

# PARENT PAYMENTS

## POLICY

### Purpose of this policy

To ensure that parent payment practices in schools are consistent, transparent and that all children have access to the standard curriculum.

### Rationale

The Victorian community shares a vision to build an education system that champions equity and excellence and ensures that every child and young person is supported to learn.

Underpinning each school's vision for excellence is a commitment that all Victorian students have access to the opportunities to succeed in life, regardless of their background or circumstance, and that no-one is left behind. This enables an approach to educational achievement, engagement and wellbeing which draws on the best evidence and is responsive to local circumstances and need.

Schools work in close partnership with parents and the broader school community to provide the best educational opportunities and outcomes for students both inside and outside the classroom. Through this partnership, parents understand that the contribution they make to their children's education, in all its various forms, has an important role in enriching the school's learning and teaching program and improving educational outcomes. The commitment from parents to contribute benefits students and results in improved achievement outcomes, wellbeing and engagement in learning. This is why parent contribution is highly valued by school communities.

Schools design and develop their learning and teaching programs drawing on the best educational knowledge and practices and strive to offer broad and enriched opportunities to students that are above and beyond what is required in the standard curriculum. Learning and teaching programs vary across schools to reflect the priorities, decisions and needs of each school and this, in turn, informs the fees set by school councils.

Schools are best placed to make decisions about their learning and teaching program and how to ensure there is equity and access to education for all students as well as a robust and comprehensive learning program that supports student aspirations.

Schools are committed to creating positive, connected school communities and implementing good practices form part of this commitment. With regard to parent payments, this includes consideration of how parent payments are set, clearly communicating how decisions are made and recognising that some families experiencing hardship may need additional consideration and support. Schools will establish clear expectations and provide supports that promote inclusion and strengthen partnerships with parents and the school community to continue improving student outcomes, wellbeing and engagement.

## Context

This policy is governed by the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (the *Act*) which provides for free instruction in the standard curriculum program to all students in government schools.

Free instruction is the teaching staff, administration and the provision of facilities in connection with the instruction of the standard curriculum program, including reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities. The standard curriculum program refers to the eight key learning areas – English, Mathematics, Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, the Arts, Languages, Health and Physical Education, and Technologies, and four capability areas – Critical and Creative thinking, Intercultural, Ethical and Personal and Social.

The standard curriculum for years F-10 means the implementation of the Victorian Curriculum F-10.

The Department allocates funding to schools through the Student Resource Package (SRP). This includes funding for the standard curriculum program, including associated administration, equipment, facilities and operational costs. The *Act* also empowers school councils to charge parents for items that the school provides or makes available to the student. The items may be categorised as either **Essential Student Learning Items** or **Optional Items**. School council may also ask parents to make a voluntary financial contribution to the school for a stated purpose.

## Parent payment categories

Schools can request payments from parents under three categories: Essential Student Learning Items, Optional Items or Voluntary Financial Contributions.

Each school determines whether an item, activity or service is an Essential Student Learning Item or an Optional Item within the context of their distinct learning and teaching program. Good governance practice will ensure school councils consider and are able to communicate the rationale for the classification of items, activities or services, requested and charged according to the three categories.

This table describes the three parent payment categories within which school councils can request payments from parents. The three categories are articulated in the  [Parent Payment Policy and Implementation Template \(docx - 1.25mb\)](#) that all schools must use when communicating their parent payment arrangements to their school community (see: [Policy Requirements](#)).

