

A policy and practice newsletter for the community information and support sector

The focus of this issue of *Informed* is education affordability, and the crisis for an increasing number of families who are struggling to pay for their childrens' education in public schools. Firstly, we look at the growing inequity in Australia's education system, and the increasing divide in schooling opportunities for the 'haves' and 'have nots'. We then focus on Victoria, particularly the growing costs of education in this state, with some clarification (but not resolution) of what schools can charge for and the associated rights of families and children. We also look at the types of education costs that are causing the most problems, and programs that can often assist. Many CISVic agencies also have localised programs that offer help with school expenses, and we highlight two of these – in Diamond Valley and Bayside.

Importantly, we highlight the advocacy efforts of CISVic and member agencies, particularly through the Advocacy Working Group (AWG), to have this crisis in education affordability addressed. As part of our ongoing campaign, we recently conducted a CISVic member survey. We finish this issue of *Informed* with a sneak preview of the findings.

We hope you find this issue interesting and informative. We welcome all feedback and discussion on any of the content. Just email Jennifer: jennifer@cisvic.org.au.



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Inequity in Australia's education system

A range of studies have found that Australia's education system is inequitable, with this getting worse over recent years i.e. there is a wide and increasing gap between children from low socioeconomic backgrounds and those from more advantaged backgrounds in terms of the education they receive.^{1 2 3} A report by the OECD found that Australia has the fifth most inequitable distribution of school education resources, and that a significant proportion of low performing students are from low socio-economic backgrounds⁴. Reid concurs:

By any measure, Australia has a high-quality education system. It compares well against other countries on a range of education tests and benchmarks. These results, however, mask the grim reality that Australian education is not equitable. It is the large achievement gap between rich and poor that blights Australian education – and the gap appears to be widening...⁵

This inequity has seriously negative effects on social and economic outcomes and political participation. According to the evidence, productivity falls, participation in civic life is diminished, and social dislocation is greater⁶. We agree with Reid that '*since education is one of the most important determinants of levels of inequality, it is clear that there is need for urgent action to improve equity in Australian schooling.*'⁷

Bonner and Shepherd discuss the implications of our increasingly segregated education system. They explain how family and personal background are having an increasing impact on student achievement in Australia⁸. They further argue that a 'schools hierarchy' is hardening along advantage/disadvantage lines, with disadvantaged students concentrated in disadvantaged schools. This is increasing the educational challenges for those from poorer backgrounds. Bonner and Shepherd highlight a clear relationship between social disadvantage and poor educational outcomes, caused in part by the separation of students along advantage-disadvantage lines across schools. They urge that Australia's increasingly segregated education system be addressed as a matter of priority.

In addition, there is evidence that social and economic disadvantage is associated with lower school engagement. The Australian Child Wellbeing Project (2016) found that disadvantaged students are more likely to miss school frequently and go to bed hungry. Those who went to bed hungry were less likely to be satisfied with school, report a supportive relationship with their teacher, or rate their school performance as 'good' (compared to other students)⁹. Thus research shows a multi-dimensional relationship between social and economic status and access to educational opportunities. Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have less access to a good education as compared to people from more privileged backgrounds, and they are also less likely to engage with school.



1 Connors, L. & McMorrow, J. (2015) Imperatives in schools funding: equity, sustainability and achievement. Australian Education Review, 28 June 2015

2 Rorris, A. (2016) Australian schooling – the price of failure and reward for success. Australia: Australian Education Union.

3 Bentley, T. & Cazaly, C. (2015) The shared work of learning: Lifting educational achievement through collaboration. Melbourne: Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy and the Centre for Strategic Education.

4 OECD (2016) Low performing students: Why they fall behind and how to help them succeed. Paris: OECD Publishing.

5 Reid, A. (2015) Building our nation through public education. Australia: Australian Government Primary Principals Association.

6 ibid.

7 ibid.

8 Bonnor, C. & Shepherd, B. (2016) Uneven playing field: the state of Australian schools. Sydney: Centre for Policy Development.

