

# Parent Payments in Victorian Government Schools

## Frequently Asked Questions for Schools

The Department's new Parent Payment Policy brings a stronger focus to transparency and family hardship, as well as outlining the expectations of implementation and communication with parents. The policy also emphasises that all children should have access to the standard curriculum regardless of their parents' ability to pay.

The following frequently asked questions provide further details about the types of payments schools can request from families and how common questions are to be handled.

### **SOME PARENTS BELIEVE THAT PUBLIC EDUCATION IS FREE. WHAT IS FREE IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS?**

**Victorian legislation clearly states that instruction in the standard curriculum program must be provided free of charge to all students in Victorian government schools.**

'Free instruction' is the teaching staff, administration and the provision of facilities in connection with instruction of the standard curriculum program, including reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities.

### **HOW CAN I EXPLAIN WHY SCHOOLS CAN CHARGE PARENT PAYMENTS?**

Schools are funded to deliver a quality education based on the standard curriculum and receive additional government funds based on the individual needs of their students or location.

However, the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* allows school councils to set their own payments in accordance with Department of Education and Training policy, as each school serves

a different community with different needs and expectations for the curriculum.

Schools can request payments to cover costs for the learning programs they decide to offer based on the needs and aspirations of their community.

### **WHAT CAN SCHOOLS ASK PARENTS TO PAY FOR?**

Parents can be asked to pay for Essential Student Learning Items that the school deems essential to student learning in the standard curriculum.

These items include:

- **items which students take temporary or permanent possession of**, including text books, student stationery and school uniforms (where applicable)
- materials for learning and teaching where students **construct, consume or take possession of the finished articles** (for example, home economics, ceramics, photography, materials for build-your-own-kits)
- **activities that all students** are expected to attend (for example, transport and entrance costs).

### **CAN I CHARGE FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE STANDARD CURRICULUM PROGRAM?**

No. The costs associated with the administration and coordination of the standard curriculum program are considered part of free instruction and must not be passed onto parents.

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## WHAT IS THE STANDARD CURRICULUM PROGRAM?

The standard curriculum program is made up of the eight key learning areas agreed to by the States, Territories and Commonwealth. These areas are: English, Mathematics, Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, the Arts, Languages, Health and Physical Education, and Technologies.

The standard curriculum also includes the four capability areas: Critical and Creative Thinking, Intercultural, Ethical, and Personal and Social.

To clarify, 'the standard curriculum for years F-10' means the implementation of the Victorian Curriculum F-10. 'The standard curriculum for senior secondary schools' means a program that enables a student to be awarded a VCE or VCAL qualification.

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## I WOULD LIKE TO EXPLAIN TO PARENTS WHY PAYMENT REQUESTS DIFFER ACROSS SCHOOLS

All schools are different and each school has the ability to set its own priorities. Therefore, it is common for schools to request different payments from parents because they offer different learning programs, go on different excursions and have different needs at school.

For example, some schools might want to start a student gardening program and others a photography program. Each program clearly has unique requirements and could lead to different parent payments.

In line with the principles of the Parent Payment Policy, schools should make parent payment decisions in good faith and in the best interests of their students. Schools must also keep costs to a minimum so that they are reasonable and affordable to most parents at the school.

In setting parent payments, schools must ensure that parents clearly understand the links between the school's learning programs and the payments being requested. They must also understand that there are support options available for families experiencing hardship.

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## HOW DOES FREE INSTRUCTION APPLY TO SENIOR SECONDARY CERTIFICATES SUCH AS VCE AND VCAL, INCLUDING VET IN SCHOOLS PROGRAMS?

Free instruction includes senior secondary certificates that form part of the standard curriculum program. These include certificates such as VCE and VCAL. VET in Schools programs are also part of VCE and VCAL and therefore instruction is free.

## Schools cannot charge for anything that could be considered teaching supports, administration or school facilities required to deliver instruction in the standard curriculum.

