

Victorian election: on education, the parties' priorities are muddled

By David Zyngier

The Victorian Labor opposition's recent promise to change the state's licence plates to "Victoria: the education state" is emblematic of the way both Labor and the Napthine Coalition government have made education a major focus of their election campaigns.

But just days before Victorian voters go to the ballot box, the promises both parties have made, including the number plate pledge, are misguided. They won't necessarily give the state the education outcomes its children need.

Napthine government's education report card 2014

To "balance the budget", more than A\$600 million was cut from public school education and \$1.2 billion from TAFE over the term of this government. The Napthine government has focused on private providers and "user pays". Student support staff, Koori education specialists and literacy and numeracy coaches have been removed. Amalgamating nine regional and metro regions into four mega regions reduced regional support staff, especially in rural areas.

Capital works funding has been halved. This has left many public schools in deteriorated and dilapidated conditions. Many school buildings still contain dangerous levels of asbestos, while private and Catholic schools continue to receive ever-larger amounts of public money.

Given Martin Dixon is a former school principal, principals, teachers and school communities should have had a state education minister who genuinely understood education. Before the 2010 election, the Baillieu-Napthine government promised to make Victoria's teachers the best paid in Australia.

After more than 12 months of industrial strife, strikes and negotiations, Western Australian teacher pay still far outstrips that of Victoria. Victoria invests less per student than any other state or territory.



Victoria invests less per student than any other state or territory. Flickr/Michael Fawcett, CC BY

Dixon has introduced a number of policy initiatives. The From New Directions to Action: World-class teaching and school leadership and the Towards Victoria as a Learning Community policies outlined the government's vision for excellence in school leadership and for a high-performing teaching workforce to help raise student achievement in Victoria to match the very best worldwide. But school communities and principals have tended to ignore these policies as just another top-down directive without substance.

Under Dixon, Victorians have witnessed the chaos and confusion over Special Religious Instruction in schools, with Dixon seemingly beholden to fundamentalist religious groups over the wishes of

principals and parents. As a result of her objections to breaches of the secular principle, a single mum of a prep child has been issued a Trespass Warning Notice by a school principal who supports ACCESS Ministries.

Using religious chaplains instead of qualified youth or social workers in secondary schools has led to the unemployment of many valued social workers. The ratio of social workers to students in Victorian schools is blowing out from the recommended one worker to every 500 students to 10,000 and higher.

The employment of primary welfare officers has been an important initiative of the Liberal Party, which has pledged to put one in every primary school in Victoria. But the removal of Reading Recovery and Literacy, Numeracy and Technology tutors, ending the funding of VCAL and scrapping the Education Maintenance Allowance has hit the most disadvantaged students in government schools.

And what are schools meant to do with the 3D printers promised by Napthine? They will soon be made redundant by newer technology.

Election promises – are they meaningless?

Labor has made education its top priority with a detailed policy statement. The Liberals' education policy is very difficult to find – the only link to it seems to be on the Independent Schools of Victoria website, not on the official Liberal Party of Victoria policy platform.

Both parties have been involved in outrageous pork-barrelling in marginal electorates. In Frankston, the Liberals have promised \$18 million for Frankston High School when the school wanted only \$2.2 million.

In an ongoing bidding war for Bentleigh, millions of dollars have been promised to primary and secondary schools in the seat. The Liberal promise to build a standalone secondary school in Prahran is contrary to the recommendations of two independent reports commissioned by Dixon.

The second more detailed report was not released. I am reliably informed by insiders that the inquiry was not in favour of a new school in Prahran. In 2012, government schools in the City of Yarra had an unfilled capacity of 1045 places.

Caulfield Liberal MP David Southwick promised more than \$600,000 to Jewish schools in his electorate, only to later delete the announcement from his website and Twitter account.

The Liberals' promise of a residential academy for gifted children from regional Victoria is an innovative and needed initiative. But the promise of a non-means-tested \$100 for all families to fund four-year-old kindergarten is ill-conceived.

Both major parties have ignored public schools in safe seats. Local community groups under the umbrella of Our Children our Schools have been campaigning to have primary and secondary schools re-opened around metropolitan Melbourne. Neither major party will commit to their requests – only the Greens have endorsed these grassroots mum-and-dad campaigns.



The plan to bring doctors into schools would be a bonus for the most disadvantaged kids. Flickr/Myfuture.com, CC BY

Labor's plan to have more than 100 doctors available for disadvantaged schools is innovative and will certainly help the most disadvantaged communities. A healthy child can certainly learn better. Promised support for families on pension cards with additional funds for school camps is another well-targeted Labor policy.

Labor has also promised a review of the way children with learning difficulties are assessed after reports by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission and Auditor-General revealed the education system was failing students with disabilities. The current policy leads to many children missing out on needed additional funding.

However, Labor's promise of free driver education for all year 10 students is poorly targeted and non-means-tested.

Key educational priorities for government

One of the issues neither party is prepared to discuss is the public funding of non-government schools – which receive 7% of their funding from the state and 29% from the federal government.

Every year, more than \$600 million is allocated from the state budget to support the Catholic (\$410 million or \$2200 per student) and independent (\$190 million or \$1700 per student) school sectors, in addition to more than A\$2.2 billion a year from the federal government (Catholic \$1.5 billion; independent \$700 million), according to the Productivity Commission's 2014 report on government services. Paying elite Scotch College \$5.4 million for a useless narrow strip of land under a freeway is emblematic of the Napthine government's priorities.

According to the Department of Education and early Childhood Development website, these arrangements will continue while it consults with stakeholders to:

... develop a long-term funding road map to better target resources to student need.

This is the Gonski money that is yet to be delivered to our schools. Many principals are asking where the Gonski money is – and so should the electorate. Remarkably, Labor has promised an additional \$120 million to Catholic and independent schools.



*Independent schools receive state and federal funding despite public schools being in greater need.
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Victoria needs to build public schools (not private religious schools) in the growth areas. There is also a need to re-open schools previously closed in metro Melbourne where population changes demand it. Research by the Grattan Institute has shown that Victoria would need an extra 550 schools within the next 20 years.

This process needs to be done transparently, with public contributions and support. Genuine workforce planning policy for teachers needs to be implemented to eliminate the current oversupply of teaching graduates who are only able to get casual or short-term contract employment.

Key issues facing Victorian education in the next decade

Why do public schools need to sell raffle tickets and run fetes or even resort to crowd-funding to make ends meet?

It's time to stop using education as a political football. Schools, teachers and parents want more stability and a coherent, long-term, bipartisan, evidence-based education policy beyond the election cycle.

This process has started in Queensland, with all stakeholders – government and opposition, teacher unions and parent associations – coming together to discuss education priorities.

Why not Victoria too?