

Student Voice in the Tech Schools initiative

How to incorporate student voice into Tech School governance and decision making.



About the Victorian Student Representative Council (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, and funded through the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET).

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The participation of students in educational policy and program development processes is vital to building a high quality, future focused education system.

VICTORIAN TECH SCHOOL INITIATIVE

Student Voice and Student Engagement in education is increasingly being recognised as a hallmark of a successful educational institution, success being; not only providing students with the best possible educational outcomes, but achieving these outcomes in a democratic and fair way. If done correctly, student voice can expose students to adult and workplace environments and equip students with knowledge and experiences applicable to the real world.

The Victorian Tech Schools initiative has an exciting opportunity to ensure student voice is mainstreamed throughout all long-term goals and decisions, be it facilities, curriculum, staffing or creating an innovative and welcoming environment. Incorporating Student Voice and Student Engagement is good governance. It ensures that the decision making process is effective in identifying issues, working on solutions and implementing those solutions to ensure the Tech Schools operate at their best for learners in Victoria.

WHY THIS MATTERS

In order for student voice to have an impact on the education system in Victoria, it must influence policy and program development. If students are to meaningfully influence the development of the educational system that is designed to engage them, it is critical that student voice be considered at the beginning of and throughout policy and program formulation processes. If student participation is restricted to decision-making processes within schools, a significant opportunity in the development of student-centred educational approaches is missed.

Student voice enables policy and program development that is highly relevant and responsive to the needs and aspirations of students. Educational policy and program development must be driven by a strong understanding of the needs and experiences of students. Student voice must be central to the development of that understanding. Students have direct experience and understanding of the impact of policies on their learning and lives. When students are supported to engage with the creation of research, policy or programs, a more nuanced and complex understanding of what is needed to best meet students' needs is developed. Good practice participatory design processes adopted in other youth-focused fields such as mental health are yielding strong results in terms of boosting the relevance of programs to young people.ⁱ

By valuing student voice at a policy and program development level, governments model established good practice in participation to the

community. Organisations, governments and community groups now understand and acknowledge youth participation as centrally important to the development of youth-specific strategies, initiatives and programs.ⁱⁱ When governments ensure that students are respected as stakeholders in policy and program development processes, they affirm and model this good practice to the broader community. The Victorian Government's continued support for the VicSRC reflects a strong commitment to ensuring student voice is heard not only within schools but also by governments and the broader community. This supportive relationship models and enables the development of meaningful opportunities at all levels for students to be engaged in decision-making and influencing change.ⁱⁱⁱ

GENERAL PRINCIPALS

When engaging student voice in policy or program development it is important to remember young people engage on different levels and through different mechanisms. Some young people will be happy to engage with schools and government through mechanisms which are relatively simple, 'one-off' and consultative, for example an online student survey. Others will be seeking more active, sustained and 'two-way' relationships with government. These young people, in particular, are likely to be looking for engagement opportunities which also enable them to build skills and networks, and to see clear outcomes from their work.

It will be important for the Victorian Tech school project to ensure a 'two-way' youth participation model. Good practise approaches include:

- Resourcing committees or Student Representative Councils of young people to undertake their own projects and events, with independent outcomes besides the provision of 'advice' to adults. Below we make suggestions about *Student Advisory Committee* for each of the Tech School project.
- Elect students formally on to the organising or advisory committee of the project. Below we make recommendations about electing 2 students as voting members for each of the Tech School Managing committees.
- Ensure students are represented on the Curriculum committee and other committees as appropriate.
- Conducting a student-led survey of student views to inform the Tech schools initiative before, during and after.
- Designing an annual large-scale event like a *Tech Schools Youth Summit* to include significant participation by students, youth-led organisations, school principals, and / or representatives from government and the

youth sector, with an emphasis on enabling young people to 'pitch' proposals for consideration of the Tech Schools initiative.

- Creating a student action team to research and develop recommendations around the Tech School project.
- Ask different school SRC's to host a student led forum to discuss the development of the Tech schools initiative.
- Train young people to lead consultation sessions with other young people and adults.
- Ensuring that youth engagement mechanisms (especially those seeking to involve young people who have not provided advice to government before) are tailored to the interests of those young people and provide opportunities for them to have fun, make friends, learn new skills, and / or contribute something to their communities, in an environment which is welcoming and accessible, and where they have time to build relationships with each other and with the adults running the event.
- Work with young people to design and support models for diverse representation.
- Best practise around youth representation is to ensure two young people work together on a committee or advisory body. This ensures they are not the only student involved and they can support each other during the experience.

