

13th October 2023

Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee
Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear Committee members,

On behalf of Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC), I am pleased that our organisation has been afforded the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry into the state education system in Victoria.

VicSRC is the peak body for primary and secondary school-aged students in Victoria. Our objective is to empower Victorian students to have their views and concerns about the education system heard. Through our advocacy, we work to ensure that student voice practices – the principles of genuine dialogue, collaboration, and joint decision-making between students and adults – form a central component to education policymaking and reform in Victoria.

Along with our advocacy, VicSRC works directly with students, teachers and schools through programs which are designed to empower students to drive positive change in their own schools.

Our Student Executive Advisory Committee, comprised of 15 secondary school students from across the state, are elected annually to represent their fellow students and their aspirations for this state's education system.

VicSRC's Student Executives, with the support of staff, work to deliver Congress, our annual student-led event which brings together students from across the state to engage in peer-led discussions to understand what they see as the biggest concerns and priorities regarding Victoria's education system. Findings from Congress go on to shape and inform our reform priorities.

For several years, Congress has revealed that Victorian students are particularly focused on a few key areas of their education experience which, according to them, are critical to improving outcomes and the quality of their experiences at school.

These key areas include understanding and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students, especially in the post-pandemic context; providing a more inclusive and accessible approach to education by recognising the diverse needs, learning styles, and experiences of students; allowing students more opportunities to thrive and achieve success at school beyond their test scores; and ensuring that schools and educators are adequately supported through strong investments which reflect the critical importance and high value of a quality education.

We used these guiding principles as the basis of our discussions at Congress, which this year welcomed 113 secondary students from across the state, including 99 students from 30 government schools.

Through those discussions, we heard from students about how their experiences in these key areas can inform further progress, thus building on the encouraging program of education reforms currently underway in Victoria which seek to address many of these key issues.

It's these reflections from students which form the basis of VicSRC's 2023 Congress Report. This Report is delivered to the inquiry as an attachment to this letter.

The Congress Report found that students are still in need of additional school-based support to address their mental health and wellbeing concerns. Furthermore, the report details students' experiences of negative feelings at school being driven by an overwhelming pressure to perform, and a fear of failure and uncertainty about the future which coincides with that pressure.

Meanwhile, the report highlights students' need for additional support from their teachers to ensure classroom settings are conducive to effective learning for all students, regardless of their learning styles or other learning needs. Students are also searching for more meaningful relationships with their teachers to develop an understanding about how best to achieve effective teaching and learning. Issues like the teacher shortage are standing in the way of this.

Students are also struggling to find a sense of personal achievement and success when the focus of their time at school is overwhelmingly dedicated to achieving academic success. Students want to have greater access to positive feedback in recognition of their personal progress at school, whether their test scores yet reflect that progress or not.

The report also explores students' attitudes to inclusivity and accessibility at school, noting that school is not always a safe and welcoming place for many students who have diverse backgrounds and identities, and noted that schools and teachers need to be better equipped to recognise the needs of these students.

This report demonstrates that students are equipped to deliver meaningful and insightful advice about their own experiences with education, and that more must be done not only to enact these systemic reforms to improve outcomes for students, but to strengthen student voice practices throughout the education system to form an integral part of ongoing policymaking in Victoria.

To this end, VicSRC makes the following recommendations to improve learning outcomes for all students:

1. Prioritise capability building within the Department of Education and across government to ensure student voice practices are understood, valued, and enacted to inform policymaking in any circumstance where that policy stands to impact students.
2. Deliver additional resources and support to teachers and schools which empowers teachers to build rapport and meaningful engagement with students and achieve a deeper understanding of what students need to succeed at school.
3. Provide additional resources and support for schools to adopt student voice practices at the school-level, ensuring students are included in decision-making processes which stand to impact their education and experiences at school.
4. Utilising a model of genuine student voice practices, provide a mechanism for students to deliver feedback and advice to the Department of Education regarding the ongoing rollout of new initiatives delivering school-based mental health and wellbeing support.
5. Prioritise initiatives that improve access and inclusion in every Victorian school to ensure that all students have equitable access to education which is suited and responsive to their needs.

