

# CONGRESS 2020

**Victorian students' ideas for change in education**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

VicSRC works on the land of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and we respect and acknowledge them as the traditional custodians of this beautiful country. We understand and respect that culture and connection to land and community is a right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and that they also have a right to self-determination and cultural safety. We also recognise that Indigenous knowledge and perspectives need to be fully imbedded in our education system and curriculum.

# OVERVIEW

VicSRC is the peak body representing school-aged students in Victoria. We exist to empower all student voices to be valued in every aspect of education. Congress is VicSRC's flagship student-led event where secondary students from across Victoria come together each year to plan action that will help solve the top issues in the Victorian education system, as voted by students. This report outlines the action priorities and plans from Congress 2020 which will be VicSRC's advocacy platform for the next twelve months, as well as how Congress 2020 happened.

“My favourite thing about Congress is being able to make change. I've never done something like this before but it's not only great fun, it also makes a positive impact for students across Victoria.”

*Student at Congress 2020*

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## A WORD FROM THE CONGRESS COORDINATOR

Congress has had a special place in my heart ever since my first experience at Congress 2015 as a year 7 student. I was beyond excited when I was elected Congress Coordinator in late 2019, and I was determined to make the event as special for others as it is for me. However, like many things this year, it did not go as planned.

We spent many weeks without knowing when, how or even if the event would be moving forward. When we reached the decision to hold the event online, this also meant we had to delay it in order to completely re-plan. There was a lot of concern about attendance from students in older years, who would be well into exam preparation by this point, which is a sentiment I completely understood as a year 12 student.

Planning for an event we'd never tried before was a challenge and felt like a massive risk. As people were joining from home, we had no idea if delegates would engage with the program over the four days. Additionally, with the rapid development of new programs and resources, we had nothing to base our event on. However, these setbacks allowed us to examine the fundamentals of Congress and reimagine the event in a way that was adaptable, while still keeping the representation and facilitation of student-driven issues and actions at its core.

Despite a year of uncertainty and change, Congress 2020 has been a huge success. We were blown away by the passion, positivity and enthusiasm exhibited by over 100 delegates at Congress this year. Even joining from home, the delegates were able to adapt to the format of the event and deliver some incredible plans by the fourth day. I commend them all for their incredible work.

Overall, it's been fantastic working as the Executive Congress Coordinator, and I'm confident that both Congress and VicSRC will continue to adapt to the ever-changing world, while still advocating for student driven change in education.

Bri Hines  
2020 Congress Coordinator

# HOW CONGRESS WORKS

Congress is a unique student-led event. Each year the event is developed by a Congress Coordinator from the VicSRC Student Executive Advisory Committee, with support from VicSRC staff and a working group of students and VicSRC alumni.

Throughout Congress, students work in groups called Action Teams, facilitated by VicSRC Student Executive Advisory Committee members. Students spend most of Congress in these teams working together on plans of action to help solve the top education issues pitched by students at the start of Congress.

At the end of Congress, each team presents their plan and students vote on the order of priority.

These Action Plans form VicSRC's advocacy platform for the next 12 months, spearheaded by the Student Executive Advisory Committee.



*An Action Team at Congress 2020*

# MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

## ACTIONS

Incorporate a consistent mental health curriculum throughout the lower secondary years (7-9). Curriculum should cover:

- ways to identify specific mental health conditions
- distinguishing between specific mental health disorders
  - learning how to support people going through different mental health problems

Promote the mental health resources already available to schools, students, and teachers, and encourage teachers and students to safely share their personal mental health experiences with one another to normalise mental health difficulties

Make sure that the schools' mental health practitioner role (which is compulsory for all government schools to have by 2022) includes educating all students around mental health - this could be through the practitioner being involved in years 7-9 health classes

Make it a priority that all school staff are educated and trained in mental health so they are properly informed and can both educate students and support those experiencing mental health difficulties

## RIGHT NOW...

There is a lack of consistent, quality mental health education in the curriculum, particularly in years 7-9, contributing to a lack of awareness and stigma around mental health. This lack of education early on significantly increases the likelihood of a negative impact on a person's wellbeing.

## IN A PERFECT WORLD...

Mental health is a consistent topic throughout the curriculum and is implemented in all schools in years 7-9, ensuring students are aware of mental health support and resources from an early age. Through quality mental health education, students will have a greater understanding of mental health, and better know how to identify the state of their own and other's mental health, as well as how to more effectively manage and care for their mental health.

