



Education and Training Reform Regulations Review

February 2017

About VicSRC

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing students in Victoria. The VicSRC's vision is a world where all children and young people have access to education that is student-led, student driven and student focussed. 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 (YACVic), the state's youth peak body, and funded through the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET).

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Introduction

As the peak body for school aged students in Victoria, Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) appreciates the opportunity to submit to this review of the Education and Training Reform Regulations.

Our submission focuses on Part 4 - Government School Councils and Parents' Clubs, as this has most relevance to our expertise in supporting student voice and participation. Our recommendations draw upon our recent research with Deakin University into students on school councils.

However, as a general comment, VicSRC would like to see all of the Education and Training Reform Regulations reflect the importance of including students in all levels of school decision making so that their diverse needs and interests can be met.

Why student voice and participation?

Student voice involves more than just listening to students – it involves taking what they say seriously and enabling students to participate in decisions made about their education.

- Students have a right to be heard. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that 'children have the right to participate in decision-making processes that may be relevant in their lives and to influence decisions taken in their regard—within the family, the school or the community.'¹
- Participation gives students skills and attitudes necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world.
- Participation is effective in supporting student engagement and retention and also in strengthening learning outcomes.
- Participation supports the social and emotional development of students; helping strengthen their capacity to manage challenges and build respectful relationships.
- Participation helps cultivate a culture of respect in schools, in which student voice and diversity are encouraged and valued.
- Participation enables student knowledge and perspectives to introduce and shape learning and teaching methods.

Student voice means supporting students to form effective school-based organisations that enable them to discuss, debate and decide on their input to such decisions. It means challenging students to represent the diverse experiences, views and needs of students to move beyond token involvement.

In student-centred schools, student participation goes beyond students having a voice only through their representation in an SRC or similar body. As well as supporting the existence and operation of these structures, student centred-schools extend young peoples' involvement to include participation in decision-making at all levels of the school and in a wide range of areas, from providing feedback through focus groups and surveys² to formal representation on decision-making bodies and participation in staff appointments. As well as this, students are involved as planners, researchers, teachers, trainers, tutors and beyond – as important voices in decisions made about them.³ A range of avenues for participation in decision-making enables students with various interests, skills and capabilities to have their voices heard. In this way, informal leaders are created through participatory practice that gives students a genuine voice in decisions.

Such involvement gives students an experience of the democratic process, recognising them as current citizens, and providing them with the safe exercise of citizenship, inclusion, and responsibility.⁴ This increases their commitment to school and hence their outcomes.

Response to Part 4 – Government School Councils and Parents’ Clubs.

In 2016, VicSRC commissioned Deakin University to undertake research into Student Representation on School Councils⁵ and we include the following recommendations from this study to inform the Reform Regulations:

Recommendation #1: Student representation on school councils should be mandatory.

The current legislation does not mandate student presence or representation on school councils. This study suggests strong student support for student representation on school councils. The selection of principals interviewed also supported student representation, although further research might explore the perspectives of a larger number of principals. Mandatory student representation will bring students’ perspectives into this ultimate democratic forum within the school community.⁶

It is recognised that schools may be at different places on a continuum of student participation, and that the process of moving school councils towards mandatory student representation should not be rushed. In recommending mandatory student participation on school councils, it is *not* recommended that all schools immediately move to full membership rights and responsibilities for students. Mandatory student representation on school councils may initially look different in different contexts.

Mandating student participation will impel schools to begin processes of contextual reflection with students, teachers, parents and community members on what this participation will mean, how students will participate, what resources and support that students may need, and processes for meaningfully listening and acting. Such reflective processes can serve to reconfigure patterns of representation on school councils to better represent and consider students’ best interests.⁷

Implementation Ideas:

- In moving towards mandatory student representation on school councils, schools should carefully and collaboratively set some foundations⁸, considering questions about students’ rights, responsibilities, assets and needs and re-thinking details of school council structures and relations.
- In moving towards mandatory student representation, schools may also experiment and test out less formalised modes of student representation⁹, for example, student representation through:
 - A school council member taking responsibility for establishing and strengthening connections and communication between the SRC to the school council, through attending SRC meetings
 - The principal and/ or school council president attending SRC meeting(s) at strategic points of the year to discuss key decisions to be made by the school council;
 - Distributing (possibly abridged) minutes from school council meetings to SRC leaders, to discuss with the SRC. These SRC leaders could then give feedback to the school principal or school council president, to be shared at the next school council meeting;
 - Student representation in school council sub-committees (see also Recommendation #6).

Recommendation #2: Students should be represented on school councils - as “students,” not “community members.”

The current legislation, which includes students under the category of “community member”, co-opted to serve on council, has meant that some schools do not necessarily include students. Section 2.3.2(2) of the *Education and Training Reform Act (ETRA) 2006* provides that the Minister may constitute a school council as a body corporate by Ministerial Order (known as constituting order), and that the constituting order prescribes the composition of the school council.

It is recommended that the Ministerial Order create a separate membership mandatory category: “students”. Including students as a separate category, with mandatory representation (see Recommendation #1) will foreground the significance of students as stakeholders in their education. As discussed above, moving towards this category of membership should be accompanied by processes of collaborative reflection and planning.

Implementation Idea:

- That the Ministerial Order create a separate membership mandatory category: “students”.

Recommendation #3: Students representatives on school councils should be equally valued members, with schools moving towards students having full voting rights and membership responsibilities.

