VicSRC

2026 MELBOURNE CONGRESS REPORT

20

Twenty years of student voice.

An evolving picture of education.

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"Be truthful. Actually keep your promise."

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"ATAR is a game, not a measure of how successful you are at school."

STUDENT INSIGHT

Being heard is not the same as having influence.

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INTRODUCTION

About this report

For twenty years, Victorian students have come together through Congress to share their experiences of education and identify what needs to change. In 2026, students continued to raise concerns about wellbeing, inclusion, opportunity, success and having a meaningful say. Their contributions also reveal how these issues are experienced today: through school rules, relationships, resources and decisions that shape everyday life.

This report brings those experiences together. It explores what students are telling us, where their concerns intersect, and what their ideas reveal about the conditions needed for a more responsive and equitable education system. It is an evidence resource for students, schools and decision-makers, grounded in contributions from the 2026 Melbourne Congress.

READING THE EVIDENCE

In students' words

Exact wording from Congress delegates.

Student insight

A restatement of what students said, not a direct quote.

What this tells us

VicSRC's reading of patterns and connections across students' contributions.

VicSRC prepares the analysis; students' experiences remain the starting point.

What this report can and cannot tell you. Congress reflects the experiences of the students who took part. It is not a survey of all Victorian students, and individual accounts are not independently verified findings about schools. We have not invented or tidied up student voices, and where we compare with earlier Congresses, we describe shifts in emphasis, not changes in how common an issue is.

Five things students told us in 2026

1 **Wellbeing depends on everyday relationships and accessible support.**

Students connect pressure, attendance and help-seeking with the trust, time and resources available throughout the school day.

2 **Being heard is not the same as having influence.**

Students want to see what happens to their ideas, and why.

3 **Where you live shapes what you can learn.**

Students raised school zoning and location, as well as costs, staffing and resources, as constraints on access to opportunities.

4 **Inclusion is practical.**

Physical access, uniforms, equipment, discrimination and staff responses all affect whether students can participate fully.

5 **Success is more than a score.**

Students question the weight placed on ATAR and ask for practical assessment, clearer guidance and pathways that recognise different strengths.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

An opportunity or support can exist on paper without being accessible, responsive or influential in practice. Students want to know not only what schools provide, but whether it works for them.

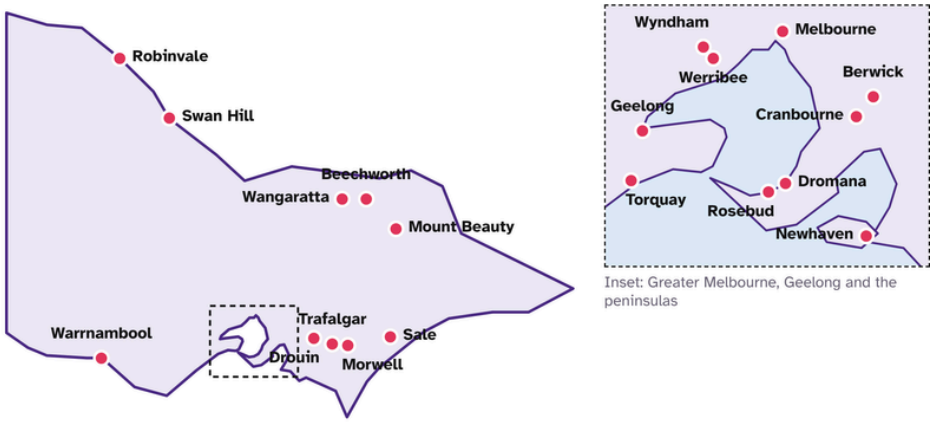
Who was in the room

117 students

30 schools

7–12 year levels

Where students came from



Inset: Greater Melbourne, Geelong and the peninsulas

Every dot is a student



Year 7 **6%** · Year 8 **15%**
Year 9 **21%** · Year 10 **18%**
Year 11 **25%** · Year 12 **13%**
Not stated **2%**

Schools by sector



75% Government · **15.6%** Catholic
6.3% Independent · **3.1%** TAFE institutes

Students by gender



61% Woman · **35%** Man · **2%** Non-binary
1% Genderfluid · **1%** Prefer not to say