9 Redmond, G., Skattebol, J. et al (2016) Are the kids alright? Young Australians in their middle years: Final report of the Australian Child Wellbeing Project. Australia: Flinders University, University of New South Wales and Australian Council for Educational Research.

In similar vein, the well-known 'Gonski Review', commissioned by the federal government, found a strong connection between educational disadvantage and low levels of achievement - particularly for certain groups such as people from an Aboriginal background, children in remote areas, people who are socially and economically disadvantaged, and those whose first language is not English¹⁰. Thus we can see that inequity is compounded and entrenched, with disadvantage leading to poorer education opportunities in various ways, and educational disadvantage leading to lower levels of achievement. The playing field is evidently far from level. In fact this is a lopsided playing field, largely underwritten by government policy at a national level, which serves to entrench advantage and disadvantage across generations.

Certainly, education has also become more costly for those accessing the public system which is meant to be free. This is elaborated on in the following section, with a focus on Victoria.

Increasing cost of education in Australia

The table below shows that an increasing proportion of Australian household expenditure is being spent on education. This increased over three-fold from 1984 to 2015-2016.

Table 1: Proportion of Household Expenditure spent on education 1984 to 2015-16

Year	Proportion spent on education ¹¹
1984	0.9%
1988-89	1.2%
1993-94	1.4%
1998-99	1.8%
2003-04	2.0%
2009-10	2.5%
2015-16	3.1%

Source: ABS Household Expenditure Survey

The table below shows that the average weekly spending on education by Australian households increased from \$3.30 in 1984 to \$43.86 in 2015-2016, an increase of over 1,300 per cent.

Table 2: Average weekly expenditure on education 1984 to 2015-16

Year	Av. weekly expenditure on education \$
1984	3.30
1988-89	5.84
1993-94	8.57
1998-99	12.87
2003-04	18.12
2009-10	30.56
2015-16	43.86

Source: ABS Household Expenditure Survey



Unacceptable costs of public education in Victoria¹²

It has been well known for some years that state education in Victoria is far from free. This is despite Victoria's proud history of being the first colony in Australia to pass an Education Act (in 1872) to establish a Department of Education to provide free, secular and compulsory primary education¹³.

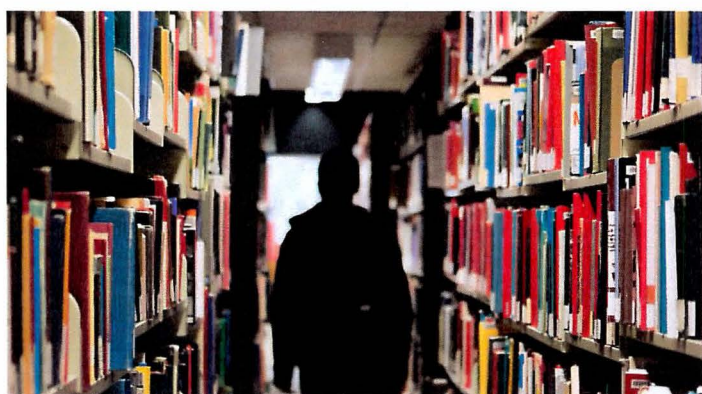
¹⁰ Gonski, D. et al (2011) Review of funding for schooling: Final Report. Canberra: Australian Government.

¹¹ 'Education' refers to different types of fees, and not all school costs e.g. general school fees and fees relating to school tuition, private tuition, and school sports. It also refers to tertiary education fees, including HECS.

¹² Thanks to Talisha Ohanessian, Policy Advisor, VCOSS, for kind assistance with resources and references for this section.

¹³ Source: VCOSS: <http://insight.vcoss.org.au/free-or-not-so-free-the-cost-of-education/>

As CISVic member agencies would be well aware from first-hand experience, today it is the community, not-for-profit sector that assists many struggling families with basic school expenses. The evident 'welfarisation' of basic education has only increased in recent years. While the 'standard curriculum' is meant to be provided in the public system free of charge, the reality is that many basic education costs are not covered within this category. In addition, some schools appear to charge for items that are meant to be free.