# 19.9%

of all young people aged 11-17 experience high, or very high, levels of psychological distress

*BeyondBlue*

# REAL WORLD SKILLS

## IN A PERFECT WORLD...

### RIGHT NOW...

Real world skills, though embedded in the Victorian curriculum, are not being taught consistently in schools. Students aren't able to see the connection between what they learn in the classroom and how it relates to real life.

Real world skills that are already included in the curriculum, like problem solving and interpersonal skills, are consistently and clearly taught in every classroom, in every school, preparing students to be successful and independent when they graduate.

Students feel they are not learning skills such as financial management, career management, home economics, problem solving and interpersonal communication, which are essential to fulfil adult responsibilities.

*Real World Skills Action Team*

## ACTIONS

Survey students on their perceptions of their real world skills education at their own schools and create case studies of schools who are teaching these skills really well, to be shared and promoted as best practice examples for other schools to implement

Promote organisations who already work in this space to implement real life skills in schools' existing wellbeing programs



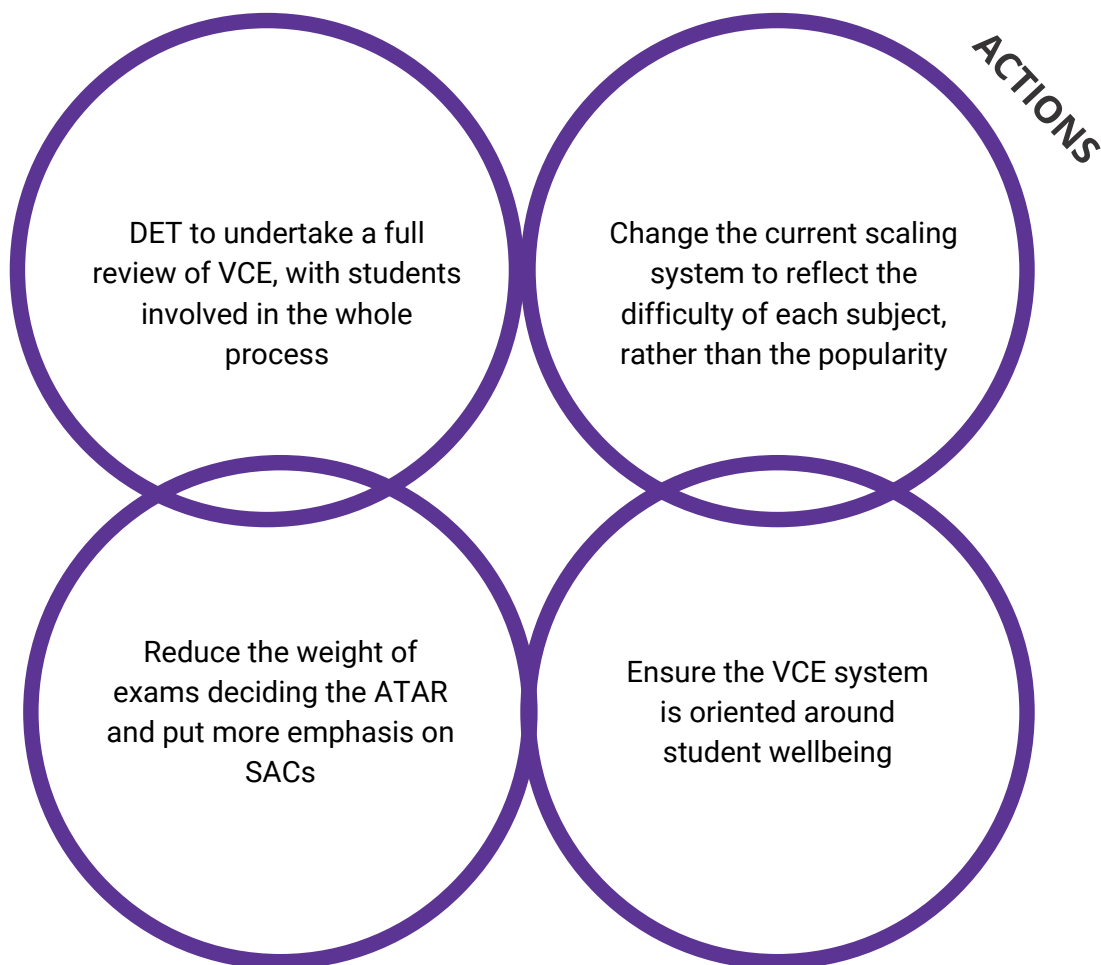
# FAIR GO VCE

## RIGHT NOW....

### IN A PERFECT WORLD...

A VCE system that showcases the individual student as a whole, using methods of assessment outside of testing and exams.