If a student consumes or takes temporary or permanent possession of an item/service that supports free instruction in the standard curriculum program, this is an Essential Student Learning Item (ESLI), for which payment may be sought.

For example, payment could be sought for the purchase of materials for a VET program, such as wood for making a standard/agreed item in VET furnishing.

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## HOW ARE THE ESSENTIAL STUDENT LEARNING ITEMS PURCHASED?

Schools will offer to purchase these items on behalf of parents, although parents have the option of purchasing equivalent materials from other sources.

Any Essential Student Learning Item must be accurately costed and affordable for most families at the school. This must be considered when determining parent payment charges.

Schools should also outline what materials can be purchased elsewhere and the specifications that need to be met. Some items, for example food provisions for home economics, may be provided by the school only, but this must be made clear in Parent Payment charge forms.

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## WHAT ARE THE OPTIONAL ITEMS?

Optional items are items or services that are offered in addition to the standard curriculum.

These items are provided on a user-pays basis and if parents choose to access them for their child they will be required to pay for them.

These items include:

- **items the student purchases or hires** such as school magazines, class photos, fees for guest speakers, functions, formals and student accident insurance
- **activities the student purchases** such as fees for extra-curricular programs or activities such as instrumental music tuition
- **items and materials that are more expensive** than required to meet the standard curriculum (for example, requesting payment for the use of mahogany in woodwork instead of the standard pine).

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## WHAT CAN SCHOOLS REQUEST PARENTS TO MAKE VOLUNTARY FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS FOR?

Schools may invite voluntary financial contributions for the following.

- Contributions to a **building or a library fund**. These are contributions that have been endorsed by the Australian Taxation Office as Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) are tax deductible.
- Contributions for a specific purpose identified by the school: for example, equipment, materials or services in addition to those funded through the Student Resource Package. This may include additional computers or student-related services.
- general voluntary contributions.

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## CAN A SCHOOL MAKE REPEATED REQUESTS FOR VOLUNTARY FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS?

No. Requests for voluntary financial contributions are limited to the initial notice to all parents and guardians and one reminder notice only.

Prior to sending out any reminder notices to parents, schools are to use their discretion with families where there may be financial difficulty or hardship.

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## CAN SCHOOLS CHARGE LEVIES AS PART OF PARENT PAYMENTS?

Yes, but it must be clear what category the levy belongs to and what it will be used for.

Levies cannot be charged for items, activities or services that are classified as part of free instruction.

Schools should not bundle together elements that would be individually classified as essential, optional or a voluntary financial contribution into one levy.

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## HOW SHOULD SCHOOLS RESPOND TO PARENTS WHO ARE UNABLE TO PAY THE CHARGES BECAUSE OF HARDSHIP?

All schools understand that families can experience financial difficulty or a crisis which makes payment difficult. The principal must nominate a parent payment contact person, with whom parents can discuss their situation and make alternative payment arrangements.

The name and contact details of the parent payment contact people must be available in the school's Parent Payment Policy and Implementation and must be easily located on the school's website as well as on display at the school's reception.

The parent payment contact person for that student's family should proactively engage the family to determine whether hardship or financial difficulty are factors in non-payment; if this is the case, hardship arrangements must be made available.

Alternative arrangements must be available for any student who is unable to provide or participate in an Essential Student Learning Item/activity. This ensures that all students learn the required knowledge and skills.

Principals must ensure any record of payments or contributions is kept confidential. Only de-identified information can be provided for reporting purposes.

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## WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE FOR FAMILIES HAVING FINANCIAL DIFFICULTY?

Schools must communicate information to families about the support options available, including:

- Access to **State Schools' Relief Committee** support for clothing/uniforms (via the principal).
- The **Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund**, which provides payments for eligible students to attend camps, sports and excursions.

For a full range of support options, see: [Cost support for families](#)

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## MORE INFORMATION

For more information, see: [Parent Payment Policy](#) - detailing the Department's policy

For information specific to your child's school contact the school directly or contact your regional office, see: [Regional Offices](#)