Victorian Government review of school funding in 2015

The Victorian Auditor-General (VAG) looked into this matter in 2015. Its report on 'Additional School Costs for Families' examined the way families are being charged for education expenses.¹⁴ In large part it focused on *'funding for the delivery of free instruction, departmental oversight of school approaches to parent payments, and parent payment policies and practices'*. It concluded that parent payments have become *essential* rather than supportive of 'free' education. VAG attributed this to two things: (1) inadequacy of government funding for schools, as reported by principals, resulting in parents being asked to make up the shortfall, (2) lack of knowledge of the cost of education provision by the Department of Education and Training that administers government funding to schools i.e.: *'DET does not have a clear understanding of what an efficient and economical school looks like. In the absence of this fundamental information, it does not know whether school funding is or is not adequate'* (2015, p.x).

Another problem highlighted by VAG was the lack of transparency of what schools were actually charging for. Consequently parents could not be clear about what they must pay and what payments are voluntary. Worse still, VAG discovered that parents are increasingly being asked to pay for items that should be free.

VAG concluded that the Department of Education and Training (DET) had shifted its responsibility onto school principals and councils without ensuring that there were effective checks and balances. It concluded: *'this is a fundamental failure in DET's internal controls'* (2015,p.x).

Response to Victorian Government review¹⁵

Responding to the review of school costs by the Victorian Auditor-General (VAG), the Victorian Government revised its parent payment policy in late 2016/early 2017. This was to:

- give families and schools greater clarity about what they can charge
- instruct schools how to better support families experiencing financial hardship
- clarify that schools can't charge extra to teach senior students VCAL subjects
- support schools to better communicate their payment structures.

The policy emphasised that students cannot be denied access to the 'standard curriculum' program or refused instruction or disadvantaged when payments are not made.

While the changes were cautiously welcomed, VCOSS highlighted an underlying issue that was not addressed – that funding to schools should be adequate to deliver the standard curriculum program for free. Then there would be no need for parents to pick up the shortfall. We certainly agree with VCOSS that *'No child should have to miss out on a quality education because of their family's finances, and no parents should be made to feel guilty if they can't afford to pay'*.

¹⁴ Source: VAG: <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/20150211-School-costs.pdf>

¹⁵ Source: VCOSS: <https://vcoss.org.au/analysis/new-rules-to-protect-parents-from-dodgy-school-fee-requests/>

Education rights and costs

*Thus, while a 'standard curriculum' is free, many of the 'essential costs' of participation in this curriculum are not. **This may be likened to saying the bus trip is free, but the petrol must be paid for!***

- Ed

What school costs are free in Victoria?

Children have the right to access primary and secondary education free of charge, a right which is enshrined in Victorian legislation. Access to education that is appropriate and of a high quality is essential and must not be affected by the financial situation of the child's parent or guardian. The Education and Training Reform Act 2006 (Vic) stipulates that education within the standard curriculum at government schools must be delivered without cost, however as will be discussed, parents and guardians may still be required to purchase essential items to assist with the learning of the standard curriculum .

Schools must stipulate the voluntary and non-voluntary aspects of school fees. The Department of Education and Training outlines that the standard curriculum is inclusive of:

- standard curriculum program of eight learning areas: English, Mathematics, Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, the Arts, Languages, Health and Physical Education, and Technologies
- the buildings and facilities
- all staff
- support for children with a disability or differing needs².

Parents and guardians are expected to pay for all essential items for a child's engagement with the standard curriculum³. The expected essential items are determined by the individual school. These essential items may include:

- school uniform (if applicable)
- text books and stationary (either borrow from the school or bought)
- materials used for coursework (for example, wood used in a woodworking class)
- compulsory excursions⁴.

What are schools' obligations?

