

# VICSRC POLICY PLATFORM

A student-driven vision of collaborative progress for Victoria's education system.

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body and leading advocate representing school-aged students in Victoria. We were created by students to elevate student voices, foster leadership, and drive systemic change for a more relevant, inclusive, and equitable education system in Victoria. Our vision is an education system where all students are empowered to shape their learning experiences and influence decision-making at all levels.

VicSRC wishes to acknowledge the more than 300 Victorian students who participated in consultations delivered by VicSRC in 2023. Their contributions provided the foundation of this platform's focus and objectives. We also acknowledge the many organisations who have provided guidance, support, and who have developed other materials which have further informed the contents of this document.



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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# STUDENT EXECUTIVE ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOREWORD

The 2024 VicSRC Student Executive Advisory Committee is proud to present the VicSRC Policy Platform, which centres the priorities and aspirations of the education system's most important stakeholders: the students.

VicSRC is committed to achieving genuine student voice at all levels of the education system.

To achieve this, our Policy Platform drew from the voices of more than 250 students through VicSRC engagements, and countless others who have contributed to other important work across the education sector to paint a clear picture of what students themselves see as the most urgent priorities for education reform.

Despite the hurdles of being a student, and the barriers they face to having their voices heard, they each found ways to play a part in the development of this Policy Platform.

We hope that this Platform will not only send a clear message to education policymakers about the need and value of student voice, but that it will empower students to help lead those changes themselves.

As the peak body for school-aged students in Victoria, VicSRC has continuously worked to establish and maintain student voice as an essential driver of education reform. The voices of students deserve the utmost respect, as they are the only stakeholders with current lived experience of the education system and its efforts in setting young people up to succeed in the modern world.

The Policy Platform is a culmination of VicSRC's efforts over many years to empower, learn from, and provide as many students as possible with the opportunity to have their voices heard at the highest levels of decision making in the Victorian education system. This Policy Platform represents a greater effort from VicSRC to ensure that we are connecting with a wide range of students in an ongoing capacity, so that previously underrepresented students can clearly see their voices and insights reflected in VicSRC's Policy Platform and ongoing advocacy.

This Policy Platform outlines 22 recommendations that span across five key priority areas identified by students. These recommendations provide achievable and realistic strategies to improve the education system to better serve students. Recommendations include new methods to re-define how students are taught and assessed, ensuring students are adequately prepared for the future whilst building a more holistic understanding of the skills and attributes important to develop through to adulthood.

The Policy Platform also puts forward recommendations which aid in the development and growth of mental health support within schools, securing more funding and resources to ensure education is enriching for students, and providing schools with the additional resources they require to meet the diverse needs of students. Of course, central to all of these efforts is the importance of embedding student voice practices across all areas of the education system, which is highlighted throughout the Policy Platform.

Alongside the Policy Platform, VicSRC's annual flagship event, Congress, will continue to act as a key opportunity for VicSRC to receive authentic information about the most relevant, urgent and important issues to students. VicSRC will also continue to engage regularly and broadly with all students from across the state, to ensure they are provided with equal opportunities to have their voices heard on the issues that matter most to them.

This Policy Platform is a living document, designed to bring to light current and emergent issues facing Victoria's students. VicSRC believes that only students know best what they need to succeed in school and life, and our mission is to ensure they are provided with as many opportunities as possible to share their expertise and help re-shape the system that has been built for them.

The determination of students to stand up and express their views about the education system is remarkable. We want to personally thank all Victorian students for continuing to fight and push for positive

change and admire the wealth of knowledge each student has. Without experiences being shared, student voice as a concept cannot grow. To be able to talk to adults in positions of power about both negative and positive perspectives of the education system requires an immense amount of strength. Thank you to all students for fighting for the best education system possible.

We also thank our partners and friends throughout the education system who, in different ways, made contributions to this platform and we cannot wait to see what we can achieve with it.

The 2024 Student Executive Advisory Committee is thrilled to present this Policy Platform, and we call on all policymakers, educators, students and stakeholders to utilise this platform to understand the experiences and perspectives of students more deeply, to help build an education system that is responsive to the needs of its intended recipients, students.

We look forward to a future where student voice is at the heart of every element of the education system, and the education system is designed with the express needs of its students at the heart of its model.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Billy Lister', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Billy Lister

Co-Chair, 2024 Student Executive Advisory Committee

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

VicSRC's 2024 Policy Platform presents a series of practical and important steps needed to achieve positive, systemic reform for Victoria's education system that is directly informed by the voices of its students.

Its development is a testament to the importance of student voice – the practice of genuine collaboration and co-design between students and adults in an effort to find and achieve solutions to difficult problems.

In centring the voices of students when developing solutions to big issues in education, we not only do a better job of identifying the root causes of the issues which stand in the way of students' engagement, achievements, and wellbeing, but we also empower them to be active agents in developing the solutions.