OUR METHOD

How students' experiences became this report

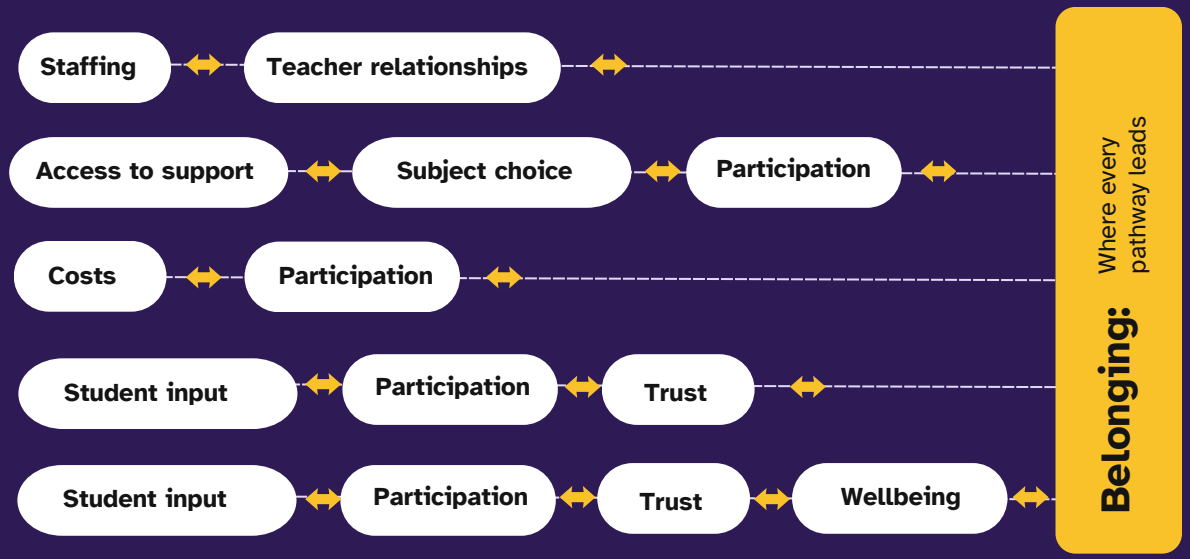
1. **Students arrive**
   Students from across Victoria come together at Congress.
2. **Action Teams**
   Students work in teams on each priority, recording challenges, causes, impacts and ideas on paper.
3. **Notes are captured**
   Student facilitators capture conversations and discussions and share findings with peers and stakeholders at the end of Congress.
4. **Making sense of it**
   VicSRC collates what students said, looks for connections and compares them with previous Congress findings.
5. **Student Executive Review**
   VicSRC's Student Executive Advisory Committee reviews drafts to ensure interpretations reflect students' contributions and perspectives.
6. **Into decision-making**
   Findings inform VicSRC's Policy Platform and our work with government and education leaders.

School is not experienced one issue at a time

Students do not experience their school lives in separate policy categories. A teacher shortage can limit subject choice and the trusted relationships students rely on. The cost of an excursion can affect participation and belonging. Assessment can shape wellbeing as well as future options. Student voice matters when it can influence the rules and decisions behind these experiences.

Considered together, the five priorities point to interconnected conditions, not isolated problems.

HOW STUDENTS' CONCERNS CONNECT



How to read this: Each row is a chain of effects students described. A condition at school, such as staffing or costs, shapes students' everyday experience and every chain ends in whether students feel they belong.

An issue students raised — A connection they drew — Where it leads

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"There is an SRC but teachers make final decision."

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"Having to pay for your own excursions."

STUDENT INSIGHT

Students want to see where their ideas go, what changes and why something cannot change.

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"More subject opportunities for all kids."

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"Students need emotional bonds and trust first."

Support needs to be part of everyday school life

Wellbeing is shaped by the school day: the pressure students carry, the adults they trust and whether help is available when they need it.

WHAT STUDENTS ARE EXPERIENCING

Students talk about academic pressure, the jump into VCE, compulsory attendance, stigma and how hard it can be to ask for help. Trusted teachers and friendships make support possible. When staff change or services are hard to reach, support becomes harder to find.

Pressure shows up in attendance, motivation, confidence and relationships.

WHAT'S SHAPING IT

Students point to gaps in wellbeing staffing, in access to psychologists and counselling, in regional services, and in the time adults have to build trust. They recognised that support depends on adequate resourcing, but few could describe wellbeing support that had worked well for them. Students could more readily name what is missing than what good support looks like, which is itself a useful signal. In their accounts, wellbeing cannot be separated from how teaching, assessment, attendance and relationships work.