- All schools must have a nominated parent payment contact person, with whom parents are able to discuss payment arrangements, and seek support if need be.
- The parent payment contact person may use their discretion to determine the most suitable mode of support for parents experiencing financial hardship. Supports may include: waiving of fees, reduced fees, flexible payment plans, and deferred payment or extension of payment deadlines.
- Schools must send early notification of a payment request, at least six weeks prior to the end of the school year.
- Schools must not refuse student advancement to the next year level, refuse teaching, or treat students differently if parent payments are not made.
- Schools must also not harass parents/guardians or students for payments and are permitted to only send a statement every six months.
- The threat or the use of debt collectors is prohibited.
- Schools should provide information to parents/guardians on support options available, including State Schools' Relief, the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, and community support agencies.
- Should a school not respond appropriately for requests for assistance, a complaint should be lodged at:
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/Page/s/complaintslanding.aspx>

¹ Education and Training Reform Act 2006(Vic)Act No. 24/2006.

² Ibid.

³ Department of Education and Training. (2018). Parent Payment Policy and Implementation Template. Melbourne: VictoriaState Government.

⁴ Ibid.

School costs in Victoria (2019)¹

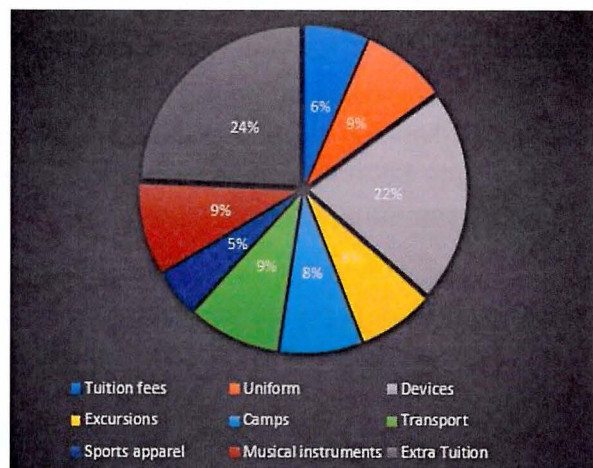
The following tables and figures provide a break-up of school costs in 2019, in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria.

Metropolitan Melbourne

Table 3: Estimated primary and secondary school costs in metropolitan Melbourne (2019)

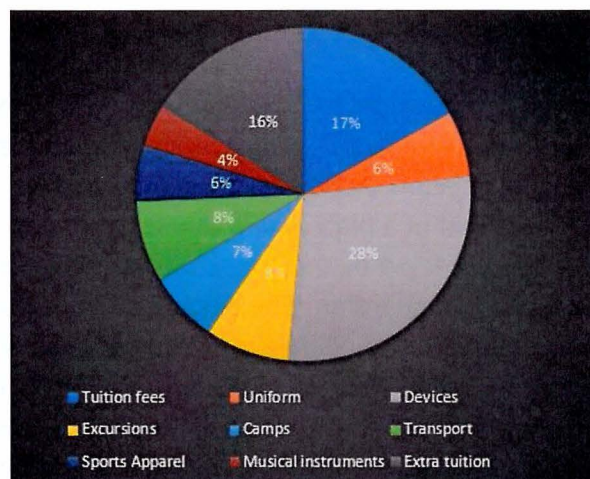
School costs	Primary	Secondary
Tuition fees	\$248	\$904
Uniform	\$328	\$345
Devices	\$825	\$1515
Excursions	\$291	\$437
Camps	\$320	\$369
Transport	\$356	\$421
Sports apparel	\$179	\$294
Musical instruments	\$359	\$219
Extra tuition	\$935	\$864
TOTAL	\$3841	\$5368

Figure 1: Estimated primary school costs in metropolitan Melbourne (2019)



For primary school students in the metropolitan area, the greatest costs were extra tuition and devices.

Figure 2: Estimated secondary school costs in metropolitan Melbourne (2019)



For secondary school students in the metropolitan area the greatest school costs were devices, tuition fees and extra tuition.

