

Statement

The Hon James Merlino MP
Deputy Premier
Minister for Education
Minister for Mental Health



Friday, 24 June 2022

STATEMENT FROM JAMES MERLINO

Today I advised the Premier of my decision to resign as Deputy Premier of Victoria, Minister for Education and Minister for Mental Health. I will also not contest the seat of Monbulk at the election in November.

A twenty-year journey is coming to an end. It has been an honour and a privilege to serve in the Victorian Parliament and represent my community of Monbulk. I leave with feelings of deepest gratitude, a little sadness and excitement for the future.

Firstly, to my great friend Dan Andrews. Thank you.

Dan is a leader characterised by courage and determination, intellect and kindness. A Premier who not only has the biggest and boldest ideas to improve the lives of Victorians, but the energy, capacity and grit to actually get it done. A rare combination.

However, it's also the quieter moments I have witnessed, away from the cameras, that speak to Dan's character – his empathy listening to parents of children with a disability and promising to do better for their kids, the easy banter with nurses and health workers he clearly cares so deeply about, his comforting of people in times of grief and hardship, his sorrow at the death of a friend, his love for Cath and gentle teasing with his kids at home.

It's in those moments I'm reminded why I've been proud to serve as his Deputy for the last ten and a half years. And why I'll be working so hard to see the re-election of the Andrews Labor Government later in the year.

To my other great friend on the front table, Jacinta Allan. Through multiple elections, from the hard slog of opposition to the challenges and opportunities of government, there is no-one else I would want to be standing next to in the trenches than Jacinta. And an outstanding Minister to boot.

To the other Premiers I've served under, Steve Bracks and John Brumby, thank you for your confidence and encouragement, in and outside of the Parliament.

To those who were with me when I first became an MP then a Minister in the Bracks Government all those years ago, Lizzie Blandthorn and Johnny McLindon, thank you for your continued support and dear friendship.

To the mighty trade union movement, specifically my friends at the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association. Many thanks to Gerard Dwyer, Michael Donovan and the broader labour movement for always fighting for justice in the workplace.

To all my cabinet and caucus colleagues. Thank you for your passion for the communities you represent and your commitment to make a positive change for our state.

Renewal is critical for any government – fresh ideas and new energy. As hard as this is, I believe in my heart that renewal, new cabinet ministers around the table, is the best thing for the Government and our state.

I know how much capacity and talent there is in our team. I look forward to supporting the new ministers for Education and Mental Health.

It was dream of mine to be Minister for Education. It has been both an honour and a joy – every day – to serve in this role for such a long period.

Education is a noble profession. It transforms lives. It's through education that we can break the cycle of poverty. It's through education that we achieve our individual dreams and aspirations. It's through education that we prosper as a society.

To all the principal, teachers and support staff in Victoria, you are, and will always be, an inspiration.

Together with our brilliant educators, there is much we have achieved in making Victoria the Education State: the biggest school building program in Victoria's history; transforming senior secondary education with the VCE Vocational Major; the establishment of the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership for our highest ability educators; enshrining in legislation 25 per cent funding for non-government schools; Disability Inclusion reform; supporting LGBTIQ+ young people in our schools; putting student mental health and wellbeing at the centre – including banning mobile phones at school (sorry kids!); the Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan; engaging high ability students at every school; thousands of school tutors; and delivering the best student outcomes in the country.

Our most vulnerable children and young people – the kids who come to school on an empty stomach, whose families can't afford the school uniform or to send them to camp, children who suffer trauma – have been our greatest priority. Equity Funding, the School Breakfast program, State Schools Relief, our support for camps, sports and excursions, and for mental health and wellbeing, have all made a positive difference.

To our Catholic and independent school sectors, thank you for the strong partnership and engagement we have enjoyed, particularly Stephen Elder and Jim Miles at the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and Michelle Green at Independent Schools Victoria.

To Archbishop Comensoli, thank you for your kindness and advice. And I have been blessed to meet, form friendships and share experiences with our vibrant Jewish and Muslim communities.

The very best part of my job was visiting schools and talking to students at an assembly. To see all the beautiful faces of the world looking back at me made me so proud of Victoria's successful multicultural and multi-faith society. Listening to their optimism, answering their questions, understanding their concerns. I will miss that.

There is no greater responsibility than leading the response to our nation's first and only Royal Commission into mental health. The Royal Commission has set us the challenge of completely rebuilding our mental health system from the ground up. If we get this right, it will help change and save countless lives.

These first years of what is a ten-year transformation are critical. I leave with the three fundamental foundations firmly in place – a pipeline of thousands of additional mental health workers over coming years, sustainable funding secured in law, and the new Mental Health and Wellbeing Bill introduced into Parliament just this week.

The Andrews Labor Government is already taking action on 90 per cent of the Royal Commission's recommendations. My thanks to our lived experience community, particularly VMIAC and TANDEM, our clinicians and our industrial partners. Together we will make this happen for the benefit of all Victorians.

To the dedicated and professional public servants in the Department of Education and Training and the Mental Health Division in the Department of Health, thank you so much. I have enjoyed working with you immensely.

To my Chief of Staff and dear friend, Ilsa Colson. A natural and exceptional leader, thank you for expertly steering the ship over the last eight years. Through sheer hard work, high expectations and a great sense of humour, you brought people together and delivered every single time it mattered.

To my ministerial team – Chris, Paul, Emma, Sinead, Elle, Liam, Alice, Liam, Ben, Bev and Maria – you are simply the best in the business. Passionate, talented and committed to the cause. I am forever in your debt. To Chris Maver, who has worked with me every one of my 12 years as a Minister, thanks mate.

To Lissie Ratcliff and the fantastic team in the Premier's Private Office. Thank you for all your efforts and expertise across the breadth and depth of government.

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To Kelly, Shae and Sophie in my electorate office in Belgrave, thank you for helping me look after the beautiful and unique electorate of Monbulk. I live in and love the hills, I very much look forward to spending the rest of this term continuing to serve the people of Monbulk.

Finally, to my family.

Megs and I met when I was an MP. I've been on the frontbench, on either side of the chamber, for the entirety of Sophie, Emma and Josh's lives. We've never known anything other than politics as a family.

It has an impact in big and small ways – family events, local sport and children's milestones missed – and even when you are there, there are many times when you're not truly present.

Politics undoubtedly puts a greater burden on your partner than should ever be the case. When our kids were young, Megs was effectively doing it by herself.

Through it all she has been the rock of our family. Thank you for your love and unwavering support.

My kids are so excited that their Dad is retiring from politics. That's all I need to know that this is the right decision for my family and for me.

To my extended family, friends, dogs, chickens and alpacas – you'll be seeing a lot more of me!