Being equally valued members of school councils includes students taking on the rights and responsibilities that other members may take, with appropriate training and support (see Recommendation #5). The value of student representatives should be explored with school council members, before students are integrated as members (see Recommendation #5).

These rights and responsibilities might include:

- The right to participate, with flexible arrangements at times. For example, student representatives may request to participate only in particular parts of the meeting via Skype if they are unable to attend a full meeting, or request to leave earlier.
- Responsibilities to make full contributions when present, and to send apologies if unable to attend (for example, if an assessment task is due).
- Further ideas about preparing students for and supporting students with their particular rights and responsibilities are explored in Recommendation #5.

Recommendation #4: Students should be consulted in decisions about how to appoint/ elect student representatives, who should be the student representatives, and how many student representatives there should be.

A variety of views on how students should be selected, who should be selected, and how many student representatives there should be were articulated during this study. There was no unanimous agreement on the best process for selecting and/or voting on student representatives. In addition, there was not a clear consensus on which students are best positioned to represent their school. The question about whether ‘representation’ means elected leadership representing the student body (as in parliamentary modes of representation) or whether representatives should reflect the diversity of the student body was not settled. These questions deserve open debate among the student body (see implementation questions and ideas below).

Recommendation #5: Students and adults should both undertake training and receive support in school council work.

At present, school council members undertake training for their role¹⁰. Students should be part of this training, done together with adults. Student representatives should receive the same training as other school council members in their roles, rights and responsibilities. Time spent together in training will support the development of partnerships between adults and young people. Specific ideas for tailored training and support for adults and students, which may be done together to strengthen their partnership, are suggested below.

Recommendation #6: The structure of school council meetings should support student representatives' meaningful contribution through, for example, the early distribution of meeting agendas, invitations to offer their feedback on other reports, and student involvement in sub-committees.

Careful deliberation on school council structures can help to challenge some of the barriers of uncertainty and fear that hinder some students from feeling that they can make meaningful contributions to these meetings. Specific ideas for school council structures are suggested below.

Implementation ideas:

- The early distribution of meeting agendas – The careful preparation and distribution of meeting agendas “at least five working days before the meeting” is already recommended in the *Improving School Governance* manual¹¹. However, anecdotal evidence from this study suggests that, in practice, this does not always occur. Distributing agendas early will enable student representatives (as it enables other representatives) “to reflect on the issues, to gather more information if necessary and to canvass the opinions of school community members”¹², including other students.
- Explicit invitations for student representatives to contribute during school council meetings – The structure of school council meetings should not only include time allocated for a student report (see Recommendation #7), but also deliberate opportunities for students to give feedback on other reports. Adult school council members might consider what kinds of “explicit gestures” could be made to signal that adults are “stepping back in order to create a space” for students’ contributions¹³. Explicitly signaling and inviting students to contribute will strengthen a sense that students are equally valued on the council (see Recommendation #3).
- Student involvement in sub-committees – To involve students only in school council meetings, and not in other sub-committees where “a significant amount of work may be undertaken”¹⁴ risks tokenism.

Recommendation #7: Student representatives should give a student report that represents students' concerns, and should report back to the student body about other school council discussions and decisions.

In addition to explicit invitations to offer feedback on other reports, students felt that there should be time allocated and structured into the school council agenda for a student report. Such a report would strengthen the feedback loop between the student body and the school council. Likewise, at SRC (or equivalent) meetings with students, time should be allocated and structured for student representatives to report on (non-confidential) matters discussed at school council meetings, for discussion.

Consideration must be given to the position of this student report on the school council meeting agenda. The student report should be situated earlier in school council meeting agendas, to signal its significance.

Recommendation #8: Student representatives should be “equally seated” with other members of the school council.

Attention to the seating arrangements in school council meetings and the power relations that they symbolise and materialise is needed. Being equally seated has the potential to support student representatives to feel comfortable, counteracting potential feelings of intimidation, therefore strengthening students’ capacity to meaningfully participate in school council meetings.

Recommendation #9: Schools should be accountable to report how students are represented on their school council.

Full student membership on school councils is the first recommendation of this report, with the caveat that some schools may need more time, resources and opportunities to experiment before full student representation is achievable. In the meantime, strengthening schools’ accountability to report how students’ “best interests”¹⁵ are not only considered, but also represented on their school council can assist schools to deepen meaningful student participation. Reporting on what they are doing to value, listen to and respond to students’ concerns at the level of school council will assist school councils to reflect collectively on their processes and practices.

Implementation ideas:

The annual school council report to the school community and the Victorian DET could include a section about student participation in school council decision-making. In this section, the ways in which the school council has consulted with, listened to, and/ or included students as representatives in their decision-making processes could be detailed.

Recommendation #10: Student representation on school council should be one aspect of a whole school vision that meaningfully involves students in all aspects of their education.

Student representation on school councils alone does not constitute meaningful student participation. Indeed students may be present in school councils meetings without having any influence, or a school may not need to have a small number of student representatives on school council because every student is empowered to take control of their own education, and they don’t actually need representatives.

Conclusion

We thank the Department of Education and Training for inviting us to submit to the review of the Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017 and we hope our submission provides sufficient context and content for our recommendations to be addressed within the updated Regulations.

The VicSRC look forward to future opportunities to work with DET to ensure student voice and perspective is meaningfully included in all levels of education policy.

References

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