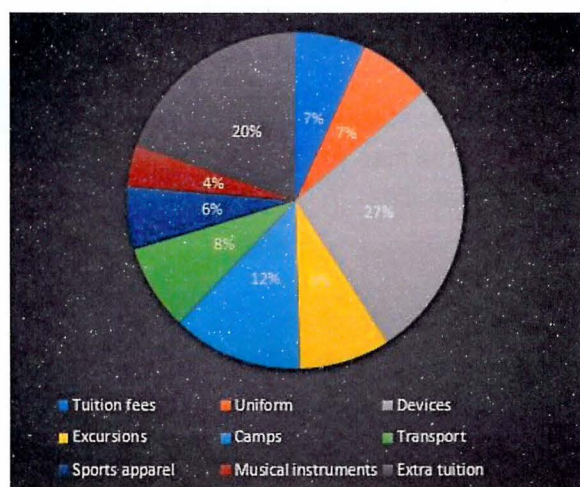
Regional Victoria

Table 4: Estimated primary and secondary school costs in regional Victoria (2019)

School costs	Primary	Secondary
Tuition fees	\$197	\$334
Uniform	\$204	\$275
Devices	\$792	\$860
Excursions	\$254	\$437
Camps	\$366	\$420
Transport	\$239	\$280
Sports apparel	\$177	\$294
Musical instruments	\$115	\$94
Extra tuition	\$574	\$282
TOTAL	\$2918	\$3276

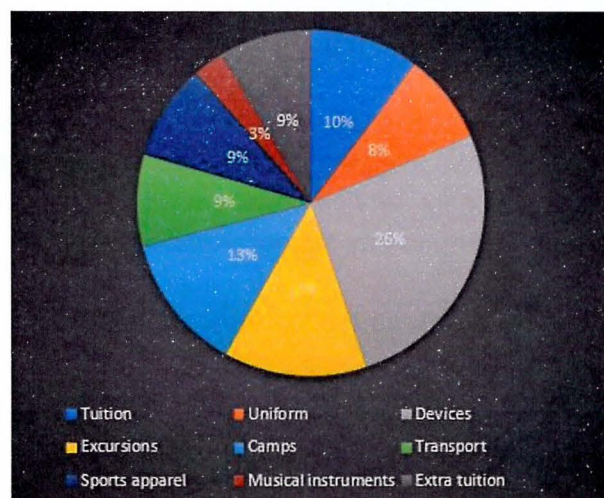
¹ Source: Australian Scholarship Group website: <https://www.asg.com.au/doc/default-source/2019-ASG-Planning-for-Education-Index/2019-australia-metro---estimated-schooling-costs.pdf?sfvrsn=0>; <https://www.asg.com.au/doc/default-source/2019-ASG-Planning-for-Education-Index/2019-australia---reg---estimated-schooling-costs.pdf?sfvrsn=0>

Figure 3: Estimated primary school costs in regional Victoria (2019)



For primary school students in regional areas, the greatest costs were devices and extra tuition.

Figure 4: Estimated secondary school costs in regional Victoria (2019)



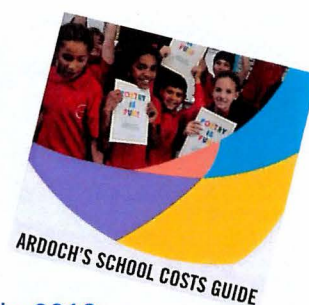
For secondary school students in regional areas, the greatest cost by far was devices, followed by camps and excursions. Devices were consistently one of the highest school costs for all students.



Getting help with school costs

Ardoch School Costs Guide

Ardoch's School Costs Guide is a resource for parents and carers that helps ensure that their child has everything they need to learn and realise their potential. It is also a great resource for service providers with a wealth of information to assist families who are struggling to pay school expenses.



