

Parent Payments Policy

PURPOSE

This policy outlines the ways in which school councils can request payments or voluntary contributions from parents and ensures that parent payment practices in schools are consistent, transparent and that all children have access to the standard curriculum.

SUMMARY

- All students in Victorian government schools must have free access to instruction that is offered by a school to fulfil the curriculum requirements in the eight key learning areas of the Victorian Curriculum F-10, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).
- School councils can only request payments from parents under 3 categories: Essential Student Learning Items, Optional Items and Voluntary Contributions.
- Schools must consider the Financial Help for Families Policy and make arrangements for families who are experiencing financial hardship and unable to make payments.
- Schools must have their parent payment arrangements approved by their school council and uploaded onto their public websites.
- Schools cannot:
 - deny students access to the standard curriculum program, refuse instruction or disadvantage students on the basis of payments not being made for education items or activities
 - request payments from parents for school operating costs (for example, utility costs) or general and unspecified charges (for example, subject levies)

DETAILS

Schools and school councils must adhere to the Parent Payments Policy which is outlined as follows.

Free instruction

All students in Victorian government schools must have free access to instruction that is offered by a school to fulfil the standard curriculum requirements in the 8 key learning areas:

1. English
2. Mathematics
3. Sciences (including physics, chemistry and biology)
4. Humanities and social sciences (including history, geography, economics, business, civics and citizenship)
5. The arts
6. Languages
7. Health and physical education
8. Information and communication technology and design and technology.

Free instruction includes 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.

Schools cannot deny students access to the standard curriculum program, refuse instruction or disadvantage students on the basis of payments not being made for education items or activities. Schools cannot withhold student access to enrolment or advancement to the next year level as a condition of payments being made.

Parent payment categories

School councils can only request payments from parents under 3 categories:

1. Essential Student Learning Items



Essential Student Learning Items are items and activities which the school deems as essential for student learning, without which, students would be unable to access the school's delivery of the standard curriculum.

Where practical and appropriate, parents may choose to purchase essential items through the school or provide their own. Where a child cannot provide an essential student learning item or participate in an **essential activity**, the school must make alternative arrangements e.g. make the item available through the school or provide alternative financial support options.

Essential Student Learning Items do not include:

- school operating costs (refer to School operating costs in the Guidance tab)
- generic subject levies or fees
- non-curriculum related costs
- unspecified charges

Schools must be able to justify why an item or activity has been categorised as an Essential Student Learning Item.

2. Optional Items

Optional Items are items and activities that enhance or broaden the schooling experience of students and are offered in addition to the standard curriculum. Students access these on a user pays basis.

Optional Items include non-curriculum-based school events, optional excursions and camps, optional sporting or music programs and materials that don't relate to the standard curriculum such as school magazines.

3. Voluntary Contributions

School councils can invite parents to make a voluntary contribution to support the school. Voluntary Contributions can be for general or clearly explained specific purposes that relate to the school council's functions and objectives. Where a Voluntary Contribution is requested for a specific purpose, the funds may only be used for that purpose.

There are no obligations on parents to make any Voluntary Contributions and schools cannot refuse students instruction in the standard curriculum if their parents do not contribute.

Financial help for families

Schools have a commitment and responsibility to be responsive to parents who may be experiencing either short-term or long-term financial hardship.

Schools must:

- ensure costs to parents are kept to a minimum and made affordable for families
- consider the Financial Help for Families Policy and make arrangements for families who are experiencing financial hardship and unable to make payments for their child
- nominate a parent payment contact person(s) to support families with parent payment arrangements

Refer to Financial Help for Families for further information.

