Education Updates

Safe Schools Program Under Review

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AEU Victoria Starts Negotiations

The Australian Education Union has opened enterprise bargaining negotiations with the Victorian Government with a demand for a 21 per cent pay increase over three years, and a reduction in short-term contracts. Click here to read more.

Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

The Australian Minister for Education and Training, Simon Birmingham, has announced that all states and territories have signed the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, 'unlocking $840 million in federal funding for quality preschool programs across the country'. Click here to read more.

Australian Child Wellbeing Project

A new report on student wellbeing finds that while most young people are satisfied with school, too many are being bullied, missing school or not getting enough to eat. Click here to read more.

New Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People

The Victorian Minister for Families and Children, Jenny Mikakos, has announced that Liana Buchanan has been appointed as Victoria's new Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People. Click here to read more.

Sporting Schools

Applications for Semester 1 Sporting Schools funding close Friday 4 March 2016. Click here to read more.

Victorian Schools Garden Awards

Applications for the Victorian Schools Garden Awards (VSGA) 2016 are now open. Click here to read more.

Victorian Student Representative Council 2016 Regional Conferences

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is inviting student leaders from Victorian secondary schools attend 1 of 12 regional conferences being held across the state in Term 1 and Term 2 this year. Click here to read more.

Bebras Computational Thinking Challenge

Digital Careers is inviting schools to take part in an online event promoting computational thinking to students in years 3 – 12. Click here to read more.

Federal parliamentary sitting dates can be found on the Parliament of Australia website. Victorian parliamentary sitting dates can be found on the Victorian Parliament website.

Please visit the Independent Schools Victoria website for seminars for March 2016.

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Safe Schools Program Under Review

The Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, has requested that a program run in schools to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) students be reviewed, after members of his backbench expressed concerns that the program encouraged students to advocate ‘for the homosexual cause’.

The Safe Schools Coalition (SSC) program, All of Us, had previously been defended by the Australian Education Minister, Simon Birmingham, after it was criticised in sections of the media (see Weekly Briefing 3/2016). ABC News reported that Minister Birmingham said after the review’s announcement that while homophobia should not be tolerated ‘it is essential that all material is age appropriate and that parents have confidence in any resources used in a school to support the right of all students, staff and families to feel safe at school’.

Coalition Senator, Cory Bernadi, criticised the federally-funded program, saying that it:

… isolates students in front of the entire class if they don’t comply with the mantra demanded of the homosexual activists. This is bullying on a grand scale and the fact it is in any way sanctioned through federal funding is a disgrace.

Labor Senator, Joe Bullock, was also critical of the program, telling The Australian that it ‘should be stopped immediately’:

I think it’s a terrible program … while bullying is an important issue particularly among young people … this program is so narrowly focused on homosexual issues that it doesn’t provide the sort of balance one would hope.

Senator Bullock was at odds with Labor Party leaders, Bill Shorten and Penny Wong, however, who spoke in favour of the SSC program. Opposition Leader Bill Shorten said:

Children have got a right to go to school and not be bullied. If they’ve got questions about their sexuality, they deserve the right to be able to get answers and be supported and not oppressed. Young people, who are gay, report that 80 per cent of the bullying which occurs occurs at school. We need to make sure that kids are safe.

The Victorian Premier, Daniel Andrews, said on Facebook that:

Schools have to be a safe place for every kid – no exceptions. Teachers have to be given the tools to deal with every situation – no excuses. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with this effective little program, which achieves the above two aims and nothing more.

Nationals Deputy Whip, George Christensen, described the SSC program as ‘an unsafe schools program’ and argued in the Australian Parliament that:

If parents knew their children were being exposed to this type of material, they would probably not let them go to school. If someone proposed exposing a child to this material, the parents would probably call the police because it sounds a lot like the grooming work that a sexual predator might undertake.

Greens sexuality spokesperson Senator Robert Simms said that Mr Christensen’s comments were ‘profoundly offensive’ and called on the Prime Minister to reprimand him. ‘To compare a program that’s about helping young people to grooming is utterly reprehensible’, Senator Simms said.

The Prime Minister called for everybody discussing the issue ‘to do so in very measured language’ and to ‘consider very carefully the impact of the words they use on young people and on their families’.

− School sexuality course review. Rob Harris, Herald Sun, 24 February 2016
− PM bows to gay lessons backlash. Joe Kelly. The Australian, 24 February 2016
− Andrews irate at Liberal threat to ace funding for schools’ anti-homophobia education. Benjamin Preiss Matthew Knott. The Age, 24 February 2016
AEU Victoria Starts Negotiations

The Australian Education Union (AEU) has opened enterprise bargaining negotiations with the Victorian Government with a demand for a 21 per cent pay increase over three years, and a reduction in short-term contracts.

AEU Victorian President, Ms Meredith Peace, told the ABC that increasing workloads and lack of employment security were also issues that teachers wanted addressed.

'We've been pretty clear about saying the Government has run on the agenda of making Victoria the 'education state', and it's not just about salaries', she said.

The Age reported that a government spokesperson said that the Victorian government was 'working to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome in a timely manner'.

The current enterprise agreement ends in October 2016.

Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

The Australian Minister for Education and Training, Simon Birmingham, has announced that all states and territories have signed the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, 'unlocking $840 million in federal funding for quality preschool programs across the country'.

Under the initiative, early childhood education (e.g. preschool or kindergarten) will be available for all children in the year before full-time school. The program must be delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher for 15 hours per week or 600 hours a year.

Minister Birmingham advised that the National Partnership:

... guarantees funding for 600 hours of quality preschool and will help achieve performance benchmarks, particularly for Indigenous children and those from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds... Under this agreement all states and territories have agreed to support preschool programs in all settings - whether that be the local state government-run preschool or a preschool within a long day care program.