For access to the Guide go to: <https://www.ardoch.org.au/publications/school-costs-guide-2019>

Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund

The Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund (CSEF) provides payments for eligible students to attend activities like:

- school camps or trips
- swimming and school-organised sport programs
- outdoor education programs
- excursions and incursions.

More information can be found at: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/csef.aspx>

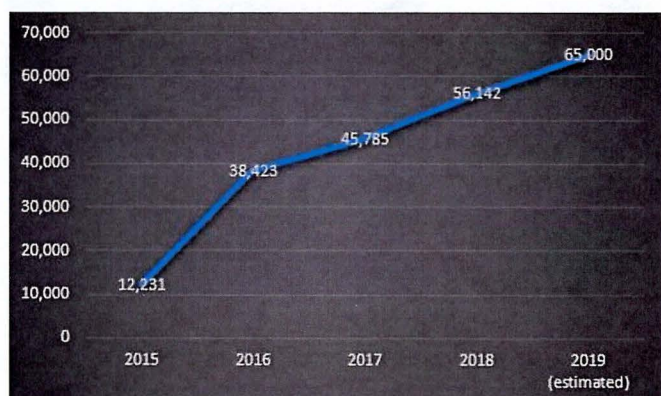
State Schools Relief

State Schools' Relief (SSR) is a not for profit organisation that supports the needs of school students in need by providing new school uniforms, shoes and educational resources. Currently SSR support can only be accessed through the school so parents need to contact the principal or welfare officer to see if they are eligible.

More information can be found at: <https://ssr.net.au/>

Increasing assistance by State Schools Relief

Figure 5: Number of students assisted by SSR from 2015 to 2019¹

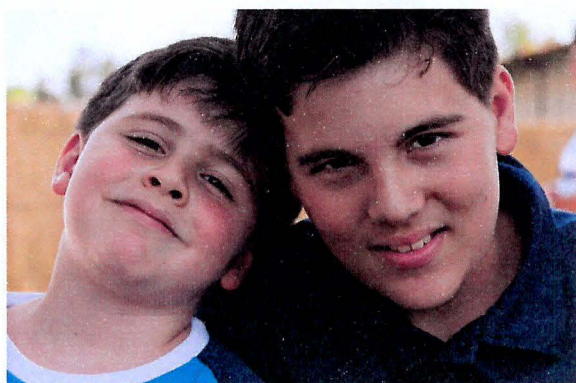


As shown in the figure, the number of students assisted by State Schools Relief with school costs has increased massively in recent years - from about 12,000 in 2015 to an estimated 65,000 in 2019!

CISVic programs in the spotlight

School cost assistance programs

Quite a few CISVic member agencies have special programs to assist families with school costs. We highlight a couple of them here – one by Diamond Valley Community Support (DVCS), and the other by Bayside Community Information and Support Service (BAYCISS). A full list will be made available in the report of our recent member survey on school costs. (Some preliminary findings from the survey are provided at the end of this issue). Despite the great support being provided for families, reports on both programs highlight an ongoing and escalating problem with unaffordable school costs. Along with this, the Camps, Sports, and Excursions Fund (CSEF) and State Schools Relief funding (SSR) are said to be inadequate to meet the demand.



Unmet need

Despite the flexibility inherent in the design of the KidsAssist program, some costs associated with education are simply too exorbitant for KidsAssist, Camps Sports and Excursions Fund (CSEF), or State Schools Relief (SSR) to cover. DVCS's program evaluation points to camps as one such example, with one Grade 5/6 camp to Canberra costing approximately \$500 - \$600 per student⁵. Despite support from programs such as KidsAssist, many families are struggling to meet the financial demands of education in Victoria.

Diamond Valley (DVCS) – KidsAssist Program

DVCS has developed a program to counter the pressing concerns of school costs, the KidsAssist Program. This began in May 2018, and in a recent evaluation it was found to have assisted 23 students, with a total of \$5,235 in funding provided¹. KidsAssist is designed to be flexible, responsive, and targeted, specifically to the unique needs of individual children studying in the Nillumbik area.