Victorian students clearly have plenty to say when it comes to improving the education system in this state. It is my hope that these recommendations, along with the 2023 Congress Report, reiterates the need to ensure that student voice is considered an integral component of ongoing reform, especially in the coming years as the Victorian Government seeks to address these important and persistent issues.

I look forward to continued engagement from this Committee. VicSRC stands ready to provide further information, and to work closely with students, on our continued effort to identify and enact student-led solutions to make education stronger, fairer, and more equitable for every Victorian student.

Kind regards,



Julia Baron
CEO
Victorian Student Representative Council



VICSRC 2023 CONGRESS REPORT

Student-driven perspectives and recommendations to make the Victorian education system stronger, fairer, and more equitable for every student.

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body and leading advocate representing school-aged students in Victoria. We were created by students to be a voice for all primary and secondary school students at the highest levels of decision making in Victorian education. Our vision is an education system that is student-led, student driven and student-focused.

The findings in this report were gathered through student-led consultations with 113 Victorian students. VicSRC thanks them for the time and expertise they shared with us in formulating this report.



VicSRC respectfully acknowledges and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the custodians of this land. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria and across the wider continent.

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Introduction

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing school-aged students in Victoria. We exist to empower all students to have their voices heard – and respected - in every aspect of education.

VicSRC is focused on making collective, systemic change in Victorian education, whilst simultaneously supporting students to enact change in their schools and local communities. First and foremost, VicSRC advocates for students to be involved in decision making about their education.

VicSRC is the only independent, education-based, student-led advocacy organisation in Australia, and a leading expert in education policy reform based on student perspectives.

VicSRC is guided by a series of priorities areas which are developed and regularly evaluated by students. While advocating for positive change to improve education outcomes for all Victorian students, we work to ensure that students are involved in the development and implementation of those policy changes, ensuring student voice is integrated at every level of the policy making process.

VicSRC's approach to advocacy

To identify VicSRC's priorities, we work with students to guide the development and strategic direction of VicSRC's Advocacy Platform. This process begins by inviting students from across the state to share their experiences, concerns and big ideas with VicSRC, allowing us to understand what is at the forefront of Victorian students' mind when it comes to their education experience, and the issues they are most eager to tackle.

We listen to what students have to say in order to identify key areas of focus which incorporate recurring themes amongst students' perspectives. Then, at VicSRC's annual event, Congress, students from across the state are invited to come together in conversations led by our Student Executive Advisory Committee to work together to propose solutions towards resolving these challenges.

After Congress, VicSRC's Student Executive Advisory Committee members work together with staff to determine the most valuable and high-impact reform areas which best address the concerns of students.

Once our priorities are established, we finalise our Advocacy Platform and report back to the student community about what we plan to achieve based on their guidance, and we get to work.

All of our objectives share a common goal; to achieve systemic reform in education which is informed and supported by students. This means working with schools and government to ensure they are equipped to work effectively with students as genuine collaborators and partners in education policy reform. As we make progress towards achieving our objectives, VicSRC will continue to ensure that students are driving this change to achieve positive outcomes by students, for all students.

Congress at a glance

In September 2023, VicSRC welcomed 113 students from 35 secondary schools from across Victoria to participate in student-led discussions about the big issues they cared most about. Students in attendance came from a variety of education contexts, including:

- Seventy-nine students from 25 metropolitan government secondary schools,
- Twenty students from five regional government schools,
- Seven students from four metropolitan non-government schools,
- Four students from one regional Catholic school,
- Three students who are home-schooled in Melbourne.

All secondary year levels were also represented at Congress.

