VICSRC 2024 CONGRESS REPORT

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body and leading advocate representing school-aged students in Victoria. We were created by students to be a voice for all primary and secondary school students at the highest levels of decision making in Victorian education. Our vision is an education system that is student-led, student driven and student-focused.

The findings in this report were gathered through student-led consultations with 84 Victorian students. VicSRC thanks them for the time and expertise they shared with us in formulating this report.

VicSRC respectfully acknowledges and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the custodians of this land. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria and across the wider continent.

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VicSRC VictorianStudent RepresentativeCouncil

Introduction

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing school-aged students in Victoria. We exist to empower all students to have their voices heard – and valued – in every aspect of their education.

VicSRC works with students, teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and others within the education sector to achieve a vision of education in Victoria which is collaborative and inclusive. This means putting student voice at the centre of practice, whether that is in the classroom, within school leadership processes, or in the context of education policy making.

VicSRC is the only independent, education-based, student-led advocacy organisation in Australia, and is a leading expert in education policy reform prioritising student perspectives.

VicSRC's work includes delivering school-based programs such as *Teach the Teacher,* an internationally recognised program aimed at empowering students to be agents of change within their school communities, while simultaneously equipping teachers with the tools they need to foster collaborative environments with their students. In communities, VicSRC programs like *Ambassadors* provide students with leadership skills and knowledge, encouraging them to advocate for themselves and fellow students in all aspects of their education, both within the classroom and beyond the school gates. Alongside these programs, VicSRC brings together students with education policymakers and decision-makers to ensure that student voice features as an important component of systemic reform.

VicSRC is guided by a series of priority areas which are developed and regularly evaluated by students. While advocating for positive change to improve education outcomes for all Victorian students, we work to ensure that students are involved in the development and implementation of those policy changes, ensuring student voice is integrated at every level of the policy making process.

For 19 years, Congress has played an integral role in shaping VicSRC's student-led reform agenda, by bringing together students from across Victoria to discuss the state of their education, and the pathways to improvement. Congress represents one of students' most valuable opportunities to have their voices heard when it comes to shaping the education system.

How Congress supports VicSRC's reform objectives

Congress is an essential component of VicSRC's work to achieve student-led education reform in Victoria. It provides the basis for our annual Congress Report, which is the definitive record of what students had to say, including how they envision solutions to the challenges within the Victorian education system each year.

Students' reflections included in the Congress Report go on to inform key recommendations included in VicSRC's Policy Platform.

The Platform, which contains 22 recommendations in total, outlines a vision for education reform in Victoria over a four-year timespan and was developed with the full breadth of VicSRC's student engagements (across programs, research, and policymaking) in mind.

Learnings from these engagements were complimented with consultation and other advice provided by other leading student-led and student-facing organisations throughout Victoria.

VicSRC's Policy Platform, like Congress, is organised into five key priority areas which were developed with students. These focus areas represent students' highest priorities in education, and serve to inform VicSRC's approach to achieving systemic reform which meets the needs of those students. They are:

1. **Enabling student voice** to inform an education system which uplifts, values, and responds to the voices of students.

2. **Supporting student mental health and wellbeing** to achieve effective, available, and place-based mental health and wellbeing support for every Victorian student.

3. **Accessible and inclusive education** which provides for all students' needs.

4. **Re-thinking the definitions of success** to change our understanding of what success looks and feels like at school.

5. **Prioritising equity in education** to lay the groundwork for sustainability and fairness in Victoria's education system.

While the Policy Platform provides VicSRC with a robust, longer-term basis for effective and student-led education reform, the Congress Report complements the Policy Platform to ensure that our advocacy continues to prosecute the most urgent priorities from the perspectives of students, as their needs, aspirations, and experiences, continue to change.

When considering students' priorities across these focus areas as demonstrated throughout this report, it becomes clear that the recommendations put forward by VicSRC's Policy Platform remain highly aligned with the needs and aspirations of students themselves, and as such will continue to serve as the basis for VicSRC's reform work.

VicSRC Policy Platform: Table of Recommendations	
Supporting student mental health and wellbeing	
1.	Commit to boosting investment in student voice practice in Victoria's education system.
2.	Support schools to embed genuine student voice practice when planning and implementing school-based mental health and wellbeing initiatives.
3.	Ensure that students act as collaborators when planning and implementing improvements to the ways in which government and schools communicate with students about mental health and wellbeing support services and initiatives.
4.	Commit to full availability of appropriate care with at least one full-time psychologist or mental health practitioner for every 500 students. Make available the current practitioner-to-student ratio to enable the tracking of progress towards this goal.
5.	Expand the Mental Health in Primary Schools initiative to include all Victorian secondary schools.
Accessible and inclusive education	
6.	Develop a comprehensive training framework to equip all teachers with additional skills to recognise and respond to diverse learning needs, including improved skills in identifying when students might be in need of additional support.
7.	Invest in improved student voice processes to empower students to engage in decisions regarding how they learn.
8.	Embed cultural responsiveness training into teachers' pre-service training, and ensure this training is made mandatory for every Victorian teacher.
9.	Invest in additional resources and support for schools to improve the safety and accessibility of the school environment for all students.