STUDENT VOICE IN THE TECH SCHOOLS INITIATIVE

Figure 1.1



Student representative on the tech school Managing Committee

- The role of the student representative would be as the representative of the entire student cohort of the Tech School. They would be the communicative link between the Student Advisory Committee and the Tech School Managing Committee. This would encourage transparency, trust and a strong culture of feedback and cooperation in the Tech School. This student would be required to meet the requirements of the Tech School Managing Committee, including attendance at meetings, participating in discussion, voting and any other requirements as set out by the Managing Committee.
- They would also have the responsibility of inducting the successive Student Representative to the Managing Committee for a single meeting after their term has finished.
- Student Representatives to the Managing Committee could have a term period for 6 months minimum but preferably 12 months.

Student Advisory Committee

- The Student Advisory Committee should act as the central body for student voice for Tech School student cohort in school governance and decision making. This group would provide advice to the Tech School Managing Committee.
- The Student Advisory Committee would also have the role of electing one of their members as a representative to the Tech School Managing Committee where this student would still be required to sit in the Advisory Committee.
- The Student Advisory Committee could also be split into focus groups that had a specialised focus e.g. facilities, curriculum, events etc.
- To ensure the smoothest running of the Student Advisory Committee, it is recommended that secretariat support is put in place. This support could be a teacher or external support person, for example. This role would be particularly important during the beginning and end of student terms and would oversee the nominations process which may include communication with member schools and informing them on the process of nominating a student to the Committee.

How should schools select the student they will nominate to be a Representative on the Tech School Student Advisory Committee?

- Schools may decide to elect students through a formal voting process. Alternatively, they may select students based on a written application or mixture of the both. The student that is nominated should show an interest for the Tech School and ideally would have participated in the Tech school programs.
- Schools should be encouraged to nominate students from any year level; a broad representation of the Tech School student cohort will make the Student Advisory Committee's outcomes as informed as possible.

Who will be responsible for the continuity of the Student Advisory Committee?

- Due to the annual turnover of students and, consequently, expertise and knowledge, it is recommended that a teacher at the Tech School, or potentially a volunteer teacher from a member school, has the responsibility to oversee this turn-over period at the beginning and end of each year unless students are able to facilitate this process themselves, which would be encouraged.
- Schools may decide to elect their representative democratically, through a formal voting process involving the student cohort of their individual school, or alternatively, they may be selected by the school through a written application and selection process.
- Student nominations may ask students to either nominate through a speech, 100-150 word personal statement or 200-2000 word written application (CV) or mixtures of each.
- Schools nominate a single student years 7-12 to sit on the Student Advisory Committee

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure students are at the front and centre of any Tech school development, design and programs.
2. Formally elect two students formally on to the Tech School Managing committees.
3. Create a *Student Advisory Committee* for each of the Tech School projects to advise the Managing Committees. Ensure the committee is properly resourced and supported to innovate and work successfully.
4. Ensure students are represented on the Curriculum committee and other committees developed by the Tech schools as appropriate.
5. Conduct a student led survey of student views to inform the Tech schools initiative before, during and after.
6. Design annual large-scale events like a *Tech Schools Youth Summit* to enable young people to 'pitch' proposals for consideration of the Tech Schools initiative. This could be an opportunity for students who have worked on projects within the Tech school in their area to get more funding and support to expand their idea.
7. Work with young people to design and support models for diverse representation.
8. Ensure a minimum of two young people work together on a committee or advisory body.

ⁱ Hagen, P, Collin, P, Metcalf, A, Nicholas, M, Rahilly, K, & Swainston, N 2012, *Participatory Design of evidence-based online youth mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention and treatment*, Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne.

ⁱⁱ The YERP online resource developed by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria provides detailed background and implementation information to youth participation, including an overview of why it matters. See <http://yerp.yacvic.org.au/#why-it-matters> (accessed 2nd May 2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ Resources developed by the VicSRC to support student engagement in decision-making can be found at <http://www.vicsrc.org.au/>

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