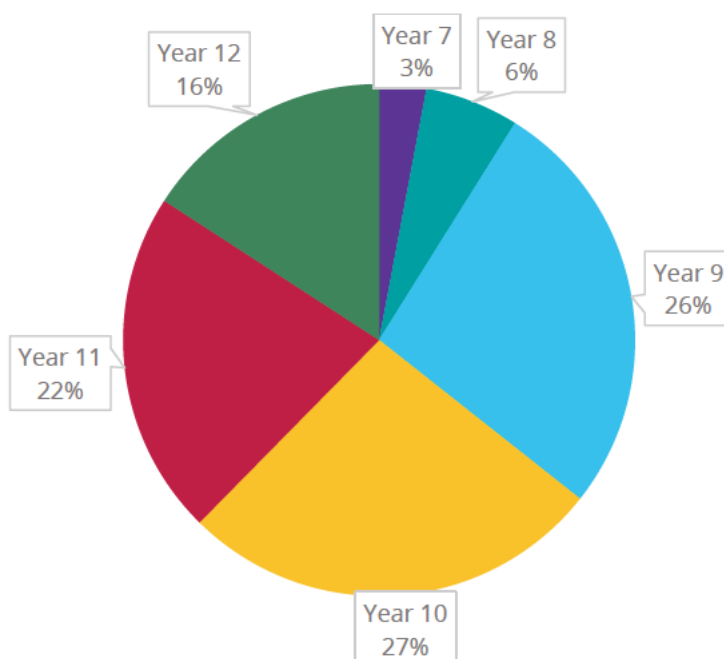


Figure 1: Students at Congress 2023 by year level

Ahead of Congress, we called for students to submit their ideas and priorities for the day, in a process called 'pitching'. Based on 44 unique pitches, we identified four overarching themes which guided the topics of discussion for the day. These were:

1. Student mental health and wellbeing,
2. Making education inclusive and accessible for all students,
3. Re-thinking the definitions of success at school,
4. Securing greater investments for students, teachers, and schools.

VicSRC's Student Executive Advisory Committee members took these four big themes and worked with staff to build a facilitation guide to lead discussions at Congress and delve further into these topics.

All of the information gathered on the day was collected and analysed to produce the following report. These findings, along with the guidance of the Student Executive Advisory Committee, will go on to shape our reform priorities into the future, expressed through our Advocacy Platform.

Student mental health and wellbeing

Students who participated in this discussion group were asked about their needs when it came to supporting their mental health and wellbeing at school, and the degree to which schools were currently meeting those needs. Students were also asked about the key drivers of negative feelings and highlighted stress, anxiety, and isolation while at school.

Results show that students believe their mental health and wellbeing needs have changed since the pandemic, and there is not enough support available to them to meet their needs. Students also noted that an overwhelming pressure to succeed academically at school was driving study stress and a sense of uncertainty about their future. Meanwhile, students reflected on the mental health of teachers, noting that teachers seemed to be struggling, and that this had an impact on students, too.

What we heard from students about this topic

Students at Congress were clear that the state of their mental health and wellbeing, and the support they required to address their concerns in this regard, had changed significantly since returning to the classroom after Victoria's extended lockdowns and remote learning. Students reflected that returning to school was not as simple as 'flicking a switch', and that the unpredictable nature of the on-again-off-again status of in-person learning in Victoria during this period had taken a toll on their mindsets when it came to being at school.

Research analysing the pandemic's impact on mental health supports their reflections, with a major meta-review of 338 studies surveying the pandemic's impact on mental health led by Australian experts in March 2023 concluded that "probable depression and anxiety were significantly higher than pre-COVID-19" and that "adolescents ... experienced heightened adverse mental health" throughout the pandemic (November 2019 - March 2022) as compared with other groups¹.

As students' mental health and wellbeing needs have increased, students at Congress noted that the demand for school-based mental health support services seemed to be outstripping supply. According to students, many support services at school were difficult to access, and in some circumstances when they did access that support, they got the sense that wellbeing and support staff were too busy to provide meaningful help.

These reflections are in-line with research on the matter, with the Australian Psychological Society noting in 2022 that despite the need for at least one full-time psychologist for every 500 students to inform best-practice school-based support for Australian students, the current ratio sits closer to one full-time psychologist for every 1500 students².

Students also highlighted a fear of judgement and stigma for needing additional help at school which also stands in the way of students accessing support.

Students reflected on the major drivers of their negative feelings like stress and anxiety and noted that an overwhelming pressure to perform and meet expectations, especially achieving strong academic results through their test scores, was one such key driver of those feelings. Students said they were sometimes made to feel like their futures depended on their academic success, adding further pressure to perform. Furthermore, students felt they didn't have the skills they needed, like resilience and tools to manage their time and stress, to effectively deal with those feelings.