School's parent payment arrangements



Schools do not need to develop their own school-level parent payment policy. However, schools should develop their own parent payment arrangements that suit their local context. Parent payment arrangements include the school's:

- payment requests to parents for items and activities. Items and activities must be clearly specified, accurately costed and itemised using the 3 categories
- financial support options for parents experiencing financial hardship
- payment methods

Schools must:

- have their parent payment arrangements approved by their school council prior to communicating it to parents
- upload their parent payment arrangements onto their school website for transparency (refer to Uploading parent payment arrangements onto the school website in the Guidance tab)

Schools must use the Parent Payment Arrangements Template to develop arrangements and communicate these to parents.

DEFINITIONS

Standard curriculum

Standard curriculum is the Victorian Curriculum F-10, Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

RELATED POLICIES

- Finance Manual — Financial Management for Schools
- Financial Help for Families
- Personal Devices — Access
- School Council — Powers and Functions
- Student Dress Code
- Students with Disability

RELEVANT LEGISLATION

- Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic)
- Education Training and Reform Act 2006 (Vic)

GUIDANCE

Finance

Finance manual

School budgeting and reporting for parent payments and contributions must follow the procedures outlined in the Finance Manual — Financial Management for Schools and Parent Payments Policy. These include, but are not limited to:

- school councils must approve, in a timely manner, parent payment arrangements
- any payment must be accurately recorded in CASES21
- receipts must be issued immediately to parents upon payment
- records of payments and contributions must be kept confidential

School operating costs

Schools cannot request payments from parents for school operating costs. This includes:

- teacher support or professional learning
- utilities such as electricity and internet
- school equipment (for example, sports equipment for physical education)



- administrative costs such as merchant fees associated with electronic payment transactions, sending text messages or letters to parents, administration software, photocopying and insurance or equipment maintenance

Outstanding payments

Schools can issue reminder notices to families for unpaid Essential Student Learning Items and Optional Items, but no more than once per term.

Schools cannot penalise students if payments for Essential Student Learning Items or Optional Items are outstanding, including:

- denying students access to the standard curriculum
- harassing or coercing parents to make payments
- carrying over debts for purchased items and completed activities to the following school year unless otherwise agreed
- charging penalty fees
- using a debt collector to recover outstanding payments
- denying students access to Optional Items if payment has not been received for Essential Student Learning Items

Schools must consider assistance to families experiencing financial hardship on a confidential and case by case basis. Schools should also exercise discretion prior to generating reminder notices for unpaid items for families experiencing hardship. Refer to Financial Help for Families for further information regarding schools assisting parents experiencing financial hardship.

Refunds

Refunds should be worked out on a case by case basis at the local school level and schools have the discretion to provide refunds to families and should do so where it is reasonable and fair (for example, if the school has not incurred a cost).

If the school has incurred costs, the school should act reasonably and take into consideration the Financial Help for Families Policy and relevant arrangements, including support for families experiencing hardship. For example, schools should consider refunding families for unavoidable event cancellations if a family experiences a crisis or sudden serious illness and the student can no longer attend the event.

If the school decides to provide a refund, then parents need to agree and advise the school where the refund should be paid. If that agreement cannot be reached, the refund is usually paid into the account from which the money came. Where the payment was made in cash, the school should wait until the parents reach an agreement and advise the school.

Seeking payment for damage to or loss of school property

Schools have the discretion to request that parents contribute to the cost of damaged or lost items owned by the school if their child was responsible for damaging or losing the item.

Schools must continue to facilitate student access to the standard curriculum regardless of whether payment for damage to or loss of items are made. Before requesting payment for damaged or lost goods, schools should consider factors including financial hardship.

If a student damages school infrastructure or buildings (for example, windows), schools should not seek payments for damages, however, schools can invite all parents to make a general or specific (for example, building fund) voluntary contribution towards repair.

Voluntary Contributions



Voluntary Contributions to schools are only tax deductible if they are:

- donations which have been endorsed by the Australian Taxation Office and have a Deductible Gift Recipients status
- donations to special schools with a Deductible Gift Recipients status

Refer to the Finance Manual for Schools for further information on this.