VicSRC's work to develop this platform began with 2023 Congress, our annual, student-led event which brings together secondary school students from across the state to identify what they see as the biggest issues facing Victorian students. Conversations and workshops at Congress are led by students, including members of VicSRC's Student Executive Advisory Committee.

At Congress, students identified five key areas for reform which they saw as the priorities to address through innovative policy solutions. These were:

1. Mental health and wellbeing,
2. Inclusive and accessible education,
3. How schools define and measure success,
4. Equitable access to quality education experiences, and
5. Investment in student voice practice across all levels of the education system.

Students worked together to share their perspectives on these issues – why they mattered to them, how they most impacted them, and what they saw as the most effective and student-centric solutions. These insights were gathered and presented by VicSRC in the 2023 Congress Report, released in November of 2023.

VicSRC then worked with its Student Executive Advisory Committee to refine the scope and direction of this platform. This platform also draws on recent contributions to the education policy and reform space made by a broad range of key stakeholders which engage in more targeted work with specific cohorts of Victorian students who are often underrepresented when it comes to students' perspectives on education reform.

Through the development of this platform, we were guided by these contributions in recognition of the relationships and expertise of these organisations and the communities they represent. Whilst VicSRC aims to engage with a diverse and broad group of students from across Victoria, we believe in the importance of working in partnership with other community stakeholders in order to share knowledge and work together to effect change.

This platform is a statement of VicSRC's vision for systemic reform in Victoria's education system which puts the voices and priorities of all students at the centre.

It includes a series of recommendations for each of our focus areas which, if implemented, will not only elevate the outcomes and wellbeing of all Victorian students, but will also demonstrate how student voice is one of the most effective forces for positive change in Victoria's education system.

There is no doubt that the task of providing Victorian students with a high-quality, inclusive, and responsive education system has never been more challenging than it is right now.

The mental health and wellbeing of students features rightly as this platform's first priority, reflecting the longstanding calls from students to improve the effectiveness and availability of school-based mental health and wellbeing support services.

This platform presents practical steps government can take to achieve students' vision of effective, available, and place-based mental health and wellbeing support for every Victorian student, to ensure they receive support when they need it, improving their wellbeing and ultimately their engagement in learning.

Meanwhile, students have made clear their urgent desire to see classrooms and schools be inclusive and accessible settings which provide for all students' needs. In listening to students about these issues, it is clear that the action needed to achieve a truly inclusive environment for all students is one of the defining challenges of this era in education.

To this end, VicSRC has firstly recognised the need to equip teachers with extra tools that see students with diverse learning needs properly catered for in the classroom. Meanwhile, we have underscored the need to boost efforts to urgently solve the teacher shortage crisis, noting that teachers are now so overextended that not only does the quality of engagement suffer, but so does the mental health and wellbeing of teachers.

Meanwhile, we also acknowledge the substantial investments already made by the Victorian Government to deliver outcomes for students with disability, and are calling for these changes to be properly assessed to ensure they're meeting the needs of students. In making this recommendation, we recognise the importance of ensuring current initiatives are working as intended, before we look to new initiatives.

In addition, we make recommendations which aim to boost cultural safety and responsiveness in classrooms and school communities to alleviate challenges disproportionately faced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, and ensure schools are safe and inclusive environments.

This platform also takes a close look at why so many students are still struggling to feel fully supported by their schools to pursue non-traditional post-school pathways, and the lack of recognition students feel is attributed to their strengths or leveraged to help them achieve their goals.

When students find themselves here, it not only reduces their motivation, but it erodes their self-esteem and fuels feelings of isolation and uncertainty about their future.

For these reasons, VicSRC believes that it is time to look seriously at what success at school means by re-evaluating our approach to assessment and delivering on reforms to senior secondary credentials in Victoria. Meanwhile, we're seeking meaningful additional support and reform to ensure that schools do the work to elevate vocational and applied learning pathways so we can begin to break down the longstanding barriers of stigma and misinformation which prevent so many students from pursuing their goals.

Finally, VicSRC firmly recognises that none of these reforms will ever properly deliver for students unless every student receives the full investment from government that they so urgently deserve.

Australia adopted the Gonski school funding benchmark more than a decade ago, and we're still not there. Meaningful collaboration between the state and federal governments to solve this issue is long overdue.

This is why VicSRC is also calling for the state and federal governments to deliver 100% of funding for every Victorian school according to the Schooling Resource Standard, and to make additional investments in high-quality experiential programs and services to make school a positive experience for all students.

The recommendations are presented in full on the following pages. They outline practical steps that the government should take to respond to these needs and strengthen both learning and engagement outcomes for every student.

These recommendations also recognise that collaboration, transparency, and accountability are the building-blocks of student-centric reform in Victorian education. We hope that these recommendations can provide the basis for further collaborative change.