Indeed, a fear and sense of uncertainty about the future is on the rise among students. A recent study from headspace which surveyed more than 2,200 young people aged 15-25 found that 40% of young

¹ Bower, M et al. (2023), 'A hidden pandemic? An umbrella review of global evidence on mental health in the time of COVID-19', *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, vol. 14, 2023.

² Australian Psychological Society (APS) (2022), 'Position statement: psychologists in school', *Australian Psychological Society*, April 2022.

people felt that COVID-19 had impacted their confidence in achieving their future goals³. However, even before the pandemic, a major OECD study found that the number of Australian students who were experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety in the contexts of their studies (47%) was high above the international average of 37%⁴.

Students at Congress also reflected on the apparent mental health and wellbeing of their teachers. Students had a clear sense that their teachers were struggling too, and they felt that when teachers couldn't provide positive and supportive classroom environments, this went on to impact students' mindsets and wellbeing at school by further informing or confirming their stress or anxiety.

The research in support of this claim is both strong and alarming. Data published by the Black Dog Institute in 2023 which included a survey of more than 4,200 Australian teachers indicated that 70% of teachers reported having unmanageable workloads, while 47% of teachers are considering leaving the profession in the next 12 months – a substantial increase from 2021 where only 14% of teachers were considering leaving⁵. The same report also indicated that 52% of teachers reported moderate to extremely severe symptoms of depression⁶.

Students also reflected that there were other factors at play which went on to impact their mindset and wellbeing at school. Students expressed a general sentiment that it is a difficult time to be growing up, with big challenges like climate change and political uncertainty dominating the news and taking a toll on their mental health and wellbeing, which present further barriers to being hopeful about the future.

These reflections align strongly with recent findings from ReachOut which conducted a survey of more than 1,000 Australian young people aged 16-21 and found that 44% of young people were at least moderately stressed about their future⁷. Respondents most commonly reported that stress about their futures began when they were 14-16 years old⁸.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Students want the quality and availability of school-based mental health to improve so every student has the opportunity to speak to a counsellor or other support person at school and receive effective support if they need it.
- Students want to be further educated about mental health and wellbeing in order to equip them with the knowledge and understanding they need to identify and manage negative feelings.
- Students want schools to prioritise the need to build positive and productive relationships between students and teachers. They feel this will achieve a sense of mutual understanding and rapport that enables teachers to better recognise when students may be in need of further support.
- Students want to see teachers provided with more education and support both to manage their own mental health and wellbeing, and to be equipped with the tools they need to recognise when students are struggling.
- Students want easier access to external support services in circumstances where schools aren't equipped to provide that support.

³ headspace (2020), 'Young Australians fearful and uncertain for their future', *headspace*, 15 June 2020.

⁴ Pascoe, M. (2018), 'Nearly half of Australian school kids are stressed. Here's how to fix it.', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 2018.

⁵ Black Dog Institute (2023), 'National Teacher Survey: Summary', *Black Dog Institute*, 16 February 2023.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ReachOut (2023), 'New research finds that stress about the future is impacting the wellbeing of young Aussies', *ReachOut*, 9 April 2022.

⁸ Ibid.

- Students want more informal, less intimidating ways of 'checking in' on their health and wellbeing without fear of intervention or judgement, and to reduce the stigma of seeking that support.

Making education inclusive and accessible for all students

Students engaged in this topic were asked if they felt included and supported by their teachers and schools, and reflected on how particular groups of students might be less likely to feel supported and understood. Students were also encouraged to consider all aspects of inclusivity and accessibility, factoring in the needs of students with diverse learning needs, and who belong to a diverse range of identities and backgrounds including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, LGBTIQ+ students, students with disabilities, and students from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds.

Findings from these discussions highlighted the need for improved rapport between teachers and students, building on the capability of teachers to provide support tailored to the needs of each individual student. Students also reflected on the need for schools to take a more proactive approach to ensuring that diverse groups of students felt welcomed, understood, and safe at school, noting that bullying and anti-social behaviour including discrimination seemed to be on the rise.

What we heard from students about this topic

Students at Congress believe that schools and teachers can be 'set in their ways' when it comes to their approach to teaching and learning. According to students, this denies them from having access to opportunities to learn and grow in ways which work well for them. Reflecting on their own experiences, students said that some teachers either did not know how, or were unwilling, to adapt their approach to match students' diverse learning styles, leaving students frustrated and uncertain of how to succeed at school.