10.	Prioritise the development of a community-led School Cultural Safety and Anti-Racism Framework to be applied across all Victorian schools.
11.	Work with relevant students and carers to remove the financial barriers that impact the ability of students in out-of-home care to engage in education.
12.	Improve key policies to ensure students are directly involved in shaping the support and interventions they need to improve their engagement at school.
13.	Mandate trauma-informed training for all Victorian teachers and ensure it features as part of teachers' pre-service training.
14.	Implement fee-free public transport for all Victorian students, and empower schools to issue fee-free Myki cards to students without additional charges.
15.	De-centralise student voice practice and expertise by supporting VicSRC in reaching regional and rural students to better understand their needs and ensure they have an equal opportunity to shape the future of their education.
Rethinking the definitions of success	
16.	Conduct a review into assessment and credentialing practices which puts the voices of students at the centre, to ensure that Victoria's approach enables students to thrive in whatever post-school pathway they choose.
17.	Develop new, student-led strategies to improve pathways and careers education in both primary and secondary school settings to address stigma and elevate vocational pathways alongside academic and other pathways.
18.	Invest in student voice processes as a core component of Victoria's approach to address the teacher workforce shortage.
Prioritising equity in education	
19.	Collaborate with school to identify the major barriers to accessing education enrichment activities and commit to provide the additional support required to deliver these opportunities.
20.	Provide students with real opportunities to shape new school builds and other infrastructure investments through student voice practices.
21.	Achieve 100% of funding for every Victorian school according to the School Resource Standard (SRS) by 2028.
22.	Close the current loophole which allows for non-education spending to be counted as part of Victoria's contribution to funding the SRS.

VicSRC's objectives all share a common goal; to achieve systemic reform in education which is informed and supported by students. This means working with schools and government to ensure they are equally equipped to work effectively with students as genuine collaborators and partners in education policy reform.

This doesn't just mean listening to students, it also means improving systems, whether they are schools, communities, or governments, to ensure that those voices are valued and included in decision-making processes. As we make progress towards achieving our objectives, VicSRC will continue to ensure that students are driving this change to achieve positive outcomes by students, for all students.

With the support of this Congress Report, alongside our Policy Platform, we will continue to seek meaningful, student-focused, and student-led education reform in Victoria – because students are best-placed to lead that change as the lived-experience stakeholders of the education system with the most contemporary and comprehensive understanding of the system, and the need for reform.

Congress at a glance

In September 2024, VicSRC welcomed 84 students from 33 secondary schools from across Victoria to participate in student-led discussions about the big issues in mental health and wellbeing, inclusion and access, the definitions of success at school, and prioritising equity in education. Students in attendance came from a variety of education contexts, including:

- Fifty-six students from 21 metropolitan government secondary schools
- Thirteen students from four regional government schools
- Five students from three metropolitan non-government schools
- Eight students from three regional non-government school
- Two students who attend Virtual School Victoria.

All secondary year levels were also represented at Congress:

- Fourteen percent from Year 7
- Eight percent from Year 8
- Nineteen percent in Year 9
- Twenty percent in Year 10
- Twenty-one percent in Year 11
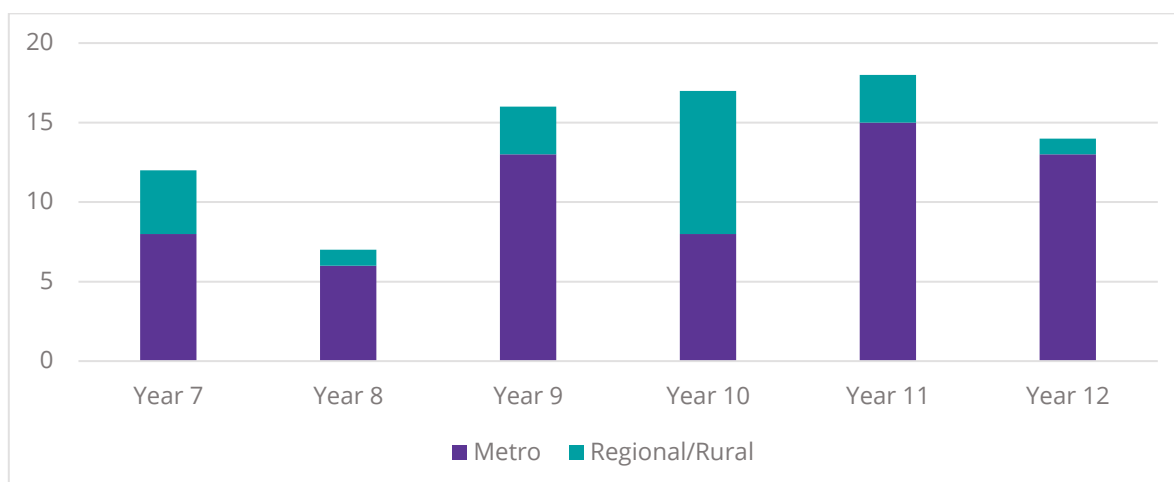- Seventeen percent in Year 12

Figure 1: Students at 2024 Congress by year level and geography

Ahead of Congress, students nominated themselves to participate in peer-led conversations centred on our focus areas in two intensive workshop sessions – giving them varied opportunities to express their views in different areas of education reform.

Led by members of VicSRC's Student Executive Advisory Committee and alumni, the conversations at Congress sought to uncover what students see as the major barriers to achieving better outcomes, and their ideas for the most effective solutions.

All the information gathered on the day was collected and analysed to produce the following report. Students' reflections strongly support VicSRC's objectives as outlined in our Policy Platform, and this report provides another essential tool in working to achieve a vision for Victoria's education system that is shaped by students.

2024 Congress Supporters

Each year, Congress is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Victorian Government and several likeminded organisations who share a commitment to student voice.

This year, we were thrilled to welcome back longstanding sponsor, the Australian Education Union, to present Congress's first ever teacher professional development offering, providing teachers with an opportunity to learn from VicSRC's expert staff about student voice in theory and practice. Meanwhile, we welcomed the Royal Children's Hospital to present the student-focused portion of the event.

