

PARENT PAYMENTS (OVERVIEW) POLICY

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/carer contribution is highly valued by school communities.
 - Learning and teaching programs vary across schools based on local needs and circumstances and reflect each school's priorities, decisions and resources. This, in turn, informs the parent payment charges approved by school councils that may vary from one school to the next.
 - 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/carer payments, this includes consideration of how these 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/carers and the school community to continue improving student outcomes, wellbeing and engagement.
 - 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 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/carers to make a voluntary financial contribution to the school for a stated purpose.
 - The Education and Training Reform Act 2016 provides for instruction in the standard curriculum program to be free for all students in government schools. School Councils are responsible for developing and approving school-level payment charges and can request payments from parents/carers under three categories only – Essential Student Learning Items, Optional Items and Voluntary Financial Contributions:
 - **Essential Student Learning Items** are those items, activities or services that are essential to support student learning of the standard curriculum. These are items that the school considers essential for all students and which students take possession of. Parents may choose to provide the items themselves or buy the items from the school where practical and appropriate.
 - **Optional Items** are those items, activities or services that are offered in addition to or support instruction in the standard curriculum program. These are provided on a user-pays basis so that if parents choose to access them for students, they are required to pay for them.
 - **Voluntary Financial Contributions**
- Parents can be invited to make a donation to the school for a general or specific purpose, e.g. school grounds projects, library fund or for new equipment. Only some Voluntary Financial Contributions are tax-deductible.
- 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.

- 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.

Purpose

- To ensure that parent payment practices at Newport Gardens Primary School are consistent with other schools, transparent and that all children have access to the standard curriculum.
- To ensure school-level parent payment policies and processes are compliant with the DET's policy requirements.
- To ensure the school complies with the legislative requirements of the Education and Training Reform Act 2006.

Definitions

Under the Education and Training Reform Act 2006, in relation to a child, "**parent**" includes a guardian and every person who has parental responsibility for the child including parental responsibility under the Family Law Act 1975 of the Commonwealth and any person with whom a child normally or regularly resides.

Student Learning Items

These are items which parents/carers pay the school to provide or may provide themselves, if appropriate. These items are essential to support instruction in the standard curriculum program and include:

- materials that the individual student takes possession of, such as text books and student stationery
- materials for learning and teaching where the student consumes or takes possession of the finished articles (e.g. home economics, photography, catering)
- school uniform (where applicable)
- activities associated with instruction that all students are expected to attend such as cost associated with excursions and work placements

Note: If parents/carers choose to provide equivalent materials themselves, this should 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) which, due to their nature, can only be provided by the school.

Optional Items

These are items or services offered in addition to the standard curriculum program. Students may access these on a user-pays basis. These items include:

- 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)
- items the student purchases or hires (e.g. school magazines; class photos; formals/graduation functions; materials for extracurricular activities; student accident insurance)
- 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)

Voluntary Financial Contributions

Parents/carers, or anyone else, can be invited to make a donation to the school for the following purposes:

- 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 and are NOT tax deductible
- general voluntary financial contributions or donations to the school

- donations to a building trust fund or contributions to a library trust fund (these trust funds are approved by the Australian Taxation Office and are tax deductible)

The standard curriculum for Years Foundation - 10 means the implementation of the Victorian Curriculum Foundation - 10.

The standard curriculum for senior secondary schools means a program that enables a student to be awarded a VCE or VCAL qualification.

Implementation

- **The school will use the mandatory Parent Payment Policy and Implementation Template when communicating their parent payment arrangements to the school community.** This will enable the school to customise the implementation of the policy to the local context whilst retaining all information in the policy template.
- As required by DET, the school will adhere to the following principles:
 - **Educational value:** Student learning, aspirations and wellbeing will be paramount in determining parent payments practices
 - **Access, equity and inclusion:** All students will have access to the standard curriculum program and participation of all students to the full school program will be facilitated
 - **Affordability:** Cost to parents/carers will be kept to a minimum and be affordable for most families at the school
 - **Engagement and Support:** Early identification and engagement strategies to ensure parents are well informed of the payment options and supports available for those experiencing hardship
 - **Respect and Confidentiality:** Parents/carers and students experiencing hardship will be treated with respect, dignity, sensitivity and without judgement and the identity and personal information of all parents/carers and students will be kept confidential in respect to parent payments
 - **Transparency and Accountability:** School parent payment practices will be well communicated, clear and transparent and their impact on student programs and families will be reviewed by the School Council
- Students will not be denied access to the standard curriculum program, be 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, the school will consider the financial hardship circumstances of the student and 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.
- It is essential that when the School Council considers the proposed requests for parent payment that cost is kept to a minimum and is affordable. The Principal will ensure 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 above)
 - parents/carers 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
 - the school ensures information on payment options is available, accessible and easily understood by parents/carers, ensuring they know what to expect and what supports they can access
 - the status and details of any financial arrangements are kept confidential and shared only 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/carers 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 which enables parents/carers to plan and budget accordingly
 - parents/carers are provided with reasonable notice for any other payment requests that arise during the school year, ensuring that parents/carers have a clear understanding of the full financial contribution being sought
 - parents/carers experiencing hardship will not be 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/carers is not permitted
 - there will be only one reminder notice to parents for voluntary financial contributions per year
 - invoices/statements for unpaid essential or optional items accepted by parents are not generated more than monthly or according to the parent payment arrangement with the school
- Families may experience financial difficulties and may be unable to meet the full or part payments requested. At all times, the Principal and School Council will exercise sensitivity to the differing financial circumstances of individual families and will give

