



The new water safety benchmark comes after a *Herald Sun* campaign for kids to be taught how to swim.

Picture: Sarah Matray

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Victorian schools told all kids must learn to swim in push to stop drownings

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SCHOOLS failing to teach their kids to swim are being urged to develop intensive programs to start in term one next year.

The *Herald Sun* revealed today that all Victorian children will have to be able to swim 50 metres and demonstrate survival skills in the water under a new curriculum in place from next year.

Education and Emergency Services Minister James Merlino said while many schools had strong swimming programs already in place, some did “precious little” work with their kids in water.

“That’s why we felt it was important to make it a mandatory part of the new Victorian curriculum,” he said, describing the standards as a “really strong message” to the community.

He said schools should develop “intensive” programs which went beyond a token swimming carnival each year.

But no funding has been made available by the government to help schools run swimming lessons, other than the \$148 million camps, sports and excursions fund, which is designed to help vulnerable families whose kids would otherwise miss out on activities.

Mr Merlino said schools would have to look at what pools and instructors were available to them locally.

He said the government was still considering the results of a trial of a before-school lessons program, which Life Saving Victoria wants rolled out more broadly to ensure kids get the water safety training they need.

The new water safety benchmark, to be part of the curriculum from next year, comes after a *Herald Sun* campaign for kids to be taught how to swim.

Schools will develop their own water safety programs but the State Government is now under pressure to commit funding to mandatory swimming lessons to ensure kids can meet the potentially lifesaving target.

As Water Safety Week begins today, the *Herald Sun* can also reveal:

— IN the past year, 43 people lost their lives in Victorian waters, five more than the 10-year average. Paramedics also responded to 70 non-fatal incidents.

— FATAL drownings are up 40 per cent among people aged over 65, prompting a major water safety campaign targeting older people, which will kick off today.

— A SECOND awareness campaign will be launched early next year to keep toddlers safe around water, with kids under four still facing the highest risk of drowning.

THE drowning rate among women and girls is up 33 per cent, including the tragic death of 13-year-old Holly Nicholson while she was saving her brother in rough surf near Wonthaggi in February.

The curriculum overhaul comes after the *Herald Sun* revealed Life Saving Victoria research that found three out of five of the state's students could not swim when they left primary school.

Children will now have to achieve the Victorian Water Safety Certificate — which also tests their water safety knowledge, rescue skills and abilities in survival sequences — in the same way that they study core subjects such as maths and English.

The swimming standard will be treated like any subject area. Students who don't meet the criteria won't get held back, but the school will be encouraged to work harder with that student to help them achieve a pass.

There will be no new funding to build pools but schools can apply for grants to help run lessons.

Education and Emergency Services Minister James Merlino said teaching kids to swim would "help save lives".

“That’s why students will learn about water safety, how to float and swim as part of their physical education classes under the new Victorian curriculum from term one next year,” Mr Merlino said.



Education and Emergency Services Minister James Merlino.

Picture: Sarah Matray

Life Saving Victoria’s general manager of education, Kate Simpson, welcomed the new benchmarks and said school was the right time “to deliver these life skills”.

“We hope the knowledge and skills the children receive will transfer into adulthood and allow them to enjoy the water safely,” she said.

It is up to individual schools to decide how students are taught how to swim, and some financial grants will be available to fund lessons for kids who would otherwise miss out.

Life Saving Victoria is building a business case to ask the government to fund lessons for pupils in key risk demographics, including children of migrants, those in lower socio-economic areas and those in regional Victoria.

Life Saving Victoria will work with the Education Department to identify which schools are most in need.

“The goal is now to continue to work with government and schools to roll out a long-term sustainable solution,” Ms Simpson said.

The government funded a trial before school swimming lessons and Mr Merlino said he was considering the findings of that “as another way to improve water safety skills among our kids”.

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