

# Premier 'made secret fire deal'

## From Page 1

In a bulletin issued to United Firefighters Union members yesterday, Mr Marshall said the union had been assured it would be consulted prior to the appointment of the next chief of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade.

"The UFU was not consulted and is yet to be officially informed that Mr Stephens has been appointed," the bulletin said.

The union's Victorian leader says the man chosen for the MFB's top job has a "union-busting, budget-breaking" track record in his previous job as fire chief in the northern English city of Liverpool.

Within hours of the news of Mr Stephens' appointment to the MFB yesterday, Mr Marshall was on the attack, saying the former chief officer of the Merseyside Fire Brigade had presided over savage cuts to firefighter numbers.

Mr Marshall also alleged that fire deaths in the Liverpool area had doubled during Mr Stephens' tenure.

According to the *Liverpool Echo* newspaper, Mr Stephens was known for his fierce opposition to government-imposed budget cuts.

Both the MFB and Emergency Services Minister Mr Merlino said yesterday their new man had a record of advocating for his work-

forces. MFB board president Jasmine Doak said Mr Stephens had a wealth of experience in firefighting, emergency services and with unions.

*"This a low point for union relations with the state government."*

Peter Marshall, UFU Victorian secretary

"Dan has a great relationship with the [Fire Brigades Union] in the UK ... He works in a unionised workforce and he knows how important that is," Ms Doak said.

Mr Marshall will gather his members on Monday for a large meeting to discuss the new appointment.

The union leader wrote in his bulletin: "The UFU has serious concerns about the appropriateness of the appointment as we do not want to import the British fire services culture of forfeiting safe working conditions and firefighter positions for pecuniary purposes."

Mr Marshall earlier had a clear warning to the Andrews' government that there was trouble coming if it persisted with hiring Mr Stephens.

"We are surprised that a Labor Andrews government would sup-

port the appointment of Mr Stephens, who has reportedly been party to union-busting tactics," Mr Marshall wrote.

"This is a low point for union relations with the Andrews government and will be a defining moment in the short and long-term relationship."

But Mr Merlino said: "We have always been determined that a wide-ranging search would be undertaken to find the best possible candidate for this important role."

"A key part of Mr Stephen's role will be to rebuild the relationship between management and the MFB workforce."

# 'If I could fly, it would be the perfect school'

## Henrietta Cook

The most infuriating moment of Elliott's commute to school comes eight minutes after he has left home.

That's when he passes Seabrook Primary, a school the six-year-old can't attend because he lives outside its zone.

A glitch in Victoria's enrolment rules means Elliott has to travel 10 kilometres by car to access his "neighbourhood" school, Altona Green Primary.

"Sometime it takes us 40 minutes, sometimes it takes 38 minutes," the grade 1 student says.

As the crow flies, Elliott lives a kilometre from his school. But a sprawling wetland separates his Point Cook home from the schoolyard and there's no direct road access.

It's a scenario that plays out across Melbourne, a city where invisible lines hike up property prices, spark grassroots community campaigns and upend many families' lives.

The Education Department says it may take into account major geographic features including rivers and creeks when determining enrolment boundaries.

But *The Age* has spoken to families who say eight-lane highways, streams, golf courses and even an RAAF base have been ignored.

Sometimes the so-called closest school is not that close at all.

As we grind to a halt on Point Cook Road in Melbourne's west, Elliott's father Pablo Feruglio struggles to contain his frustration.

"The policy is designed so families go to the school that is closest to them," he says.

"But no one has looked at how families access that school. If I could fly it would be the perfect school."

Every metropolitan school has an enrolment boundary, which is calculated using a straight line, or how the crow flies.

These lines are drawn up using Voronoi polygons (a shape that reflects the halfway point between a school and surrounding schools) and mapping software.

When enrolments soar and a school nears capacity, more restrictive enrolment zones are put



Pablo Feruglio, with son Elliott, struggles to contain his frustration with the inflexible drawing of school enrolment boundaries. Photo: Jason South

into place. These bar students from attending the school if they live outside the zone.

The Education Department says the zones are calculated by considering a family's distance and access to a school.