Supporting Partners Orygen Digital and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) lent their support to Congress focus areas. Orygen Digital supported students' conversations about mental health and wellbeing, while VCAA chose to support students' conversations about re-defining success at school.

Student Sponsors from across the education sector supported students in attending Congress free of charge by covering the costs of tickets. Those organisations included the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) and YACVic Rural, Parents Victoria, and the Country Education Partnership (CEP).

Wurun Senior Campus in Fitzroy North generously provided their beautiful school to set the scene for Congress, while the Department of Education continued their longstanding support of Congress this year, too.

Presenting Partners	**AEU** Australian Education Union	*The Royal Children's Hospital*
Supporting Partners	orygen DIGITAL MOST Supporting 'Student Mental Health & Wellbeing'	*Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority* Supporting 'Definitions of Success'
Student Sponsors	YACVIC Youth Affairs Council Victoria	YACVIC RURAL
	Parents Victoria	cep LEADERSHIP ACHIEVEMENT COLLABORATION COUNTRY EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP
In-kind Partners	wurun senior campus	THE CONVERSATION
Special thanks	THE EDUCATION STATE	VICTORIA State Government | Department of Education

Supporting student mental health and wellbeing

Students who chose to participate in conversations focused on mental health and wellbeing discussed in detail how their mental health and wellbeing was affected, both positively and negatively, by various factors within their school environment. Conversations focused on a few key considerations, including the extent to which school-based mental health and wellbeing supports were meeting their needs, the persistent stigma and misinformation which surrounds accessing these services, and how other elements of the education experience and school environment impact their mental health.

Students reflected that while schools were generally providing mental health support services, they overwhelmingly cited a lack of reliability and accessibility of those services to meet the demand. This extended to teachers as well, who students said were lacking the time and resources they need to meaningfully build trusting relationships with them. These factors, combined with stigma or misinformation regarding mental health and wellbeing, meant that many students are going without the support they need. Meanwhile, academic pressure and social isolation were identified by students as two additional key drivers of mental health and wellbeing concerns.

What we heard from students about this topic

Students at Congress made it clear that a lack of awareness and education about supports being offered by their school, along with stigma and misinformation which persists around these services, are major barriers for their engagement with mental health and wellbeing support at school.

Students said that while mental health resources might be available through school, many students were not aware of them, or didn't have a full understanding of how those services might be able to help them. This lead to students making assumptions about how mental health and wellbeing support services may not be suitable or appropriate for them, or that their own circumstances were not serious enough to warrant that support.

Students also reflected on a lack of education and awareness of the nature, prevalence and seriousness of some mental health issues, and the impacts they may have on their school life and education. Students identified that there are strong stereotypes around people who experience mental health challenges, which fuels shame. Gender stereotypes also exist, making it more difficult for young men to engage in support. Furthermore, students identified that when the effort isn't made to build their understanding of mental health and wellbeing, it provides an easy pathway for misinformation and stigma to take hold.

Students at Congress specifically shared that conversations about drug use and its impacts on mental health and wellbeing are stigmatised at school, despite being a highly relevant topic. As these topics are not spoken about openly enough in mental health education, students notice that it is easier for misinformation to spread.

Meanwhile, some students highlighted the stigma associated with being seen in school wellbeing spaces. Students expressed that this can sometimes prompt intrusive questions or assumptions from their classmates, which can fuel bullying and social exclusion. Additionally, students expressed that cultural and religious contexts present additional barriers in reaching out for help or understanding the nature of mental health challenges.

The challenge of stigma in preventing young people from accessing the help they need is well-documented, with one recent Australian study finding that stigma, driven largely by the perception that mental health challenges were the result of self-failure or weakness as opposed to a genuine

health concern, presented a major barrier to young people seeking help[1]. This fact, combined with students' reflections that awareness and education around mental health needs to be improved, reiterates the need for additional and early intervention in promoting effective and health-based education regarding mental health challenges.

Students also noted that gender-based stereotypes are still prevalent in the mental health and wellbeing space, presenting additional challenge for male students in accessing support, who are conscious of perceived social expectations of young men and their ability to self-manage their mental health.

Altogether, students' reflections make it clear that more work is needed to ensure that alongside delivering mental health and wellbeing support to students, an effort must be made to ensure that students and school staff alike are supported in building and maintaining a positive and supportive culture around help-seeking. This will ensure students do not feel excluded from support if and when they need it.

Conversations between students at Congress demonstrated that the degree to which schools are providing adequate levels of mental health and wellbeing support varies greatly. This means that many students go without the support they need. Some students reflected that the level of staffing and resourcing available for their school's mental health and wellbeing programs simply did not meet demand, leaving students waiting for extended periods to talk to someone. Accessibility was a barrier for some students in other ways, too, like burdensome or over-complicated administrative processes required for students to gain access to support. According to students, this not only made the process more difficult, it also hindered their access to rapid-response support when it was needed.

Recent studies also look closely at access-related issues surrounding school-based mental health support, with one recent study finding that barriers to access of these services come from a wide variety of sources, including stigma related to accessing formal help, family concerns about their children's development, and perceptions about mental health services being over-subscribed, and not able to cater for a student's needs[2].

Despite the Victorian Government's continued efforts to support the mental health and wellbeing of students at school, many students are still waiting for these initiatives to translate into improved outcomes. Furthermore, it is difficult to ascertain exactly what the availability of, and access to, mental health and wellbeing support looks like for Victorian students, because of a lack of reported data to this end[3].

Students agreed that their teachers are central to impacting and supporting their mental health and wellbeing. However, multiple barriers exist in the way of achieving this.