WHAT STUDENTS WANT TO CHANGE

- Wellbeing staff students can reach, and private spaces to talk
- Buddy systems and clubs that build connection
- Education for staff and carers
- Clear pathways to support
- A student say in wellbeing resources

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"Students need emotional bonds and trust first."

STUDENT INSIGHT

Students want schools to build the relationships and conditions that protect wellbeing, not only respond when a student reaches crisis.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

Wellbeing provision is not only a question of whether a service exists. Students' accounts point to the accessibility of that service, the time adults have to build relationships and the school practices that can increase pressure. These are useful tests for policy and school-level implementation.

Continuing: pressure, trust and access to support remain central.

Shifting in 2026: students link support more directly to daily school structures and relationships.

Signal for decision-makers: for students, wellbeing is experienced through relationships and routines as much as through services. Whether students know who to go to, and trust them, is a useful test of whether support is working.

Being heard is not the same as having influence

Students identified a gap between being invited to contribute and seeing their contributions affect decisions. They want an explanation when an idea is accepted, changed or cannot proceed.

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"There is an SRC but teachers make final decision."

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"Be truthful. Actually keep your promise."

WHAT STUDENTS ARE EXPERIENCING

Students describe SRCs and consultation processes where their input doesn't always lead to action. Some say teachers make the final decision after students have contirbuted and that promises are not kept. Others say they are expected to be grateful simply for being included, rather than being treated as genuine partners in the process.

WHAT'S SHAPING IT

Having a student representative body does not, by itself, establish meaningful influence. Students pointed to decision-making authority, reciprocal respect and feedback on outcomes as the missing parts of participation. These experiences make follow-through a practical measure of whether student voice is working.

WHAT STUDENTS WANT TO CHANGE

- Student-led spaces and activities
- A real role in school rules, learning and subject choices
- Clear feedback on what was decided and why

WHAT THIS TELLS US

Meaningful participation requires more than consultation opportunities. The decision-making process needs to be visible, students need to understand the limits of their influence, and schools need to report back on what happened to their ideas.

STUDENT INSIGHT

Students want to see where their ideas go, what changes and why something cannot change.

Continuing: access to meaningful participation remains a concern.

Shifting in 2026: students put more weight on visible follow-through and respect that goes both ways.

Signal for decision-makers: closing the loop is what makes participation credible. This applies to schools and equally to government consultation with young people.

An opportunity is only fair when students can use it

Students connected their opportunities with family costs, the resources of individual schools and the choices permitted by geography.

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"Having to pay for your own excursions."

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"More subject opportunities for all kids."

WHAT STUDENTS ARE EXPERIENCING

Students describe camps cancelled for lack of funds, paying for their own excursions, under-resourced creative subjects, too few specialist teachers, concerns about toilets and facilities, and big differences in what schools can offer.

WHAT'S SHAPING IT

Students raised zoning as a barrier to attending schools, alongside location, travel, uneven subject availability and the cost of participating in school life. They also questioned perceived differences in funding and how resources are allocated.

A QUESTION TO EXAMINE: ZONING

These are student-reported experiences. The notes do not show how particular enrolment zones operate or how widespread these barriers are, and students did not propose a specific zoning reform.

WHAT STUDENTS WANT TO CHANGE

- Fairer, needs-based school funding
- Affordable excursions and camps
- More specialist teachers
- Wider subject choice, including creative subjects
- Opportunities wherever students live

STUDENT INSIGHT

Students want their opportunities to depend less on what their families can pay or what their schools choose to provide.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

Equity is experienced through practical choices: which school students can attend, which subjects are offered, and whether participation is affordable.

Zoning deserves further inquiry alongside funding, travel and school-level provision, without assuming a single cause or solution.

Continuing: costs, staffing and resources shape opportunity.

Shifting in 2026: students add zoning, location and access to schools, subjects and excursions as practical limits on choice.

Signal for decision-makers: where students live has long shaped their access to education, particularly for regional and rural students. In 2026, Melbourne students added zoning, showing that location can limit choice in metropolitan areas too. Zoning is a signal worth further examination.

06 INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION

Support should fit students, not the other way around

Inclusion is made real or undermined by everyday access, school practices, learning support and how students are treated.

