



Every risk needs addressing

VCOSS feedback on the Education and
Training Climate Change Adaptation Action
Plan

August 2021

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body for the community services sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

VCOSS advocates for a fair and equitable society by supporting the social service industry and representing the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage.

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VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and pays respect to their Elders past and present.

This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.



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Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Education and Training Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan (AAP). We commend the legal requirement that all AAPs must support vulnerable communities and promote social justice under the Climate Change Act 2017.

VCOSS considers successful adaptation as improving the wellbeing of people experiencing disadvantage, rather than simply ensuring that they are not worse off. Victoria's response to climate change is an opportunity to reduce entrenched inequality by addressing the factors that heighten vulnerability.

The AAP analyses the risks and opportunities to the education and training system through the following domains:

- health, wellbeing and emergency management;
- knowledge, capability and adaptive capacity;
- teaching and learning, curriculum, and;
- assets and infrastructure.

Many of those risks and opportunities, however, are not actually addressed by the 22 actions identified in the AAP. Further, VCOSS identifies there is not sufficient consideration of the disproportionate impact of climate change on people experiencing disadvantage. This is a significant oversight. VCOSS would be pleased to provide support to the Department to develop this part of the AAP. VCOSS also notes there is scope to collaborate with the community sector to deliver the aims of the AAP and VCOSS stands ready to assist with this engagement.

We have reviewed the plan through the four areas outlined above and make the following recommendations for strengthening and enabling the plan's adaptation actions:

- Provide training for teachers and educators so staff have the skills, knowledge and confidence to address the wellbeing impacts of climate change on students.
- Fund and support early learning providers to build organisational resilience and adapt educational activities to reflect the impacts of climate change on wellbeing and service delivery.
- Build and sustain partnerships with community sector organisations to support climate change adaptation for people experiencing disadvantage.
- Fund and support the Learn Local sector to develop and deliver a dedicated learning stream on climate change adaptation for community members.
- Provide funding for the Learn Local sector to improve business continuity, build infrastructure resilience and adapt service delivery to the impacts of climate change.
- Empower and resource students to take action on climate change in their local communities, as part of the Department's commitment to building student voice.

- Ensure the Victorian training system has the capacity and capability to deliver the knowledge and skills required to support the State's transition to a net-zero carbon economy.
- Install air-conditioning and solar panels, upgrade energy efficiency and improve shade in all government school classrooms and playgrounds.
- Undertake a vulnerability assessment and address the disproportionate impacts on students experiencing disadvantage.

Health, wellbeing and emergency management

Recommendations

Provide training for teachers and educators so staff have the skills, knowledge and confidence to address the wellbeing impacts of climate change on students.

Fund and support early learning providers to build organisational resilience and adapt educational activities to reflect the impacts of climate change on wellbeing and service delivery.

The AAP identifies the risk that:

“Events such as bushfires can cause trauma in children and young people; such trauma can have long-term learning impacts if not addressed appropriately. There is a risk that there will be increased demand on teaching staff who provide the first point of contact and support, and as such additional supports may be required, including an increasing demand for practitioners. Teachers and support staff will have increased demand to provide ongoing support to address learning impacts.” (p20)

An extra adaptation action is required to provide professional development for teachers about the impact of climate change on physical health and mental wellbeing, so that they have the capacity to confidently support students. For example, teachers need to understand – and know how to identify and respond to – climate impacts such as increases in family violence following emergencies or poor sleep in hot homes during heatwaves.

In addition to professional development, the workforce will need other supports to mitigate stress and fatigue associated with the climate emergency. The Department can draw on insights from the Black Summer bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic to identify emerging needs, recognise any gaps in current models of support and implement appropriate solutions.

VCOSS notes core elements would likely include ensuring employee assistance programs are accessible and fit-for-purpose in the context of climate change, providing mental health first aid training and allowing additional time for debriefing and reflection. Investment should also build resilience at a systems level. This could include sharing examples of best-practice models for other providers to adapt or scaling exemplary models across the system. There is also an opportunity to invest

in building new capabilities in organisational leadership to respond to multiple and complex challenges unique to climate adaptation.

In regard to early childhood, action 22 commits to: “*Continue to explore ways to support the early childhood sector to adapt to the current and expected impacts of climate change.*” (p26) There are practical actions that should be delivered before the next AAP in 2026, such as scenario workshops with the early childhood sector. Such workshops would assist the Department and the sector to better understand how service delivery might be impacted by the changing climate – for example, the impact of multiple, concentrated extreme weather events on providers’ resilience or the rising frequency of heatwaves on the delivery of outdoor programs. The Western Alliance for Greenhouse Action and RMIT explored Climate Resilient Service Delivery through scenario planning with maternal and child services in West Melbourne.¹ These sessions could be adapted for the education sector to improve providers’ resilience to climate change.