On the other side of town, in the north-eastern suburb of Bellfield, Rebecca Armstrong is also exasperated. Her daughter Olive, who starts prep next year, has been assigned a state school that is not the most convenient.

While Charles La Trobe P-12 College's Olympic Village in Heidelberg West might be the closest school as the crow flies, busy Bell Street stands between the family's home and the school. "I would like her to be able to walk to school but it's too dangerous," she says.

She says the most convenient school is Ivanhoe Primary. Unfortunately, she lives a few houses outside its zone.

Joe Hurley, an urban planning



expert at RMIT, says the current rules can lead to perverse allocations of students to schools.

"The closest school may not be the easiest school to get to," he says.

He says if the department wants to encourage families to walk, cycle or catch public transport to school, they should allocate the closest school based on these routes.

Mr Feruglio fired off emails to department bureaucrats and argued that his son should be allowed to attend Seabrook Primary.

"We are concerned that this situation will negatively impact on the education of our son and make our family life extremely challenging," he wrote.

He also sent them maps of his daily commute to prove that it was the most convenient school.

But his pleas were unsuccessful. "They told me about their straight line policy. They draw a line on the map, and if you are on one side you go to school A."

The family has tested out different

routes and modes of transport to school.

Walking takes 37 minutes and cycling 20 minutes. These options are not viable because of work and other childcare commitments.

An alternative route by car takes them past Carranballac P-9 College, another school they are zoned out of.

According to a department spokesman, the current policy strikes a balance between ensuring families can attend the local school and also have the option of enrolling at other schools when there is room.

"There are some historical anomalies and quirks in school boundaries, so the system is not completely uniform across the state, yet the existing boundaries are well understood at a local level," he says.

Mr Feruglio says he's not chasing a better school.

He's impressed by the teachers at Altona Green Primary and Elliott is happy.

"These are all good schools. This is purely about logistics."

# Build three rail tunnels: council

**Timna Jacks**

Melbourne needs two more underground rail tunnels by 2035 to cope with exploding population growth, the city council has proposed.

Melbourne City Council also says trams need road and traffic light priority throughout the city – as in Zurich – to cope with the demand.

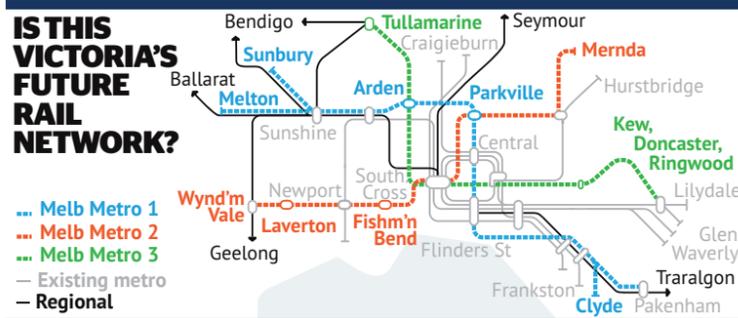
The council has put forward its vision to expand the city's public transport network, as it prepares for an extra 116,000 people taking trains into the city in the morning peak by

2031 – almost double the present number.

Trains are overcrowded, trams are impossibly slow and tram stops are poorly designed and cramped, the paper says.

Nicolas Frances Gilley, the council's transport portfolio chairman, said it was time to think seriously about radically expanding Melbourne's metro system.

"We know that as soon as the Melbourne Metro Tunnel is finished, it will relieve pressure on the City Loop, but it will be full to capacity by the time it comes on," he said. "What



we need to be doing right now is identify where are the new rail corridors."

The council's complete transport strategy will be released later this year. What the council really wants

is another two underground rail tunnels to be built by 2035.

By 2030, Melbourne Metro 2 – a tunnel linking Newport to Clifton Hill via Fishermans Bend – could be built, the document said. If planning on this project were to start this year, the line could be operational by 2028 or earlier, experts said.

Melbourne Metro 3 – a second airport rail line linking to Southern Cross, via Arden Macaulay and Maribyrnong – could be built by 2035, the council paper said. The eastern end of this line could extend east to Ringwood.

