

VICSRC 2025 MELBOURNE CONGRESS SNAPSHOT

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 53 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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INTRODUCTION

Congress leading student voice for 20 years

ABOUT VICSRC

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing school-aged students in Victoria. We exist to empower every student to have their voice heard and valued in education.

VicSRC works alongside students, educators and decision-makers to build a more inclusive and collaborative education system. As Australia's only independent, student-led education advocacy organisation, we lead reform that is grounded in student experience and driven by student leadership.

Our programs, including Teach the Teacher and Ambassadors, help students build leadership and advocacy skills, and ensure their insights shape classrooms, school leadership and education policy.

ABOUT CONGRESS

For 20 years, Congress has been the cornerstone of VicSRC's mission to elevate student voice in education reform, as a student-led event. Each year, students from across Victoria come together to discuss the issues that matter most to them, identify solutions, and set priorities for change.

The 2025 Melbourne Congress marked the beginning of VicSRC's 20th Anniversary celebrations. Throughout 2026, we'll continue this milestone with regional Congress events in Swan Hill, Geelong, Wangaratta and Gippsland amplifying voices from every corner of the state.

HOW CONGRESS SUPPORTS VICSRC'S REFORM OBJECTIVES

Congress plays a vital role in VicSRC's mission to drive student-led education reform in Victoria. It forms the foundation for our annual Congress Report, which captures and records students' voices and perspectives on the state of the Victorian education system. Following the 2026 Regional Congress events, VicSRC will publish this 20th Anniversary Congress report as a key piece of research.

Insights from Congress directly shape VicSRC's Policy Platform. This is our key mechanism for translating student voice into policy reform. The Platform's 22 student-driven recommendations outline a clear vision for a more inclusive, equitable and empowering education system.

As this Melbourne Snapshot Report demonstrates, student priorities across all focus areas strongly align with the recommendations in the Policy Platform. This alignment reinforces the Platform's ongoing relevance, credibility and impact as a blueprint for reform grounded in lived experience.

MELBOURNE CONGRESS AT A GLANCE

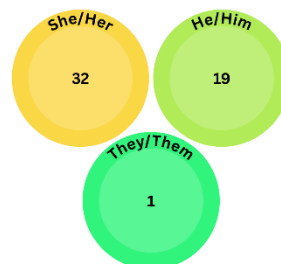
In September 2025, VicSRC welcomed 53 students from 19 secondary schools from across Victoria to participate in student-led discussions about the big issues in mental health and wellbeing, inclusion and access, the definitions of success at school and prioritising equity in education.

Student Reach

Age Groups



How Students Identify



Student Satisfaction Average

5.0 ★★★★★

Geographic split



Returning Schools



65% Schools have attended before

35% Schools new to Congress

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Wellbeing and positive mental health are the core of a thriving school community

What we heard from students about this topic

Stigma remains a barrier to accessing mental health support.

- Many students have trouble confiding in parents, carers, and guardians.
- Teacher shortages limit students' ability to build trusting relationships.

Lack of awareness about available supports impacts help-seeking.

- Support seems to only be promoted after a crisis occurs.
- Some students are unaware of available supports, while others find that wellbeing staff numbers do not meet student needs.

Assessment and pathways pressure is a significant contributor to poor mental health.

- The ATAR offers narrow, grades-based ranking, encouraging unhealthy comparison.
- There is pressure to choose the 'right' pathway without enough guidance.
- Vocational and arts pathways are stigmatised across the school community.
- Family and cultural expectations limit options, along with gender stereotypes.

Burnout is caused by difficulty balancing school, work, hobbies, and social life.

- Stress around workloads and assessments lead to poor mental health and low attendance.
- Social media, phone, and gaming use make it harder to live balanced lives.

Culturally informed mental health support is necessary for students from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds.

Students' mental health is impacted by multiple forms of **discrimination**, such as queerphobia, racism and gender-discrimination.

Student Insights

A strong student-teacher relationship can make all the difference.

We shouldn't have to wait for a crisis before someone checks in.

Racism, queerphobia and ableism are on the rise at school.

Decision-makers don't know what school is like for us.

Bullying continues to harm student mental health, with **decreasing trust in school reporting**.

- School reporting processes remain inaccessible to students, who are not

convinced that speaking up will lead to genuine outcomes.

Negative media portrayals of young people also contribute to students **disconnecting from school**.

