



VicSRC

ADVOCACY

PLATFORM

2022

VicSRC Victorian Student
Representative Council

VICSRC 2022

ADVOCACY

PRIORITIES

CONGRESS 2021

At the start of 2021, a year into the COVID-19 pandemic that came hard on the heels of devastating bushfires, VicSRC declared a mental health crisis for Victorian students. As students reported that disruptions to learning and extended lockdowns had exacerbated mental health and wellbeing issues we called on the system to provide more support and to make sure good mental health and wellbeing was the main priority of schools.

WHO SHOULD PAY ATTENTION TO THIS REPORT?

VicSRC encourages everyone involved in education in Victoria to read this report and consider the actions students have identified. While we have asked named decision makers to take specific action, we want the culture at schools to change so that mental health and wellbeing are protected, valued and prioritised by the whole system and by each school community.

We encourage schools to support leadership, teachers, students, families and the community to consider the actions in this report and how their schools can create a school where everyone feels safe, welcomed and knows their mental health and wellbeing is just as important as their learning achievements.



A WORD FROM THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Congress this year looked a little different than usual. Not only was the event virtual (sadly), but this year, Congress had a theme!

After surveying over 100 Victorian students on their top issues in education, VicSRC found that the overwhelming response from students was that mental health and wellbeing was their top priority. Consequently, the theme for Congress 2021 was mental health and wellbeing in education.

Although it was hard not seeing everyone in person, the #CongressVibes were coming in strong through screens. Even an earthquake the morning of couldn't stop us from making change!

At Congress itself we tackled the eight issues identified in the survey, which you will read about in this report. We began with high-level discussions and then proceeded to unpack the issue. After identifying sub-issues and causes, investigating links to student mental health and wellbeing and doing some blue-sky thinking, we brainstormed some actions to solve the problem

Following Congress, some members of the VicSRC Student Executive Advisory Committee and the Student Community formed came together for a series of action planning sessions, the working group was able to further develop the bold and creative ideas from Congress, refining them into tangible and concrete actions for both schools and the education sector at large.

The past two years have undeniably had significant impacts on students in Victoria, but we should also acknowledge that there have been opportunities. One of the major takeaways from these last two years is the power of student voice and agency. As the major stakeholder in education and educational experiences, students need to be listened to and actively consulted in decisions that affect us. We need to have the support and the platform to voice our concerns, opinions, and ideas. And one of the key ways VicSRC empowers students to do so is through Congress and this Advocacy Report.

I hope you enjoy the report!

– *Aakriti, 2021-2022 VicSRC Student Executive Advisory Committee Member*

CONGRESS 2021

WHAT WAS THE BEST PART OF CONGRESS 2021?

“
Having the ability
to share my
views
”

“
Seeing students all over
Victoria coming together to
share ideas on the issues in
schools all over
”



“
Feeling as though I as an
individual were actually having a
positive impact on change
”

“
Getting to have a say in issues
that directly influence me and
being able to help come up with
possible solutions.
”

“
Getting to talk to people
from different schools
who could offer different
experiences
”



“
Gaining new
ideas for things to
implement in my
own school
”

WHY DO YOU THINK CONGRESS IS IMPORTANT?

“
To enhance student voice and advocate for change within the education system
”

“
Education impacts us young people so by having a voice we can create a desirable education system.
”



“
It is a major place for students to come together and not only voice complaints with education, but also lets us appreciate what our schools do right.
”

“
It allows students to create change in their schools
”

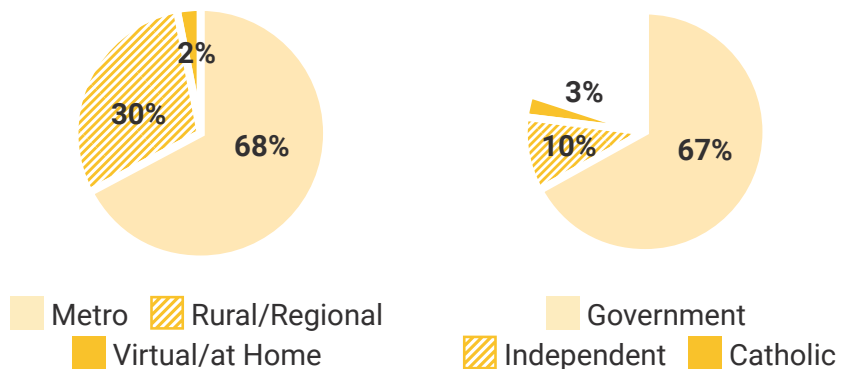
“
Getting to have a say in issues that directly influence me and being able to help come up with possible solutions.
”

“
It is really important to get student and youth ideas and opinions, since we are the ones who are actually getting anything out of education!
”

CONGRESS 2021 STATS

188

students participated in the survey and Congress sessions



WHAT ARE THE PRIORITIES?

