Opinion:
Schools in deep water over mandatory swim lessons

by Henry Grossek
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Earlier this week principals in Victorian government primary schools were stunned to learn that as from the beginning of 2017 that all students would have to be able to swim 50 metres continuously by the time they finished year 6. Swimming would become a mandatory part of the new Victorian Curriculum as part of the Andrews Government’s aim to prevent deaths by drowning. It didn’t help that principals found this out via the media.

There is no disagreement about the goal – having all children competent in swimming is a no brainer. But, as is too often the case, the devil is in the detail and in this case the detail doesn’t stack up. More’s the pity because with some meaningful consultation between the government and school principals, so many of the self-inflicted obstacles to potential success with this initiative could have been avoided and the government would have been on a winner.

Earlier this year schools received their new Parent Payment Policy and Implementation Guidelines. A key feature of the new guidelines was the distinction made between that for which schools could charge parents and that for which they could not. Whilst instruction is free, parents can be requested to pay for activities associated with instruction, such as travel, entry fees and accommodation. Consequently, with swimming becoming a mandatory activity as from the beginning of next year, schools will not be allowed to charge parents for the swimming instruction fee component. Education Minister James Merlino made this clear in his announcement when he categorically ruled out any funds being provided to schools to cover this expenditure increase.

This decision will cause a major financial headache for schools – and we’re talking in the thousands of dollars for many schools. To date, schools have avoided the danger of being caught out on funding shortfalls for activities such as camps, excursions and swimming as they are defined as optional activities, meaning that parents who choose to have their children participate, pay for all costs including instruction. Of course most schools retain some funds to enable children of families in hardship to attend these optional activities, but by defining the activity as mandatory, schools will have to foot the bill for instruction for all students.

Most schools budgeting plans for 2017 are well under way and optional swimming programs for next year have been booked well in advance. Also, parents will have received their individual parent payment packages for their children consistent with the guidelines that require schools to provide parents with at least notice of 6 weeks before the end of the school year. Now, with just 3 weeks of the school year remaining, the potential for financial chaos in schools
has been created and needlessly so. It is this aspect of the out-of-the-blue announcement by Minister Merlino that upsets principals greatly.

The fact that by the end of year 6 all students are required to be able to swim at least 50 metres continuously, is an organisational nightmare – all the more so because it starts next year. Think about it! All primary schools will now have to assess their year 6 students early next year, and that will require them to hastily scramble around to find swimming centres that have time still available to timetable a flood of schools all trying to meet the last minute in the year, non-negotiable announcement by the Minister for Education. Having done that, schools will then have to schedule swimming lessons for those children in year 6 not yet capable of swimming the mandated 50 metres continuously. The cost to the school for the instructional part of that will be significant and will increase as the year progresses as individual children reach the benchmark leaving fewer and fewer children participating.

Then there is the disruption to the teaching program that the requirement that year 6 students be able to swim 50 metres continuously will cause. It appears to have completely escaped the attention of those select few who made this call that children learn at varying rates, not to mention in different ways. Some year 6 students may well be attending swimming lessons for the greater part of the year. What about everything else they are supposed to be learning? They will clearly be disadvantaged in relation to their classmates in this respect. Some sensible consultation with schools would have enabled the Minister to consider the wiser option of phasing the 50 metre swimming component in over two or three years. That would have avoided an unnecessary headache of gigantic proportions for all concerned. Too easy!

On another note what now happens to the many schools Early Years voluntary swimming programs that have already been booked? Do they cancel them and replace them with their Year 6 students, given that many swimming centres are already heavily booked? That hardly makes any sense.

More generally, it’s doubtful that all schools will be able to meet the new swimming requirements immediately – for example, legitimate questions remain regarding availability at swimming centres and the reticence of some community members regarding their children participating in swimming programs per se. Principals will have to deal with such issues, and promptly, and at a time of the year when they are preoccupied with a plethora of other requirements.

Quite apart from the standard end of year school based activities, there are the annual compliance requirements of School Annual Implementation Plans, the content of which has changed again, staff performance management and the Child Safety Standards, the compliance requirements for which many schools are still struggling with due to the relatively short notice they were given to complete. Then there is the no small matter of staff employment with significant numbers of schools still advertising and interviewing potential employees for next year.

By the way, schools still have not heard from the Department of Education (DET) regarding the new swimming requirements announced by the Minister for Education – this despite the latest DET Bulletin arriving at schools by email 24 hours after his announcement.
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