Category	Description
<b>Essential student learning items</b>	<p>These are items, activities or services that the school deems <b>essential</b> to student learning in the standard curriculum. Where practical and appropriate, parents may choose to purchase items through the school or provide their own. Examples are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• items that the student takes temporary or permanent possession of such as text books, student stationery, book bags, Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS)</li><li>• materials for learning and teaching where the student consumes or takes possession of the finished articles (e.g. technology projects, workbooks, photography)</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• school uniform (where applicable)</li> <li>• activities associated with instruction that all students are expected to attend, such as costs associated with excursions and work placements.</li> </ul> <p>Note: If parents choose to provide equivalent materials themselves, this must be done in consultation with the school, and items should meet the specifications provided by the school. However, there are some items (e.g. food provisions for home economics) that, due to their nature, can only be provided by the school.</p>
<b>Optional items</b>	<p>These are items or services that are <b>optional</b> and are offered in addition to the standard curriculum. Students may access these on a user pays basis. These items include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• activities the student purchases (e.g. fees for extra-curricular programs or activities offered in addition to the standard curriculum such as instrumental music tuition; fees for guest speakers; optional camps and excursions; entry fees to school-based performances, productions and events)</li> <li>• items the student purchases or hires (e.g. school magazines; class photos; formals/graduation functions; materials for extracurricular activities; student accident insurance)♣</li> <li>• items and materials that are more expensive than required to meet the standard curriculum (e.g. use of silver in metal work instead of copper)</li> </ul>
<b>Voluntary financial contributions</b>	<p>Parents, or anyone else, can be invited to make a <b>voluntary</b> contribution or donation to the school for the following purposes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contributions for a specific purpose identified by the school (e.g. equipment, materials or services) in addition to those funded through the SRP. This may include additional computers or student-related services. These contributions are NOT tax deductible.</li> <li>• general voluntary financial contributions or donations to the school. These contributions or donations are NOT tax deductible.♣</li> <li>• donations to a building fund or library fund (if these funds have been endorsed by the Australian Taxation Office and have a Deductible Gift Recipients (DGR) status). Donations to these funds ARE tax deductible to the donor.</li> <li>• any donations to special schools with a DGR status are also tax deductible to the donor.</li> </ul>

For a simple visual diagram of the Parent Payment categories see:  [Understanding Parent Payment Categories \(pdf - 285.74kb\)](#)

## Policy requirements

Schools are required to use the  [Parent Payment Policy and Implementation Template \(docx - 1.25mb\)](#) when developing the school's parent payment arrangements. This will ensure that schools can customise their implementation of the policy to the local context whilst retaining all information in the policy template, thereby facilitating consistent implementation of key practices across schools.

In setting parent payments based on the school curriculum, principals and school councils are responsible for approving parent payments.

## Principles

In implementing this policy, schools must adhere to the following principles: ♣

- **Educational value:** Student learning, aspirations and wellbeing are paramount when schools determine their parent payments practices ♣
- **Access, equity and inclusion:** All students have access to the standard curriculum program and participation of all students to the full school program is facilitated ♣
- **Affordability:** Cost to parents is kept to a minimum and is affordable for most families at the school ♣
- **Engagement and Support:** Early identification and engagement strategies by the school ensure parents are well informed of the payment options and supports available for those experiencing hardship ♣
- **Respect and Confidentiality:** Parents and students experiencing hardship are treated with respect, dignity, sensitivity and without judgement and the identity and personal information of all parents and students are kept confidential in respect to parent payments ♣
- **Transparency and Accountability:** School parent payment practices are well communicated, clear and transparent and their impact on student programs and families are reviewed by school councils.

### Access to education

Students are not to be denied access to the standard curriculum program, refused instruction or disadvantaged on the basis of payments not being made for education items or services.

Where a child cannot participate in an essential activity or provide an essential student learning item, schools must consider the financial hardship circumstances of the student or make alternative arrangements that provides for the required knowledge and skills to be learned. This ensures that all children and young people learn the required content necessary to meet the achievement standards in the standard curriculum program.

### Cost to parents

It is essential that when school councils consider the proposed requests for parent payment that cost is kept to a minimum and is affordable. It is important that:

- the school does not withhold access to enrolment or advancement to the next year level as a condition of payment for any of the three categories.

