Cut by classes

By LIA BICHEL

POOR and disadvantaged students may be the brunt of State Government funding cuts, with many schools considering cutting programs and services to make up for losses.

The State Government announced this month it would scrap the School Start Bonus and the school-based Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) payments would be discontinued.

Out of 22 schools in Casey’s north, four schools have benefited from the changes with a total increase of $38,000, while 18 schools will have a loss of almost $314,000, making a net loss across the 22 schools $275,000.

There are 12,574 students throughout all 22 schools, and 33 per cent of them receive EMA. Glenelgs Secondary College Principal Sue Peddie-eden and chair of the Casey Net-work executive, said the school had previously provided parents who received the EMA with funds similar to a line of credit until they received their payments so they could buy books and uniforms for their children.

Since the school will no longer receive the funding, they are unable to assist parents in need.

“How do parents who are on the pension or poor afford to buy (books and uniforms) for their kids?” Ms Peddie-eden said.

“I am very concerned there will be kids coming to school without these items. And for many students who are making the transition into year 7, not having the right books or uniforms and not fitting in will make the transition even more difficult.”

Ms Peddie-eden said she would write a letter to parents to inform them about the cuts and tell them about charitable programs which could provide assistance.

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Loving lingo

BERWICK Primary School was transformed into Spain during Education Week celebrations. To promote Spanish, which was introduced as a language program in classrooms this year, students enjoyed numerous Spanish-themed activities.

Principal Kaye Setson said the school was delighted with the way Spanish had captured the interest of the students and their parents.

“Our students are very enthusiastic about learning Spanish and were excited to participate in the week’s activities,” she said.

Mr Setson said one of the highlights of the week’s festivities was a dress-up day inspired by Spanish-speaking countries. About 900 students dressed in colourful costumes including a flamenco dancer, bull fighters, matador festival participants, tucan, Zorro, Rafael Nadal, Pablo Picasso, and Donas.

Mexico, Chile, Peru, Portugal and Argentina

Grade 1 student Tanis Normington dressed as Speedy Gonzales during a parade at Berwick Primary School.

They also got a cooking demonstration from Marco from the Robert Burnet Spanish restaurant in Collingwood, and made and tasted tapas.

Marco also cooked paella for the school’s open night giving away 170 serves of the Spanish cuisine.

Cut by classes on the education frontline

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“We really are seeing the need for support being pushed onto charitable organisations,” he said.

Many principals in the Casey network have echoed Ms Paddick’s concerns.

Berwick Lodge Primary School Principal Henry Greseck said he was “disappointed” when the changes were announced and said the public decision was “unfair and wrong.”

He said the school would lose $20,315 which could cause a “ripple effect” as the school might have to cut student services and maintenance to make up for the lost.

“We won’t be paying out on our kids who can’t afford things. If we need to make up the net reduction, we may have to cut programs and services which will mean everyone pays a price,” Mr Greseck said.

“We will look at spending less money on programs that we currently have - like student coaching and multi-media programs. And we may have to buy fewer resources like literature books and cut back on certain types of maintenance like fixing our raised concrete and pavement,”

Mr Greseck said he hoped the State Government would reconsider the changes before next year.

“Hopefully it can be put on the government to rethink its decision before they actually implement it,” he said.

James Cook Primary School is considered one of the winners from the changes and will experience a $57 million increase based on 2012 figures, but Principal Kathy Sharp said the small increase could put them into a loss if there were changes in enrollment.

“The $67 could turn into minus $1000 in an instant,” she said.

“The concern is for our families. We currently work in partnership with the school portion of the EMA and the family portion so students can purchase books, go on excursions to camps and things that add value to their life and education. Now with the changes, families may find they have additional pressures and the price money on daily living expenses and not for their children’s experiences meaning children could miss out.”

“I think schools and families work very hard together; it would be great if the State Government would work together to support us and be a third leg of the stool,”

Narre Warren North MP Luke Donnellan called the cuts savage and heartless and said they would “hit local families hard.”

But Minister for Education Martin Dixon’s spokesperson James Martin said the agency focused on reform to the EMA meant increased payments would be targeted to the most needy schools rather than going to all schools.

He said EMA paid directly to low-income families to help with costs such as uniforms, books and excursions and would actually increase from the start of next year. Eligible families with a child in prep will receive $200, up from $175; families with a child in Year 1 to 6 will receive $150, up from $117; and families with a child in Years 7 to 9 will receive $300, up from $230, and families with children in years 8 to age 16 will receive $250, up from $233.

While school-based EMA payments will cease from 2013, this will be offset by $62.3 million over two years in additional equity-based funding to schools with high numbers of students from a lower socio-economic background and increased parent payments.

Mr Dixon said “All schools are provided with a global budget that they are able to allocate to best meet their needs. EMA payments generally represent less than one percent of a school’s total budget.”

>>> For Berwick Lodge Primary School Principal Henry Greseck’s letter regarding the EMA changes, turn to Page 6.
Opinion

We all lose with EMA cuts

THE Victorian Government recently announced changes to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) that have been widely condemned in the media.

Mostly the coverage has been scathing, with school principals and organisational heads questioning the cuts as mean and indefensible in that they target school communities most in need of assistance.

