ROYAL COMMISSION INT0 MENTAL HEALTH

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC)
submission – July 2019

Nina Laitala
eo@vicsrc.org.au

About VicSRC

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing students in Victoria. The VicSRC's vision is a student focused education system that enhances young people's capacity to change the world. The organisation exists to empower all student voices to be valued in every aspect of education. The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria and funded through the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET).

Victorian Student Representative Council
Our Community House 552 Victoria Street North Melbourne 3051
0411 679 050

Authors

Nina Laitala and Executive Committee Members for the Victorian Student Representative Council

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing school aged students in Victoria. Our vision is for a student-focused education system that enhances young people's capacity to change the world.

We exist to empower all student voices to be valued in every aspect of education.

The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria and funded through the Department of Education and Training Victoria (DET) and Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEM).

The VicSRC welcomes the opportunity to put forward a submission to this Royal Commission as mental health support, or lack thereof, in schools has been identified consistently as a priority issue for Victorian secondary students for over a decade.[i]

During their primary and secondary school years, young people experience crucial developmental phases and these years are formative for growth and development – socially, emotionally and physically.[ii] The formative years of adolescence are the peak period for the onset of mental illness and the subsequent adverse impact on adolescent development can have lasting affects including:

- Decreased motivation and concentration can lead to long term self-esteem issues resulting from the failure to complete schooling.
- Isolation from peers, family and friends that impacts psychological and social development.
- The effect of alcohol and other drugs on brain and cognitive development.[iii]

Students experience the best learning outcomes when their social and emotional development is supported, including their mental health.[iv] According to the Report on the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, young people are less likely than any other age group to seek professional help despite almost one fifth of young people aged between 11 and 17 years reporting experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress, and half of all lifelong mental health problems beginning before the age of 14.[v] [vi] [vii] The prevalence of young people aged between 4 and 17 that experience a mental health condition each year is one in seven and the statistics around self harm and suicide are at the highest they've been for more than a decade. [viii] [ix] One in ten young people aged 12-17 years old will self-harm, one in 13 will seriously consider a suicide attempt, and one in 40 will attempt suicide. [x]

Young Australians feel less like they belong in their schools compared to the average from across the OECD countries and this feeling of belonging was even less for Indigenous students, rural and regional schools and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.[xi] There is a greater prevalence of mental health issues, particularly depression and anxiety, amongst students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.[xii] The latest Mission Australia report also indicated that coping with school, study and stress as well as mental health concerns ranked high for young people.[xiii]

While over 50% of Victorian schools are responding to this shift in concern for young people by prioritising school belonging in their vision and mission statements, the reality for young people is still a lack of consistency, feeling of disengagement at school and lack of support from teachers and peers.[xiv]

Research has suggested that a sense of belonging at school as well as positive student-teacher relationships can lead to increased mental health wellness at school.

> "Belonging relates to higher levels of student emotional wellbeing and better academic performance and achievement. It also reduces the likelihood of mental health problems, promotes resilience when mental health difficulties are experienced and reduces suicidal thoughts and behaviour."[xv]

Students feel a greater sense of belonging at school when there is a culture of mutual respect for students and teachers and students are empowered and valued in their learning journey.

> "Each year level in my school has 2 teachers that are Wellbeing Managers and they speak at assemblies regarding mental health services at our school. This includes a special building in my school just for student services and any student can access this service any time they feel upset, stressed or are dealing with a personal dilemma. Although we do not have a 'Mental Health Week', my school takes mental health seriously by giving students the opportunity to access services whenever they wish." (Student Via Student Voice Hub)[xvi]

Most mental health programs concentrate on the individual student rather than a whole school approach that specifically focus on empowering students to be active supporters in their own and their peer's mental health. There are many great examples of student led programs in Victorian schools that encourage young people to play an active role in supporting the wellbeing of their peers.