Students at Congress reflected that they were often hesitant to approach their teachers with their concerns. This was driven by the impression that their teachers did not have the time or resources to recognise, understand, or support their mental health and wellbeing needs. In turn, students were often left believing their concerns didn't warrant attention from their teacher, and that teacher's workload and stress levels hindered their sense of empathy and compassion when providing

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[1] Harvey, Lauren J., and White, Fiona A., (2023), 'Emotion Self-stigma as a Unique Predictor of Help-seeking Intentions: A Comparative Analysis of Early Adolescents and Young Adults', *Psychology & Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice, vol. 96, no. 3,* pp. 762–7.

[2] Williamson, V, et al. (2022), 'Primary School Based Mental Health Practitioners' Perspectives of School-Based Screening for Childhood Mental Disorders and Intervention Delivery: A Qualitative Study', *Emotional & Behavioural Difficulties, vol 27, no. 2,* pp. 105-117.

[3] Australian Psychological Society (APS) (2022), 'Position statement: psychologists in school', *Australian Psychological Society,* April 2022.

wellbeing support to a student. Research from the Australian Psychological Society supports this, finding that teachers often lack the confidence or expertise they need to properly identify circumstances in which students may need additional support[4].

Students highlight additional elements of the teacher workforce challenge which also contributes negatively to their mental health. Namely, students reflected on the reliance on casual relief teachers (CRT) to bridge staffing gaps, explaining that the process of building trusting and open relationships with their teachers was made more difficult when their teachers were frequently changing.

Alongside these considerations, students also reflected on other impacts that frequent teacher changes and CRTs can have on their mental health, especially in the senior secondary years. Students explained that a lack of consistent teachers leads to knowledge-gaps in their learning throughout the year. Without consistent academic support, students are more prone to experiencing stress associated with their academic performance.

Recent data which investigates these issues support students' reflections. In 2023, The Black Dog Institute conducted a survey of more than 4,200 Australian teachers which indicated that 70% of teachers reported having unmanageable workloads, and 47% of teachers are considering leaving the profession in the next 12 months[5]. The same report also indicated that 52% of teachers reported moderate to extremely severe symptoms of depression[6]. Considering these survey results, it is unsurprising that students do not feel able to seek support from their teachers, and students at Congress this year have reiterated the impacts of this challenge.

The pressure to perform academically was a primary factor impacting the mental health and wellbeing of students. More specifically, students described how stress builds due to pressure felt around their assessments and the preconception that students' futures depend on their academic performance. A recent major study conducted by the OECD found that almost half of all Australian students were experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety in the contexts of their studies – a figure much higher than the international average of 37%[7] -- and indicating that a special focus on the academically-focused drivers of stress and anxiety within the context of Victorian schools merits deeper consideration.

Students at Congress also shared that another key contributing factor to struggles with mental health and wellbeing has been an increase in feelings of social isolation. Not only does this contribute to mental ill-health, but it also dissuades students from seeking help from friends, family, or support services.

This reflection is as complex as it is alarming, and recent research provides further insights as to what is driving this increase in isolation among young people. The 2023 Mission Australia Youth Survey, which engaged more than 19,000 young people aged 15-19, found that 28.5% find it hard to fit in and socialise at school, work or socially[8]. Given students' reflections on this, it is not surprising that location was a major feature of students' conversations at Congress to this end.

Taken together, these reflections indicate that the substantial reform efforts underway require thorough and consistent review, putting students' experiences at the centre, to ensure new schemes are meeting their objectives over time.

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Black Dog Institute (2023), 'National Teacher Survey: Summary', *Black Dog Institute,* 16 February 2023.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Schmid, M. (2018), 'PISA Australia in Focus Number 4: Anxiety', *Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER),* p. 4.

[8] McHale, R et al. (2023). 'Youth Survey Report 2023'. *Mission Australia.*

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Enable greater agency and input from students to inform how schools deliver mental health support, including better consultation and evaluation of existing initiatives.

- More resources and strategies, informed by the advice of students, for schools to tackle stigma surrounding mental health, wellbeing, and accessing support. Students proposed strategies including hearing from lived experience experts at school, taking an earlier focus on mental health in primary school, and finding more effective ways of equipping students with a range of tools to promote positive mental health strategies.

- Improve pathways to connect with school-based support, reducing administrative barriers and providing anonymous options to ensure timely support.

- Address the negative impacts of the pressure to achieve academically through a greater focus on holistic education, improving support for students in transition, especially from primary to secondary school.

- Improve referral pathways and connections between schools and external, community-based support services.

- Improve teachers' capabilities to support students in need by providing training on trauma-informed practice at school.

- Strengthen opportunities for students and teachers to build relationships founded on trust.

Making education inclusive and accessible for all students

Students who chose to focus on inclusive and accessible education during their time at Congress explored questions around the extent to which their education experience was responsive to the needs of individuals, and what barriers existed to their full participation and inclusion on the basis of their circumstances.

These discussions took a wide view of inclusivity and accessibility, to understand how inclusion and access vary depending on students' circumstances, and how intersecting identities and circumstances can have a compounding effect on a students' experience in the education system. Throughout these discussions, students considered the experiences of:

- Students with disabilities and who have diverse learning needs
- Students who belong to a diverse range of cultural backgrounds
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students
- Students with diverse gender and sexual identities
- Regional and rural students

Students felt that those with diverse learning needs and other disabilities are often unsupported in the classroom due to time constraints faced by teachers, as well as inaccessible school infrastructure. Students from migrant and/or refugee background reported facing racism, discrimination, and cultural barriers that impact their safety at school.