VicSRC 2021 ACTION PLANS

GRAPHIC RECORDING by SARAH FIRTH

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→ Click on a puzzle piece to view that Advocacy Priority!

CONSENT



EDUCATION

THE PROBLEM

Schools and the broader community are uncomfortable talking about consent and this discomfort influences students and teachers in the classroom and creates a barrier to open conversations.

- Consent is a challenging topic because of the different ideas across communities and cultures about what it means and how it should be taught.
- Teachers don't have appropriate training or resources to make consent education safe, accessible and inclusive for all students.
- Consent education is not prioritised like other parts of the curriculum and there is less accountability for how well it's being taught.

HOW DOES THIS PROBLEM IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?




Students feel unsafe, uninformed and disempowered because we don't understand enough about what consent means and how to meaningfully practice it. Rape culture, victim blaming and toxic masculinity are still too prevalent in school and society and we feel like we won't necessarily have appropriate support from school if something happens that relates to these taboo topics.

WHAT WOULD CONSENT EDUCATION LOOK LIKE IF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING WAS PRIORITISED?

Schools would be safe places that model good consent practices in relationships and decisions. Consent would be a normal topic of discussion in and outside the classroom from Prep up to Year 12.



IDEAS FOR ACTION AT SCHOOL

-  Make sure resources are publicly available for students, teachers and families that are student-created, inclusive, age-appropriate and include legal and cultural aspects of consent education for use in class, at home and in the broader community.
-  Make consent education a regular part of learning from the first year of formal education. Classes should not be divided by gender and should focus on student-led discussions facilitated by teachers.
-  Provide quality consent education training to all teachers so that they feel confident teaching to all year levels and can have discussions about it regularly to normalise the topic.

OUR ADVOCACY ASKS

- The Victorian Government should fund students to create resources to support consent education at school, at home and in their communities.
- Schools should report on the quantity and quality of consent education taught each year for each year level through their Annual Implementation Plans.
- The Department of Education and Training (DET) should provide regular opportunities for teachers to access training focused on teaching consent education across all year levels at school.

TEACHER—



STUDENT

RELATIONSHIPS

THE PROBLEM

The education system doesn't support balanced student-teacher relationships within professional boundaries.

- Students feel like teachers are in charge so there is a power imbalance at school.
- Schools don't consistently support collaborative student-teacher work with time or resources.
- Not all schools understand the value of effective student-teacher relationships.

HOW DOES THIS PROBLEM IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?




Students feel like we can't connect reliably connect with our teachers because they aren't all approachable or friendly. For some of us this impacts our motivation and engagement in learning. Some students feel like others get preferential treatment, which can make them feel less valued.

WHAT WOULD STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS LOOK LIKE IF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING WAS PRIORITISED?

Students and teachers would work in partnership to create welcoming, safe and engaging schools.



IDEAS FOR ACTION AT SCHOOL




-  Include at least one student on all interview panels for teachers and school leadership to ensure the candidates can relate to students.
-  Provide regular opportunities (at least once a term) for students to give feedback to teachers, strongly encourage and support teachers to analyse the feedback in partnership with students to develop the most effective learning environment.
-  Include a ten minute session in each subject or class focused on fun activities (games, discussions, etc.) focused on building relationships between students and teachers.

OUR ADVOCACY ASKS


- The Minister for Education should mandate student participation on teacher and school leadership selection committees or interview panels.
- DET and Catholic Education Victoria should fund schools to implement and maintain regular feedback surveys or programs for every teacher. We encourage all independent schools to implement the same.
- Schools should prioritise time across the timetable to focus on building student-teacher relationships and encourage and support all teachers to develop effective relationships with each student.



IDEAS FOR ACTION AT SCHOOL

-  Ensure that content being taught always includes a range of cultural and community perspectives and diverse examples, including consistent inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in all areas of the curriculum.
-  Get rid of gendered bathrooms, uniforms or dress codes, teams and activities.
-  Provide regular training and learning opportunities for school leadership, teachers and students focused on celebrating and understanding diversity.