# Parents move mountains to get in the zone

**Henrietta Cook**

Education editor

Sally Connor fought long and hard for a state school in Beaumaris.

But when the new Beaumaris Secondary College was finally announced, her excitement turned into disappointment: she wasn't in the zone. It was a huge blow for the family, who had already moved from Mentone to Cheltenham to be closer to the site earmarked for the school.

"It was devastating," Ms Connor said. She says she didn't consider appealing the zoning decision because she knew her chances of success were low, even though she could have argued that Beaumaris Secondary would be the most convenient high school for her children Abigail, 11, and Xavier, 9, because it didn't involve crossing major highways.

Ms Connor could have also pointed out that she spent six years lobbying politicians, harnessing community support and securing a pledge from Labor to build the school on the former Beaumaris campus of Sandringham College.

Instead, the family moved house for a second time, finally securing a home within the zone. "We are here and we are happy and that's all that matters," she said.

Last year, just 10 per cent of the 266 families who appealed enrolment decisions at Victorian state schools were successful.

"Laura Simpson" – who doesn't



Sally and Mike Connor with their children Xavier, 9, and Abigail, 11. Photo: Jason South

want to use her real name because she fears it could jeopardise her daughter's enrolment – was among them. She went to extreme lengths to secure an enrolment at Melbourne Girls College after being told she wasn't in the zone.

She forked out \$1000 for a land surveyor who used satellite signals to determine the distance between her home in Kew and the sought-after state school.

The surveyor's report provided

the vital evidence she needed. It proved that Melbourne Girls College was her nearest school, undermining what the Education Department had told her.

"It was an amazing, and painful experience," she said. "I spent six months trying to get her into the school. It took up all my time, I was ruminating about it 24 hours a day."

Ms Simpson said she wanted her daughter to go to Melbourne Girls College because she was impressed

by its students. Her daughter wanted to learn in a single-sex environment alongside her friends from primary school.

Parents who want to overturn an enrolment decision must first lodge an appeal with the school in question. If unsuccessful, they can then appeal to the department's regional director.

Victorian Education Minister James Merlino said he wanted "every Victorian government school

to be the school of choice for its local community".

The Opposition's education spokesman, Tim Smith, said school zoning rules were too confusing.

"It's not clear which school zones are enforceable and which aren't," he said. "The Andrews government is still working off *Melways* that are 20 years out of date."

When it comes to parents trying to bend the rules, McKinnon Secondary College principal Pitsa Binnion has seen it all. One parent even created a bogus address in McKinnon's sought-after zone by installing a fake letterbox in a front yard. "I have parents falling over in front of me begging," she said. "It's very traumatic to manage."

The school knocks back 150 applicants every year because they aren't in the zone, and about 15 of these families appeal to the school. Only a few are successful.

One student from a local primary school, who had a learning difficulty and whose friends were attending McKinnon Secondary was successful. He had become a school refuser and the school accepted his appeal on compassionate grounds.

Another student, who had been accepted into the school while living in the zone, had to move out of the area when her father died. She was also successful.

"It's heartbreaking," Ms Binnion said. "You have a very clear framework but you are dealing with people. Behind all these names are young people and their families."



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# Call for action on bypassed schools

Henrietta Cook

Choosing a school is a bit like choosing a restaurant, one Melbourne principal says.

"You don't go into the restaurant that is almost empty," he says. "You go to the one with people in it."

It's a catch-22 situation. The more families who flock to a school, the better its reputation becomes and the more funding it attracts. But there's often a neighbouring school that's left behind.

While the popular school is rolling out portable buildings to accommodate extra students and enforcing strict enrolment zones, the forgotten school is screaming out for children.

The Melbourne principal, who wants to remain anonymous to protect his school's reputation, sees many students bypassing state schools in his area, including his own.

They travel great distances to access schools in neighbouring suburbs, sometimes even moving house so they can enrol at zoned schools.

His observations are backed by

## 'If I could fly, it would be the perfect school'

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to be the school of choice for its local community". The Opposition's education spokesman, Tim Smith, said school zoning rules were too confusing. "It's not clear which school zones are enforceable and which aren't," he said. "The Andrews government is still working off maps that are 20 years out of date." When it comes to parents trying

How *The Age* covered the story on Thursday and yesterday.

figures in an Auditor-General's report from last year, which revealed that more than half of Victorian parents are now avoiding their local state school.