Importantly, students also recognised a lack of cultural safety for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, including a lack of education in school about Aboriginal histories and connections to land and water. Additionally, LGBTIQA+ students reported experiencing discrimination and homophobia within many school settings, with these attitudes being exacerbated by online debates.

Cost-of-living pressures was another key consideration for students, as this effects access to uniforms, textbooks and extracurricular activities. These pressures are especially amplified for regional and rural students, who experience additional barriers to engagement because the costs associated with those engagements were often higher, often thanks to increased travel expenses.

Throughout these conversations, a lack of student voice and agency was identified as a key barrier to achieving effective solutions to these challenges, with students reflecting on top-down, unaccountable, or tokenistic responses which lacked in effectiveness or representation.

What we heard from students about this topic

One of students' primary considerations within these discussions revolved around the role teachers play in supporting students' learning, where adjustments or additional supports were needed. Students reflected that teacher's often struggled to provide them with adequate support, citing their heavy workloads as a key factor impeding teacher ability. In this regard, students' reflections mirrored those of students who considered workload to be a key barrier for teachers in providing adequate mental health support.

Students also shared instances of teachers being resistant to new or creative teaching methods, again highlighting a lack of time for proper implementation as a barrier, along with a lack of training for teachers to cater to different learning needs effectively. This effects both students who need additional support, and students who seek extension opportunities.

These reflections from students are reiterated by recent research which points to the state of Australia's overworked teachers as a key driver of their inability to provide adequate support to students with diverse or additional needs[9]. This is further exacerbated by the fact that less than 40% of Australian teachers said they felt adequately prepared to make proposed use of diverse teaching methods to suit the needs of those students[10].

Students also said that Individual Learning Plans, which rely heavily on teachers to enact, were often poorly implemented. Furthermore, students with learning difficulties were sometimes subjected to punitive measures rather than receiving additional support, which was especially difficult for students who explained that the process of obtaining necessary diagnoses to access that additional support was financially inaccessible for them.

Students at Congress additionally reflected on those who are living with chronic illnesses, and the additional barriers students may face when they cannot access additional support for their learning while navigating persistent, necessary absences. Students explained that in those cases, families might consider moving students to different schools to access higher levels of support, but in doing so, students have even less classroom time, and combined with the challenges of transition between school settings, this often sets their achievement back even further.

Students at Congress also raised issues of increasing experiences of discrimination at school, based on gender identities and cultural backgrounds. They also believed discriminatory behaviours are still on the rise, extending similar reflections from students at 2023 Congress[11].

Examples cited by students included instances of homophobia and misogyny. Students explained that online trends which utilise offensive or exclusionary language serves to give other students more social licence, thus increasing its prevalence. Students reflected on the importance of teachers in

[9] Black Dog Institute (2023)

[10] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2018), 'Teaching and Learning International Survey 2018: Country Note – Australia', *OCED,* 19 January 2019.

[11] VicSRC (2023), '2023 Congress Report', *Victorian Student Representative Council,* p. 9.

modelling appropriate behaviours and responses to these instances, but they felt that their teachers often would not step in when they should, or were not confident in doing so. This particular reflection is supported by a recent study which found that some Australian teachers felt unprepared to deal with instances of LGBTIQA+ discrimination because of a perceived need to remain 'neutral' to any particular ideological positioning on these matters[12].

More generally, it is well-established that bullying and discrimination can have hugely negative impacts on students' wellbeing, as well as their outcomes, at school[13]. Unfortunately, these occurrences seem to feature as part of a growing trend. New data from the 2024 Attitudes to School Survey indicates that around 15% of Victorian students in Years 4 -12 experienced bullying, a one per cent increase from 2023[14].

Students from migrant and/or refugee backgrounds made it clear that more was needed to make their school environments culturally safe. One aspect of this is addressing racism and ignorance directed at students' cultural identities. Students explained that bullying and discrimination was common. Alongside the negative impacts of this, however, they also noted that they could not always find the support they needed from teachers and staff who, according to them, sometimes held unhelpful or racist views themselves. Regional students reflected that these problems tended to be more acute in their communities, where cultural diversity was less of a feature than in some metropolitan areas.

Students who spoke English as an additional language also expressed that they were not adequately supported by their school. This lack of support from their school communities compounded other challenges they faced around adjusting to their cultural surroundings. Beyond a lack of support, racism also appears to be rising in Victorian schools according to the latest Attitudes to School survey data, which reported that around 17% of students in Years 4-12 are experiencing racism. This is a two percent increase from last year, indicating that current initiatives are not adequately addressing the problem[15].

These sentiments are validated by the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) which notes that students from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds can face overwhelming challenges at school considering the need for them to adjust to different cultural and social systems, languages, and norms, all while dealing with the usual challenges associated with entering into a new educational setting, like building relationships and familiarity, alongside their personal development. These factors combined, according to MYAN, require targeted educational and wellbeing responses[16] to ensure those students are adequately supported.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Student voice should be prioritised in schools, to help make their schools safe, accessible, and inclusive. In this regard, students highlighted the need for:

[12] Bartulovic, M, Kusevic, B, Siranovic, A (2023), 'From neutrality to engagement: the modalities of understanding secondary teacher professionalism in dealing with LGBT issues', *Multicultural Education Review,* vol. 15, no. 1, 2023, pp. 42-59.
[13] Berry, K (2018), 'LGBT bullying in school: a troubling relational story', *Communication Education,* vol. 67, no. 4, 2018, pp. 502-513.
[14] Department of Education (2024), 'Data snapshot: Attitudes to School Survey (AtoSS) 2024', *education.vic.gov.au,* accessed 11 November 2024.
[15] Department of Education (2024).
[16] Foundation House & Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (2020), 'Education and students from refugee and migrant backgrounds: Briefing Paper', *Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network,* November 2020.

