



Education State Submission

July 2015 | Final Report





About the Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC)

The 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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Executive Summary

We can't call ourselves the education state if we aren't looking after the education and wellbeing of our students.

15 year old student, The Mac.Robertson Girl's High School

Background and introduction

In launching the Education State consultation in June 2015, the Andrews Labor Government asked all Victorians to have their say about the future of our education system. Capturing student voice is crucial in this project. Students are at the centre of education in schools. They have strong understandings and ideas about what works, and ways to improve learning and teaching. When schools engage student voices, they create opportunities to facilitate a stronger sense of membership, resulting in students who feel more positive about school, respect and self-worth. Students feel positive about themselves as learners, enabling them to better manage their own progress in learning agency and realising they can have impact on things that matter to them. We see the consultation process as a critical opportunity to talk about the importance of student voice in education, and to provide practical and tangible examples.

Consultation methodology

In an effort to capture the thoughts, feedback and ideas of Victorian students about the Education State, VicSRC sent out a survey to all member schools. Our survey asked students to reflect on questions designed around the eight Education State focus areas determined by the Government. The survey received a very strong response,

from 352 students across 32 schools. We think that this in itself is a significant reflection on the importance of both student voice and providing opportunities for this to be heard.

Student responses revolved around four key areas:

- the school environment and student engagement
- the curriculum
- funding and equality
- wellbeing.

These areas of focus align with the VicSRC policy statements developed over the last decade, as well as the areas of interest set by the 170 students who attended the VicSRC's 2015 Congress. This submission is set out to explore students perspective of the current state of education, what students hope for the education state and recommendations. The submission is framed around the four themes listed above.

Summary of Recommendations

Victorian students have clear ideas about what school in the Education State should look and feel like. Highlighting and listening to student voice is critically important in achieving this, and students want the Education State to provide clear avenues for this to happen consistently across all schools. We took students ideas and worked with members of the VicSRC Student Executive to come up with a range of recommendations to help the Department of Education with their work on creating the Education State.

Recommendation #1

Ensure the Education State is committing to strengthening student voice in Victoria by including a student representative from VicSRC at the launch of the Education State reforms in September, as suggested by the Hon. Minister for Education, James Merlino, on 3rd July 2015.

Recommendation #2

Facilitate the development of a state-wide coordinated framework for developing student voice and SRCs.

We see student voice as the most effective means to involving young people's active participation in shared decision-making, and suggest that Student Representative Councils (SRCs) provide the best mechanism for achieving this. Best practice SRCs offer a space for teachers and students to work in partnership to transform education.

Implementation ideas:

- The VicSRC believes that principals, teachers, students must be able to communicate effectively to ensure a healthy environment for teaching and

learning. We recommend that this be formalised through mandatory student involvement in decision making processes at all levels, including but not limited to school council meetings.

- An online interactive portal offering access to best practice models, case studies, relevant research and other material for students, teachers and principals to improve mechanisms to support student voice.
- A partnership with teacher education universities and the Bastow Institute to support pre-service and existing teachers in understanding student voice, active participation in shared decision-making and personalised learning.
- Allocated funding and time for SRCs, SRC teacher advisors and SRC training in every school.

Recommendation #3

Ensuring all students attend schools with equipment and facilities that meet a minimum standard of being professional, safe, modern and well maintained.

Implementation ideas:

- The equipment and facilities must meet the needs of all teachers and students regardless of background or ability.

Recommendation #4

Ensuring that a flexible curriculum is developed lead and informed by students.

Implementation ideas:

- Empower students to take control of their own learning through a student-centred model of teaching and learning.

- Students should have the opportunity to pursue a wide range of interests. The curriculum needs to be more flexible in providing opportunities regardless of location.
- Engaging for VCE, VET and VCAL students, and promotes VET and VCAL opportunities to students, parents and the community as being equally valuable to VCE.
- Invest in more 'Student Empowerment' model-based schools similar to the Templestowe College model.

Recommendation #5

The education state should provide funding and equality through developing a needs based funding model that works to correct the inequalities experienced by students with disability or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Implementation ideas:

- Schools must be funded adequately, and this must be based on the broad range of factors that impact their ability to support students.
- Accordingly, we suggest the state government deliver the Gonski funding commitment in full as the Education State program is rolled out.
- Furthermore, we suggest the Education State develop a funding approach that provides commitments that go beyond the lifetime of Government.