Being negatively stereotyped in the media can lead students to feel defined by those labels, reducing their drive to participate at school.

There is a strong connection between **student voice** and supporting **positive mental health**.

- Current decision-making does not seem to represent students' lived experience, and students want to be involved in effective solutions.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Increase school funding for mental health programs.
- Provide time and resources for staff to build relationships with students.
- Create relaxation and sensory break spaces at school.
- Provide mental health education programs for students, tailored to each year level.
- Provide mental health education programs for parents, carers and guardians.
- Provide trauma informed mental health training for staff, with an assessment component.
- Promote mandated wellbeing teams within the school community.
- Run more mental health-focused events at school.
- Create content for students about reaching out for support to normalise help seeking.
- Provide schools with the tools to refer students to additional mental health support.
- Take students concerns about teachers seriously, with genuine and transparent outcomes.
- Create student peer support groups, considering both student agency and child safety.
- Provide options for in-exam support, as well as alternative assessment types.
- Enable greater agency and input from students across education policy.

Reflections:

We want schools to treat our wellbeing as seriously as our grades.

INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION

Students should feel seen, safe and celebrated at school no matter their identity

What we heard from students about this topic

There is a **lack of support** for students who have experienced the **youth justice system**.

Individual learning needs are not consistently met.

- Some teachers assume support is provided elsewhere and Education Support Officers sometimes fail to assist students with complex needs.
- Younger students report unstructured lessons.
- High-achieving students lack extension opportunities, and these opportunities are dependent on the schools they attend.

Students with disabilities and neurodivergence face multiple barriers.

- Staff often lack training and do not use a strengths-based approach.
- Disability is sometimes minimised or joked about by peers and staff.
- Students are excluded from Physical Education and face inaccessible infrastructure.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experience **racism and underrepresentation**.

- Issues range from microaggressions to systemic exclusion.
- Lack of representation in student leadership and school staff.

Students from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds experience racism and lack of necessary accommodations.

- The curriculum often lacks multicultural representation, fuelling discrimination.
- Refugee and migrant students often enter schools without adequate support.
- Limited cultural accommodations, such as prayer rooms, remain a concern.

LGBTIQA+ students continue to face **queerphobia and exclusion**.

- All-gender bathrooms remain unavailable in many schools.

Student Insights

We don't see ourselves in what we learn.

We don't know how to report an issue, or what will change if we do.

How can we participate if we can't access parts of our school?

Schools need the money and time to create safe environments.

There are **inconsistent staff responses** to bullying and wellbeing issues.

Gender stereotypes and misogyny affect student experiences.

- Stereotypes influence subject selection and extracurricular involvement.
- Misogyny in schools, including from staff, makes students feel judged or limited.

Newer teachers struggle with **classroom management**, especially when **under-resourced**.

Resource shortages and the **workforce crisis** limit schools' ability to prioritise inclusivity.

Student voice must be central to shaping **school policies and practices**.

Reflections:

Support should fit each student, not the other way around.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Increase funding for inclusivity and accessibility, with tailored support for individual needs.
- Provide stronger support around disability, neurodiversity, and learning needs through teacher resources, training, diverse assessments, referrals, and personalised Individual Learning Plans.
- Prioritise cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through identified staff roles, leadership positions, and dedicated engagement programs.
- Provide cultural responsiveness training and diverse cultural representation in the curriculum.
- Reduce cost barriers around textbooks, uniforms, and extracurricular activities.
- Ensure access to all-gender bathroom facilities at every school.
- Address discrimination through early intervention, inclusivity education, online reporting, and programs that challenge gender stereotypes.
- Support student-teacher relationships through increased salaries, student wellbeing surveys, and regular reviews of inclusive teaching practices.

DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS

Students seek an education system that values holistic achievement and growth, with genuine support to reach the right pathway

What we heard from students about this topic

A **narrow conception of success** underpins many challenges in the education system.

Academic **pressure and workload balance** remain major challenges for students.

- There is a culture of constant comparison, especially with the ATAR system.
- Major **assessments often overlap**, leaving little time for feedback, revision, or recovery.

Attendance policies are seen as prioritising presence over wellbeing.

- There is little flexibility for different learning needs, challenges, or circumstances.

Students feel expected to **choose a career path** too early, with limited guidance.