The current VCE system doesn't recognise students as individuals, failing to look beyond the "intellect" of a person and ignoring all other abilities. The high focus on exams inaccurately reflects students' knowledge and ability, and the results scaling system means students focus on pleasing the system rather than on their interests.



# IGNITING INDIGENOUS INCLUSION

## RIGHT NOW...

- There is a lack of consistency around teaching young people about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture across primary and secondary schooling, particularly from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives, rather than a coloniser perspective. This lack of education and understanding is leading to the continued oppression of First Nations peoples.

## IN A PERFECT WORLD...

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture is consistently taught in schools and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, building understanding and awareness in all Victorian students. Through this, people are more connected to their communities and develop cultural awareness and understanding, and become more inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

## ACTIONS

Reform the VCE Text Advisory Panels for (at minimum) all English subjects to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative/s

Collate and promote a list of resources for students and schools that provide advice and guidance on how to be an ally and advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Expand VAEAI's Marrung Cultural Understanding and Safety Training to include students as participants, and prioritise incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's culture and history into schools through cultural understanding training for all staff AND students in every school

Mandate, promote and regulate a compulsory set of minimum guidelines of school practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history, including:

- Acknowledgement of Country at events and on school websites/information
- Flags raised everyday
- Signs acknowledging the Traditional Owners at every school
- Selecting texts that are written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

Explore how all Victorian schools could have a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educator to provide cultural education to both students and staff

# ENGAGEMENT ENJOYMENT ENDEAVOUR

Learning needs to be  
engaging and interesting  
for every individual student

*Engagement Enjoyment Endeavour Action Team*

## RIGHT NOW...

More and more students  
are disengaged and  
disinterested at school.

## IN A PERFECT WORLD...

Students have agency  
over their learning and  
can choose what they  
would like to learn,  
regardless of their year  
level.

# 25%

of the students who  
drop out of school early  
do so because they  
claim to not be engaged  
in their learning

*Monash University 2016*

## ACTIONS

Advocate for the  
implementation of  
vertical learning  
models such as  
the TC Model

Provide  
consistent and  
quality careers  
and pathways  
education earlier  
in secondary  
school

Research whether  
students who have  
more subject or  
learning options earlier  
are more likely to stay  
engaged and make  
recommendations to  
the DET

Continue to promote  
student voice and agency  
through programs like  
Teach the Teacher so  
students can speak up  
about teaching methods

# EDUCATE THEN EXPRESS

## RIGHT NOW...

Trans and nonbinary students are being excluded by an education system that is built on binary genders and denies the validity of their identity.

## IN A PERFECT WORLD...

An education system that accommodates gender diversity, with adequate facilities to provide for trans, nonbinary and gender-diverse students, and an educated and informed community of teachers, school staff and students.

# 81%

of LGBTIQ+ students believe that their school doesn't support them

*Minus18*

## ACTIONS

Create and promote a diversity practice checklist to identify safe schools for gender diverse students. Checklist should include:

- Encouraging the inclusion of preferred pronouns
- Bathroom access
- What diversity and inclusion training staff have undertaken

Update the DET's CASES21 system (the mandatory record keeping software for schools), along with other popular school management systems such as Compass, to allow the easy modification of students preferred names, genders & pronouns on school administration systems

Promoting and prioritising professional development for all educators (both primary and secondary) to learn how to create safe and supportive environments for gender diverse students in a classroom setting, including:

- Adding diversity training as a PD area for VIT registration
- Incorporating this area into the AITSL standards
- Promoting Minus18's 'C2' Transgender & Gender Diversity workshop for schools
- Promoting sport inclusion training for PE educators and school sports coaches

Mandate the inclusion of gender-neutral bathrooms in all new schools being constructed

# STUDENTS WITH A VOICE



Without an opportunity to contribute to the decision making around a school's direction, such as teachers and their teaching style or uniform policy, students cannot achieve agency, independence, and influence in their learning.