Recommendation #6

Increase support for the wellbeing and health needs of every Victorian student, through more individualised support, increased investment in wellbeing services.

Implementation ideas:

- More individualised support for all students through an increase in teachers, support staff and resources.
- Young people need to be empowered to understand and take action around their mental and physical health concerns. We see the students themselves as a key resource, and see the development of peer-to-peer mentoring and support programs around youth specific mental health issues such as mental health first aid, as being a crucial component in this.
- Resources should be based on the CHIME model of recovery (connectedness; hope and optimism about the future; identity; meaning in life; and empowerment).
- Investing significantly in more wellbeing services and fulltime professionals within schools to assist students in dealing with mental and physical health concerns.
- All professionals in frequent contact with young people must be trained to understand and support young people's mental and physical health.

The School Environment and Student Engagement

The current state

Victorian students generally perceive the school environment as being of good standard. Others, however, suggested better facilities are required and schools should:

“Stop attempting to fix things that should not be fixed and rather renewed.”

While many reported experiences of high student engagement, the majority did not. Low engagement was linked to overcrowded classrooms and under resourced teaching staff. Students consistently emphasised the pivotal role played by teachers in creating an engaging classroom, ensuring content is interesting and that all students are involved and their wellbeing looked after:

“Our teachers deserve more recognition. These teachers are the people that shape us for six years, and in the end, have no real recognition. I know that some of the teachers at my school will be lifelong mentors and friends, and they have shaped me to be the person that I can, and want to be.”

Respondents also reflected on the impact that is felt when the reverse is true: when teachers do not acknowledge the different learning styles within their students, when teachers don't make efforts to be engaging, and when students are not encouraged to exercise their voice and have direct input in the classroom.

“It is important to note that students are missing out and falling behind because teachers are not being efficient and making learning inspiring. Teachers often spend too much time focussing on one area, or some don't even teach

the appropriate learning areas at all... It is also clear that teachers are experiencing a lot of stress as they teach different areas of the curriculum, for instance, a PE teacher teaching science or a music teacher teaching English, thus reducing their efficiency when teaching students. It is vital to say that some of the teachers teaching in a wide variety of subjects do not even know what they're teaching.”

The school environment and student engagement in the Education State

Victorian students have incredibly clear ideas about what they want the school environment and student engagement in the Education State to look and feel like. Overwhelmingly, they want school to be a place where students actually want to be, offering a welcome to everyone and allowing them to be safe and happy:

“Convince students to want to learn. You can't claim to be the Education State unless the students are actually happy at school.”

Students also want their schools to acknowledge the different ways in which people learn:

“I would like to see schools and classrooms with e-learning spaces, interactive whiteboards and libraries that still have shelves and shelves of hardcover books for those who still and always will read the 'old-fashioned' way. I still want to see primary school kids running around the playground, discovering their mobility and keeping physically fit to maximise the health benefits for not just their wellbeing but also to benefit their learning.”

Our respondents want the engagement of students to be the responsibility of the teacher – and more broadly, the school and the Government. They do not think that it's their responsibility to connect to the subject by default: rather, the teacher should be trained adequately in order to recognise the varying learning styles and needs within the class and cater to this. This was identified as a key means for working towards re-engaging disaffected students:

“Students who need to be re engaged most likely have other issues in their life so finding a teacher that suits them and understands their problems without being characterised as a counsellor (which scares us) who they can trust will help them get on the right track to being part of the school community again.”

At VicSRC, we are passionate about the importance of highlighting and listening to student voice. So are Victorian students. They want Education State schools to provide clear avenues for this to happen consistently and across all areas:

“I would like to see students having true liberty. They should feel happy at school and be encouraged to be open minded, which a key to development is. Students should feel comfortable bringing up issues at their school without being dismissed by figures of authority. They should understand their strengths and weaknesses, and feel comfortable discussing problems and questions with teachers and in class. It is an important life skill to be able to communicate with others - life skills are not simply learning to do taxes or read out of a textbook.”