The KidsAssist program aims to be responsive and not prescriptive in what it is able to fund for students. While some Back to School programs operate between the months of November and January, KidsAssist can be accessed year round. Access is possible through an Eligible Referral School in the Nillumbik area completing an online application form detailing the situation and assistance needed. Pending assessment and approval, KidsAssist can fund: stationery, text books, electronic devices, excursions/ camps, school sports, other essential items, and it provides a breakfast and lunch program².

KidsAssist has been instrumental in positive educational and learning outcomes for students in the Nillumbik area, particularly through increased attendance and engagement. KidsAssist has also had beneficial impacts on the emotional wellbeing of students, for example attendance at school camps and excursions cannot be underestimated in supporting social inclusion and friendship building³. Diamond Valley Community Support plans to deliver KidsAssist to over twenty schools in the Nillumbik and Banyule areas by 2020⁴.

1 Wellington, K. (2019). KidsAssist Pilot Program Evaluation. Greensborough: Diamond Valley Community Support Inc.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

Bayside (BayCISS) – Smart Kids

The BayCISS Education Support Program Smart Kids presents a similar model for supporting students and families with education costs. Since its inception in 2008, the Smart Kids Program has enabled the distribution of \$530,000 to schools in the Bayside and Kingston area, with a total of 2,200 students supported as a result⁶. The Smart Kids Program funds: camps, excursions, books, sports activities, music tuition, and travel (Myki)⁷.

Similar to KidsAssist, camps, excursions, and sports costs are some of the most common reasons for Smart Kids funding.⁸ Evidently the State Government funded Camps, Sports, and Excursions Fund (CSEF) is insufficient to support the needs of many families in Victoria.

School cost trends

In delivering the Smart Kids Program, BayCISS has observed some concerning trends, in addition to the increased costs associated with camps, sports, and excursions. BayCISS has identified pressure for families to pay for items that were previously provided by the school. In addition, there is increasingly the expectation that Essential School Items are paid for prior to students being able to take part in some school activities⁹. The implications of these trends remain concerning, including increasing disengagement from school, and social exclusion.



⁶ Bayside Community Information & Support Service Inc. (2019). Education Support Program Report 2018-19 Smart Kids Program. Hampton East: BayCISS.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Advocacy by CISVic to reduce school costs

Advocacy Working Group (AWG)

As we know, many CISV member agencies are being overwhelmed with requests for assistance with school costs like fees, books, IT devices, excursions, and uniforms. This has been nominated as the number one issue by the CISVic Advocacy Working Group. As part of our strategy we recently conducted a survey with members about how they are encountering requests for help with education expenses. (See preliminary findings from the survey at the end of this issue).

We will also be conducting a survey November 2019 to February 2020 to track exactly what is being requested and what help is being given to support families with school costs.

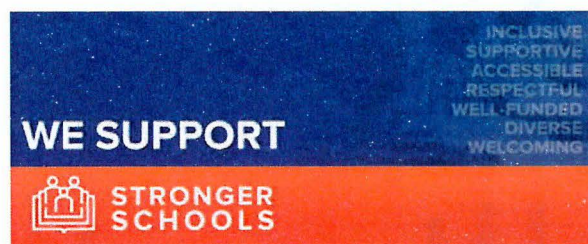
In addition, we are organising a 'flashmob' for March 2020 followed by media attention to shine a light on the escalating costs of education that is meant to be free. (For those who don't know, a flashmob is a pre-planned dance routine in a public place. Brief, but fun and eye-catching!). If you wish to join this campaign, the flashmob and/or join the Advocacy Working Group contact Jennifer at: jennifer@cisvic.org.au



Strategic collaborations

CISVic is part of VCOS's Education Equity Alliance, a group of community organisations that collaborate and agitate so that all Victorian school children have access to educational opportunities, no matter their background. CISVic and member agencies have been active participants in VCOS's Stronger Schools campaign.