The sector has undergone significant change over the last 10 years with the introduction of Child Safe Standards, Child Information Sharing Scheme and MARAM, alongside new child-to-staff ratios, qualification requirements and the implementation of School Readiness Funding. While these changes are largely positive and promote better outcomes for children, many carry an administrative burden and take time to understand, implement and embed.

Any work in building climate resilience must be appropriately supported to minimise reform fatigue as well as the financial cost of implementing changes. Providers need funding to adapt their service delivery and infrastructure, and staff require sufficient time to implement the changes. Modifications could be based on tailored workshops with individual providers to identify organisational gaps in preparing for, responding to and recovering from hypothetical shocks and stressors.

¹ RMIT University, *Climate Resilient Service Delivery*, accessed 3 August 2021: cur.org.au/project/climate-resilient-service-delivery

Knowledge, capability and adaptive capacity

Recommendations

Build and sustain partnerships with community sector organisations to support climate change adaptation for people experiencing disadvantage.

Fund and support the Learn Local sector to develop and deliver a dedicated learning stream on climate change adaptation for community members.

Provide funding for the Learn Local sector to improve business continuity, build infrastructure resilience and adapt service delivery to the impacts of climate change.

VCOSS commends the AAP for acknowledging that:

“The community sector has many initiatives to help climate change adaptation, particularly for vulnerable groups and those experiencing disadvantage. There are several groups that work with early childhood services, schools, teachers and their communities to create awareness of climate change, encourage localised learning and action, and embed climate change at the whole-of-school level.” (p15)

The community sector plays an important and ongoing role in supporting learners’ wellbeing and sustaining their engagement with education across all stages of life.

The discussion paper acknowledges the strategic partnership between DET and VCOSS. VCOSS welcomes the invitation to provide feedback to this body of work but has not had sustained engagement on the specific issues outlined in the AAP and their implications outside of this process.

The formal partnership between DET and VCOSS can be extended to leverage the insights and expertise of the community sector in supporting children, young people and families to design place-based solutions that build climate resilience, improve health and wellbeing and help communities thrive.

VCOSS would welcome the opportunity to elevate the existing partnership with DET to increase the opportunities for the community sector to play an ongoing role in working with government to maximise opportunities to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

An additional action should capture the importance of a partnership approach with the community sector.

For example, Learn Locals are community-based not-for-profits who support adult learners with diverse needs. They are an important part of the education and training eco-system.

Action 16 addresses the role of Learn Locals in committing to: *“Support the Learn Local sector to adapt its service offering so that vulnerable cohorts do not experience additional barriers to learning as a result of climate change and Traditional Owners are engaged.”* (26)

In addition to support for the Learn Local sector to adapt its current service offering and curriculum, assistance should include:

- creating a dedicated learning stream on climate change adaptation, which would require developing curriculum and training the workforce;
- embedding learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic, such as ensuring the adult community education offerings through Learn Locals were not adversely impacted financially;
- committing funding for providers to build their business continuity so the risk of service disruption is minimised during extreme weather events, and;
- providing funding to ensure infrastructure is resilient to the changing climate, e.g. back-up power supply, solar panels to absorb increasing cooling costs, installing HEPA filters to protect occupants from bushfire smoke, etc.

Teaching and learning, curriculum

Recommendation

Empower and resource students to take action on climate change in their local communities, as part of the Department's commitment to building student voice.

Ensure the Victorian training system has the capacity and capability to deliver the knowledge and skills required to support the State's transition to a net-zero carbon economy.

The AAP commits to a short-term 2026 objective that will: "*Develop age-appropriate approaches to engage and empower young people to take action on climate change.*" (p8) Although there are adaptation actions about curriculum, there are no actions that support students to use their education about climate change for real-world action.

This is a missed opportunity because young Victorians are passionate about climate change in Victoria and have the skills, motivation and creativity to help their communities adapt. Students should be actively empowered to undertake projects in and out of school with adequate support and supervision.

For example, Banksia Gardens Community Services' (BGCS) Climate Adaptation Requires Youth Action project in Broadmeadows trains young people about climate change before supporting the cohort to develop their own local adaptation initiatives.² The program furthers students' education about climate impacts through creative and hands-on learning to empower young people to become local adaptation leaders.

The 10-week training program developed by BGCS could be a useful starting point for action 19: "*Convene a diverse group of students to advise on the most engaging learning and teaching resources relating to climate change and communicate these to schools.*" (p26) BGCS could provide advice about engaging students from diverse backgrounds in communities with high unemployment.