- Guidance is too focused on academic pathways, instead of students' interests.

Stigma around **vocational and arts pathways** persist more broadly, limiting students.

- Students in vocational pathways face limited access to placements.

Some schools reportedly discourage lower-scoring students from attempting the VCE to protect **performance data**.

- This leaves students feeling their interests are secondary to school rankings.

English subject requirements are seen as disconnected from students' goals.

Student Insights

Success shouldn't be a number on a piece of paper.

Every pathway should be respected, whether it's Uni, TAFE or something else.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Provide more effective course counselling and careers education to students.
- Provide trial periods in Year 10 for senior secondary pathways.
- Formulate a fresh approach to assessments to genuinely recognise students' strengths and overall development. This includes:
 - Transitioning from timed exams to project-based learning.
 - Including student voice in assessment development and options.
 - Scheduling assessments and homework evenly throughout the year.
- Celebrate personal growth both in and outside of school, as well as academic growth.
 - Potentially through awards which focus on students' community contributions.
- Deliver learning with greater focus on life skills at school.

Reflections:

Let us define success for ourselves.

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION

Every school should have the resources and funding to deliver quality education, because students feel the impact first-hand

What we heard from students about this topic

Financial barriers continue to limit the ability of students from low socio-economic backgrounds to fully engage in school life.

- This includes costs of uniforms, textbooks, and stationery, as well as camps, excursions, and enrichment opportunities.
- Existing savings programs are insufficient and carry stigma.

Resource inequity across subjects and schools remains a major concern.

- Some school subject departments are well-funded while others lack basic materials and equipment.
- Student-led groups, such as Student Representative Councils, are underfunded.

Regional and rural students face significant structural barriers.

- Unreliable transport, long travel times, and limited shelter at bus stops.
- Fewer opportunities for extracurricular and community engagement.

Infrastructure issues impact learning environments, with a lack of **student consultation**

- Students report run-down classrooms, broken air conditioning, power outages, and unclean facilities, especially for rural and government schools.

The **teacher workforce crisis** continues to distress students.

- Staff shortages lead to cancelled classes or unsupervised online learning.
- Frequent use of Casual Relief Teachers results in inconsistent lessons, unclear expectations, and learning gaps.
- The workforce crisis worsens student motivation, behaviour and school culture.

Students recognise deeper **causes of the teacher workforce crisis**.

- Issues such as low pay, high workload, and limited career incentives.

Student Insights

It's hard to feel valued when our subjects don't even have the resources we need to learn.

We learn better when our schools are safe, clean, and cared for.

Teaching should be valued like the vital job it is.

We can't thrive if our schools aren't properly funded.

- Societal stigma and gendered assumptions about a teaching career.
- Burnout and high turnover make it harder to connect with students.

Lack of **individualised learning support** leaves many students behind.

- There are not enough Learning Support Officers or tailored catch-up programs.
- Smaller and under-resourced schools often cannot offer a wide range of subjects.

Students understand the connection between funding, staffing, and learning conditions.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Achieve 100% of funding for every Victorian school according to the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS).
- Provide schools in need with better equipment and infrastructure improvements, especially in rural and regional areas.
- Improve access to clean, reliable, and timely public transport in regional and rural areas.
- Ensure Casual Relief Teachers are allocated to the subjects they are trained to teach and are provided with online lesson plans to refer to.
- Improve teaching salary and incentives to combat the workforce crisis.
- Continue the Schools Savings Bonus, acknowledging that this does not resolve ongoing cost of living issues.

Reflections:

We want extra help, not lower expectations.

2025 MELBOURNE 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 four Presenting Partners: Flying Fox, the Royal Children's Hospital, Monash University Action Lab and the Australian Education Union (AEU), as well as our Data and Insights Partner, Pivot.

Our Supporting Partner, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, chose to support students' conversations about re-defining success at school.

Student Sponsors from across the education and youth sectors supported students to attend Congress free of charge by covering the costs of tickets: Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), Western Bulldogs Community Foundation, Parents Victoria and the Country Education Partnership (CEP).

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

Presenting Partners		
		
Data and Insights Partner		
Supporting Partner	  <p>Supporting 'Definitions of Success'</p>	
Student Sponsors		

		 <small>LEADERSHIP ACHIEVEMENT COLLABORATION</small> COUNTRY EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP
In-kind Partners		
Special thanks		 Department of Education