Students often speak to friends about any mental health or wellbeing challenges but students have reported they often don't feel equipped to properly support friends. Students would welcome ongoing or regular training and guidance around common mental health areas such as anxiety and depression, so students have confidence to provide support, advice and identify when and how to refer friends to specialist support services.[xvii]

> "We have a Student Wellbeing Action Group (otherwise known as SWAG) that looks into these sorts of things. In Year 10, we have a program that talks about Mental Health and how to deal with it, and this year I've found it to be really helpful." (Student via Student Voice Hub)

Schools are uniquely placed to support students' development and wellbeing. Because almost all young people attend school (while not all families are connected with other community services), schools are able to offer support to students and help them connect with outside agencies if and when they need them.[xviii]

We know that this kind of support is most effective when services are linked, so that families, social groups, community services and schools work together. Schools have an important role to play in this network of support for young people so that everyone has somewhere to turn when they need support.[xix]

> "My mum never let me see a psychologist and always said to use the schools one, but i don't think she understood the amount of effort and confidence it takes to annoy the school with my issues when they deal with so many other students. But my teacher ended up chatting with me and practically became my psychologist…" (Student, year 11)

The increasing demands on teachers can lead to added stress which can increase the difficulty of maintaining authentic positive student-teacher relationships. It is crucial that schools prioritise these relationships to ensure students are supported beyond academics.[xx] Students attending Congress 2017 reported their belief that "good mental health and the wellbeing of students should be as important as good academic results.

Students need to feel that they can access quality support as soon as they need it, without any stigma attached."[xxi]

Supporting the wellbeing of all students is a central role for schools. All students should have ready access to mental health support at school according to need, including a range of programs that are accessible, affordable and culturally safe.

> "The thing that struck me the most is that if you wanted to chat with the counsellor it had to be an 'serious issue' and not just caring about your mental wellbeing" (Student, year 9)

With access to the right support when they need it, young people can be active, healthy, connected members of their communities. This support can include prevention programs such as mental-health education, mentoring, youth engagement and life-skills programs. For students experiencing difficulties, this might include counselling; for more complicated problems, specialised services are helpful.[xxii]

> "Schools don't take mental illness (not ill health by the way) seriously especially from those broken families. Through my experience with the school counsellor, they didn't understand how violent and unsafe both mentally and physically it is for children when their parents are getting a divorce or heading through the custody battles. However, when I finally recognised the stress and mental harm my parents divorce was having on me and my siblings, I went to see the school counsellor because I thought it was safer than going straight to the police. But the expectations of being counselled or even finding a solution or escape the toxic environment were very different as the 'talks' I had with them turned into criticism and interrogation. I never wanted to 'dob' on my parents but wanted to find an alternative way to deal with (the situation). In the end my poor mental health was diagnosed as an illness and no thanks to the school, the courts had to intervene." (Student, year 10)

Students can collaborate with staff to develop school wellbeing programs and approaches. Student representatives can be members of student wellbeing committees within schools, and work with teachers and specialist staff to develop responsive programs and proactive curriculum-based initiatives for all students.

> "One really cool thing we run at our school, is the SRC run a weekly program called Holistic Understanding Group Support (H.UG.S). The way we run it does involve your clique, sit in a circle and talk about your issue, however each week the participating students choose the topic and we have discussion based activities and also more interactive activities. The topics   have ranged from depression and anxiety to social skills and confidence building, to try and have a balance between discussion but also giving them the skill sets to overcome it. The program is entirely run with SRC members collaborating with the students. Additionally, we supply snacks and hot drinks, as apart of creating a calming atmosphere.
> The more schoolwide approach is that we have a house system where teachers are delegated to do check-ups on students and also have welfare staff that are easily accessible to students to just 'hang' in their office to calm down or just have a breather etc" (Student via the Student Voice Hub)

Students who have a disability or who are experiencing difficulties need extra support. Whilst there are services and programs specifically designed for young people with disabilities, large gaps remain. These include insufficient respite services, a lack of support for young people to attend mainstream services, too little support for those in rural and regional areas, not enough youth-specific services and inadequate funding

support for siblings of young people with disabilities.[xxiii] Better resourcing for these services gives students with disabilities a better chance to reach their full potential. Further, alternative educational pathways have a key role to play in supporting the educational engagement of students who learn differently, who have not experienced success or who have been excluded from mainstream educational settings.

Specialised programs offered in schools help young people develop resilience and the interpersonal skills to succeed in life. These include programs to educate students about gender-based violence, which help students manage themselves and their relationships with others.[xxiv]

We also know that same-sex attracted students feel better about their sexuality when schools have anti-homophobia policies and effective strategies against homophobic bullying. Both can have a major impact on their health and safety. Students also benefit from support staff who are trained to deal with questions of gender and sexuality in a positive and non-judgmental way.[xxv]

Each of these programs help ensure that students leave school with good mental health, strategies to manage personal challenges and the skills to become healthy, connected members of the community.