Other youth-led initiatives like HEY! Grants should be supported.

In regards to training and skills, the AAP should consider workers in emission-intensive industries when implementing action 17: "*Through the government's skills industry engagement framework, consult with industry to understand any skills issues arising from both the impacts of climate change and the requirements to transition towards a net-zero carbon economy by 2050.*" (p26) This includes re-skilling and up-skilling power station

² Banksia Gardens Community Services, C.A.R. Y.A Climate Adaptation Requires Youth Action Instructor Manual, March 2020.

workers in the Latrobe Valley and ensuring courses for emerging industries are affordable and accessible.

The plan should also adopt a gender lens and consider that emerging industries like batteries and renewable energy are male-dominated. Training and apprenticeships should include specific pathways for women entering the sector. In addition, given the important role that community sector workers will play in supporting students, families, teachers and educators to adapt to climate change, sufficient attention should be provided to building the pipeline of community sector workers. As part of this, the Department of Education and Training has a key role in ensuring access to affordable, high-quality industry-relevant training and employment opportunities.

Assets and infrastructure

Recommendation

Install air-conditioning and solar panels, upgrade energy efficiency and improve shade in all government school classrooms and playgrounds.

Action 4 is a solid starting point for addressing the impact of heatwaves on school children: “Develop a plan to respond to thermal comfort-related impacts of climate change on Victorian government schools.” (p25) Extreme heat harms students and impedes their learning. For example, headaches and nosebleeds have been reported in non-air-conditioned classrooms that rise above 30°C on hot days.³

Air-conditioning is not a requirement for all government schools and many schools depend on fundraising to purchase cooling systems. The plan should commit to a rollout of efficient reverse-cycle air-conditioners for every classroom and pair it with rooftop solar panels to assist with the additional energy usage and minimise carbon emissions.

The energy efficiency of school buildings should also be upgraded to improve thermal comfort. Insulation and draught proofing would help students keep cool in summer and warm in winter while increasing the effectiveness of cooling and heating.

Heat exposure in the playground can be reduced by planting trees for shade and using heat-smart materials. For example, unshaded asphalt and artificial grass is common but can reach 70°C during summer.⁴

Consideration should be given to streamlining processes that enable early learning services and other education providers to access climate resilient infrastructure such as shade sails. For example, VCOSS members who work in early learning noted the application process to install or replace a shade sail is long and arduous. Current processes create delays for services to access these key pieces of infrastructure and adds additional administrative burden.

³ H Cook, Nosebleeds, headaches, a hospital visit: The students with no aircon, The Age, 28 February 2019: www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/nosebleeds-headaches-a-hospital-visit-the-students-with-no-aircon-20190228-p510v6.html

⁴ S Pfautsch, S Rouillard, A Wujeska-Klaue, A Bae, L Vu, K Holmes, M Leishman, L Staas, A Manea, S Tabassum and A Ossola, *School Microclimates*, Western Sydney University and Macquarie University for the State Government of NSW, 2020.

Equity

Recommendation

Undertake a vulnerability assessment and address the disproportionate impacts on students experiencing disadvantage.

Action 16 is the only action that explicitly mentions vulnerability despite the short-term 2026 objective to: *“Develop approaches to support the most vulnerable in our system.”* (p8) The plan also identifies the risk that:

“Children are considered more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change; but, within this group, there are even more vulnerable groups...Learners with disabilities may also have communication difficulties, challenging behaviour and difficulty understanding changes to routine caused by an evacuation or similar response to a hazard.” (p20)

And furthermore:

“Children are vulnerable to climate change impacts, and young children and children from disadvantaged background are more vulnerable. Research shows that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are at greater risk of poorer educational outcomes than their peers, and some climate change impacts could exacerbate this.” (p16)

VCOSS commends the AAP for acknowledging the disproportionate impact of climate change on students experiencing disadvantage but the plan must tangibly address these concerns.

A starting point could be taking a learner-centred approach in undertaking a comprehensive vulnerability assessment of the early childhood, education and training sectors to understand how different learners and their families are at-risk due to climate change. This should include what needs to be done to support learning outcomes and sustain engagement with education, such as different parts of government and the service system working together to address barriers to education. For example, families living in overcrowded homes with low thermal comfort during heatwaves may need support to find suitable housing to get the rest needed to be ready to learn.

The assessment should be backed by funding to properly address its findings. This would ensure that learners experiencing disadvantage are not at greater risk of climate change in 2026 than they are already in 2021.



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