

THE AGE



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One woman's mission to save strays from the streets
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'DIFFERENCE IS A STRENGTH'

Students at St Albans Secondary College have backgrounds from 60 countries and 70 languages. Such rich diversity, says its principal, is what makes it one of the leading state schools in Melbourne's western suburbs. But, as our special report reveals, education in the booming region is stretched beyond its means.

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St Albans' John Coulson-Silva with, from left, Ricardo Vom, Tiana Stepanovski, Ethan Shaw, Vanessa Ngo, Minhthu Huynh and Haily Le.

Photo: Paul Jeffers

Promise to parents, pushback to premiers

Natassia Chrysanthos
Nick Newling

Health and Disability Minister Mark Butler has moved to assure parents their kids won't be kicked off the NDIS and slapped down complaints from state premiers as concern brews about the government's ability to deliver a new disability system for children within two years.

The federal government stands to save up to \$100 billion over the next decade if Butler can contain growth in the NDIS to 5 per cent a year, as he flagged on Wednesday, in part by delivering a new Thriving Kids support scheme for children who have otherwise flocked to the insurance scheme.

But curbing costs of the NDIS, which grew by 10.2 per cent last financial year, will rely on state governments matching Butler's urgency in rolling out the new system for children with developmental delays and mild or

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Chalmers revs up EV road user tax amid 'quick wins'

Paul Sakkal, Shane Wright, Millie Muroi and Nick Newling

Treasurer Jim Chalmers has revealed plans to slap EV drivers with road-user charges within months and to revamp environmental protection laws to accelerate the development of houses, mines and renewable energy projects, as he declared the tax system defective.

At the end of the government's three-day economic roundtable, Chalmers confirmed a checklist of

Why we can't wait 25 years for results

SHANE WRIGHT ANALYSIS PAGE 6



more than 30 areas - most of which had been known before the start of the talks - that he and other ministers will move on, some within days.

Since Tuesday, more than 30 hand-picked experts, including representatives from business groups,

unions, academia and community organisations, have sat in the cabinet room discussing issues from the state of the budget to the cost of small tariffs on imported goods.

Chalmers, who declared the roundtable a success, said the government would move on several "quick wins" to help lift the living standards of all Australians, improve the budget bottom line and make the economy more resilient.

One of the first actions will be to get state and territory government

agreement on road user charges to help make up for the looming collapse in fuel excise due to the rise of electric vehicles.

Chalmers and NSW Treasurer Daniel Mookhey were working on options for the proposed charges that will go to a meeting of all the nation's treasurers on September 5.

"There was more than the usual amount of consensus in a conceptual way around road user charging, a lot of reform appetite in that area," he

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Boy arrested over attack

Erin Pearson
Crime and justice reporter

A boy cleared of murdering teenager Declan Cutler due to his young age is back behind bars after a violent home invasion where a man was stabbed, shot and beaten with a hammer.

Footage shows Kemal Akbulut, 60, being repeatedly attacked by four males in the July incident in Gladstone Park, in Melbourne's north-west.

Police allege one of the attackers was a 16-year-old boy involved in the 2022 gang killing of Cutler, who has been back in the community since a judge freed him in late 2023.

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As leaders debate peace, Putin takes what he can



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'PEOPLE ARE DRINKING IT'

Hospital safety fears prompts hand sanitiser move



NEWS

Students celebrating VCE success, but the western suburbs need more schools

Noel Towell, Craig Butt

Melbourne's booming west needs dozens of new government, Catholic, private and specialist schools in the coming years to catch up with the educational access and choice available to residents of other parts of the city.

But *The Age's* data analysis of exam results shows that schools in the western suburbs are surmounting their challenges and performing competitively in VCE against students from the more educationally advantaged areas of Melbourne.

Our analysis of high-achieving western suburbs schools, by VCE results, shows Suzanne Cory High School, Williamstown High School and St Albans Secondary College top the government school table, while Lowther Hall Anglican Grammar School, Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School and Al-Taqwa College are best-performing non-government schools.

Over coming months, *The Age* is strengthening its focus on Melbourne's booming west, with a special series examining the positives and challenges the region faces.

In October, our reporters will moderate a West of Melbourne Economic Development Alliance (WoMEDA) summit to discuss a vision for the success of the western suburbs. The alliance of university, industry, community and local government experts works to unlock the west's economic potential.

Private schools in the west are reporting an enrolments boom. Students are flocking to independent education in the region at twice the average Victorian rate, according to Independent Schools Victoria (ISV).

The lobby group said there were 24 independent schools in the west in 2024, with 23,250 students, up from 18 schools and 16,400 students in 2019. The average annual growth rate of 7.2 per cent is more than twice the state's average, with further rapid growth expected in the west in coming years.

ISV's Rachel Holthouse said that faith-based schools were key to the growth in independent enrolments in the west.

"We are seeing more and more lower to middle-income families in Melbourne's growth areas choosing an independent school education," Holthouse said.