- items students consume or take possession of are accurately costed.
- payment requests for goods, services and other items provided by the school to students are broadly itemised within the appropriate category (see: [Parent Payment categories](#))
- parents are advised that they have the option of purchasing equivalent Essential Student Learning items themselves, in consultation with the school. This does not include activities set by the school.
- schools must ensure information on payment options is available, accessible and easily understood by parents, ensuring parents know what to expect and what supports they can access.
- the status and details of any financial arrangements are kept confidential and only shared with relevant school personnel.
- payment may be requested but not required prior to the commencement of the year in which the materials and services are to be used.
- parents are provided with early notice of annual payment requests for school fees, that is, a minimum of six weeks' notice prior to the end of the previous school year. This enables parents to plan and budget accordingly.
- schools must provide reasonable notice for any other payment requests that arise during the school year, ensuring that parents have a clear understanding of the full financial contribution being sought.
- parents experiencing hardship are not pursued for outstanding school payments from one year to the next.
- the use of debt collectors of any type to obtain any outstanding funds owed to the school from parents is not permitted.

### **Support options for families**

Principals and school councils need to be aware of, and exercise sensitivity to, the differing financial, cultural or social circumstances of individual students and their families. This must extend to the provision of interpreting and translation services in circumstances where this would be helpful.

Free interpreting and translation services are available through the Department to support schools in communicating written and verbal information in languages other than English. See Interpreting and Translating under [Department resources](#) below.

A range of support options are available for parents experiencing difficulty in paying for essential student learning items. An outline of the support options, that schools should make families aware of, is available at [📄 Cost support for families \(docx - 75.91kb\)](#) and includes:

- access to State Schools' Relief support via the Principal to assist with uniforms, shoes, textbooks, and stationery
- the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, which is available for eligible families, to cover the costs of school trips, camps and sporting activities
- welfare and support agencies that have established partnership arrangements with schools to provide further assistance to students and their families.

Parents who experience difficulties providing or paying the school to provide essential student learning items should be supported to make an appointment with the Principal or the school's nominated contact person to discuss alternative payment methods. Every effort must be made to support students and parents experiencing difficulty with payments.

## Responding to parental hardship

Schools have a commitment and responsibility to be responsive to parents who may be experiencing either short term or long term hardship and are unable to make the requested payments. This includes offering options which support and assist those parents.

Consideration of hardship arrangements and concessions are provided to families experiencing long term financial hardship or short-term crisis on a confidential, case-by-case basis. Consideration must be given to the impact on the student and any determination must ensure that outcomes for the student are kept at the forefront of decision-making. This approach provides for an individualised, family-centered and student outcomes focus that necessarily requires thoughtful consideration of each situation.

Each school must have written documentation for hardship consideration, which is communicated to parents with clarity and timeliness. These arrangements must ensure that:

a) a proactive approach is taken by schools to providing hardship support for parents experiencing financial difficulty. Schools must have early identification and engagement strategies to ensure parents are well informed of the payment options and linked with available supports when experiencing hardship. Teachers will often be the first to detect signs of family stress and/or hardship from students. A clear process for guiding teachers to follow-up and provide the necessary support and information to students and parents needs to be well communicated to them by their school leadership team.

b) all parents are provided the name and contact details (phone number and email address) of a nominated parent payment contact person(s) at the school who can discuss payment arrangements. Parents should be assured that their child has access to the educational opportunities being offered by the school. The contact person undertaking this function will do so with sensitivity, respect and understanding to ensure they are responsive to families' needs. The contact person needs to have the required authority to use their discretion to make alternate payment arrangements.

c) the parent payment contact person is able to use their discretion within the mandate of the policy and guiding principles to agree on the appropriate forms of support and assistance. These options may include, but are not restricted to:

- waiving of fees
- reduced fees
- deferred payment or the extension of payment deadlines
- flexible payment plans – beyond what is available in the school's standard policy
- cost saving options available at the school, such as:

- essential student learning items that can be substituted at a lower cost or for items which the family already owns, e.g. stationery, uniform items, school bag, calculator
  - second-hand options, e.g. uniforms, text books and resources, stationery
  - resources that can be loaned from the school, e.g. text books (digital and/or hard-copy), devices, essential equipment such as graphic calculators
  - referral to government assistance programs and community assistance programs in the local area.
- d) when discussing payment and support options with parents, the parent payment contact person is required to:

