

[Equality in education is] 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.

Victorian student, July 2015

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing student voice in Victoria. The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic). YACVic is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people's issues in Victoria. VicSRC exists to empower all student voices to be valued in every aspect of education. Our organisation is student run, and student led. We exist to provide an important link between policy makers and students, ensuring student perspectives are offered on key policy directions, initiatives and programs.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and introduction

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. We see this consultation process as a critical opportunity to talk to students about their views on school funding in Victoria.

Equity and funding in Education is a critical issue for students. It was identified as a top issue in our consultation on the Education state. Last year students at our annual congress pass a resolution calling for a reinstatement of the Education Maintenance Allowance. EMA affects 200,000 students across Victoria and support for financially disadvantaged students and other avenues of financial support for student was seen as the highest priority. While we we're pleased to see the instatement of the Schools, camps and excursion fund in the last state budget there is still a gap in the way funding is allocated for students. The message was again reinforced at the 2015 VicSRC Regional Conferences. We held 12 conferences in metro and regional Victoria were we talked to over 1000 students who ranked 'School funding and equity' as the second most important issue concerning students.

Consultation methodology

In an effort to capture the thoughts, feedback and ideas of Victorian students, VicSRC sent out a survey to all member schools around school funding and the Education State. 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. This submission also incorporated 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.

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

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.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Victorian students have clear ideas about how the funding system could be improved. Highlighting and listening to student voice is critically important in achieving a fair and equitable funding system. 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.

Recommendation #1 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
- Increased transparency so students understand how and why schools are funded
- All students attend school that has up-to-date classrooms and facilities
- More individualised support for all students
- A curriculum that meets the needs of all students
- Reduce class sizes in upper primary and secondary schools
- Better levels of respect and pay for teachers.

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