and inclusion:** Supports for students with disability must be accessible and inclusive for all students in need, including those in early years settings, remote learning and rural/regional areas. Attempts should be made to access expertise in the community sector and expertise from families. Use consistent messaging, plain language and translations to ensure supports are available to all families. Collaborate across schools. Ensure the Hub responds to local needs, offering local solutions to local problems.
- **Teacher support:** Consider how to best support teachers to use existing resources, professional learning and development. Ensure supports for students with disability are part of regular classroom arrangements and not an add-on. Consider reintroducing network groups for stronger connection and support of professional learning.
- **Holistic and student focused design:** Develop a model that starts with personalised learning plans for students that are informed by data, then build teams around the learner (including families, health professionals, teachers etc). Draw on past learnings, real experiences and examples of strong student-led work.

### Participant comments:

*It will take a mindset change to fulfil the vision that every kid goes to their local school and has an excellent experience every day.*

*Diverse learners are less in number in rural schools, so interaction with similar peers would be valuable and would support student's learning and wellbeing.*

*Give everyone a chance (Lenny)*

*This is an exciting time in education with this cultural shift within schools, as they are looking to move from teachers being the only person with knowledge to asking students as well.*

*Make sure the Hub is a critical friend of the school rather than monitoring/compliance based.*

### Forum reflection

In the closing plenary **Working together as a collaborative system**, Department Secretary Jenny Atta expressed her hope that we continue to work together as a sector to strengthen school education in Victoria. The Secretary acknowledged that it is a genuinely exciting time to work in education in Victoria. Our schools have changed significantly over the past five or six years, they're better resourced, more inclusive, have modernised physical infrastructure and contemporary teaching and learning practices. Improved collaboration with teachers and students is evident, however there is more to do.

We are building a school community that is centred around improving student inclusion and well-being. Schools will play a crucial role in reassuring students and rebuilding their confidence after the challenges of 2020 and 2021. Mental health, disability inclusion, tutor learning and the student excellence initiative are central to that role going forward and will support a modern school system that fosters excellence, equity and wellbeing.

The Secretary noted that the forum allowed us to harness our collective skills and experience and provide the opportunity to celebrate achievements. Through frank and informed discussion, we can look at how we can do better and what we need to do differently. The Secretary thanked participants for taking part in the forum, for their valuable participation and support of a shared vision and expressed her confidence that the sector shares a sense of urgency about the work that we need to do together.

### Final comments from participants:

*We can no longer separate Health and Wellbeing from Education - there is a dependency and value between them, which is acknowledged more widely now. Very glad to see that Health and Wellbeing is an essential good and becomes more and more integrated across our school education community.*

*It was very encouraging to hear about the importance of the symbiotic relationship between learning and wellbeing. For too long schools have been measured on achievement outcomes, often at the cost of student wellbeing. Measuring, acting on and reporting student wellbeing is a huge step forward and will tell the other side of the school story.*

*[The event] provided important insights from students with lived experience in an empowering way.*

*I found each [workshop] was useful to assist the future work and contributions we do with the system, schools and families. This will maximise the impact of these govt reforms that Govt/DET have prioritised including the revised FISO 2.0.*

*Key takeaway is that non-DET stakeholders need to be more proactive in ensuring reforms are implemented and communicated clearly so that the broader community understands the cultural change that is happening.*

*Thank you for yesterday – it was the tonic everyone needed*

*It was great to be talking about something other than COVID - nice to engage in some proactive thinking about future – really enjoyable*