- allow parents to be accompanied by a support person or community advocate if they choose to do so
- explain to parents that the school's learning and teaching program builds on the free instruction in the standard curriculum and outline how parent payments support educational outcomes
- outline that the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* empowers school councils to charge fees to parents for goods and services made available or provided by the school to a child of the parent (section 2.3.6(c))
- assure parents that their children will be supported to participate in learning activities regardless of the family's inability to pay
- enable parents to nominate a payment and/or schedule they can afford
- provide information on the supports available, including government assistance programs, legal and/or financial counselling and assistance from local community and welfare organisations and refer parents where applicable
- abide by the hardship policy principles in the practice and delivery of hardship support to families
- abide by principles of good practice in this policy.

Schools must be aware of and inform families of any second-hand options available for materials and resources commonly required by students, e.g. uniforms, textbooks, calculators and stationery, and encourage and explore ways to make quality second-hand books and uniforms available to parents in need. Schools are strongly encouraged to place the [clk2sell State Schools' Relief Smartphone App](#) - on their website where it is easy to find.

It is expected that schools assess where there may be barriers to learning and participation for students on the basis of financial hardship. The school aims to assist schools to ensure their activities and procedures are sensitive to low income families. Also, the [Low Income Awareness Checklist for Schools \(docx - 69.48kb\)](#) has been developed by Good Shepherd to help schools assess where there may be barriers to learning and participation for students from low income families. Schools are strongly encouraged to use these tools to help them implement a fair, consistent and transparent process for assessing hardship and increase educational access more broadly.

Guidance for schools in better understanding and responding to family hardship is provided at:

[Supporting families experiencing hardship \(docx - 76.01kb\)](#).

## Open and transparent practices and communication

Open and purposeful engagement with parents is vital for ensuring the best possible outcomes for students, the health and wellbeing of the school community and to supporting good outcomes for schools. This encompasses the exchange of ideas where parents feel they have opportunities to be heard and have been involved in discussion about their child's learning.

Research demonstrates that the most meaningful partnerships are those where schools, parents, students and the community work together to focus on student learning.

The [Framework for Improving Student Outcomes](#) recognises that the greatest impact on student outcomes is the home environment. When schools strengthen relationships with families, they can enhance the environment that has the greatest impact on students. Schools acknowledge this valuable relationship and as part of a whole of school approach, work to create a positive school environment in which parents are welcomed, respected and valued as partners in their children's learning.

Parent consultation and engagement is therefore critical in all aspects of the educational context including parent payments. The *Act* specifies that schools need to be informed of, and take into account the views of the school community. In respect to parent payments, school councils must have strategies in place to ensure they are aware of and understand the needs and views of their communities when determining parent payments. To identify and understand the needs of families who are hard to reach and disengaged schools are encouraged to connect with and engage their local welfare and community organisations that provide support for these families.

School councils must give consideration to how an item, activity or service supports or enriches the school's learning and teaching program when determining whether the item, activity or service is an Essential Student Learning Item or an Optional Item, and must be able to explain the reasoning to the broader school community.

As the context of each school is unique, schools choose from a range of strategies to communicate with families in parent payment processes. Whatever the particular engagement strategies used, schools need to at a minimum:

- advise parents how the school's learning and teaching program is enhanced by the parent payment charges being requested
- communicate how parent payments are specifically utilised to support improved outcomes for students
- use existing or new communication channels to enable a range of viewpoints to be represented
- address any concerns raised
- ensure parents are informed and understand that while they are expected to provide essential education items to support their child's education, it is their choice whether they purchase items through the school
- ensure parents are made aware of financial and other supports available to them and the means to access them
- upload the Parent Payment Policy and Frequently Asked Questions onto the school's website.

It is critical that school communities, parents, key stakeholders and the Department can see how the parent payment policy is being implemented at the local level. Therefore, ensuring schools assess the impact of the policy on students and parents is important.