"The aspirational parents do whatever they can to get into what is perceived as the more middle-class school," the principal says.

"The school they bypass becomes more disadvantaged." It's called

residualisation. The principal is not opposed to school choice, but says the Education Department should ensure enrolments are spread more evenly.

It should be capping enrolments at large schools to prevent them growing at the expense of surrounding schools, he argues.

This week, *The Age* exposed glitches in Victoria's school zoning

rules which are forcing some families to drive for 10 kilometres every morning to get to their "neighbourhood" school, passing closer schools that are not in their zone.

*The Age* also reported on the lengths to which parents are going to secure enrolments at zoned schools, including moving house twice and hiring land surveyors.

The Australian Education Union is now calling for a review of school zones and school choice to address the growing equity gap between schools. "There is a real question about whether we let some of our schools get bigger and bigger and [keep] adding resources to them, while we let others become residualised," says Meredith Peace, president of the union's Victorian branch.

"We want to make sure all communities have strong, well-resourced schools."

But Victorian Education Minister James Merlino says he's not considering any changes to the Department's enrolment rules.

"We have invested a record \$5 billion to make Victoria the education

state - to build and upgrade our schools, to deliver more training and support to our teachers, and to make sure every student gets the support they need to thrive," he says.

Our Children Our Schools, an alliance of public education groups, is campaigning for a new benchmark for school facilities, which spells out the basic infrastructure every school should have.

The group's president, Cate Hall, says this benchmark would address the uneven playing field between schools and encourage more parents to send their children to local schools.

"To help even out demand we need more equitable school facilities provision and for all schools to be fully funded to meet the needs of their communities and be schools of choice," she says.

Sue Bell, the president of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, says many residualised schools have fantastic teachers and programs. "But when parents don't send their kids to them, they have less money and can't pull themselves up," she says.

# Long drop may go as primaries get cash splash

Henrietta Cook

Once a term, the teachers at Middle Indigo Primary have to empty the murky chambers at the bottom of the school's long drop toilets.

It's an unpleasant task, and one that would not be needed if the school had a septic system and flushing toilets. "I don't think any school in Australia should have to put up with pooing in a hole," the school's acting principal James Farley said.

Preps at the small rural school in Victoria's north-east find the drop toilets daunting. They were installed a decade ago to conserve water during the drought.

"In the so-called Education State, teachers have to shovel excrement from a long drop toilet to a paddock," the Opposition's education spokesman Tim Smith said.

This week, Middle Indigo Primary received a visit from the Coalition who pledged that if it won the state election the school would re-

ceive flushing toilets as part of a \$116,000 makeover.

It was among dozens of schools that received welcome news this week, as the Andrews government and Victorian Opposition zipped across the state promising education spending.

Yesterday, Premier Daniel Andrews, Education Minister James Merlino and Member for Western Victoria Jaala Pulford visited Ballarat and announced \$180.8 million in next month's budget to build,

plan and upgrade 60 regional schools. This includes money for the planning and construction of five new schools in some of Victoria's fastest growing regional communities. The state budget will contain funding to build a new Armstrong Creek West Primary School in the Geelong area and Lucas Primary School in Ballarat.

Early work will begin on the new Armstrong Creek Secondary College and planning will commence for Leneva Primary School in

Wodonga East and an expansion of Miners Rest Primary School.

"This is about giving regional kids the 21st century education they deserve - with the facilities to match," Mr Andrews said.

Back in Melbourne, Opposition leader Matthew Guy and the Liberal candidate for Albert Park Andrew Bond pledged that if elected, the Coalition would spend \$14 million building a new performing arts centre for Albert Park College, which now has 1300 students.

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**WORLD**



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**ENROLMENT** Numbers limited

## School rules zone out choice

**EXCLUSIVE**

**Henrietta Cook**

Victorian state schools with large numbers of students from outside their area will soon start rejecting families following changes that wind back parents' school choice.