Recommendations

Recommendation #1

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Recommendation #2

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Implementation ideas:

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- An online interactive portal based on the VicSRC Represent! Resource offering access to best practice models, case studies, relevant research and other material for students, teachers and principals to improve mechanisms to support student voice.

- A partnership with teacher education universities and the Bastow Institute to support pre-service and existing teachers in understanding student voice, active participation in shared decision-making and personalised learning.
- Allocated funding and time for SRCs, SRC teacher advisors and SRC training in every school.

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Ensure all students attend schools with equipment and facilities that meet a minimum standard of being professional, safe, modern and well maintained.

Implementation ideas:

- The equipment and facilities must meet the needs of all teachers and students regardless of background or ability.

The Curriculum

The current state of the curriculum

Students are concerned the Victorian curriculum and teaching styles are not providing students with the skills they need to compete in a modern and globalised world:

“The curriculum is not living up to the standards the students deserve now. Things being taught to students are not taught in a fun and interesting way by some teachers, but above that, the set criteria to be taught is rather useless and irrelevant in some aspects. I have also been in classes where the teacher is not trained in the class, and that what the school is providing us in those classes (information wise) is terribly out-dated and inaccurate.”

Others argued that schools are too often positioning certain subjects, academic excellence and going on to a university education as the only ways to be successful:

“This ‘hierarchy’ of which subjects are better or more important than others should be demolished. Subjects such as art are equally as important as mathematics, and that should be encouraged.”

Students emphasised the student voice as a means for both students and teachers to identify where more work needs to be done. In schools where student voices are not privileged, respondents observed:

“A lack of respect from some of the teachers towards the students, as well as the lack of respect from the students towards the teachers.”

The curriculum in the Education State

Victorian students see what they learn while at school as one of the most important factors in their education. Accordingly, they want the Education State to offer a curriculum that encompasses a variety of learning environments, styles and concepts as well as encouraging the development of learning as a lifelong skill. It should be:

“Engaging and active in terms of learning. Students within the Education State should be proud and devoted to continuing and furthering their education.”

Students want to see the curriculum redesigned to have more depth in what is thought to constitute excellence. While our respondents recognised excellence in maths and science are key to developing a world-ready cohort of students, creative and critical thinking skills can be developed through other avenues and this should be acknowledged and encouraged. Students also suggested that it is really important that connections with the real world are made explicit. Students need to be:

“Shown the bigger picture. Students have to see why they should go to school and the benefits that it will bring them.”

Interestingly, our respondents essentially divided themselves into two camps on the question of what excellence is. One group defined excellence as being an academic pursuit and provided examples like high ATAR scores, or receiving subject awards as being the height of excellence, while the other described it as a more holistic endeavour:

“The school’s definition: achieving the best that you can and knowing that you’ve given the challenge your absolute best shot. My definition: scoring above 90% in all tasks and being able to completely master everything.”

The Education State should provide:

“The opportunity to learn without the constant and impending pressure of assessments.”

Recommendation

Recommendation #4

Ensuring that a flexible curriculum is developed lead and informed by students.

Implementation ideas:

- Empower students to take control of their own learning through a student-centred model of teaching and learning.
- Students should have the opportunity to pursue a wide range of interests. The curriculum needs to be more flexible in providing opportunities regardless of location.
- Engaging for VCE, VET and VCAL students, and promotes VET and VCAL opportunities to students, parents and the community as being equally valuable to VCE
- Invest in more ‘Student Empowerment’ model-based schools similar to the Templestowe College model.

Funding and Equality

The current state of funding and equality

Our respondents overwhelmingly identified issues of funding and equality as a key issue facing Victorian students. Many raised the stark contrasts between their educational experience, and the experience of those schools perceived to have more money or opportunities. Significant gaps were identified between public and private systems, as well as metropolitan and regional schools:

“Inequality is felt especially in county and regional schools in the availability of particular course and the access to good resources and facilities.”

“There is a lack of resources and funding in regional and specialist schools. This extends to the range of access to subjects for smaller schools/schools in isolated areas.”

Some argued having select entry schools within the public sector create unnecessary resentment.

“I believe select entry schools are making other schools look stupid, saying that they are better than anyone else. When students can't get in they think they've been classified as dumb.”