There was also strong consensus that teachers do not have the time necessary to build rapport with their students in order to have an understanding of what they need to succeed in the classroom.

These reflections lend further importance to Black Dog Institute's recent findings which indicated an Australian teacher workforce which is chronically overworked,⁹ leaving little time for teachers to meet the diverse needs of their students. Furthermore, recent data from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey indicated that only 38% of Australian teachers felt adequately prepared to employ diverse teaching methods to suit varied abilities and learning styles of students in their classrooms¹⁰.

These factors combined leave many teachers with little flexibility in the way they approach their teaching. Students felt that many of their classes were not interactive or engaging, which, according to them, are two important aspects of high-quality and effective class time. This rigid, one-size-fits-all approach leaves many students feeling lost or unsupported despite their best intentions to succeed at school, and stands in the way of them meeting their full potential.

Students at Congress also suggested that some schools and teachers have a narrow understanding of accessibility and inclusivity, and emphasised the need for schools to recognise that access and inclusion extended beyond individual lived experiences and must be intersectional. According to the students who shared those views at Congress, they often felt misunderstood and unsupported when teachers and other staff did not take the time to learn about their lived experience, backgrounds, or individual needs.

⁹ Black Dog Institute (2023)

¹⁰ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2018), 'Teaching and Learning International Survey 2018: Country Note – Australia', *OCED*, 19 January 2019.

Indeed, the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network notes that students from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds do have specific educational and wellbeing needs, and “commonly face more specific challenges related to ... settling in a new country, including learning a new language, navigating a new culture and social systems, building new peer relationships, negotiating grief and loss associated with separation from significant others, and an unfamiliar (and often very different) educational environment”¹¹.

Students also noted that the use of derogatory and pejorative language based on identities or backgrounds (such as terms like “gay” or weaponising the use of pronouns) was on the rise, and this kind of anti-social behaviour was taking a major toll on diverse groups of students including LGBTIQ+ students and students from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds, in ways which make them feel unsafe and othered.

While much data exists to support the claim that anti-social behaviour can prove to be deeply damaging to students¹², an ongoing focus on the perceived rise of bullying and discrimination in the post-pandemic context should be maintained in order to address a current lack of definitive data.

Students also reported that in circumstances where students do raise issues with teachers, they often felt their teachers did not understand or were not sensitive to those student's needs, which further drove feelings of isolation, misunderstanding and low self-esteem. According to a 2023 study, some teachers feel unprepared to deal with issues such as discrimination because of a perceived need to remain ‘neutral’ to any particular ideological positioning on these matters¹³.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Students want to see teachers and staff equipped with additional skills to recognise and respond to diverse learning needs and identify when particular students (including LGBTIQ+ students, students with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from migrant and refugee backgrounds) might be in need of additional support.
- Students want to be empowered to make more decisions when it comes to how they learn. Rather than feeling confined to a classroom or pre-defined approaches to work and assessments, students want the option to approach learning in their own way with the support of their teachers.
- Students and teachers need to be able to spend more time learning about each other, including in one-on-one settings, to achieve a greater mutual understanding of a student's learning style and to foster a positive relationship which students believe is critical to their long-term success and wellbeing in the classroom.
- Students want to see schools provided with additional resources, support, and advice to make the school environment a safe, inclusive and accessible place for all students, moving beyond the idea of ‘accepting’ or ‘dealing with’ diversity and inclusion to genuinely celebrating it. Initiatives like gender neutral bathrooms and extracurricular activities dedicated to cultural exchanges were provided as good examples of how to achieve this.
- Students want to see more done to address a rise in bullying and discrimination based on identity.

¹¹ Foundation House & Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (2020), ‘Education and students from refugee and migrant backgrounds: Briefing Paper’, *Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network*, November 2020.

¹² Berry, K (2018), ‘LGBT bullying in school: a troubling relational story’, *Communication Education*, vol. 67, no. 4, 2018, pp. 502-513.