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"We don't want equality, we want equity."

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"Making a conscious effort in respecting students' identity."

WHAT STUDENTS ARE EXPERIENCING

Students describe physical barriers such as few ramps and lifts and heavy doors, school laptops being taken away, and funding limits. They describe disabled students being compared with non-disabled peers, and students who learn differently being labelled "bad students".

They also describe teacher favouritism, racism, sexism, homophobia, gendered uniform rules, and few chances to celebrate or express their cultural identities.

WHAT'S SHAPING IT

Students connect inclusion to everyday rules, school buildings, what teachers know and believe, and whether affected students are part of decisions. They describe long or difficult paths to getting help, poor support spaces, teacher shortages, and leadership roles that feel predetermined or out of reach. Some raised being excluded from sport or classes, and gender stereotypes about who takes which subjects.

WHAT THIS TELLS US Students' examples show that accessibility and belonging depend on physical environments, staff practice, school rules and responses to discrimination. Individual adjustments matter but cannot substitute for inclusive everyday systems.

WHAT STUDENTS WANT TO CHANGE

- Accessible buildings and support spaces
- Teaching that understands disability
- Asking students and minority groups before funding and policy decisions
- A statewide student voice framework
- Simpler, more inclusive uniform options
- More cultural celebrations and student-led cultural groups
- Real responses to discrimination

On uniforms, some students want no uniforms; others want flexible alternatives.

STUDENT INSIGHT

Students want help that arrives when they need it and lets them take part fully, without being singled out or left out.

Continuing: responsive support and belonging remain central.

Shifting in 2026: students name specific physical barriers, gendered uniform rules, discrimination and cultural representation alongside disability support.

Signal for decision-makers: students define inclusion more broadly than individual adjustments. Physical access, school rules and staff attitudes all shape whether a student can participate.

07 DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS

There is more than one way to do well at school

Students question whether a single academic measure can capture achievement, effort, interests and the futures they want to pursue.

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"ATAR is a game, not a measure of how successful you are at school."

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"Not defining success as a letter on a piece of paper."

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"More assessed physical tasks rather than on paper."

IN STUDENTS' WORDS

"Everyone can access their chosen course."

WHAT STUDENTS ARE EXPERIENCING

Students want teachers to help them learn, not just lift their marks. They describe choices limited by funding, not enough careers information, a narrow focus on VCE and ATAR, and stigma around creative and alternative pathways.

WHAT'S SHAPING IT

Students link success to how they are assessed, the status given to different pathways, the support teachers can give, and the time they have to choose. Several connect success to wellbeing, belonging and purpose, not only test scores.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

Assessment, pathway advice and subject availability are connected. Students' ideas invite decision-makers to examine whether the ways achievement is recognised and pathways are resourced leave enough room for different strengths and aspirations.

WHAT STUDENTS WANT TO CHANGE

- Earlier careers and prerequisite information
- Time to explore pathways
- Wider access to VET and creative subjects
- Practical, varied assessments
- Supportive, qualified teachers
- Pathways students enjoy

Complementary ideas, not one agreed alternative to current assessment.

STUDENT INSIGHT

Students want their strengths, ambitions and future choices to count, even when they do not fit a single academic pathway.

Continuing:
Students challenge narrow academic definitions of success.

Shifting in 2026:
Students explicitly question ATAR and propose practical assessment, earlier guidance and creative or vocational options.

Signal for decision-makers: students' sense of success is closely tied to how they are assessed and whether every pathway is respected. Pathway stigma is part of how students experience school, not only a careers issue.

What is continuing and what is shifting

Read alongside the 2025 Melbourne Congress Snapshot and the 2026 Regional Congress Report, this year's contributions show enduring concerns and distinctive details. The comparison describes differences in emphasis across these sources, not changes in prevalence. Zoning is a specifically recorded concern in the 2026 Melbourne material; it should not be described as a newly emerging statewide trend.

PRIORITY	CONTINUING		SHIFTING IN 2026 MELBOURNE
Mental health and wellbeing	Pressure, trust and access to support remain central.	→	Students link support more directly to daily school structures and relationships.
Student voice	Access to meaningful participation remains a concern.	→	More weight on visible follow-through and respect that goes both ways.
Equitable access	Costs, staffing and resources shape opportunity.	→	Students add zoning, location and access to particular schools, subjects and excursions as practical limits on choice.
Inclusion	Responsive support and belonging remain central.	→	Students name specific physical barriers, gendered uniform rules, discrimination and cultural representation alongside disability support.
Definitions of success	Students challenge narrow academic definitions.	→	Students explicitly question ATAR and propose practical assessment, earlier guidance and creative or vocational options.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

Twenty years of Congress gives students a consistent, student-run way to describe their education. That continuity lets us notice shifts in emphasis without claiming trend data.