Finally, and most importantly, this platform recognises that student voice must be at the centre of all reform efforts, recognising the expertise of Victorian students, who are best placed to provide valuable insights and

advice to improving education based on their experiences of the education system which has been designed to support them.

VicSRC greatly looks forward to continuing working together with students, government, teachers, parents, school communities, and other education stakeholders to deliver on this vision for a modern and robust education system for every Victorian student.

## Summary of Recommendations

### Student Voice

**Recommendation 1:** VicSRC recommends the Victorian Government commit to boosting investment in student voice practice in Victoria's education system by:

- a) Ensuring Department of Education officials are provided with high quality training on student voice practice, and are equipped with the skills and resources they need to implement genuine student voice practice in all areas of education policymaking.
- b) Providing schools with financial support and guidance to implement student voice practice within their school communities.
- c) Taking steps to ensure that every Victorian government school is fulfilling their obligation to have students represented on their school governance councils and that school governance councils adopt genuine student voice practices to inform collaborative decision-making with student representatives.

### Mental Health and Wellbeing

**Recommendation 2:** Support schools to embed genuine student voice practice when planning and implementing school-based mental health and wellbeing initiatives, including by:

- a) Actively supporting schools to involve students in relevant decision-making processes.
- b) Requiring schools to conduct feedback and evaluation processes of the mental health and wellbeing services it provides, to ascertain their effectiveness and provide guidance for continual improvement.
- c) Mandating that schools receive the endorsement of students (e.g. via student representative councils) when making decisions regarding school-based mental health and wellbeing supports.

**Recommendation 3:** Ensure that students act as collaborators when planning and implementing improvements to the ways in which government and schools communicate with students about mental health and wellbeing support services and initiatives.

**Recommendation 4:** Commit to full availability of appropriate care with at least one full-time psychologist or mental health practitioner for every 500 students. Make available the current practitioner-to-student ratio to enable the tracking of progress towards this goal.

**Recommendation 5:** Expand the Mental Health in Primary Schools initiative to include all Victorian secondary schools.

## Accessible and Inclusive Education

**Recommendation 6:** Develop a comprehensive training framework to equip all teachers with additional skills to recognise and respond to diverse learning needs, including improved skills in identifying when students might be in need of additional support.

**Recommendation 7:** Invest in improved student voice processes to empower students to engage in decisions regarding how they learn. This is particularly important for students with disability, students who are experiencing mental ill-health, students with English as a second or third language, and students who have disrupted education and experiences of trauma. Supporting students and teachings to approach curriculum development in a collaborative way will improve engagement of students and overall learning outcomes.

**Recommendation 8:** Embed cultural responsiveness training into teachers' pre-service training, and ensure this training is made mandatory for every Victorian teacher.

**Recommendation 9:** Invest in additional resources and support for schools to improve the safety and accessibility of the school environment for all students. Initiatives such as gender-neutral bathrooms, prayer rooms and extracurricular activities dedicated to cultural exchanges are some effective examples highlighted by students.

**Recommendation 10:** Prioritise the development of a community-led School Cultural Safety and Anti-Racism Framework to be applied across all Victorian schools. This framework should:

- a) Deliver on students' recommendation that schools are provided with additional resources to make their schools safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive places of learning.
- b) Further ensure that culturally responsive training is delivered effectively to school staff and Department of Education officials.
- c) Provide additional support to community organisations to offer cultural awareness and anti-racism modules included in the Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu.
- d) Ensure that the Framework is implemented with targeted and community-led measures to lift outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- e) Strengthen accountability mechanisms to track and respond to instances of racism in school.

**Recommendation 11:** Work with relevant students and carers to remove the financial barriers that impact the ability of students in out-of-home care to engage in education.

**Recommendation 12:** Improve key policies to ensure students are directly involved in shaping the support and interventions they need to improve their engagement at school.

**Recommendation 13:** Mandate trauma-informed training for all Victorian teachers and ensure it features as part of teachers' pre-service training.

## Definitions of Success

**Recommendation 14:** Conduct a review into assessment and credentialing practices which puts the voices of students at the centre, to ensure that Victoria's approach enables students to thrive in whatever post-school pathway they choose. The review should consider what students have already identified as their key priorities for such reform<sup>1</sup>, which include:

- a) Methods of including student voice and continual improvement practices into VCE assessment schemes.
- b) The negative mental health and wellbeing impacts of the current assessment scheme.
- c) The effectiveness of current VCE assessment schemes to provide modern, inclusive, and strengths-based outcomes including credentials.
- d) The need for teachers to be able to tailor assessments to students' needs, and for them to have varied and accessible means of achieving progress through their assessments according to their needs.