¹³ Bartulovic, M, Kusevic, B, Siranovic, A (2023), ‘From neutrality to engagement: the modalities of understanding secondary teacher professionalism in dealing with LGBT issues’, *Multicultural Education Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2023, pp. 42-59.

Re-thinking the definitions of success at school

Students were asked how they perceive the pathways to achieving success at school, what stood in the way of them attaining a sense of achievement, satisfaction, or progress at school, and the impacts this had on them. They were also asked what they envisaged as effective alternatives to current approaches, and the benefits these alternatives might provide to students.

Consensus was that students are struggling to gain a sense of achievement and progress at school with such a strong emphasis placed on the importance of academic success. They felt that this narrow focus took a toll on their wellbeing and self-esteem. Students reflected on potential improvements to the modes of assessment employed in classrooms and the way in which success is discussed and perceived at school.

What we heard from students about this topic

Students shared that they were struggling to thrive when their school emphasised the importance of academic success as key determining factor that would lead to overall success in life. This insight served to further support the reflections of other students who made similar observations in the context of major drivers of negative feelings at school, and the impact of those feelings on their mental health.

Students also suggested that the focus on academic excellence, especially in the context of ATAR, served to create a competitive tension between students which fuelled a fear of failure and drove anxiety about the need to perform while also exacerbating tensions between students and teachers.

Existing research about high stakes testing serve to support students' reflections to this end. One major joint comparative study by the Whitlam Institute and the Foundation for Young Australians noted that high stakes testing regimes pose "serious concerns [for] student health and well-being" with a specific focus on the "stress, anxiety, pressure and fear experienced by students" who are amidst these testing regimes¹⁴.

New data also supports students' claims about the stress of their studies. A ReachOut survey focusing on study stress in 2022 found that around 50% of young people felt extremely or very stressed about study and exams, and 46% indicated that study stress was having a major impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

The same study also found that 55% of young people aged 16-26 were stressed by how they will compare with other students¹⁵, further supporting students' claims that highly competitive testing environments play into negative feelings at school.

Students also felt that the way in which ATAR 'scales' certain subjects was unfair and caused students to feel pushed away from the subjects they felt most interested in because in many cases they knew that doing so would not deliver the same academic outcomes (i.e. a high ATAR score).

Students said they felt disengaged from subjects which they felt compelled to study because of the scaling system rather than their personal interests, and are frustrated by the perceived need to make such decisions because of the narrow pathways to achieving success at school. Students added that these problems could go on to fuel a sense of broader resentment with school which in turn would drive disengagement in other subjects.

Part of this problem, according to students, was informed by the fact that many schools continue to have a narrow view of career success when students are told that a high ATAR score and subsequent

¹⁴ Polese, J, Dulfer, N, Turnbull, M (2012), 'The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families', *Whitlam Institute*, January 2012.

¹⁵ ReachOut (2022), 'Study stress impacting students' mental health, sleep and relationships according to new research by ReachOut', *ReachOut*, 9 October 2022.

university studies are the only way to achieve 'success' or their career aspirations. On the contrary, students felt confident that there were many pathways available to them which could support them in finding a successful career, but they felt that schools were sometimes not supportive of alternative post-school pathways including vocational education.

Meanwhile, students also discussed their dissatisfaction with being assessed solely by exams or tests. This sentiment was driven by two key underlying perspectives from students. Firstly, students felt that tests and exams were not always the most appropriate mode of assessing their academic achievement at school. Secondly, students felt that by taking a limited approach to assessments, students were left with limited means of accessing positive feedback and a sense of achievement at school, especially when they were struggling to achieve good academic results.

These concerns are reflected by The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, which agreed that employing "varied approaches to assessing student understanding" formed a critical component of achieving effective and representative formative assessment¹⁶ in the classroom. Meanwhile, this same research also notes the practice of teachers establishing personalised learning goals for students and fostering a classroom environment where feedback is exchanged and suggestions from students are implemented over time not only serves to improve learning, but also students' sense of motivation and self-esteem¹⁷.

The benefits of adopting a more personalised approach to assessing student achievements are drawn into further relief by a major study of 3,300 educational stakeholders including students and teachers, which found that assessments must be customised to "accommodate the ability, social, cultural and linguistic background of students" while also "address[ing] the personal impact of assessment practices on individual students"¹⁸ in order to achieve fairness and equity through classroom assessments.