- ○ Greater agency in deciding what they need within their school environment to be safe and comfortable, including inputs into non-gendered uniform policies and strategies to promote cultural awareness and inclusion.

- ○ Schools implementing a regular time for students to raise issues with staff.

- ○ Schools communicating policies around discrimination more clearly to students.

- ○ Greater student participation in decisions around how their learning occurs and learning goals.

- ○ Students participating in hiring panels for new staff.

- ○ Ensuring that students have a diverse range of opportunities to engage in school leadership, noting that election-based models can sometimes be a barrier for diverse representation.

- ○ More support for student-led clubs to create safe spaces for themselves and their peers.

- Additional support around neurodiversity and additional learning needs should be implemented at school. Students suggested:

  - ○ Smaller classroom sizes.

  - ○ Giving teachers the resources and planning time they need to cater to students' needs.

  - ○ Increased funding for professional development with a focus on ensuring teachers can incorporate different learning needs and adaptability in their lesson plans.

  - ○ The school system recognising different learning needs and being accountable for delivering appropriate support in response to those needs.

  - ○ A greater diversity of assessments and classroom work to accommodate for different learning needs.

  - ○ Prioritising conversations between students and teachers about student learning goals and improvement plans.

- Greater support for students with disability should be provided, including additional training for teachers and more accommodations for learning differences in the classroom.

- More support for students from migrant and/or refugee backgrounds should be provided to build cultural safety. This should include:

  - o Attracting teachers from diverse backgrounds to encourage better representation in the profession and in classrooms.

  - o Cultural responsiveness/awareness training for teachers and school staff.

  - o A greater focus on world religions and cultures as part of the Victorian curriculum.

- Students from regional and rural areas should have access to similar extracurricular and excursion opportunities as students from Melbourne, either through local facilities or enabled by public transport that is free, reliable, frequent, and clean. These may include visits to cultural centres and landmarks, engagements in local communities/industries, and STEM centres.

- There should be a greater focus on addressing discrimination in schools, especially homophobia, misogyny and racism. Students recommended a focused effort to engage young men about positive masculinity.

- Cultural safety for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students should be a priority at school, as well as mainstream cultural education about Aboriginal histories and connections to land and water.

Re-thinking the definitions of success at school

Students who chose to participate in these discussions focused on how their aspirations, pathways, and planned post-school trajectories were seen through the eyes of their schools, and the barriers and enabling factors which impact achievement of their goals. In doing so, students reflected on a range of areas from their assessments, transitions, and stigma around vocational pathways.

Overall, students expressed a need for more information about senior secondary pathways, especially vocational pathways, reiterating other students' reflections on this topic. Students also explained that the early secondary years are an important time for preparing students for pathways and senior secondary education, but that they often felt unprepared once they entered Year 10.

Furthermore, students found that the VCE and ATAR systems posed limitations for them, preventing a holistic view of education and achievement at school. Students expressed their desire to see changes to assessment schemes which take an overall view of their development and their achievement in all facets of their education and their life.

What we heard from students about this topic

Students across all year levels expressed their need for clear and balanced advice about their senior secondary options. They reflected on persistent and challenging perceptions around non-university pathways at their schools which they described as poorly represented, undervalued, and subject to stigma. Students described a perception that exists in varying degrees, that those pathways were less valuable, desirable, or accessible than mainstream, academic-focused VCE pathways.

Whether through advice they received from teachers or pathways advisors, resources they had available to them to help inform their choices, or sentiments from within the school community including parents and caregivers, it was clear that vocational pathways are still widely considered a 'second choice' for many students. Students explained that this process of seeking information and finding answers to their questions without the reliable support of their schools led to additional stress and anxiety during the already intense and stressful senior secondary period.

These reflections are clearly supported by external research, with one 2021 study of 176 Australian secondary school students finding that a lack of clear, comprehensive and balanced information regarding vocational pathways presented a key barrier to students taking up those pathways[17].

Students also reflected that their parents or caregivers generally were not in a position to answer their questions effectively, especially given recent changes to VCE leaving many families and communities without an up-to-date understanding of the senior secondary education landscape. The same was true in regard to the ATAR system, and how vocational pathways interacted with a student's ATAR score which, according to students, was a priority for many parents in understanding the value or outcomes associated with potential pathways.

[17] Choy, S., Dymock, D., Le, L., & Billett, S. (2021), 'Understanding student decision-making about VET as a pathway: an Australian study', *International Journal of Training Research*, vol. 19, no, 2, pp. 125–141.

Altogether, there remains a great need for students to have access to higher-quality information regarding their study options as they prepare for senior secondary education.

Students who had transitioned into senior secondary education described a significant gap between their expectations of senior secondary education and the reality of their experiences. Students felt that their education in Years 7 and 8 did not provide them with the necessary tools, knowledge, and other preparation which they felt they needed once they transitioned into year 10. Students described a lack of preparedness about the shift in workload and increase in academic expectations which drove feelings of stress, anxiety, and overwhelm.

These feelings were exacerbated in circumstances where students felt pressure to maintain an intensive study-load because of stigma surrounding the notions of choosing to complete fewer units in any given timeframe, or selecting subjects which were seen to be less academically rigorous even when those subjects more readily aligned with a students' own interests or aspirations.

These factors combined left students not only feeling overwhelmed by their obligations, but also resentful when they later realised that an alternative pathway or approach to their senior secondary education might have been a better option for them.