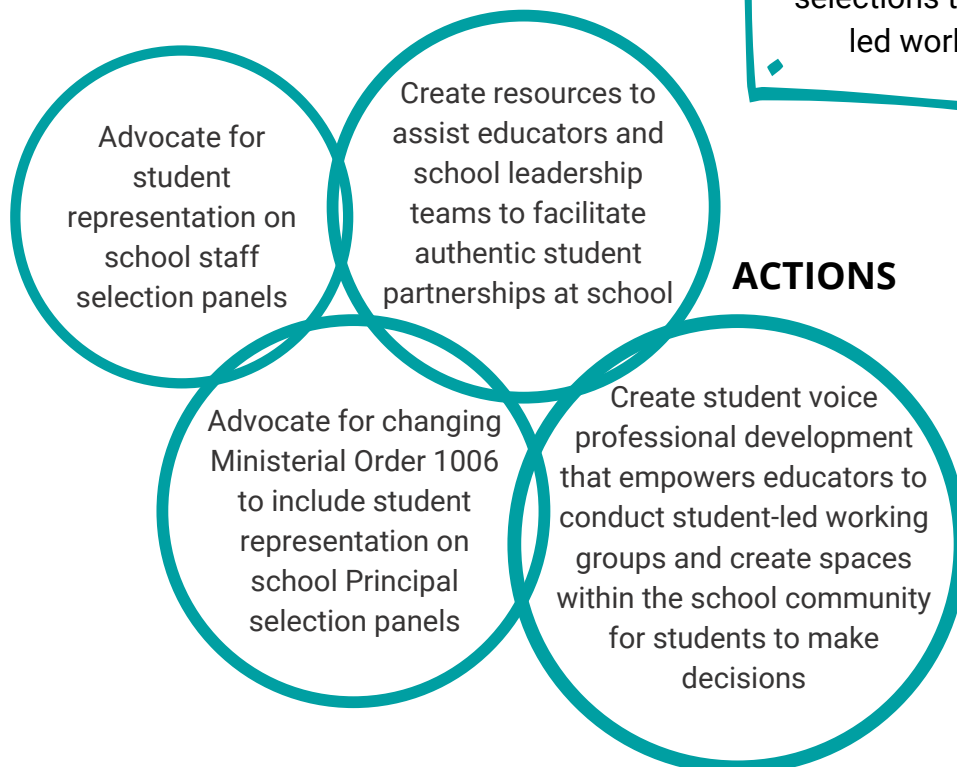
*Students With A Voice Action Team*

## RIGHT NOW...

Students feel disempowered by the lack of real student representation and input into school policy decisions and staff selections which effect their education experience.

## IN A PERFECT WORLD...

Students at all schools work in collaboration and partnership with their school staff to make major school policy decisions and staff selections through student-led working groups.



# SUSTAINABILITY IN SCHOOLS

## RIGHT NOW....

Students are not receiving sufficient education about sustainability at school, and schools are not demonstrating good sustainable practices like recycling and reducing waste initiatives.

## IN A PERFECT WORLD....

Sustainability education is taught and demonstrated at school year-round, making environmentally friendly practices second nature to students.

“Sustainability affects all aspects of a person’s life and is an important issue to students as we’ve seen through the ongoing work of School Strike 4 Climate and the participation of hundreds of thousands of students around the country.”

*Sustainability in Schools Action Team*

## ACTIONS

Advocate for students to be involved in the process of school sustainability planning and policy creation

Promote school sustainability programs like ResourceSmart Schools

Survey students on sustainability practices and education at school to publish a report and make recommendations to the DET

# INADEQUATE SEX EDUCATION

## RIGHT NOW...

Current sex education in schools does not include modern and inclusive content that students are demanding to learn. Young people need to understand their rights and responsibilities to make informed decisions about their health and relationships.

## IN A PERFECT WORLD...

All students feel safe and comfortable during sex education, and they are appropriately supported by, and involved in the creation of, their school's sex education curriculum, allowing the topics covered in class to break down social stigma. No student is excluded when learning about their own health regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or religion.

