

2021 VICSRC STUDENT LED PROJECT AWARD WINNER

START THE CONVERSATION

Northcote High School

The Team

Lucy, Kitty, Hannah, Mia and Charli are a student action group devoted to advocating for the revision of the sexual education and consent curriculum in Victorian government schools, with an end-goal of reducing rape culture in the wider community. After some unfortunate events at their school, they took the initiative and facilitated a series of student-led discussion forums to research their cohort's understanding of respectful relationships and identify gaps in their knowledge that they could help fill.

The Project

After identifying an issue with how the Respectful Relationships program is delivered in schools, the group used Instagram and social media to facilitate three student-led discussion forums, each with a different focus.

The focus of the first forum was to create a space where all students felt comfortable to share their thoughts and feelings. This was achieved by first sharing their own experiences and then opening the floor for other students. After the success of the first forum, the second forum was more structured and asked the question "What do you want to learn about?". Due to the popularity of the second forum, they decided to run a third to continue to collect qualitative data. In the third forum, Start the Conversation engaged and invited in Northern Centre Against Sexual Assault (NCASA) who were able to listen to students concerns and be onsite to support students as they discussed this sensitive information.

See the report from the forums [here](#).

Once all the information from the forums was gathered, the students arranged a meeting with their school's leadership team, wellbeing staff and the Respectful Relationship representative for the area to share the findings and discuss a way forward. The meeting was successful, and they began to work and build a strong relationship with NCASA to develop educational programs they can deliver to the school based on the needs identified at the forums.

Start the Conversation were also invited to participate in a Respectful Relationships Student Voice Pilot program, where they were able to voice the concerns of the students and school directly and learn more about the program. After this meeting and independent research, they identified two issues with the current Respectful Relationships program:

- Teachers who are expected to deliver this program don't receive enough support or training (there are only 34 support staff to support over 1000 schools and teachers!)
- Students need to be asked more frequently what they feel they need to learn because students will always have the most relevant answer.

To address this, Start the Conversation entered the [Monash's Social Justice Matters video competition](#), speaking about the lack of teacher support and training to raise awareness about how under-resourced the Respectful Relationships program is. They have also met with their local state MP, Kat Theophanous, about the project and are planning to facilitate larger community-wide forums to gather more information before getting in contact with the Minister for Education with the findings.

The Impact

As a result of the forums and engagement with the leadership team and NCASA, Start the Conversation were able to bring attention to and develop a long-term plan to address pervasive issues at their school through education. Since their concerns were raised, their school has also engaged a service to provide 'Man Box' workshops, which emphasise that breaking down harmful gender stereotypes benefits the health and safety of both women and men and reinforces the inclusion of men in the prevention of violence against women.

The involvement of NCASA also helped individual students seek support for their experiences, and many students were thankful for both introducing the service and making them feel like their voices matter.

By running the first-ever student-led forums at their school to address an issue, a precedent was set for other students and Start the Conversation will be creating a guide and mentoring other students how to run forums for any topics and engage school leadership to ensure that voices will continue to be heard.

For More

To follow what Start the Conversation are doing and get involved, find them on Instagram:

[@starttheconversationnhs](#) and
[@starttheconversationvictoria](#)