consideration to hardship arrangements on a case-by-case basis. There are a range of support options available. These can be accessed through **“Cost support for families”**.

- In respect of parent payments, the School Council will engage in effective communication with the school community and have strategies in place to ensure they are aware of and understand the needs and views of parents.
- At all times, the Principal and School Council will exercise sensitivity to the differing financial circumstances of individual families and will make decisions on a case-by-case basis.
- If necessary interpreting and translation services will be made available.

Hardship Consideration

- The school will be proactive in dealing with hardship and will endeavour to identify families experiencing difficulty through teachers and other appropriate strategies regularly used by the school.
- Where families have difficulty making payments, the Principal will encourage parents/carers to make an appointment to discuss with them the range of support options available, and to negotiate an appropriate alternative arrangement, such as payment by instalments, obtaining support from State Schools Relief, accessing the Camps, Sports & Excursions Fund and welfare and support agencies that have established partnership arrangements with schools.
- The school also has options for the sale of second hand uniforms.
- Decisions about how to manage non-payment of essential items or optional extras will be made by the Principal on a case-by-case basis.
- This hardship consideration statement will be communicated to parents/carers clearly and in a timely manner.
- Parents/carers will be assured that their child/children will have access to the educational opportunities being offered by the school.
- The School Contact Person undertaking this function will do so with sensitivity, respect and understanding to ensure she/he is responsive to families' needs.
- It is not acceptable to use coercion or harass parents/guardians to obtain payment.
- Under no circumstances will collectors of any type, including debt collectors, be used by the school to obtain any funds from parents/carers.
- The School Contact Person will have authority to use their discretion and make alternative payment arrangements such as
 - waiving of fees
 - reduced fees
 - deferred payment
 - flexible payment plans
 - cost saving options such as substituting one item for another, using resources that can be loaned from the school
 - referral to government and/or community assistance programs

When discussing payment and support options with parents, the parent payment School Contact Person is required by DET to:

- allow parents/carers to be accompanied by a support person or community advocate if they choose to do so
- explain to parents/carers that the 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/carers 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

The School Contact Person is expected to 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.

The school will assess where there may be barriers to learning and participation for students on the basis of financial hardship. The DET 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).

- The Principal and School Council are responsible for approving parent payments.
- The school will ensure that all communication with parents/carers, including payment requests, is fair and reasonable. Payment requests, letters or CASES21 invoices for student materials and services charges will be accompanied by the following information –
 - a description of each of the three parent payment categories
 - details of the materials and activities parents/carers are being asked to pay for
 - that parents/carers are required 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 School Contact Person if the parent wishes to discuss the payments further
- A copy of the Parent Payment Policy and a link to DET's Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) will be posted on the website.
- The Principal as Executive Officer of School Council, will ensure that the school-level policy complies with the DET's policy and that all staff are familiar with and adhere to it.
- The school will ensure that:
 - administrative and financial processes are compliant with Departmental requirements such as CASES 21 financial reporting.
 - invoices for unpaid essential student learning items or optional items accepted by parents are generated and distributed on a regular basis, but not more than once a month.
 - only the initial invitation for voluntary financial contributions and one reminder notice per year is sent to all parents/carers
 - receipts are issued to parents/carers immediately upon payment and receipted on CASES 21.
- All documentation relating to individual parent/carer payments will be kept confidential and in a secure location. It will be accessible only to the Principal, Business Manager and other nominated staff.
- If in doubt, for the most frequently asked questions, the Principal will refer to DET's website Frequently Asked Questions and other resources such as Costs and Financial Assistance, Finance.
- In the event of a parent complaint, the school will refer to the Complaints, Parents Policy.
- Please refer also to the Personal Devices – Parent Payments Policy and the Financial Management Policy and to other links on the DET website below.

Evaluation

- This policy will be reviewed at least annually (or if guidelines change) as part of its ongoing improvement and report back to the school community (latest DET update late August 2016).

This update was ratified by School Council in October 2016

Reference:

www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/spag/management/pages/parentpayments.aspx