For more information about the Stronger Schools campaign go to:



<https://www.strongerschools.org.au/>

CISVic is also working closely with State Schools Relief to see how we can better support families struggling with school expenses. Watch this space!



CISVic member survey on school costs (2019)

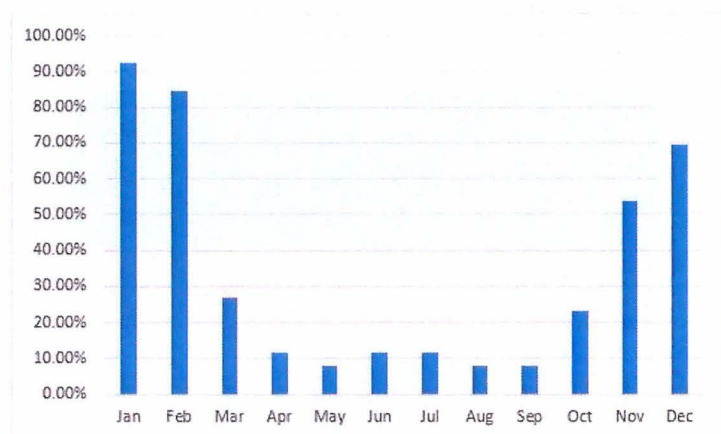
Thanks to all the agencies that recently participated in a member survey about school costs. We had a great response, with a wealth of qualitative as well as quantitative information.

Altogether we had 28 responses from 26 agencies. A report will be made available soon. In the meantime some of the findings are presented here.

Twenty-six agencies (93%) indicated that people present at their agencies for help with school costs. 14 (54%) said they present for this assistance often.

Requests for help with school costs were most frequent in the months of January, February, December, and November.

Figure 6: Months of highest demand for help with school costs at CISVic member agencies

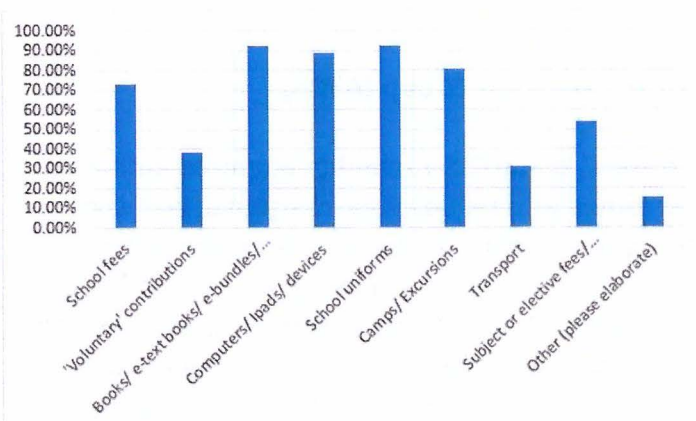


'The requests are throughout the year however there is an increased demand at the beginning and end of year term'.

School costs that families most often wanted help with were (in order):

- Books/e-texts/books – equal with school uniforms
- Computers/lpads/devices
- Camps/excursions
- School fees
- Subject or elective fee

Figure 7: School costs families seek help with at CISVic member agencies



Twelve of the agencies had a special program for assisting with school costs.

Funds and resources to assist families with school costs came from a variety of sources including: government emergency relief funding, philanthropy, donations, fundraising, community banks, community clubs, local businesses, councils, councils, and opportunity shops.

Twenty-four respondents answered questions about the schools in their area:

- 12 respondents indicated they collaborate closely with schools, and 12 said they didn't.
- 10 thought that most or all local schools facilitate access to State Schools Relief (SSR).
- 12 thought that most or all local schools facilitate access to the Camp Sport Excursion Fund (CSEF).
- 7 thought that most local schools aim to keep the costs of education generally affordable.
- 5 thought that local schools make every effort to assist families who can't afford school costs, most of the time. (None indicated that schools do this 'all of the time').

Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic) is the peak body representing local community information and support services.

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