These findings in turn support two more central focus areas of students at Congress who expressed that the concept of success at school should be measured by personal progress and achievement, in addition to test scores. Students noted, however, that they struggled to find that sense of progress or positive feedback when their test scores didn't match their own perception that they were making progress at school. Students noted that this lack of positive feedback had a negative impact on their motivation and sense of self-worth, and felt that assessments which better suited their learning style would be beneficial.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Students want to see teachers tailor assessments to their needs, and to have their results reflect their progress at school more so than their test scores.
- Students want more varied and accessible means of achieving a sense of progress and positive feedback from school, aside from their test scores, to address a sense of low motivation and self-esteem when it comes to achieving success at school.
- Students want more information prior to senior secondary about what to expect from VCE and how to manage the stress that comes with it, including time management and wellbeing strategies.
- Students want to work with schools and teachers to find new ways to celebrate a more diverse range of career pathways and outcomes.

¹⁶ Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) (2008), 'Assessment for Learning: Formative Assessment', *OECD/CERI International Conference: 'Learning in the 21st Century: Research, Innovation and Policy'*, 2008.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Scott, S, Webber, C. F, Lupart, J. L, Aitken, N, Scott, D (2012), 'Fair and equitable assessment practices for all students', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2012, pp. 52-70.

Securing greater investments for students, teachers, and schools

Students were asked to consider the aspects of their education experience which seemed to be worse off because of a lack of support, factoring in various potential causes such as a lack of financial investment or free time of teachers or staff. Students were also asked to consider circumstances where they had noticed a difference in recent times when it came to the opportunities which were available to them, or things they felt they needed more of. Students were asked to consider the most important or urgent areas where additional investment or resources were needed to improve experiences and outcomes for students.

The reflections students offered as part of this discussion strongly reiterate the need for additional investment and resources in key areas of the education system such as teachers and teacher training, mental health and wellbeing support, and opportunities for students to forge positive experiences at school.

What we heard from students about this topic

It was clear among students that they were feeling the various impacts of the teacher workforce shortage. Reflecting similar conversations on other themes for the day (e.g. mental health and wellbeing) students noted that teachers seemed stressed and overworked, and that this had a negative impact on students' own wellbeing. Furthermore, students agreed that this has resulted in teachers being unable to take the necessary time to cover learning content and ensure all students have understood the information.

Students said that the increasing reliance on casual relief teachers (CRTs) was causing a sense of disruption for students by making it more difficult to establish and maintain effective relationships with their teachers. They added that this posed an especially difficult problem for students undertaking specialised studies because CRTs often did not possess the expertise needed for students to make progress in specialised subjects.

Students had also noticed that some new teachers appeared to be struggling, especially with advanced subject materials like specialised mathematics. They felt that teachers needed additional support in the early years of teaching or as part of their pre-service training to help them build their confidence in the classroom and ensure they were adequately prepared to engage with a classroom of students with diverse needs and learning styles.

Students reiterated the need for additional school-based mental health and wellbeing support services, explaining that the level of additional support available to students who need it was insufficient in some circumstances.

Meanwhile, regional students at Congress felt that they were underserved when it came to being provided with opportunities to engage in additional or specialised studies like STEM courses offered through Tech Schools, as compared with their metropolitan peers.

Students have also noted that opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities like camps and excursions were disappearing, which presents a major problem because those activities provide them with valuable opportunities to forge positive experiences at school and develop stronger and more positive relationships with their peers and teachers.

Indeed, a marked reduction in experiential learning opportunities has been noted in recent commentary, which cited budget constraints and the rising costs of delivering these programs¹⁹ as two key factors in schools' decisions to stop offering such opportunities to students.

Students also expressed the need for schools to be inviting spaces which are fit-for-purpose and conducive to learning and collaborating but were concerned that tired school infrastructure meant that students weren't provided with the kinds of inviting and positive environments most conducive to good outcomes and positive experiences while at school.