For more information, visit the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education website.

Australian Child Wellbeing Project Report

A new report on student wellbeing finds that while most young people are satisfied with school, too many are being bullied, missing school, or not getting enough to eat.

The Australian Child Wellbeing Project Report is based on the responses of 5000, 8 to 14 year-old Australians in surveys or interviews about their lives and wellbeing. It finds that most of the respondents are doing well, with 'high average levels of wellbeing with respect to their objective circumstances, relationships and how they perceive their lives'.

However, the report finds a 'significant proportion' of young people in their middle years had low wellbeing and were missing out on opportunities, and that low wellbeing was:

- concentrated in groups of young people who are recognised as marginalised – young people with disability, young carers, materially disadvantaged young people, culturally and linguistically diverse young people, Indigenous young people, young people in rural and remote Australia and young people in out of home care.
Other findings in the report include that:

- 1 in 10 reported missing school at least once a week in the last term
- 1 in 6 students have been bullied
- almost 1 in 10 reported being close to only one person or close to no-one
- almost 1 in 5 students are going hungry to school or bed
- family or social support networks are important – young people with smaller networks have lower levels of wellbeing than those with larger networks.

According to the report, different forms of low wellbeing are linked, i.e. high pressure from schoolwork was related to higher levels of health complaints.

Dr Petra Lietz, Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Council for Educational Research, said that school satisfaction was associated with positive relationships with teachers. 'Teachers who listen and show they care, and believe in their students' success are supporting student wellbeing', she said.

New Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People

The Victorian Minister for Families and Children, Jenny Mikakos, has announced that Liana Buchanan has been appointed as Victoria’s new Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Minister Mikakos said that Ms Buchanan, currently the Executive Officer for the Federation of Community Legal Centres, had a ‘distinguished record in public service and will be an outstanding advocate for the rights of Victorian children and young people’.

As Commissioner, Ms Buchanan will have responsibility for a new reportable conduct scheme in Victoria to improve child safety. Under the scheme, reporting of allegations of child abuse by workers or volunteers in organisations with a high level of responsibility for children, will be centralised. Ms Buchanan will also be empowered to:

- monitor investigations into abuse and report on trends,
- share information with key organisations to lift child safety
- inquire into the safety systems of organisations engaged in child-related work.

The Law Institute of Victoria (LIV) welcomed Ms Buchanan to the role, paying tribute to her ‘outstanding record in law reform, access to justice and family violence law reform’.


Sporting Schools

Applications for Semester 1 Sporting Schools funding close on Friday 4 March 2016.

Sporting Schools is a $100 million Australian Government initiative that aims to get children healthy and active, before, during and after school. Its key purpose is to encourage more children to do more sport-based activities, and empower schools to help them do that.

Term 1 funding applications are open until Friday 4 March 2016. Term 2 applications will remain open until Friday 27 May 2016. For more information, or to apply, visit the Sporting Schools website.

Victorian Schools Garden Awards

Applications for the Victorian Schools Garden Awards (VSGA) 2016 are now open.

The VSGA Grants Program is designed to provide funding for schools to assist in the establishment of new gardens in their grounds. According to the VSGA, gardens form an important part of their student’s education, as well as being ‘interesting and involving outdoor classrooms’.

The program encourages student involvement, with students asked to record the development of their journeys of outdoor gardening spaces. The format includes photos and responses to the criteria in a PowerPoint presentation.
More than $25,000 in of grants is available to distribute to schools. The grants come in the form of a voucher to be redeemed at a retail nursery which is a member of the Nursery & Garden Industry of Victoria. Grants are awarded in eight categories, including the Independent Schools Victoria Sensory Garden Grant – for the Greatest Demonstrated Improvement and/or increase of a School’s Green Space.

The VSGA Grants Program is open to all Victoria schools. Applications for the 2016 Grants program close on Friday 29 April 2016. For more information, to register to book for the workshop or to apply for a grant, visit the [School Garden Awards website](http://www.schoolgardenawards.com.au).

**Victorian Student Representative Council Regional Conferences**

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is inviting student leaders from secondary schools across Victoria to attend 1 of 12 regional conferences being held in 2016.

The VicSRC says that the one-day conferences are suitable SRC members in years 7 to 12, school leaders and ‘all students who want their voices heard’. Participants get to ‘work together on common issues, define what really matters to Victorian students, and drive positive change in their schools, communities and education system’.

Student discussions in the conferences also inform the ‘hot topics’ at VicSRC’s Student Congress in July.

- Registrations for Term 1 Regional Conferences closes on Friday 11 March 2016.
- Registrations for Term 2 Regional Conferences closes on Monday 18 April 2016

Registration costs $55.00 per student ($45.00 for VicSRC Members). An optional Teacher Professional Learning session is also offered, costing of $35.00 per person.

For more information, or to register, visit the [VicSRC website](http://www.vicsrc.vic.edu.au).

**Bebras Computational Thinking Challenge**

Digital Careers is inviting schools to take part in the Bebras Computational Thinking Challenge – an online event promoting computational thinking to students in years 3 – 12.

Students participating in the Challenge are required to solve tasks by using logic, digital technologies, discrete structures, computation, data processing and algorithmic concepts.

The hour-long challenge is free for schools and can be delivered, in class, between Monday 14 and Friday 25 March 2016 (teachers can choose when their class participates). Teachers are supported with webinars prior to the challenge, and are provided with teaching notes explaining the concepts behind each of the questions. No prior computing knowledge is required.

Certificates of participation will be awarded to each student who complete the challenge, with their name, achievement level and score.

For more information, or to register, visit the [Bebras Computational Thinking Challenge website](http://www.bebras.org/au).