Students need to be assured that counselling and other services are provided in confidence and that staff are appropriately trained. Students have identified concerns that their privacy and confidentiality of discussions could be spread inappropriately within school communities. Students need to be able to access services without being labelled, and in ways that preserve their privacy.

> "Even just getting to sit down and chat with a counsellor was more a hassle then it should've been. You have to:
> a) book in a time to sit down and chat by lingering outside their office till they arrived or noticed you
> b) be allocated a time
> c) you're then pulled out of class in front of everyone and then finally able to talk after signing a crappy (document)" (Student, 16)

Student mental health continues to be an area of concern in schools. Because of the stigma associated with mental health, many students find it difficult to ask for support. Support at school should be informed, accessible, inclusive and accommodate varying needs, rather than focusing on crisis and/or prevention. The VicSRC advocates for a holistic, whole school approach to mental health support that acknowledges the need for appropriate and professional individualised support while also recognising the importance of belonging at school for students.

> "A culture of respect, equality and trust is integral so supporting the best environment for learning and educational outcomes in schools. Recognizing that students have the maturity to make their own informed decisions or to learn from their mistakes should be respected in a school community, as it would be respected in any other setting. If this is established then student teacher bonds, trust and a healthier culture will all follow and the benefits will be felt across the whole school." (Student)[xxvi]

Recommendations:

1. Teachers are provided with education that helps them to recognise when students are in need of mental health support, such as mandatory youth mental first aid training.

2. Develop initiatives that go beyond the 'wellbeing day' experience and follow up on wellbeing initiatives already in place. Those ideas and initiatives should be consistently reinforced throughout the school year.

3. Schools to promote a social media campaign to spread awareness, challenge stigma and encourage those with wellbeing issues to speak up and seek help: #TimeToTalkAU

4. Regular mental health checks for students. Termly check-ins for every student in order to identify challenges and create plans to improve the wellbeing of all students.

5. Instigate a student mental health program similar to Safe Schools Program in order to ensure that all students feel safe at school regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation and differences. Human diversity plays a huge role within student mental health and wellbeing.

6. Stronger capacity to deliver prevention and early intervention support to students through schools, for example through the placement of youth workers in schools to work with existing wellbeing teams and linking youth focused community services with schools.

7. The Victorian State Government ensures that all schools have sufficient student support services, including trained teachers, allied health professionals, counsellors, nurses, GPs and psychologists within schools.

8. All school welfare and wellbeing staff are trained to work in positive, constructive and non-judgmental ways with students who share information about their sexual orientation and gender.

9. The Victorian State Government to continue to support the engagement of community organisations that adhere to the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Code of Ethics to provide interactive and engaging programs in schools addressing issues of mental health, drug and alcohol misuse and abuse, gambling addiction, and other relevant wellbeing issues.

10. Students are provided with quality training and support to strengthen their knowledge and skills in how to be supportive of friends with mental health concerns, including being trained and supported to intervene positively and respectfully around issues of behaviour amongst students.

11. Wellbeing strategies such as mindfulness are included in the curriculum.

12. A culture of confidentiality and trust exists in schools so that students sharing sensitive information with school staff can be confident it will not be shared inappropriately.

13. Funding arrangements are reformed so that resourcing for wellbeing services are consistent, equitable and needs-based, so that all schools can meet the wellbeing needs of their students, particularly those with a low ICSEA[xxvii] value.

[i] Victorian Student Representative Council Policy Platform
https://gallery.mailchimp.com/f4c8b5faedc14e0aa5a5fe825/files/a191f7f0-9306-4f79-aca3-3500da1a1d14/VicSRC_Policy_Platform_Feb_2017.pdf

[ii] Paula Grogan, Kate Colvin, Jen Rose, Lisa Morstyn, Carolyn Atkins, *Building the Scaffolding: Strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Melbourne, 2013, pp.83, 85.

[iii] Kelly CM, Kitchener BA, Jorm AF. *Youth Mental Health First Aid Australia. 4th Ed.* Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2017.

[iv] Marc A. Brackett & Susan E. Rivers, *Transforming Students Lives with Social and Emotional Learning* in Reinhard Pekrun and Lisa Linnenbrink-Garcia (eds) International Handbook of Emotions in Education, Routledge, New York and London, 2014.

[v] Kessler, RD et al. (2005). *Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication*. Archives of General Psychiatry, 62: p. 593-602

[vi] Commissioner for Children and Young People WA. (2015). *Our Children Can't Wait – Review of the implementation of recommendations of the 2011 Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in WA*, Perth: Commissioner for Children and Young People.