In essence the State Government, in changing the formula, will allow schools to receive a portion of the EMA for primary schools that amounts to $117.50 per annum per eligible child and for secondary schools the amount is $234.50 – having reduced serious amounts of money, actual cash, out of schools.

Depending on a school’s Student Family Occupation Index (SFO) index the amount received could be as high as $60,000 or even more. Last resort to schools in the order of $1,000,000 per annum because of the change is not uncommon.

The government argues that the changes are in response to difficult times economically and that it is actually refining the system whereby it will be redirecting money to several hundred schools in need of financial assistance because of the economic disadvantage of their families.

Superficially this sort of argument may have appeal to some. Gig is a little deeper and the view becomes abhorrent.

Firstly no sensible school would lose money, and then only marginally. As yet, the government hasn’t been particularly coy about the actual sums of money they claim by which schools will benefit. Experience suggests school principals are more often than not, more than an exercise in smoke and mirrors.

The real issue is the reduction of millions of dollars from our schools.

For the record, which measures household economic disadvantage on a scale of 0 to 1, is designed to provide an aggregated average number for all families. Therefore if schools apply, say an SFO of 0.4 could be described as disadvantage, less disadvantage, or the majority of schools.

Under the new formula, schools with an SFO of less than 0.5 can reasonably expect to lose all their school portion of the EMA. Yet it is quite possible that such schools could have up to one third of all students ‘families’ covered by virtue of EMA payments. This represents a significant percentage of economic hardship.

The problem lies in the mathematics – no small irony there!

Because the SFO index is an average of all families, schools which have a broad cross-section of wealth and poverty in their community will be penalised. The SFO can mask the load of economic handicap amongst its families.

The upshot of this is that the hardship of those families isn’t magically cancelled out by the presence of families at the school with much higher social advantage. It simply means that work that way dripping the $1,175.50 per annum per eligible child from schools could mean an aggregated average number completely ignores the complex and powerful differences between schools to the disadvantage of all.

In a practical sense schools will have a daunting task to make. Only cuts or pressure poor families to cough up the dough. Neither is fair nor appropriate. As a rule, those schools, with significant numbers of EMA students aren’t exactly flush with funds. To lose even $15,000 from their annual budget and many schools will lose considerably more can be quite devastating.

Schools don’t segregate students on the basis of disadvantage when making decisions about their provision of educational programs, resources and services. The loss of the school portion of the EMA will affect all students at those schools if they do not recoup that money from the EMA families.

Programs will have to be cut, resources pruned and services reduced across the board. Everyone loses out.

Alternatively, requesting that parents struggling to make ends meet should make up the shortfall is that they have had the surplus money all the time. That is simply not true, a fact that our increasingly resource starved government would do well to heed.

There was a time when, in our country economic hardship was seen as the time we all dug deep and helped those in most need. It would be a sad reflection if those times were to pass into memory lane – dusted off for occasions of senseless compassion.

Henry Grossel,
Pastoral Coordinator, Berwick Primary School.

Credit not due

We have just been subjected to another expensive and misleading four-page advertisement by Liberal MP Greg Plebile.

This time, Mrs Plebile is claiming credit for Labor-funded projects, including the Clyde Road Duplication, Heliam Road duplication, Pound Road South Gippsland Freeway Intersector upgrade and Lindsay station. She is even suggesting that the Ballarat Government has funded the Monash Children’s Hospital and an expansion of Casey Hospital.

In reality, Monsieur Chavanon has been under-funded to the tune of $235 million and there is no funding for a single extra bed at Casey Hospital.

She boasts about the announcement of the duplication of North Warren-Danbougre Road, but just days before the announcement issued a media release claiming that it would not go ahead. Even her own side Loans her in the dark.

Mrs Plebile can start claiming credit for projects in Casey only when she actually delivers something for our community.

Judith Galroy,
Narellan Warren South ML.

Smoke and mirrors

I REFER to Minister Lockely’s letter (News, 24 March) regarding early childhood education and wish to clarify some matters. The Minister calls for the truth, so here it is.

The Ballarat Government has not provided a single dollar in this year’s state budget to upgrade our existing kindergartens or build new ones to meet growing demands. The only Government commitment was a Federal Government Partnership Agreement designed to expand kindergarten hours for all four-year-old children to at least 15 hours a week by 2013.

The Federal Labor Government is allocating $210 million over five years in the implementation of this policy. However, Minister Lockely’s reckless behaviour of lark vestment is now threatening the delivery of the final instalment of this money.

Minister Lockely freely admitted in April that 40 per cent of Victorian kindergartens are not ready to implement the 15-hour year and yet her government did not cut one cent in this year’s budget towards capital.

The Minister claims to have received $50 million in kindergarten upgrades but yet again she has failed to mention all of this money is from the Federal Government.

Our kinders should be the priority for Ballarat Government but they have been forgotten about in this year’s budget.

Luke Don
Narellan Warren ML.

Shed a lost cause

WELL men of Cranbourne, it looks as if we’ve missed out again for a Men’s Shed. They say they haven’t got any money to build us a new building on a community site so we missed out.

There are two public buildings under committee or other that are not used at all, until we know who these are. Perhaps they are a grave mistake that the council thought would be two more at the same place who aren’t using the people out to a new place.

They don’t know what they are going with them but we can’t use them till the new one built – is that too hard.

Norm Williams
Cranbourne.