The  [Transparency Framework \(docx - 88.27kb\)](#) assists schools in their implementation and compliance with the policy. It includes a Transparency Checklist Tool that enables self-assessment of open and transparent processes and practices. This tool can be used to provide a good practice framework upon which policy implementation can be regularly reviewed and reported on. Schools are strongly encouraged to work through the checklist at least annually.

## School-level administrative processes

Initial payment requests and letters to parents for student materials and services charges must be accompanied by the following information: ♣

- a description of each of the three parent payment categories ♣
- the materials and activities that parents are being asked to pay for ♣
- that parents are expected to provide Essential Student Learning Items for their children, and have the option of purchasing these through the school or through a local supplier, where appropriate
- the availability of alternative payment options and an invitation to contact the principal or nominated parent payment contact person, if the parent wishes to discuss the payments further.
- a copy or link to the Parent Payment Policy and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ).

Schools must ensure that:

- administrative and financial processes are compliant with Departmental requirements such as CASES21 financial reporting ♣
- prior to generating reminder notices to parents for unpaid items, discretion should be exercised with families where there may be hardship or financial difficulty ♣
- invoices/statements for unpaid essential student learning items or optional items accepted by parents can be generated and distributed according to parent payment arrangements, but no more than monthly
- only the initial invitation for voluntary financial contributions and one reminder notice per year is sent to all parents ♣
- receipts are issued to parents immediately upon payment and receipted on CASES21 ♣
- all documents relating to individual parent payments are stored confidentially in a secure location and accessible only to the principal, business manager and other nominated staff ensuring identifiable parent information is kept confidential.

## Review of policy implementation

As part of the Department's and each school's commitment to ongoing improvement, and ensuring that the impact of policies and practices on students are assessed in an ongoing way, implementation of the Parent Payment Policy and school practice will be reviewed as follows:

- School councils have a key role in ensuring the school level approach to parent payments reflects the shared expectations of the whole school community and is therefore responsible for monitoring effectiveness and impact on parents and students.
- The Department, through the Regional Services Group (RSG), will undertake regular audits for compliance with the Parent Payment Policy.

## Related policies

- [Financial Management](#)
- [Personal Devices - Parent Payments and Access](#)
- [Parent Complaints](#)

## Department resources

- [Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund](#)
-  [Cost Support for Families \(docx - 75.91kb\)](#)
- [Families as Partners in Learning](#)
-  [Frequently Asked Questions for Parents \(docx - 81.12kb\)](#)
-  [Frequently Asked Questions for Schools \(docx - 76.25kb\)](#)
- [Interpreting and Translating](#)
- [Parent Complaints](#) - information for parents on how to raise a concern about their child's school
-  [Parent Payment Policy and Implementation \(docx - 1.25mb\)](#)- template all schools must use
-  [Supporting Families Experiencing Hardship \(docx - 76.01kb\)](#) - questions and answers
-  [Support Materials for School Use \(docx - 99.29kb\)](#) - includes template and sample documents
-  [Transparency Framework for Schools \(docx - 88.27kb\)](#)
-  [Understanding Parent Payment Categories \(pdf - 285.74kb\)](#) - one page information sheet

For further support, schools can contact the relevant regional office or the School Operations and Governance Unit – Regional Services Group via the School Policy and Advisory Guide  
email: [theguide@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:theguide@edumail.vic.gov.au)

## Other resources

- [clk2sell State Schools' Relief Smartphone App](#)

-  Good Shepherd - Sample Low Income Awareness Checklist for Schools (docx - 69.48kb)
-  Social Inclusion at School - How to help low-income families (pdf - 550.49kb)

## Related legislation

### *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*

- *Sections 1,2,2 (1)(b)* – Principles underlying the Government education and training system
- *Section 2.2.4. (1)* – Instruction in specified learning areas to be free to student under 20
- *Section, 2.3.6 (1)(c)* – Powers of a school council to charge fees
- *Section 2.2.7* – Voluntary financial contributions
- *Schedule 1* - Learning areas subject to free instruction

### **Evaluation:**

- This policy will be reviewed as part of the school's annual review cycle.

Signed:

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School Council President

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School Principal

This policy was last ratified by School Council in....

**November, 2017**