Students reflected on the impacts of time-poor teachers regarding the quality and usefulness of the feedback they were receiving at school. Students explained that they were often left wanting more in terms of feedback and guidance on their schoolwork in the interest of their own development and improvement, but that this personalised feedback was not forthcoming because teachers seemed not to have the time to provide it. Without this feedback, students said they were left without proper guidance about how to continue pursuing improvements which, for some students, fuelled disengagement through a feeling of helplessness.

During discussions about assessments, students made it clear that they felt current assessment systems were limiting and did not accurately reflect a holistic view of their learning, growth, or strengths. These reflections also serve to further support contributions made by students in other conversations during Congress, which focused on mental health and wellbeing and inclusive education. During these discussions, students also remarked on the negative mental health impacts of academic pressure.

Students explained that exams presented a very limited approach to assessment which did not yield results that were indicative of their capabilities or their development. These high stakes assessments conducted under time pressure are not conducive to highlighting students' growth. Furthermore, students reflected on the difficulties they face in maintaining a rigorous pace of exams within one short period of time (i.e. at the end of each VCE year), explaining that their mental health suffered, which led to compounding issues of further stress and anxiety as they doubted their ability to perform within those settings. Students also resented the short-term nature of those assessments, reflecting on situations where they may be impacted by external or other factors which prevented them from bringing their 'full and best' selves into examination rooms, compromising a year or more of hard work because of under-performance in a single window.

These reflections are not surprising given recent research on the topic of exam stress. In a 2024 study of 4,086 Australian secondary students who were asked to report their most frequent and serious concerns, academic pressure was cited as the most common theme with more than 25% of respondents invoking their education as a source of concern for them[18]. Furthermore, recent data from ReachOut also supports students' claims, finding that around half of all young people felt very

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[18] Bartholomew, A., Maston, K., Brown, L. et al (2024), 'Self-Reported Concerns among Australian Secondary School Students: Associations with Mental Health and Wellbeing' *Child Youth Care Forum,* vol. 53, p. 1439.

stressed about their exams, while more than 40% agreed that this stress was having a serious impact on their mental health[19].

Students also considered the ways in which typical modes of assessment did not provide an equal playing field for students who could demonstrate their aptitudes in other ways, such as through extracurricular activities, creative endeavours, or project-oriented work. Some students also recognised that their schools seemed hesitant to adopt new methods of assessment because they placed great value on high academic performance as part of their school's reputation.

The evidence, however, overwhelmingly demonstrates that in order to achieve equity and fairness in education assessments, assessments must be customised to account for students' individual circumstances. One study of 3,300 education stakeholders explain that assessment practices must "accommodate the ability, social, cultural and linguistic background of students" while also "address[ing] the personal impact of assessment practices on individual students"[20] in order to achieve fairness and equity through classroom assessments.

Students took a special focus to the ATAR's ranking system, which they explained leads to competition among classmates and unhelpful comparisons of performance between peers. Students pointed out that an ATAR score alone cannot accurately reflect the level of commitment or effort they placed into their education throughout their studies. This is especially true in circumstances where the success criteria for assessments is exceptionally narrow. Assessments like these leave little room for a student to demonstrate their understanding of relevant concepts beyond the specific requirements.

In considering solutions to this challenge, students were quick to emphasise the need for voice and agency within the context of their own assessments which, according to them, would help them and their teachers build a deeper understanding of their strengths, and develop strategies to effectively demonstrate this through their assessments. While this notion is supported by emerging evidence which suggests that voice and agency can play a transformative role in boosting students' engagement and performance in the context of their assessments[21], there is also a need for additional evidence to further ascertain the value and power of voice and agency to support students in their assessments and ensure that their results are reflective of their strengths.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- A fresh approach to assessments is necessary to genuinely recognise students' strengths and overall development.

- Schools should include greater efforts to destigmatise vocational pathways, such as sharing information about all pathways earlier and in a balanced way. Additionally, schools should implement strategies to emphasise that the outcomes of senior secondary education do not dictate the life course of students.

- Students should receive more support and informed guidance about the senior secondary years before they get there. This includes information about pathways, expectations, and positive strategies to manage stress, namely in Years 7 to 9.

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[19] ReachOut (2022), 'Study stress impacting students' mental health, sleep and relationships according to new research by ReachOut', *ReachOut,* 9 October 2022.
[20] Scott, S, Webber, C. F, Lupart, J. L, Aitken, N, Scott, D (2012), 'Fair and equitable assessment practices for all students', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice,* vol. 21, no. 1, 2012, pp. 52-70.
[21] Adie, L.E., Willis, J. & Van der Kleij, F.M., (2018), 'Diverse perspectives on student agency in classroom assessment', *The Australian Education Researcher*, vol. 45, pp. 1-12.

- Working with their teachers, students should have greater agency in determining how they can best utilise their strengths throughout their studies to achieve their goals. This could include a focus on different study techniques and learning styles.

- Schools should make a greater effort to re-conceptualise the idea of students' success, helping students to recognise progress within themselves as it happens.

- Teachers should be supported to provide more individualised feedback on students' assessments, including by working with students on strategies to set them up for future success.

- Schools should provide students with opportunities to engage in non-classroom based activities which support their achievement at school, like opportunities to demonstrate their strengths through local community engagement.

Prioritising equity in education for every Victorian student

Students who chose to participate in these discussions focused their discussion on the role that money, including financial investments in schools and supports which are available to students, plays in shaping their education experience. Students shared their perspectives on these factors and made recommendations about how to further improve resourcing to ensure that students, families, and schools (including their teachers) are adequately supported.

Students made it clear that cost-of-living pressures are having real impacts on the nature and quality of their education experience, citing rising costs of essentials like uniforms and equipment, which hinder their access and participation in education.