Others argued that the criteria for select entry schools places too much emphasis on maths and science, and subjects such as the arts and humanities should be valued equally.

Funding and equality in the Education State

One student defined equality in education as:

“Everyone receiving a level of education that is relevant to our world, regardless of whether it is public or private. This means enough resources, classes that are no bigger than 25-students and easy access to one-on-one help if it's required.”

Students consistently asked that the Education State work towards embracing multiple modes of learning and acceptance of all individuals regardless of financial background, race, gender or sexuality. They defined the ideal school in the Education State as:

“A school that goes away from focussing on 'traditional' talent and that focuses on acceptance, diversity and the students' learning.”

Another student described the Education State as:

“A state that is raising students with reliable knowledge on life skills, creating an ability to be independent learners. A state that gives every child the same opportunities regardless of money and other statuses.”

But more than anything, the Education State should offer a system that is:

“Equitable and have no distinction between rich and poor. The standard of education will be higher. Creativity in schools will be embraced, schools will adopt a focus in shaping well-rounded individuals who can think for themselves as opposed to mass-producing students who only know how to memorise and repeat information.”

Recommendation

Recommendation #5

The Education State should provide funding and equality through developing a needs based funding model that works to correct the inequalities experienced by students with disability or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Implementation ideas:

- Schools must be funded adequately, and this must be based on the broad range of factors that impact their ability to support students.
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Wellbeing

The current state of wellbeing

Victorian students perceive inequality in the education system as not being limited to funding: it's also a matter of wellbeing. Respondents referred to varying experiences of school based racism, sexism, homophobia, physical and verbal abuse, face-to-face and cyber bullying.

Despite this, respondents think Victorian schools are generally doing well in looking after their students' mental health and wellbeing. Students said there are significant efforts made towards "building balanced students", and that in many cases this is achieved through emphasising "mental, sexual and social health from a young age".

"Victorian schools are doing exceptionally well at addressing students' emotional and physical needs through the amount of student counsellors available as well as the classes regarding mental health and wellbeing."

Victorian schools are doing well at accepting all types of cultures, sexual orientations and are creating groups for almost anyone to join. Schools are also succeeding at making the students aware of bullying and discrimination through performances and guest speakers."

Other respondents reminded us that while the policies and teaching strategies might be in place, the actual experience of students does not always follow this:

"Bullying is a big challenge and teachers don't always see it. It's silent, it's harmful, and it goes on behind closed doors. Although we've got 'no bullying' statuses up around, it's actually worse than ever, and someone needs to do something about it."

Wellbeing in the Education State

Students want schools in the Education State to acknowledge the importance of supporting wellbeing, and to employ teachers who are adequately trained in better supporting these needs:

"Education has impacted my health dramatically. I suffer from major depression disorder as well as severe anxiety which hasn't been helped by unnecessary pressure at school despite having letters to explain why I need help and why things are the way they are at different points in time. Teachers aren't educated themselves in mental health issues that effect a large majority of students which makes things harder for the student. I have been put down numerous times for things I can't control and work not to my usual standard because of panic attacks during a test or exam. I also have a brother who is autistic and dyslexic. He has gone to school and is put down by teachers and screamed at for not reading something that he can't read anyway. Because of this he comes home aggressive and angry, which impacts my home life, all because of a teacher not understanding."

As part of this, schools should focus on not just academia:

"But on other areas as well, like practicing mindfulness and getting active. Things that enable students to understand the importance of taking care of themselves physically, mentally and socially."

A focus on wellbeing was also identified as a means of re-connecting and re-engaging disaffected students. One student suggested teachers could:

“Connect with students on an emotional level throughout activities such as meditation and self-discovery. Most students don't know what they have to offer; they aren't even aware of their good qualities and as a result are self-destructive.”

Students also suggested that excellence needs to be re-imagined as a more holistic undertaking: taking into account wellbeing, as well as the idea of comparing progress against yourself, rather than a benchmark set by the Government:

“Excellence in my school is being the best you can be. As long as you do your best you are excellent.

Excellence in our school is of course striving to achieve high goals and trying our best. It's also about challenging ourselves and getting along with others in the community as well as the classroom.”

Recommendation

Recommendation #6

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Implementation ideas:

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