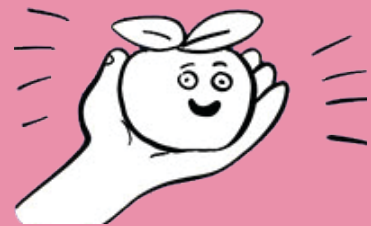
OUR ADVOCACY ASKS

- Schools should work in partnership with local community-based organisations to provide teachers and students with professional development and learning opportunities supporting a better understanding of different cultures, communities and identities.
 - VCAA should ensure that 70% of prescribed texts, films, history etc. are created by people of colour, people with a disability or LGBTIQ+ people.
 - DET should create a policy to ensure government schools cannot mandate gender-based rules, activities, programs or facilities.
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TEACHING AND

LEARNING



THE PROBLEM

Students aren't involved in developing the curriculum or planning how it is implemented, which makes it less effective and engaging.

- Teachers often teach in only one way, which doesn't account for different learning styles.
- Content is often outdated, not inclusive or relevant, and doesn't represent the current student experience.
- Education is treated as something that is done *to* students rather than *with* students.

HOW DOES THIS PROBLEM IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?




Students aren't engaging with content which means we are less engaged with school. If the content doesn't reflect our experiences, cultures and communities, we don't feel like we belong.

WHAT WOULD TEACHING AND LEARNING LOOK LIKE IF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING WAS PRIORITISED?

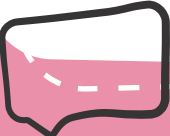
Students would work with teachers and school leadership to create engaging, flexible and relevant learning content and teaching practices that are supportive and personalised for each student.



IDEAS FOR ACTION AT SCHOOL

-  Include student committees in developing and reviewing curriculum at the state and school level.
-  Support teachers to work in collaboration with their classes to create engaging, flexible and relevant lessons that accommodate different learning styles.
-  Support students to follow their interests and passions, shifting the curriculum and teaching styles to fit them as individuals.

OUR ADVOCACY ASKS

- The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) should appoint paid student committees to regularly review the Victorian Curriculum.
 - DET should create resources with experts in student-led curriculum development to assist teachers and students to collaborate in the classroom.
 - The Minister for Education should increase funding for government and low-fee Catholic and independent schools to ensure smaller class sizes and more education support staff so that all students has personalized support.
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P-10



ASSESSMENT

THE PROBLEM

Schools focus too much on standardised testing which doesn't successfully measure achievement for all students.

Standardised tests:

- promote competition and ranking rather than measuring and celebrating personal learning growth,
- discourage schools from valuing difference and diversity in learning,
- make some students feel worthless and unintelligent.

HOW DOES THIS PROBLEM IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?




Exams and tests create anxiety and stress in students, made worse by standardized testing and ranking, which can make students feel inferior and create unrealistic goals for students, schools and families.

WHAT WOULD P-10 ASSESSMENT LOOK LIKE IF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING WAS PRIORITISED?


P-10 assessments would be focused on personal growth and understanding of learning instead of comparing and ranking students



IDEAS FOR ACTION AT SCHOOL

-  Refocus student reports on measuring personal growth with the option to include grades and ranking measurements. Let teachers, students and families work together to identify what reporting and assessment could look like from a strength-based perspective.
-  Give teachers dedicated time at the start of each year to understand how each student learns best and how to tailor assessments to suit individual learning styles.
-  Explicitly teach students time management skills and strategies for coping under pressure in time-based assessments from Year 2 onwards.

OUR ADVOCACY ASKS

- DET should provide support and guidance to schools to help them better understand different learning and assessment styles that can be adapted for each individual student.
 - DET should require schools to report on flexibility in teaching and assessment for individual students in their Annual Implementation Plans.
 - Schools and families should work together to focus on measuring personal growth in student assessments and reporting rather than ranking students.
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FAMILY AND



COMMUNITY

ENGAGEMENT



THE PROBLEM

Schools don't focus enough on building relationships with families, guardians and communities, which leads to a lack of understanding about students' lives outside of school.

- School and family life is considered separate and there isn't enough consideration given to how one impacts the other.
- Schools often communicate *to* families but not as often *with* families.

HOW DOES THIS PROBLEM IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?




Students feel like we're living two different lives at school and home or in the community, which can be hard on student wellbeing. Schools don't always understand what's happening at home or in the community and families and communities don't always understand what's happening at school, so when we have issues in one part of our lives that affect the other it can be hard to explain or manage responsibilities and wellbeing.

WHAT WOULD FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE IF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING WAS PRIORITISED?