**Recommendation 15:** Develop new, student-led strategies to improve pathways and careers education in both primary and secondary school settings to address stigma and elevate vocational pathways alongside academic and other pathways by:

- a) Requiring schools to provide relevant and accessible information about VET to students and their families at equal measure to the information they provide about non-VET subjects.
- b) Encouraging schools to diversify the guest speakers they invite to speak to their students, ensuring genuine diversity of lived experience, education background and chosen career pathway.
- c) Establishing minimum qualification requirements for careers specialists in Victorian schools and expand career education professional learning initiatives to ensure all prospective careers specialists have access to this training.

## Equitable Access to Quality Education

**Recommendation 16:** Implement fee-free public transport for all Victorian students, and empower schools to issue fee-free Myki cards to students without additional charges.

**Recommendation 17:** De-centralise student voice practice and expertise by supporting VicSRC in reaching regional and rural students to better understand their needs and ensure that they have an equal opportunity to shape the future of their education.

**Recommendation 18:** Invest in student voice processes as a core component of Victoria's approach to address the teacher workforce shortage.

**Recommendation 19:** Collaborate with schools to identify the major barriers to accessing education enrichment activities and commit to provide the additional support required to deliver these opportunities, recognising that they are central to a full and rich education experience for Victorian students.

**Recommendation 20:** Provide students with real opportunities to shape new school builds and other infrastructure investments through student voice practices.

**Recommendation 21:** Achieve 100% of funding for every Victorian school according to the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) by 2028.

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<sup>1</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 11.

**Recommendation 22:** Close the current loophole which allows for non-education spending to be counted as part of Victoria’s contribution to funding the SRS.

# CONTEXT

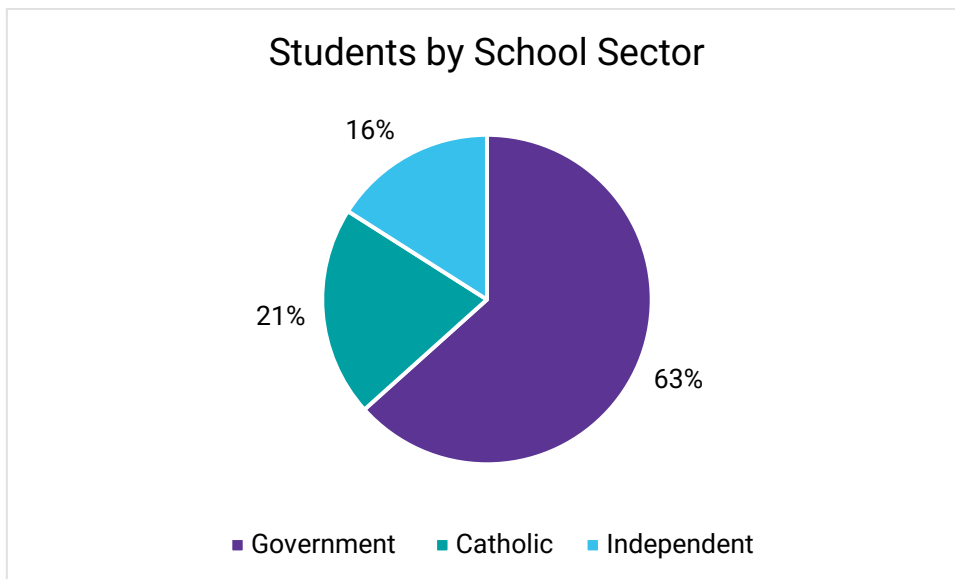
The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body and leading advocate representing school-aged students in Victoria. We are dedicated to amplifying student voices in all aspects of education, and our mission is to ensure that every student’s voice is not only heard but also respected and acted upon when it comes to shaping Victoria’s education system.

At VicSRC, our commitment to student voice is reflected through our structure. VicSRC’s Student Executive Advisory Committee, composed of 15 secondary school students, collaborates closely with the VicSRC Board of Trustees to lead the organisation by guiding our operations, programs, and advocacy. This collaboration ensures that student perspectives are at the heart of all decision-making processes, ensuring VicSRC remains true to its values of representing student voice.

VicSRC is driven by a vision of collective, systemic change within the Victorian education system. As the only independent, education-based, student-led advocacy organisation in Australia, VicSRC is a leader in education policy reform which is grounded in the authentic voices and experiences of students.