Four conditions decide whether an opportunity is real

Across the five priorities, students repeatedly identified the same conditions: the resources available, the rules governing access, the relationships that make support possible, and the decisions students can influence. These conditions interact, so a gap in one can undo progress in another.

1
Resources
shape what a school can offer.

2
Rules and practices
shape who can use it.

3
Relationships
shape whether students feel supported and included.

4
Decision-making
shapes whether students can influence how it works.

AN ILLUSTRATION RUNNING THROUGH ALL FOUR

A preferred subject is not offered at the student's school. → Their pathway choices narrow to what is available. → Pressure grows to succeed in the subjects that are left. → There is little chance to question the decision.

An interpretation of connections across contributions, not the story of one individual student.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

Limited subject availability can narrow pathway choices; costs can turn a nominal opportunity into one some students cannot take up; and consultation without feedback can weaken trust. Together, the four conditions give decision-makers a practical lens for reading all five priorities.

The changes students want to see

Raised by students and grouped for readability. Not a single agreed package of reforms or formal VicSRC recommendations. Where a concern was raised without a specific solution, including zoning, it is identified as an issue for further examination.

Students' exact words **Students' ideas, summarised**

Support students can trust

Wellbeing

- Wellbeing staff students can reach, and private spaces to talk
- Buddy systems and clubs that build connection
- Education for staff and parents
- A student say in wellbeing resources

A real say, and a reply

Student voice

- **"Be truthful. Actually keep your promise."**
- Student-led spaces and activities
- A real role in school rules, learning and subject choices
- Clear feedback on what was decided and why

Opportunity without hidden costs

Equitable access

- **"More subject opportunities for all kids."**
- Affordable excursions and camps
- Fairer, needs-based funding and more specialist teachers
- For further examination: zoning and school location

Schools built for everyone

Inclusion

- Accessible buildings and support spaces
- Teaching that understands disability
- Simpler, inclusive uniform options
- Cultural celebrations, student-led cultural groups and real responses to discrimination

Every pathway respected

Definitions of success

- **"Everyone can access their chosen course."**
- **"More assessed physical tasks rather than on paper."**
- Earlier careers and prerequisite information
- Wider access to VET and creative subjects

Students want an education system that works in practice, not only in principle.

- Support they can trust
- Opportunities they can access
- Environments where they belong
- Pathways that recognise different strengths
- A meaningful role in decisions that affect them

Students' contributions show how closely these expectations are connected. A school cannot be fully inclusive if students cannot access its opportunities. Student voice cannot be meaningful if contributions disappear without explanation. And success cannot be understood through academic achievement alone when students' wellbeing, circumstances and ambitions are so varied.

For twenty years, Congress has created space for Victorian students to describe education on their own terms. The recurring concerns deserve attention, as do the practical details students are now identifying about the ways schools operate. These contributions give decision-makers evidence to examine how policies and resources are experienced by students, and where change is needed.

Student perspectives are not an optional addition to education policy. They are essential evidence about how the system is experienced by the people it exists to serve.

WHERE THIS EVIDENCE GOES

1 Listen	2 Make sense	3 Carry	4 Report back
Students set the agenda at Congress.	Student words and analysis kept separate.	Into the Policy Platform and work with decision-makers.	We report back to students on how their evidence was used.

Thank you

Congress happens because organisations across Victoria choose to back student voice.

Our thanks to every organisation on the facing page, and to the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) for supporting this year's Congress.

We also thank The Ross Trust, a major supporter of our Regional Congress events. What students shared at those events was vital to this report, giving us a statewide picture to read the Melbourne findings against.

117 students
30 schools
One Congress

Primary supporter

Congress is made possible through the ongoing support of the Victorian Department of Education.

2026 Melbourne Congress sponsors

Sponsored ticket partners

In-kind support

For generously providing their expertise to help us evaluate Congress and better understand the impact the experience has for students.

Venue partner

For offering us an amazing space to bring students together.