Schools would be open and welcoming to all families and students' support networks, and meaningfully involve them as partners in learning.



IDEAS FOR ACTION AT SCHOOL

-  Share results with families from things like the Attitudes to School Survey and facilitate group discussions about what the results might mean and how everyone can collaborate to support students.
-  Host regular events at school that are open to families to promote, build and support effective relationships.
-  Encourage and support teachers and families to communicate regularly about changes in students learning and lives so that there is a shared understanding of how each student is going throughout the year.

OUR ADVOCACY ASKS

- The Minister for Education should mandate the sharing of the Attitudes to School Survey or other school-wide survey results with all students and families.
- DET, Catholic Education Victoria and Independent Schools Victoria should provide funding and/or support to ensure all schools can host an annual event for families and the community that focuses on celebration and relationship building rather than fundraising.
- Schools should prioritise conversations rather than one-sided feedback with every student and family at the start, middle and end of the year to develop relationships.



SENIOR SECONDARY

THE PROBLEM

Senior secondary education is too focused on passing assessments and not focused enough on learning about life after school.

- Students can't choose broad subjects that teach practical life skills unless they are doing VCAL.
- Students don't get enough information about pathways after school other than VCE students go to university, VCAL students go into a trade.
- Exams are too focused on retaining and regurgitating information rather than the application of knowledge.

HOW DOES THIS PROBLEM IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?

Students feel like there are limited options after high school, which can make senior secondary feel inflexible. This can make us anxious and uncertain and we feel unprepared for leaving school.

WHAT WOULD SENIOR SECONDARY LOOK LIKE LIKE IF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING WAS PRIORITISED?


Schools would provide current and relevant information to students about further education, training, and career pathways, and all senior secondary education pathways would support students to successfully transition to life after school.



IDEAS FOR ACTION AT SCHOOL

- 💡 Run an applied learning program for students in Years 10-12 that teaches life skills and isn't assessed through exams or standardised tests.
- 💡 Provide relevant, accurate and comprehensive information to students in Years 10-12 about pathways after school without pressuring them to choose academic or applied learning options.

OUR ADVOCACY ASKS

- ✓ VCAA should introduce a compulsory life skills area into the 10-12 curriculum that covers things like civics and citizenship, consent, financial management, workers rights and responsibilities.
 - ✓ VCAA should replace VCE exams with long-term projects that develop and assess the application of skills and knowledge rather than information retention and derive study schools from these.
 - ✓ The Victorian Government should run a campaign each year to highlight different examples of success for academic and applied leaning pathways.
 - ✓ DET should create an online careers portal where students can find advice about pathways including case studies and video chats with career advisors.
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SCHOOL



TIMETABLING

AND STRUCTURE

THE PROBLEM

Schools don't have the flexibility to support all students to learn in the way they need.

- Traditional classroom set ups don't support different learning and teaching styles and needs.
- School timetables, including start and finish times, aren't designed to suit students' optimal learning and engagement needs.
- Students aren't consistently involved in co-designing policies and rules at school so they don't always meet students' needs.

HOW DOES THIS PROBLEM IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?

Students don't feel like school is designed for us, which can make us feel alienated and disengaged. Strict timetables with set start and finish times and few breaks makes it hard to learn, which is de-motivating and makes it hard to maintain good mental health practices.

WHAT WOULD SCHOOL TIMETABLING AND STRUCTURE LOOK LIKE IF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING WAS PRIORITISED?

Schools would provide clear learning goals for students while being flexible enough to let individuals reach those goals in a way that suits them.



IDEAS FOR ACTION AT SCHOOL

- 💡 Adjust secondary school timetables to provide classes from 8am to 6pm each weekday so that students can choose which times suit their learning style.
- 💡 Set up multiple spaces for students to take a break to study or chill out whenever they need to.
- 💡 Put student committees in charge of deciding school timetables, structures and rules that they submit to school leadership for discussion and approval.
- 💡 Provide students with lesson plans for consistent time periods (a week, a fortnight, five weeks) so that students can work at their own pace and grow their agency over their own learning.

OUR ADVOCACY ASKS

- ✓ The Minister for Education should update the *Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017* to include specific requirements around including students in developing rules, policies and timetables and to require schools to provide flexible class times for secondary students.
- ✓ The Minister for Education should mandate that all new government school builds or renovations include plans and funding for spaces for study and relaxation at a quota of one space per 20 students.
- ✓ Schools should provide clear lesson plans in advance to all students to encourage agency and self-directed learning.



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