## ACTIONS

Add questions regarding how students are feeling about their sex education into the Attitudes to School Survey

Add sex education into the school review process to hold schools accountable

Conduct a curriculum audit to identify what sex education content is not included in the Victorian curriculum, and which parts are not being implemented adequately

Provide wellbeing support in and outside of the classroom during sex education classes

Include students in the development of sex education curriculum and content, including at school so content is determined by individual student cohort needs

Provide and prioritise quality sex education resources and training for teachers

Actively create safe school environments by acting on student feedback in the Attitudes to School Survey and school reviews, and being a part of the Safe Schools program

Creation and promotion of quality and accessible resources for students to go to for further information outside of class

Advocate to parent groups about the importance of quality sex education



# ACA-MUCH: TOO MUCH FOCUS ON ACADEMICS

## IN A PERFECT WORLD...

Personalised learning at every school; adaptable and accessible learning for every student. Students will choose what and how they learn at school, and feel included, happy, and comfortable because the teaching style suits their learning style.

## RIGHT NOW...

Students are not finding school fun and engaging due to the overload of assessments and the unnecessary workload that isn't personalised to the individual student's learning style.

# 46%

of students feel that they are falling behind at school

*VicSRC's Learning From Remote Learning Report 2020*

## ACTIONS

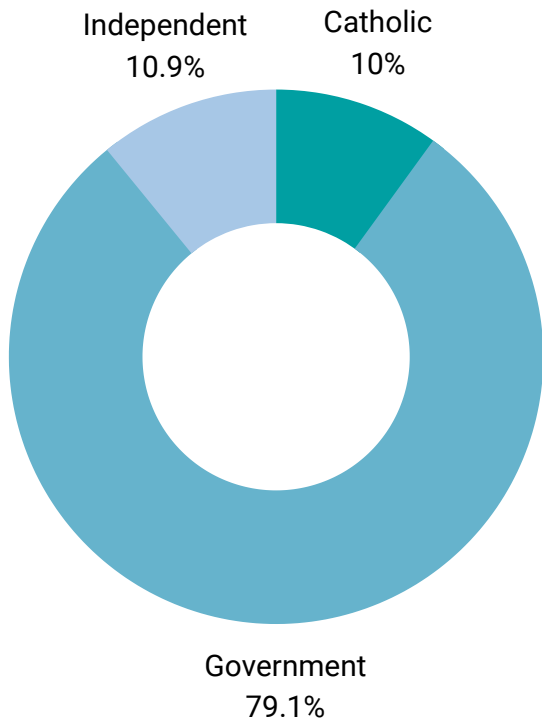
Include a section about personalised learning in the Attitudes to School Survey and the staff opinions survey for schools to act on feedback

Allow all secondary students to access a more diverse range of elective classes in earlier year levels, either in-person or virtually, and through collaboration between schools in the same area

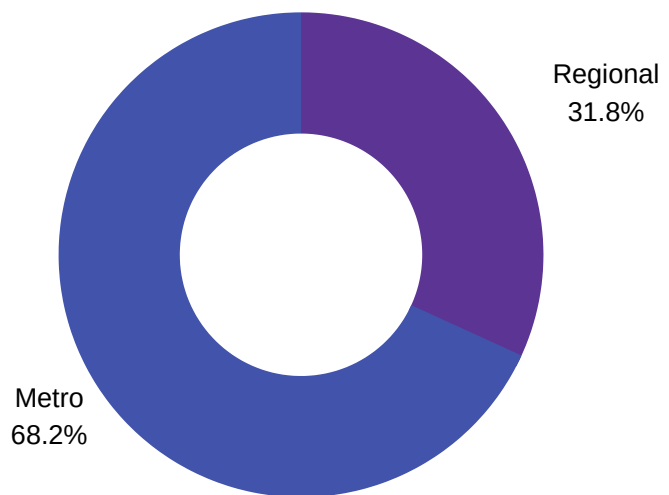
Continue to advocate for student-teacher collaboration and personalised learning approaches through programs like VicSRC's Teach the Teacher