Students were also concerned with the rising costs of extra curricular engagements, including camps and excursions. Students explained that in some circumstances, these opportunities were not being offered as frequently as before, and in other circumstances, the associated costs were rising significantly, hindering their participation.

Students also reflected on their physical learning environments and the impact that a well-maintained, accessible, modern, and clean learning environment has on their engagement and wellbeing. In their reflections, students spoke specifically to the disparities that rural schools experience in quality of infrastructure when compared to metropolitan schools.

Students were also concerned about teacher workforce challenges and reflected on the urgent need for new solutions to ensure that not only were there enough teachers to support their learning, but that the health and wellbeing of their teachers was protected, too.

What we heard from students about this topic

Discussions among students on this topic made it clear that the ongoing teacher shortage is significantly impacting students' experiences at school. This shortage hinders learning, exacerbates wellbeing challenges, and dissuades students from considering a teaching profession. In conversations across other themes throughout Congress, students made it clear that teachers play a central role in determining their outcomes (including their wellbeing and their achievement) but that teachers were often left without the time and resources they needed to deliver that support.

Regional students explained that their schools were dealing with especially challenging circumstances in filling teaching roles within their schools.

Students also considered the role the teacher shortage was playing on the variety of subject offerings available at their school. Students shared that subjects they are interested in are sometimes not offered at school, especially those in creative fields and humanities.

Students also described circumstances in which they were hindered in establishing student-led initiatives due to the lack of staff to support them. Furthermore, students describe situations where staffing issues resulted in camps no longer being offered because schools could not support the engagement.

Additionally, students have identified that casual relief teachers were playing a more prominent role in their classrooms, and have noticed challenges which impacted the ability of CRTs to use their limited time with students effectively. Students noted that CRTs were rarely provided with consistent or relevant information before delivering classes, especially advanced or extension classes, and they would often forget to use lesson plans or individual learning plans where they had access to them.

Discussions around financial barriers at school were another key focus for students at Congress. Students explained that rising cost of living pressures were placing additional burdens on them and their families when it came to their education. The costs of essentials like uniforms, textbooks, stationery, and transport were all rising, while other costs incurred (related to enrichment opportunities like camps and excursions) were also rising. These factors combined mean that students and their families are feeling the pressure associated with a lack of access to a full and rich education experience.

Students additionally reflected on the fact that some financial supports which were available came with unhelpful stigma which acted as a disincentive for some families to engage with that support. Other avenues of support available like second-hand uniforms have the effect of highlighting students' inability to meet the costs of new supplies. These reflections were especially pertinent for students who are dealing with complex situations at home, often shouldering additional responsibilities including financial responsibility in ways that other students do not.

The impacts of financial disparity were especially felt in rural and regional schools, where students noted that fewer enrichment or extracurricular opportunities existed, and in circumstances where they were offered, they were often very expensive. Students also reflected on the additional challenges faced by regional and rural students who rely on public transport to access their education. Not only was this a cost barrier in itself, but students also explained that they may be penalised for absences caused by unreliable transport and risk falling behind in class when they had no reliable transport to school.

School infrastructure was another key consideration for students at Congress, particularly in rural areas where students described an over-reliance on solutions like portable classrooms for extended periods, which they said did not provide ideal learning environments and conveyed a lack of prioritisation and resourcing for them. This problem extends to necessary accessibility features for students with disabilities, with students describing situations where their schools couldn't properly provide for their needs because their school infrastructure did not cater for them.

In addition to these considerations, some students said it seemed like other investments in their school's infrastructure was overdue, like upgrades to classrooms, libraries, air conditioning systems, and toilets, all of which contribute to an inviting, engaging, and accessible learning environment.

Students also reflected on the growing onus on students themselves to raise money for enrichment activities, especially for school social events. While they feel fundraising can present valuable leadership opportunities, students were clear that they should not be expected to bear the burden of raising money required for essential aspects of their education.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Schools should provide more support for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, including:
  - Providing free or subsidised stationery and school uniforms for students.
  - Removing other cost barriers to education, like providing free public transport and making extracurricular activities free.
  - Providing advice to students about external financial supports available for them and their families.

- Students want to see excursions be made more affordable and see increased funding to support delivery of extracurriculars in school.

- Students want school staff to have the capacity to organise school social events, and for these to be provided at a reduced cost to students.

- Students want extension opportunities to be provided to all students, with a greater emphasis on student choice. Likewise, additional teacher resourcing support should be provided across all subjects where needed.

- Students want the government to provide schools with additional financial support to source better equipment, as well as for schools to share and borrow equipment in their local area.

- Improvements to clean and accessible infrastructure for schools, especially rural and regional schools.

- Building greater awareness of grants and funding relief for schools, and providing support to apply for these.

- Students want a greater say in what their school's infrastructure looks and feels like by being involved in planning and consultation when schools undergo upgrades and refurbishments. This includes greater involvement in school councils and engagement with the state government.

- Students want government to address challenges within the school curriculum offerings. This could include:
  - Schools in the same district sharing curriculum resources and classes among each other
  - Revising a curriculum that appears overcrowded
  - Schools providing a greater focus on non-textbook learning
  - Training current teachers in a variety of subjects, to increase the array of subjects being offered
  - Employing a staff member to support students who attend online classes. These courses should also be offering social opportunities and excursions and greater awareness of these should be spread

- To address cost of living pressures, students want to see:
  - Free tutoring programs after school
  - Increase in government funding to support low-income families, including funds for extracurricular activities
  - Free lunches or cheaper lunch options for students
  - Free public transport for students