Under new Education Department rules, schools will not be entitled to extra portable classrooms from next year if 50 per cent or more of their students do not live locally.

Turning away out-of-area families has been a long-running practice at zoned schools, and now other schools will start refusing enrolments on similar grounds.

The move is a departure from successive governments' mantra of families being able to choose the school of their choice, and is aimed at curbing the growth of large schools and encouraging students to attend their nearest school.

It follows a 2017 Auditor-General's report that revealed more

than half of Victorian parents avoid their neighbourhood school.

About 15 per cent of Victorian schools – or about 230 schools – received a phone call from the Education Department late last week and were told they'd be impacted because at least half their enrolments were non-local. The Education Department told *The Age* these schools also had limited space.

The plan has divided the community: principal groups and the state opposition have slammed it as ill conceived, while the Australian Education Union, parent and public education lobby groups say it will lead to better outcomes for students.

"It has been a clandestine strategy to wind back parent choice and to save money in the process," Berwick Lodge Primary School principal Henry Grosseck said.

Mr Grosseck said 70 per cent of his enrolments are from outside the local area, and many of these students bypassed their closest school

**Continued Page 6**



Divya Sharma chose a primary school outside her local area for daughter Lavanya and son Eshan. Photo: Darrian Traynor

## Reef charity record casts doubt on \$444m grant

**EXCLUSIVE**

**Nicole Hasham**

The charity that has pledged to use a \$444 million federal grant to attract private donations and help the Great Barrier Reef previously failed to

raise money for a Cape York replanting project, casting doubt on the extent to which it can leverage the massive investment.

The revelations undermine the Turnbull government's justification for entering the partnership, in a process that shut out expert bodies including its own agencies.

The business-focused foundation has been under intense scrutiny since the government last month announced it would hand over the unsolicited funds without a tender process and without having fully assessed the organisation's ability to manage the windfall.

Federal Environment Minister

Josh Frydenberg defended the decision, saying the foundation would leverage the funds to attract additional money from the corporate and philanthropic sectors.

In November 2016 the federal and Queensland governments announced a similar but smaller partnership in which the charity and the

Queensland government would each contribute \$3 million to remediation at Cape York.

The work, at the Queensland government-owned Springvale Station, was part of a \$45 million investment to tackle agricultural run-off.

**Continued Page 4**

**WEATHER**

Today Cloudy  
Tomorrow Shower or two  
Wednesday Shower or two  
Details

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**ODDSPOT**

A Chinese man gave his girlfriend a huge heart-shaped bouquet of 'flowers' made with 334,000 yuan (\$A69,263) in banknotes. A Bank of China official says the besotted boyfriend could face trouble for damaging the currency.



**Business**

Fair Work makes first race ruling  
**ANNA PATTY**  
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# NBN 'kills' top speeds in bush plans

Jennifer Duke

National Broadband Network chief executive Bill Morrow has warned there may never be a time when all Australians get the fastest available internet speeds, as such a project would cost "billions and billions" of dollars.

The cost of rolling out the required technology to enable Australians living in all regional areas to access 100Mbps speeds is so high, the NBN Co has "killed" any plan to provide it and has taken it off the road map, Mr Morrow said at Senate Estimates.

The NBN is obligated to provide all businesses and premises with ac-

cess to at least 25Mbps peak data speeds, with the majority to have 50Mbps. So far, most connected households have opted for 25Mbps plans although the trend is improving for faster speed tiers.

In metropolitan areas and regional cities, households are typically able to buy up to 100Mbps speed plans when they move on to the NBN, while those on fixed wireless connections in rural and remote areas can usually get up to 50Mbps. Fixed wireless uses towers to transmit data over radio signals to an antenna installed onto a home, and is the chosen connection type when houses are kilometres apart from each other.

How far a home is away from a

transmission tower directly affects speed. When asked what the cost would be to roll out 100Mbps across these regional areas, Mr Morrow said it would be "outrageous" and wouldn't "make any sense" on an economic basis.

He described the potential expense as "exponential" and "cost prohibitive".