[vii] . Slade T, Johnston A, Teesson M, Whiteford H, Burgess P, Pirkis J, et al. (2009) *The Mental Health of Australians 2: Report on the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*. Canberra: Department of Health and Ageing.

[viii] Lawrence D, Johnson S, Hafekost J, Boterhoven De Haan K, Sawyer M, Ainley J, Zubrick SR. (2015). *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents. Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.* Canberra: Department of Health.

[ix] Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2015). *Causes of Death, Australia, 2014.* Catalogue No. 3303.0.Canberra: ABS.

[x] Lawrence D, Johnson S, Hafekost J, Boterhoven De Haan K, Sawyer M, Ainley J, Zubrick SR. (2015). *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents. Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.* Canberra: Department of Health.

[xi] Dr Kelly-Ann Allen, Dr Peggy Kern, Professor Lea Waters, Professor Dianne Vella-Brodrick, *Why don't Australian students feel a sense of belonging.* University of Melbourne.
https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/why-don-t-australian-school-kids-feel-a-sense-of-belonging

[xii] World Health Organization and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. *Social determinants of mental health. Geneva*, World Health Organization, 2014.

[xiii] Carlisle, E., Fildes, J., Hall, S., Hicking, V., Perrens, B. and Plummer, J. *Youth Survey Report 2018,* Mission Australia, 2018

[xiv] Dr Kelly-Ann Allen, Dr Peggy Kern, Professor Lea Waters, Professor Dianne Vella-Brodrick, *Why don't Australian students feel a sense of belonging.* University of Melbourne.
https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/why-don-t-australian-school-kids-feel-a-sense-of-belonging

[xv] Dr Kelly-Ann Allen, Dr Peggy Kern, Professor Lea Waters, Professor Dianne Vella-Brodrick, *Why don't Australian students feel a sense of belonging.* University of Melbourne.
https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/why-don-t-australian-school-kids-feel-a-sense-of-belonging

[xvi] Student Voice Hub https://studentvoicehub.org.au/

[xvii] Victorian Student Representative Council Policy Platform
https://gallery.mailchimp.com/f4c8b5faedc14e0aa5a5fe825/files/a191f7f0-9306-4f79-aca3-3500da1a1d14/VicSRC_Policy_Platform_Feb_2017.pdf

[xviii]] Department of Education and Training (DET), *Education State: Schools*. Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2015, p.52.

[xix] Paula Grogan, Kate Colvin, Jen Rose, Lisa Morstyn, Carolyn Atkins, *Building the Scaffolding: Strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Melbourne, 2013, pp.11-13.

[xx] Dr Kelly-Ann Allen, Dr Peggy Kern, Professor Lea Waters, Professor Dianne Vella-Brodrick, *Why don't Australian students feel a sense of belonging.* University of Melbourne.
https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/why-don-t-australian-school-kids-feel-a-sense-of-belonging

[xxi] VicSRC Congress is an annual conference for secondary school aged students in Victoria. Student delegates work together to find solutions to issues in the education system and present them to education stakeholders. Congress 2017 report https://vicsrc.qwilr.com/2017-Congress-Report-FzRajEz7QzSL

[xxii] Anna. M. Ross, Laura. M. Hart, Anthony. F. Jorm, Claire. M. Kelly & Betty. A. Kitchener. *Development of key messages for adolescents on providing basic mental health first aid to peers: a Delphi consensus study*, Early Intervention in Psychiatry

[xxiii] Paula Grogan, Kate Colvin, Jen Rose, Lisa Morstyn, Carolyn Atkins, *Building the Scaffolding: Strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Melbourne, 2013, p.55.

[xxiv] Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *Victorian Essential Learning Standards*, Melbourne, 2005, p.7.

[xxv] Lynne Hillier, Tiffany Jones, Marisa Monagle, Naomi Overton, Luke Gahan, Jennifer Blackman, Anne Mitchell, *Writing Themselves In 3: The third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people*. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, 2010, p.83, p.107.

[xxvi] Victorian Student Representative Council Policy Platform
https://gallery.mailchimp.com/f4c8b5faedc14e0aa5a5fe825/files/a191f7f0-9306-4f79-aca3-3500da1a1d14/VicSRC_Policy_Platform_Feb_2017.pdf

[xxvii] **ICSEA** stands for the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage. **ICSEA** provides an indication of the socio-educational backgrounds of students