"This is particularly evident in the growth of Islamic and Christian



St Albans' John Coulson-Silva with, from left, Ricardo Vom, Minhthu Huynh, Haily Le, Vanessa Ngo, Ethan Shaw and Tiana Stepanovski. Photo: Paul Jeffers

schools in Melbourne's west.

"These schools provide families with an education that aligns with their beliefs and priorities."

In many parts of the west, such as gentrifying Williamstown, parents seeking private education send children to exclusive schools in the inner-south and inner-east.

The state government, Catholic school authorities and the private sector face challenges to keep up with demand for classroom places as the population in parts of the west grows faster than anywhere else in Australia.

RMIT researchers have calculated that children in Melton and Wyndham live further from their schools than students in any other council area of metropolitan Melbourne. Melton council estimates it will need eight new high schools to cater for 8795 new secondary students expected by 2031.

At St Albans Secondary College, one of the highest-performing government schools in the VCE, which teaches children with backgrounds from more than 60 countries and more than 70 language groups, diversity is a superpower, according to acting principal John Coulson-Silva.

"That diversity gives us a richness. Our students really get to experience the best of every culture



Use the QR code to find the full Go West series



and see the differences and understand and appreciate that difference is a strength," Coulson-Silva said.

The school's average VCE study score of 31 last year puts it in the academic elite of non-select-entry government schools anywhere in the state, and Coulson-Silva said the teachers and support staff worked hard to overcome social and economic challenges to achieve excellence.

"We have an unrelenting focus on continuous improvement for each and every student, driven by a culture of high expectations," the acting principal said. "We realised a long time ago, one size doesn't fit all for our students and our families."

"We ensure that our classrooms, as much as possible, are calm

learning environments for students, where they can feel safe, where the routines are predictable, and we create an environment that prioritises learning, number one."

The western region's cultural diversity also poses challenges.

The Western English Language School (WELS) provides a specialised curriculum for students who are entitled to up to 12 months of intensive English language instruction.

But the language school is co-located with mainstream schools in the Maribyrnong, Brimbank, Hobsons Bay and Wyndham council areas, and the one primary school in Melton offering the service only teaches children up to year 6.

The National Growth Areas Alliance says Melton schools are reporting large numbers of students entitled to enrol in the program, but who would not sign up for WELS because of the long journeys required to access the lessons.

High-achieving students in the west also often face a long commute to their school of choice. John Monash Science School in Clayton told *The Age* last year that some of its students from Point Cook spent two hours each way travelling to school.

Access to the academically elite select-entry government schools is another huge challenge for families

in the west, with only one of the four main select secondary schools, Suzanne Cory High School in Werribee, west of the Maribyrnong River.

The state government has acknowledged the gap, putting \$1 million in this year's budget for a feasibility study for a new select-entry maths and science school in the north-western suburbs.

Education Minister Ben Carroll said the government was working hard to meet the soaring demand for classroom places in the west.

"We have opened 32 new schools in Wyndham and Melton LGAs [local government areas] since 2017 and are opening a further seven new schools in Wyndham and Melton in the next two years – ensuring every Victorian student can access a world-class education close to home," he told *The Age*.

Carroll's office said there were plans to expand the English language program in Melton.

The Catholic school sector is also building in the west, as it, too, experiences surging demand for places, a spokesperson for the Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools said.

The West of Melbourne Summit, presented by WoMEDA with *The Age*, will be held on October 22 and 23. For details go to womedata.com.au

Top non-government schools in Melbourne's west in 2024

School	Median study score	Percentage of study scores 40 or above
Lowther Hall Anglican Grammar School	34	19%
Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School	34	16%
Al-Taqwa College	34	10%
Westbourne Grammar School	33	15%
Islamic College of Melbourne	31	13%
Ave Maria College	31	11%
Overnewton Anglican Community College	31	9%
St Aloysius College	31	9%
St Bernard's College	31	8%
OneSchool Global Vic	31	8%
Good News Lutheran College	31	7%
Mount St Joseph Girls' College	31	7%

Note: Schools are categorised as being in Melbourne's west based on Department of Health boundaries

Top government schools in Melbourne's west in 2024

School	Median study score	Percentage of study scores 40 or above
Suzanne Cory High School	34	19%
Williamstown High School	31	10%
St Albans Secondary College	31	9%
Braybrook College	31	8%
Strathmore Secondary College	30	6%
Maribyrnong Secondary College	30	6%
Keilor Downs College	30	5%
Mount Alexander 7-12 College	30	5%

How VCE study scores in Melbourne's west compare

Average scores for government, independent and Catholic schools by region in 2024. (The median VCE study score is 30)

	Government	Independent	Catholic
Eastern Melbourne	29	33.1	32
Southern Melbourne	28.6	31.8	29.8
Western Melbourne	27.6	30.3	29.7
Northern Melbourne	26.7	28.3	29.3
Regional and rural Victoria	26.1	29.9	28.4

Source: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority data analysed by *The Age*