How students envisioned solutions and improvements

- Students want teachers to have more time available to dedicate to providing students with the additional support they need, including by spending more time one-on-one with students, to make them best placed to provide high-quality education to students without being overwhelmed by their responsibilities.
- Students want to see the size of classes reduced to help students and teachers build positive relationships and enable teachers to tailor their approach in more effective, targeted ways.
- Students believe that teachers should be more highly valued, and that an effort needs to be made to increase the quality of their education and pre-teacher training, so that teachers feel valued and prepared to cater for students with diverse and unique needs.
- Students want more support to be made available to new teachers who need it, in order to help deliver complex course materials and to boost their confidence in the classroom.
- Students want to see more extracurricular opportunities delivered, enhancing students' learning experience at school.
- Students want to play a more active role in determining how school infrastructure funding is to ensure that schools are modern, inviting, and engaging places to learn because a positive learning environment is key to keeping students motivated and engaged.
- Students also want to be more involved in determining how mental health and wellbeing services are chosen and delivered in their schools, ensuring that the services provided to students meet their needs, and that the facilities which those support services utilise are fit-for-purpose and meet the needs of students.
- Students want to feel more supported in the post-pandemic context because they believe that learning styles and learning needs have both changed because of the pandemic, and greater investments are needed to address this.

¹⁹ Hefferman, M, Carey, A (2022), 'Principals warn camps, concerts and excursions will be cut because of budget pressures', *The Age*, 28 November 2023.

Student-led reform priorities which strive for a better, stronger, and more equitable education system for all students

Based on the findings from the student-led conversations that took place at Congress, it is clear that students envision large-scale solutions to the multi-faceted challenges which currently stand in the way of them meeting their full potential at school. Evidently, several key issues emerged throughout students' conversations across multiple areas, indicating the need for systemic improvements to achieve the scale of impact required to improve their education experiences in a meaningful and sustainable way.

The input from students has enabled VicSRC to have a deeper understanding of the nature of the challenges students face, along with clear direction on what effective and practical solutions look like. This allows VicSRC to develop a series of reform priorities which will guide our strategic focus and will go on to provide VicSRC's Student Executive Advisory Committee members with the advice they need to set our objectives as part of our Advocacy Platform next year.

1. Further expansions to mental health and wellbeing support services and resources in schools to ensure every student who needs support gets it.

Despite good progress made so far to equip schools with the resources they need to support students with their mental health and wellbeing, students are finding that the demand for those services is outstripping supply. We must ensure schools have access to, and are utilising, an appropriate amount of support for students' wellbeing.

2. Boost the teacher workforce and the quality of their training so teachers have the time to learn about their students' needs, and the skills to manage those needs in the classroom.

Students told us that if teachers had more time to spend with them in meaningful ways, it would set them on a path toward improved rapport, greater achievements and success, and allow more time for teachers to cater to students' needs in the classroom, addressing growing and multi-faceted problems stemming from the teacher shortage.

3. Work with the government and schools to find new ways of measuring a student's success by considering their personal development and progress throughout their education journey, and providing students with more opportunities to demonstrate their academic progress.

Students are ready and willing to work hard to achieve success at school, but they don't think that tests and exams are always the best way to achieve this. Students want to see projects and other competency-based assessments included in the mix of assessments at schools to provide more students with assessments to match their strengths.

4. Secure greater investments in fun, positive, and inclusive experiences at schools like camps and excursions and provide students with a greater voice in determining how best to find new ways to love learning.

Students feel like they're increasingly missing out on opportunities to forge positive experiences and relationships at school. Students look forward to activities like camps and excursions, which provide meaningful ways to extend their learning in a new environment. At the same time, we need a strong focus on ensuring that all students feel fully welcomed and supported at school. Providing them with a stronger voice in finding the way forward will be essential.

What comes next

Equipped with findings, data, and recommendations from Congress, VicSRC's Student Executive Advisory Committee members, with the support of staff, will work together to identify the most effective and high-impact ways to turn these reform priorities into a reality by developing strategic and targeted objectives which aim to address students' concerns and ensure that student voice is maintained as an essential component of ongoing reform work. This will go on to form VicSRC's updated Advocacy Platform.

It is our priority to ensure that Victorian students remain at the heart of this reform work. That is why this document exists not as a conclusion to Congress, but as the beginning of our advocacy to achieve better outcomes and more positive experiences for all Victorian students.