

**PURPOSE**

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

**RATIONALE**

The Victorian community shares a vision to build an education system that champions excellence and ensures that every child and young person has access to the opportunities to succeed in life, regardless of their background or circumstances. Schools are best placed to make local decisions which ensure that all students can access a broad range of learning opportunities that support their expectations and promote their aspirations as they move through the education system. Parent contribution, in all forms, assists schools to provide an enriched learning and teaching program for every student and 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.

**WHAT CAN SCHOOLS CHARGE FOR?**

The Education and Training Reform Act 2006 provides for instruction in the standard curriculum program to be free to all students in government schools. School councils are responsible for developing and approving school-level parent payment charges and can request payments from parents 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.

The attached diagram "Understanding Parent Payment Categories" provides examples of items and materials under each category.

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

**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

### **COST AND SUPPORT TO PARENTS**

When school councils consider the proposed requests for parent payments the cost is kept to a minimum and is affordable to most parents at the school.

School principals must ensure that:

- items students consume or take possession of are accurately costed
- payment requests are broadly itemised within the appropriate category
- parents are advised that they have the option of purchasing equivalent Essential Student Learning Items themselves, in consultation with the school
- information on payment options is available, accessible and easily understood to all parents so that they know what to expect and what supports they can access
- parents are provided with early notice of annual payment requests for school fees (i.e. a minimum of six weeks' notice prior to the end of the previous school year). This enables parents to save and budget accordingly.
- parents are provided with reasonable notice of any other payment requests that arise during the school year- ensuring parents have a clear understanding of the full financial contribution being sought
- the status and details of any financial arrangements are kept confidential and only shared with relevant school personnel
- parents experiencing hardship are not pursued for outstanding school fees from one year to the next
- use of debt collectors to obtain outstanding school funds owed to the school from parents 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.

### **SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES**

**Families may experience financial difficulties and may be unable to meet the full or part payments requested.** Principals and school councils exercise sensitivity to the differing financial circumstances of students and their families when considering parent payment fees. There are a range of support options available to support and assist parents. These can be accessed through “Cost support for families.”

Consideration to hardship arrangements in respect to payment requests is provided to families experiencing long term hardship or short term crisis on a confidential, case by case basis. All schools have written hardship arrangements that include a proactive approach to providing support for parents experiencing financial difficulty.

All parents are provided the name and contact details of a nominated parent payment contact person at the school who they can discuss payment arrangements with.

### **ENGAGING WITH PARENTS**

In respect to each school's development of its parent payments, school councils 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.

### **REVIEW OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION**

Schools will monitor the effectiveness and impact of the implementation of this policy at least annually as part of its ongoing improvement and report back to the school community.

The full Parent Payment Policy is available from the Department's School Policy and Advisory Guide.

Answers to the most commonly asked questions about school costs for parents see: Frequently Asked Questions – For Parents

Schools will develop their own implementation approach; however the following elements need to be covered to comply with the policy:

### **PARENT PAYMENT CHARGES**

- clear specification of the items, description and costs within the three payment categories
- articulate how payment requests support/enrich the school's learning/teaching program

### **PAYMENT ARRANGEMENTS AND METHODS**

Include options to pay in instalments

### **FAMILY SUPPORT OPTIONS**

- Second hand and low cost options e.g. school clothing pool, low cost suppliers
- CSEF
- State Schools Relief
- Local community supports

### **CONSIDERATION OF HARDSHIP**

Detail how the school will provide support to parents experiencing hardship, including:

- name and details of nominated parent payment contact person who parents can communicate with by phone, email or in person about their financial situation and related difficulties in making payments.
- the processes for meeting/communicating with parents experiencing hardship, including information to be provided

Note: in reflecting on the school's hardship arrangements, schools could consider their proactive strategies to engage with parents disconnected from the school who

may be experiencing hardship, such as discretely approaching families who may need support and special payment arrangements.

**COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES**

- Outline how the policy and the school's implementation will be communicated with the school community. Schools are encouraged to have this prominently on the school website.
- State the opportunities available for parents to raise any issues, make general inquiries about charges and the contact details where complaints can be referred

**MONITORING AND REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY**

- Include a statement about the responsibility of the school council to monitor the implementation of the policy, identify the factors/measures to be taken into account, such as transparency of processes and engagement with parents, how/when it will be reported back to the school community, and timing and processes of review.