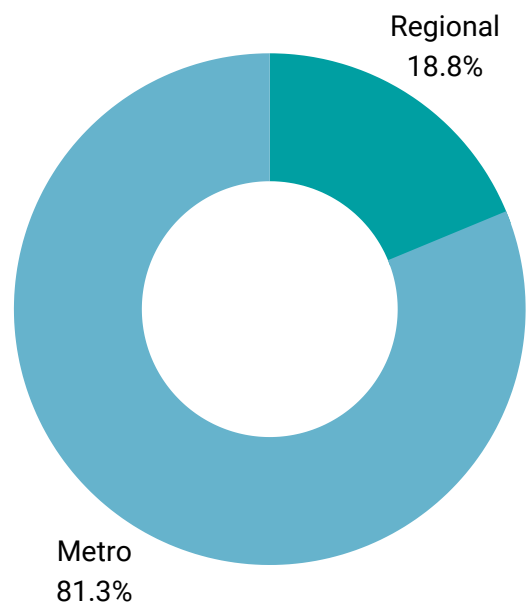
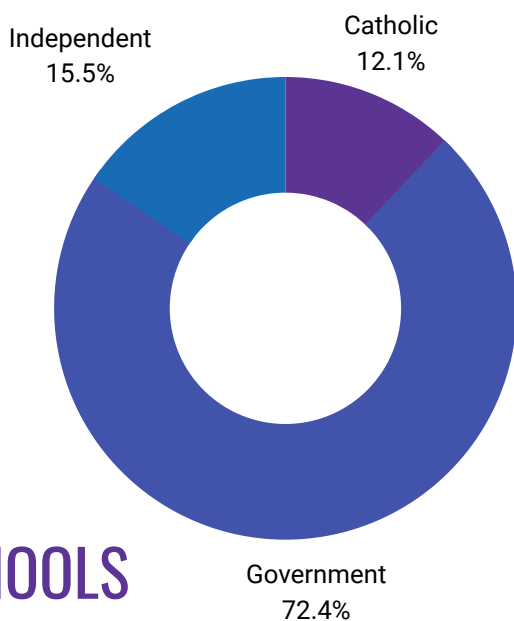
# WHO WAS AT CONGRESS



## 110 SECONDARY STUDENTS



## 58 SCHOOLS



# AMPLIFYING STUDENT VOICE

## EDUCATION PERSPECTIVES PANEL

Panelists: Issy (Year 12), Lochie (Year 11), Talia (Year 12)

Facilitated by Tafara (Year 12), VicSRC Student Executive Advisory Committee member

Students from diverse backgrounds discussed their experiences of education and the challenges and opportunities faced by students across Victoria. [Watch the recording on Facebook.](#)