"There is no economic model that would work, that consumers would be willing to pay to get the 100Mbps service, especially when most applications ... do not warrant 100Mbps downloads," he said, describing a lack of "mass market" demand for the highest speed product in these areas. About 300,000 customers are affected by this decision.

The NBN Co is required by the government to recover its costs and return a profit, with the gains from the roll-out in metropolitan areas used to offset the losses from providing services in unprofitable regional areas.

"I think we have to acknowledge ... the vast land is going to drive economics that will likely mean the regional end users using broadband over this network are likely never to see the kind of bandwidth capabilities that will [be seen] in a city centre," Mr Morrow said.

Labor senator Deborah O'Neill said the NBN continued to "fail" regional Australia, by reneging on a plan to offer 100Mbps on fixed wireless. She said there would likely be

regional residents who would make use of the highest speed.

Despite this, Mr Morrow did not believe this was creating a digital divide between Australia's cities and regional areas.

"Regional Australia had near nothing with broadband access, today the number of stories that I have heard and witnessed about them suddenly having satellite capability and suddenly having 25Mbps has changed their life.

"The divide has actually closed because this is a universal access of everybody having at least 25Mbps. The divide that you can introduce, if you like, is those that have 25Mbps versus those that have [gigabyte per second] speeds," he said.

## Tough issues dodged

Adam Carey

The Labor Party has avoided potentially difficult public discussion about offshore detention, live exports and changes to the date of Australia Day, moving votes on the issues behind closed doors.

Motions on all three subjects had been on the agenda for the Victorian Labor conference yesterday, but were removed or deferred before debate.

The motion calling to change the Australia Day date from January 26 to May 9 was withdrawn before day two of the conference at Moonsee Valley Racecourse.

Several other motions, including one to end offshore detention of asylum seekers, were deferred, avoiding a public internal debate on which the Coalition would have sought to capitalise.

The last-minute vote to defer them to Labor's administrative committee was likened to "student politics" by Special Minister of State Gavin Jennings.

But CFMMEU state secretary John Setka, who voted in favour of the deferrals, said it was "democracy at work".

With AAP



Labor leader Bill Shorten and wife Chloe at the party's state conference. Photos: Paul Jeffers

## School zone changes limit choice for parents, students

From Page 1

because it was overcrowded. If enrolments increase to the point where he needs a new portable, Mr Grosseck will have to reject prospective out-of-area students because he won't be provided with facilities to house them. This will exacerbate enrolment pressures on other schools, while his school has capacity for more students, he said.

"Up until last last week we were advised that unless your school has a zone, you must take kids from outside your neighbourhood," he said. "Now that's all changed."

Education Minister James Merlino said schools could accommodate non-local students if there was enough space. "We can't have schools where they are accepting enrolments from the other side of the city, which results in dozens of portables taking up vital space where children play," he said.

"It also adds strain on the school when they need to accommodate local children in future years."

Victorian Principals Association president Anne-Maree Kliman said principals were not consulted and had been put in a difficult position as they started enrolling students for

2019. "Now they have been told they won't get facilities if they need them," she said.

She suspects the "drastic" change is a response to Victoria's booming student population and is aimed at ensuring there is a more even spread of students across schools.

The move could be politically sensitive ahead of November's state election, with the opposition's education spokesman, Tim Smith accusing the Andrews government of "punishing kids and parents for simply choosing a school that isn't the closest to their home."

But Australian Education Union

Victorian branch president Meredith Peace said letting students attend the school they want and allowing schools to grow risked creating a "stratified education system".

Cate Hall, the president of public education lobby group Our Children our Schools, said attending the local school strengthened communities and encouraged students to walk and cycle.

According to Ms Hall, the school choice mantra has "resulted in poor equity outcomes, with some schools lacking both students and resources, and others crammed with portables".

Divya Sharma is among tens of thousands of Victorian parents whose children don't attend their closest school. Her daughter Lavanya, who is in grade 5, and son Eshan, who is in prep, attend Glendal Primary School in Glen Waverley.

She was attracted to the school's dedicated teachers and impressive robotics program.

The family used to live in a unit the area, but upsized to a house in Mount Waverley more than a year ago.

"I want to choose which school I send them to," Ms Sharma said. "It's critical."