PARENT PAYMENT CATEGORIES

Essential Student Learning Items

As each school delivers the curriculum differently and based on their own local context, it is at a school's discretion to determine whether an item or activity is essential for student learning.

Essential Student Learning Items do not include:

- School operating costs (see School Operating Costs in the Guidance section)
- Generic subject levies or fees
- Non-curriculum related costs
- Unspecified charges

Schools cannot deny students access to the standard curriculum program, refuse instruction or disadvantage students on the basis of payments not being made for educational items or activities.

As students cannot access the school's delivery of the standard curriculum without Essential Student Learning Items, the school must ensure that all students have access to Essential Student Learning Items and can participate in essential activities, regardless of whether payment is received.

This differs from optional items and activities which are provided on a user-pays basis and schools do not need to provide students access to the item or activity if parents have not paid for these.

Schools must ensure there are arrangements in place to support all students with access to Essential Student Learning Items including making them available through the school or providing alternative financial options if parents are unable to pay for them.

COMMUNICATIONS AND SCHOOL ARRANGEMENTS

Communications to parents

Communications to parents must begin at least 6 weeks prior to the end of the previous school year to enable parents to plan and budget accordingly.

When inviting parents to purchase items and activities, communications must include:

- clear descriptions of each of the 3 parent payment categories and the items and activities to purchase
- a link to the Department's Parent Payments Policy
- the details of the nominated school parent payment contact
- the availability of financial help for families arrangements

Schools can use the Parent Payment Arrangements Template when developing communications to parents.

All communications must use language that is easy to understand, is culturally appropriate and if required translated into multiple languages. Refer to Interpreting and Translation Services for further information.

Uploading parent payment arrangements onto the school's website

Schools must upload their school council approved parent payment arrangements onto their school's public website 6 weeks before the end of the school year.



A school's parent payment arrangements include all communications with parents in relation to parent payments including booklists and school fee schedules for each year level.

Schools must use the Parent Payment Arrangements Template to complete their arrangements for each year level and upload the completed templates once they have been approved by school council.

School websites must also include a link to the Department's Parent Payments Policy on the same page as the school's parent payment arrangements.

Parent payment contact person

The school must nominate suitable staff members to be parent payment contacts to respond to parent queries and facilitate financial help for families arrangements on behalf of the school.

This may be one or two staff members, including the Principal, Business Manager or welfare officer, who can be responsible for working with parents to determine, negotiate and maintain appropriate responses on behalf of the school.

Refer to Financial Help for Families for further information.

BREACHING THE PARENT PAYMENTS POLICY

The Department conducts regular reviews of schools' parent payment arrangements to ensure schools adhere to the Parent Payments Policy.

If a parent is of the view that a school is incorrectly applying the Parent Payments Policy or they are being incorrectly charged for items or activities, they will be able to raise concerns with the Department to follow up with the school.

If a school is found to be in breach of the Parent Payments Policy and incorrectly charging parents for items or activities, the Department will work directly with and support the school to make the relevant changes and to re-communicate its parent payment arrangements to the school community. Where money has been incorrectly received from parents they may need to be credited or repaid.

APPLYING THE POLICY TO SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

Alternative methods of instruction

Schools can request payment from parents for alternative methods of instruction (for example, Montessori Method of Education) that are offered in addition to the standard curriculum. These programs should be categorised as Optional Items and provided on a user-pays basis.

Schools should seek additional advice from the Department when categorising any form of instruction as an alternative method of instruction.

Additional academic programs and electives

Schools can request payments from parents for additional academic programs (for example, extension programs, special LOTE programs) and elective subjects that are offered in addition to the standard curriculum. These programs should be categorised as Optional Items and provided on a user-pays basis.

REVIEW CYCLE

This policy was last reviewed and approved by school council in **September 2020** and is scheduled for evaluation and review in **September 2021**



School Council President Signature: _____

Date _____

Executive Principal Signature: _____

Date: _____