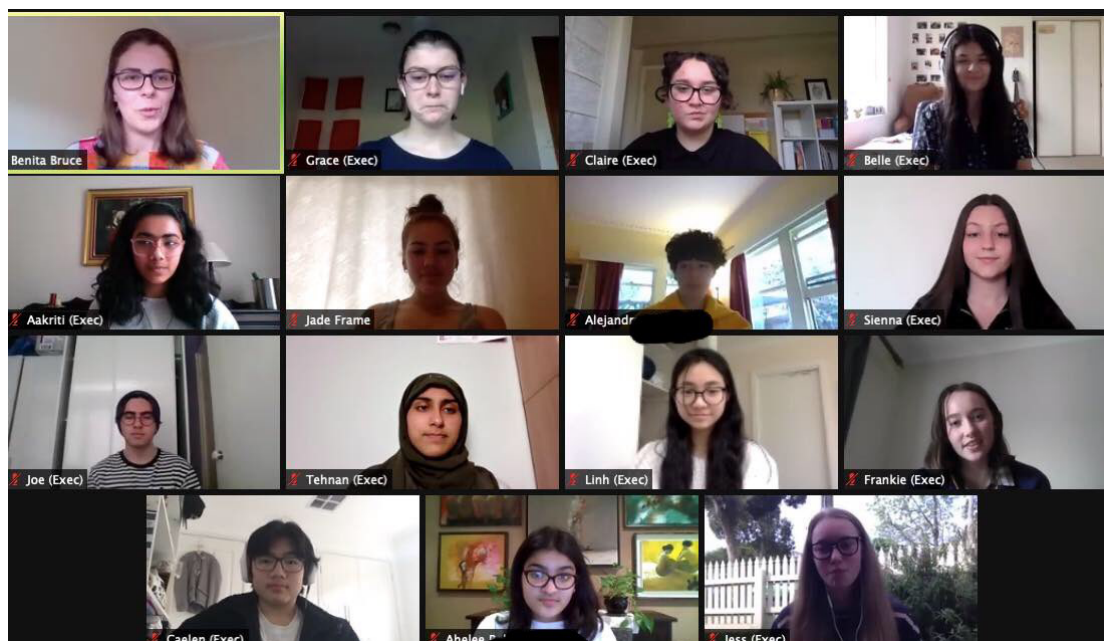
## THE WINTER FLARES

An amazing musical performance from The Winter Flares, an Australian sibling duo who have performed across Australia and New Zealand. Elina (15) and Ethan (17) have a diverse repertoire and use vocals, piano and keyboard, guitar, saxophone and ukulele in their work. [Watch the performance on Facebook.](#)

# ENGAGING EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS

The Congress 2020 Twilight Session brought together almost 100 education stakeholders to hear about the work done by students at Congress.

The 2020 - 2021 VicSRC Student Executive Advisory Committee reported on what VicSRC had done in the past year. The Action Plans from Congress were presented, and stakeholders had the opportunity to ask the Student Executive Advisory Committee questions about them.



*The 2020 - 2021 VicSRC Executive Advisory Committee*

# HOW WE DID IT: A UNIQUE EVENT, NOW ONLINE!

Every year for fourteen years VicSRC has held its annual Congress as a face-to-face, often overnight, event. Congress is no conference – it's a multi-day collaboration that brings delegates together from across Victoria to plan action to solve the big issues in education and learn from each other about student voice.

Early on in 2020 the VicSRC Student Executive Advisory Committee, counselled by staff, made the call that Congress 2020 would have to go online. Making the call early was important, even though we didn't know what restrictions on in-person events would be like in July. We did not have capacity to plan for both in-person and virtual events.

Once this decision was made, the Congress Working Group (made up of VicSRC Exec members, Ambassadors, alumni and staff) established the key parameters for designing virtual Congress:

1. Video calls are exhausting – keep screen time to the minimum possible
2. Group work is harder online – make the groups smaller to help with engagement
3. Compulsory fun is rarely fun – let delegates do their own socialising outside of Congress

## Video calls are exhausting

The Working Group stripped Congress back to its core and re-built it to make sure there was as little screen time as possible. The Action Teams are the key part of Congress – these were deemed essential, and everything else was an added bonus. An extra day was added to the program to make sure less time would be spent on screens each day. All up, virtual Congress ended up being only 4 hours of “compulsory” sessions per day. These were mostly the Action Team sessions, spent collaborating on Action Plans in groups of ten delegates and facilitated by VicSRC Exec members and Ambassadors.

## Group work is harder online

As well as capping each Action Team at ten delegates, we built two online learning courses to support delegates and their Action Teams through Congress, rather than relying only on Zoom to engage in group work.

VicSRC is lucky to have a software engineer with years of experience in human-centred design on staff. Without this expertise, virtual Congress would not have been possible. Pre-pandemic, VicSRC had already been exploring options for creating online learning courses and had a learning management system lined up for use. The two courses made were a Welcome to Congress course giving delegates information about the event, background on VicSRC plus the basics of the Victorian education system and advocating for change; and an Action Team course, supporting Action Teams through creating Action Plans.

Zoom was used for Action Team sessions and Zoom Webinar for the plenary sessions at the start and end of the event. Everything was tied together with the CrowdCompass Event App – this app has been a part of Congress for the last couple of years, and a virtual event meant it could be used to its full potential. The app included the program of events with Zoom links, push notifications when things were happening and also served as a place for delegates to connect and have a bit of fun.

With all this software in use, getting delegates set up and confident beforehand was a key factor in a successful virtual Congress. Onboarding sessions for delegates were run before the event to help delegates log in and understand the platforms they would be using – this meant any problems with access could be addressed before the event started.

## Compulsory fun is rarely fun

The Working Group decided that scheduled fun was not a productive use of our time. This meant that the socialising and connecting between delegates happened organically – in Zoom chats and Action Team sessions. We were surprised by how long Zoom chat conversation continued after a webinar session finished. The final factor of Congress was the dedication and energy from the VicSRC Exec and Ambassadors facilitating Action Teams. With only two days of training, these students created fun, engaging and productive online sessions with their Action Teams. The by students, for students idea of Congress has always been the core reason for its success, and this year was no different.

# CONGRESS 2020 WAS PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY