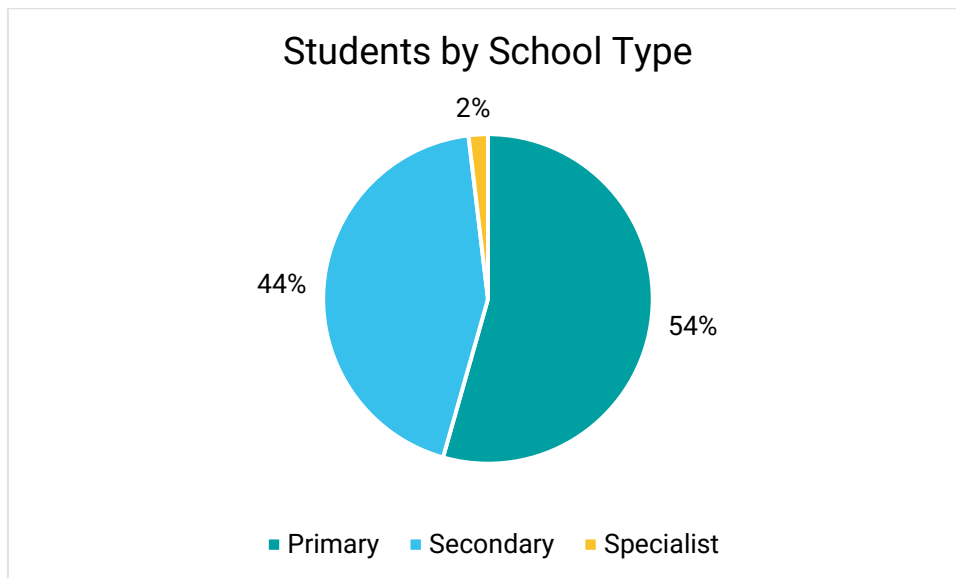
## Victorian Students

Victoria is home to over one million students; each bringing unique perspectives and needs to the educational landscape. In 2023, Victoria's student population comprised 653,976 government school students, 213,178 Catholic school students, and 165,026 independent school students. Of these, 561,512 were in primary school and 451,148 in secondary school, with an additional 19,520 enrolled in specialist and language schools<sup>2</sup>.



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<sup>2</sup> Department of Education (Victoria) (2023), 'Summary statistics for Victorian schools 2023', education.vic.edu.au, accessed 25 June 2024 ([link](#)), pp. 1-2.



Victoria’s student community is wonderfully diverse. In 2023, 244,344 students in Victoria came from language backgrounds other than English, with 167,208 – around one in six – primarily speaking a language other than English at home. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students made up 2.7% of the student population, and 27% of students have a disability<sup>3</sup>.

Victorian students also share a variety of post-school and career aspirations, reflected by their diverse educational pathways. In 2023, 70,693 students were enrolled in Vocational Education and Training (VET) certificates while at school. Just over half of all Victorian students who complete Year 12 go on to enrol in a Bachelor’s degree, while around 21% pursue alternative further studies, and an additional 22% transition into the workforce right away, or intend to do so<sup>4</sup>.

VicSRC aims to represent this broad and diverse group of students, valuing their varied and intersectional experiences. VicSRC is committed to engaging schools and government to work effectively with students as genuine collaborators and partners in education policy reform. Alongside our efforts, we look to other organisations who dedicate themselves to working closely with specific groups of students to more deeply understand their needs. Through our combined efforts, we strive to create an education system that truly reflects and respects the voices of all Victorian students.

This platform is built upon the lived expertise of students, and sets out a series of recommendations across five key priority areas which we believe will make a meaningful difference to the outcomes and quality of experience for all Victorian students. Our work to reach and empower all Victorian students must continue to ensure full equity of representation – this platform provides a structure to improve that representation and ensure that all Victorian students are provided with opportunities to shape their own education.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Education (Victoria) (2022), ‘On Track 2021: Destinations of Victorian School Leavers’, education.vic.edu.au, accessed 25 June 2024 ([link](#)), p. 6.

# FINDINGS

## Student Voice

*An education system which uplifts, respects, and responds to the voices of students, fostering better outcomes for everyone.*

Student voice practice is the common thread which unites what VicSRC hopes to achieve in education policy reform. Despite the breadth of priority areas including mental health and wellbeing, accessible and inclusive school communities, improved engagement and learning outcomes, and post-school pathways, student voice holds the key to achieving meaningful, sustainable, and effective education reform which truly serves students' needs and aspirations.

Student voice is a term which is as broad as it is important. It is also frequently misunderstood, which can sometimes interfere with the achievement of genuine progress in this area.

Student voice does not solely refer to listening to students. Though listening is an essential component of the process, it represents merely the first step in achieving genuine student voice practice.

In fact, student voice represents a series of critical practice principles encompassing the voice, participation, and agency of students in decision-making processes. VicSRC offers the following definition of genuine student voice practice<sup>5</sup>:

*Student voice refers to the active and meaningful engagement of students in all levels of decision-making that affect their learning experiences and educational environments.*

*It encompasses a genuine partnership with decision-makers to shape policies, curriculum development, school culture and other aspects of their schooling through joint decision-making processes that genuinely reflect the perspectives, ideas, and contributions of students.*

*This approach acknowledges students as integral partners whose insights, feedback, and diverse viewpoints are vital to creating inclusive, responsive, and empowering educational settings.*

Achieving student voice in education policymaking is one of VicSRC's major priorities, because when the conditions of genuine student voice are realised, the results are compelling. This is true not only for students, but entire school communities.

Some of these benefits are intuitive, like the boost in student engagement and satisfaction that comes from being involved in the decision-making processes which shape their education<sup>6</sup>. But there are other benefits of student voice too.

Students who feel empowered by robust student voice processes also gain a better understanding of what effective teaching and learning practices look like, which allow them to more effectively evaluate and adjust their own learning to maximise their achievements. Students are also able to set higher

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<sup>5</sup> VicSRC (2024), 'Student Voice Definition', Victorian Student Representative Council.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Education (Victoria) (2019), 'Amplify: empowering students through voice, agency and leadership', Victorian Government, p. 8.

standards for themselves, work harder, and demonstrate improved planning<sup>7</sup>. These positive impacts work together to transform the outcomes of students for the better, both in terms of their achievement and wellbeing.

Beyond the benefits, student voice also represents an imperative standard which the education system must recognise, that students exist as the sole stakeholders of the education system built to support them.

This means that students are the only ones who are equipped to provide unique and essential contributions to education policymaking which leverage their position as the only stakeholder with lived expertise of the education system as it is right now.

It is these essential considerations, together with the undeniable positive impacts of student voice practice, which drive VicSRC to work towards its implementation at every level of the education system in Victoria.

Student voice in policymaking yields clear positive outcomes which support inclusive decision-making in schools and across the system.

In the past year, as the government has grappled with complex and essential challenges related to education policy, students have provided invaluable insights to guide policymaking which serves the interests of students and have made for better outcomes.

In 2023 alone, VicSRC facilitated student collaboration on departmental policy and guidance regarding vaping in schools, which highlight the ineffectiveness of punitive measures and the need for a health and wellbeing focused response. Students also helped to shape improved guidance on gender inclusiveness in school sports, allowing educators to more confidently have appropriate and sensitive conversations with gender diverse students about their options. In addition, students helped to create accessible and relevant resources to support their peers through the complaints making process when they have serious concerns at school.

In 2018, VicSRC worked closely with the government to instate the requirement to have students represented on school governance councils of all government secondary schools. This achievement marked another major step in ensuring that students hold legitimate equity in the decision-making process when it comes to their own education.

These achievements not only work to deliver better outcomes for students, but they also represent the government's ability to engage with students to deliver positive outcomes.

However, there remains a need to ensure that student voice practices are not adopted as an optional component to the policymaking process. Decision-makers and policymakers across government must share a strong mutual understanding of student voice and its value, as well a shared understanding of best practice approach for its implementation.

To do this, the Victorian Government, including and especially the Department of Education, must broaden and deepen their commitment to achieving high quality student voice practices within their policymaking processes.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 8-9.

**Recommendation 1:** VicSRC recommends the Victorian Government commit to boosting investment in student voice practice in Victoria’s education system by:

- a) Ensuring Department of Education officials are provided with high quality training on student voice practice, and are equipped with the skills and resources they need to implement genuine student voice practice in all areas of education policymaking.
- b) Providing schools with financial support and guidance to implement student voice practice within their school communities.
- c) Taking steps to ensure that every Victorian government school is fulfilling their obligation to have students represented on their school governance councils and that school governance councils adopt genuine student voice practices to inform collaborative decision-making with student representatives.

In addition to these steps, VicSRC has presented additional recommendations across each of our priority areas which emphasise the need for, and importance of student voice practice. These recommendations represent valuable opportunities for the government to invite students into reform initiatives, recognising that student voice will improve the quality, reach, and sustainability of those reforms.

As VicSRC continues to advocate for the recommendations contained within this platform, we will also maintain this distinct but related focus on working collaboratively with government to ensure that we can together achieve the essential goal of putting student voice at the centre of education policy. In doing so, we will provide students with opportunities to meaningfully engage with policymaking processes whenever and wherever that policy will impact their experience of education.

## Mental Health and Wellbeing

### *Effective, available, and place-based mental health and wellbeing support for every Victorian student.*

Improving and safeguarding mental health and wellbeing has been a major priority for Victorian students for many years. Though students and experts agree that the pandemic has increased the burden of mental health challenges for young people<sup>8,9</sup>, mental health and wellbeing concerns among Victorian students have sat well above the international average for many years prior to the pandemic<sup>10</sup>.

Students cite several contributing factors to mental health and wellbeing concerns at school including anxiety caused by an overwhelming pressure to perform and associated fears of failure, fear about the future, and social isolation<sup>11</sup>.

Meanwhile, students are also increasingly distressed by the wider societal context, with global challenges like climate change and cost-of-living driving further negative feelings<sup>12,13</sup>.

In response to these trends, the Victorian Government have made substantial investments to improve the availability of school-based mental health support services through initiatives such as the Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu, and the various schemes which boost the presence of mental health practitioners and wellbeing staff in Victorian schools.

Students, however, have explained that the demand for these services is outstripping the supply, and that in circumstances where support is available, it is not always accessible nor responsive to the specific needs of that student cohort<sup>14</sup>. At Congress 2023, improving the availability and appropriateness of mental health support in schools was one of students' most common and recurring recommendations they put forward to help address these challenges<sup>15</sup>.

Rollouts of the Victorian Government's new schemes to address students' mental health and wellbeing concerns are ongoing. The statewide roll-out of the Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu, for example, will continue in 2024<sup>16</sup>, and as such additional time is needed to completely assess the reach and impact of these new initiatives.

While we are hopeful that these new schemes will effectively address students' concerns of availability and appropriateness of support, this will not be possible unless the government works together with students to ensure that their voices are heard when it comes to making essential and timely improvements to those schemes based upon their experiences in accessing them.

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<sup>8</sup> VicSRC (2023), 2023 Congress Report, Victorian Student Representative Council ([link](#)).

<sup>9</sup> Bourmistrova, N. W., Solomon, T., Braude, P., Strawbridge, R., & Carter, B. (2022). 'Long-term effects of COVID-19 on mental health: A systematic review'. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 299, pp. 118–125

<sup>10</sup> Dumuid, D, et al. (2023), 'Trends in Well-Being Among Youth in Australia, 2017-2022', *JAMA Network : Open*, 6(8), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> VicSRC 2023, pp. 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hickman, C. Marks, E, et al. (2021), 'Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey', *Lancet Planet Health*, 5(12), p. 863.

<sup>14</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Department of Education (Victoria) (n.d.), 'School operations : Mental Health Fund and Menu', [education.vic.gov.au](https://education.vic.gov.au), accessed 19 March 2024, ([link](#)).

That is why it is important for the Victorian Government to take steps which ensure students play an active role in decision-making when it comes to mental health and wellbeing supports delivered within their school communities. These steps, guided by the major concerns of students, should include:

- a) Actively supporting schools to involve students in relevant decision-making processes.
- b) Requiring schools to conduct feedback and evaluation processes of the mental health and wellbeing services it provides, to ascertain their effectiveness and provide guidance for continual improvement.
- c) Mandating that schools receive the endorsement of students (e.g. via student representative councils) when making decisions regarding school-based mental health and wellbeing supports.
- d) Seeking ongoing advice and collaboration from students to improve communication between government and students about mental health and wellbeing initiatives.

Students clearly have valuable insights to share about how the ongoing focus on mental health and wellbeing in schools should be directed, as well as the kinds of mental health and wellbeing support services they may need access to, which vary between each school community. We hope to see these strategies implemented to leverage students' expertise about their experiences and ultimately improve the quality of care delivered to Victorian students.

As well as this, students have also identified that more must be done to improve the availability and accessibility of information regarding school-based wellbeing supports. Addressing this problem will enable students to make more informed decisions about the support they engage with. It will also empower students to collaborate with wellbeing staff and school leadership to ensure school-based mental health and wellbeing support effectively responds to the needs of the student cohort.

If we are to ensure that the rollout of new mental health and wellbeing initiatives are successful, more action is also needed to properly understand the nature of the challenges we face, and to ultimately achieve an appropriate level of care.

For example, the Australian Psychological Society and Australian Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools recommend that Australian schools should achieve a 1:500 ratio between mental health practitioners (including psychologists) and students to ensure availability of world-class support<sup>17,18</sup>. While information on the number of mental health practitioners per number of students is not published for Victorian schools, the limited data which does exist estimates the current ratio may be as large as 1:1500<sup>19</sup>.

That is why it is critical to establish a state-wide target ratio of one full-time mental health practitioner to every 500 students, and that a real-time estimate of that ratio be published to inform proper accountability in achieving this important objective.

VicSRC believes that if implemented, this approach will deliver significant progress towards ensuring every Victorian student has guaranteed access to appropriate and timely mental health and wellbeing support at school, which is exactly what students have consistently been calling for.

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<sup>17</sup> Australian Psychological Society (2022), 'Psychologists in Schools : Position Statement', psychology.org.au, accessed 19 March 2024, p. 7 ([link](#))

<sup>18</sup> Australian Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools (2018) 'A submission by APACS', pc.gov.au, accessed 19 March 2024, ([link](#)), p. 4

<sup>19</sup> APS 2022, p. 5

Alongside school-based support services, students have made it clear that teachers also play a critical role in supporting their mental health and wellbeing<sup>20</sup>. To this end, the government should take steps to ensure that all teachers are properly trained to recognise and respond to students' mental health and wellbeing needs, both in classroom settings and at school more broadly.

The Victorian Government have already made encouraging progress in responding to this need by working collaboratively with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education to develop the Mental Health in Primary Schools scheme, which currently provides 100 government and low-fee non-government primary schools with funding to employ and appropriately train a teacher to become a certified Mental Health and Wellbeing Leader<sup>21</sup>.

Through this scheme, evidence-based training is delivered to teachers to support them in implementing a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing for students, staff, and families, which work to respond to students' mental health and wellbeing needs<sup>22</sup>.

Evaluations of this scheme, which is now set to expand to every government and low-fee non-government primary school in the state by 2026<sup>23</sup>, have delivered promising results. Ninety-five per cent of participants agree that the scheme has increased whole-school capacity to support student mental health and wellbeing<sup>24</sup>.

It is clear from the evidence that expanding this model to encompass all Victorian secondary schools will help boost the mental health and wellbeing expertise in schools, responding to the calls of students to increase the level of school-based mental health supports, and ensuring educators are properly prepared to implement effective whole-school strategies which respond to students' mental health and wellbeing needs.

In taking these steps, the Victorian Government will make great progress towards ensuring every Victorian student has timely, appropriate, and effective access to mental health and wellbeing support, which is responsive to their specific needs, and shares the responsibility of supporting student wellbeing across teachers, support staff, and the broader school community.

To this end, VicSRC calls on the Victorian Government to improve access and quality of school-based mental health and wellbeing supports through the following measures:

**Recommendation 2:** Support schools to embed genuine student voice practice when planning and implementing school-based mental health and wellbeing initiatives, including by:

- a) Actively supporting schools to involve students in relevant decision-making processes.
- b) Requiring schools to conduct feedback and evaluation processes of the mental health and wellbeing services it provides, to ascertain their effectiveness and provide guidance for continual improvement.

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<sup>20</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 8

<sup>21</sup> Victorian Government (n.d.) 'Mental health support in primary schools', vic.gov.au, accessed 19 March 2024, ([link](#))

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Murdoch Children's Research Institute (n.d.), 'Mental Health in Primary Schools: Key facts', mhips.org.au, accessed 19 March 2024, ([link](#))

- c) Mandating that schools receive the endorsement of students (e.g. via student representative councils) when making decisions regarding school-based mental health and wellbeing supports.

**Recommendation 3:** Centre the voices of students when planning and implementing improvements to the ways in which government and schools communicate with students about mental health and wellbeing support services and initiatives.

**Recommendation 4:** Commit to full availability of appropriate care with at least one full-time psychologist or mental health practitioner for every 500 students. Make available the current practitioner-to-student ratio to enable the tracking of progress towards this goal.

**Recommendation 5:** Expand the Mental Health in Primary Schools initiative to include all Victorian secondary schools.

## Accessible and Inclusive Education

### *Accessible and inclusive education which provides for all students' needs.*

Many Victorian students have reported experiencing marginalisation and discrimination at school based on aspects such as their cultural background, gender and sexuality, disability and access needs, or other experiences of disadvantage, leading to feelings of alienation and exclusion, which ultimately leads to their disengagement<sup>25</sup>. The barriers to full participation for many of these students is systemic and ongoing.

Access and inclusion means addressing discrimination, building cultural safety, embedding trauma-informed practice, and providing targeted supports so that all students can engage equally in their learning and feel a genuine sense of belonging.

Achieving progress across this area requires ambition and investment. Crucially, it also requires that students are put at the centre of the policymaking process, to ensure their needs are heard, understood, and responded to.

### **Improving access for students with disability**

Despite promising progress and substantial investments in boosting access and inclusion in education for students with disability, Australian data makes it clear that there remains significant room for improvement. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, around two thirds of students with disability experience difficulties at school, with more than half reporting learning difficulties and one third reporting difficulties with fitting in at school<sup>26</sup>. Meanwhile, just 34% of people with disability in Australia have completed Year 12, as compared with 66% of people without disability<sup>27</sup>. In addition, while the rate of completion of Year 12 among all people regardless of disability has increased over the last decade, this rise is not equal for people with disability as compared to people without disability<sup>28</sup>.

The Victorian Government's efforts to lift outcomes for students with disability are admirable, not least through its \$1.6 billion investment in the Disability Inclusion scheme<sup>29</sup> which aims to provide additional support for students with disability at school. The scheme, which will continue to rollout until the end of 2025, delivers a suite of new tools for schools to support students using a strengths-based approach that emphasises students' needs and capabilities.

As the rollout continues, however, the Victorian Government must ensure that these reforms are working as effectively as possible, and remain responsive to the changing needs of students as the scheme continues to be implemented over time.

This was made evident by students who told VicSRC that there continues to be a need for teachers and staff to be equipped with additional skills to recognise and respond to the diverse learning needs

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<sup>25</sup> Monah University n.d., 'Causes of disengagement', education.unimelb.edu.au, accessed 19 March 2024, ([link](#))

<sup>26</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019), 'Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings', abs.gov.au, accessed 16 April 2024 ([link](#)).

<sup>27</sup> Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (2022), 'People with disability in Australia', aihw.gov.au, accessed 16 April 2024 ([link](#)).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Victorian Government (2024), 'Disability Inclusion: a new approach for students with disability', vic.gov.au, accessed 15 April 2024 ([link](#)).

of students with disabilities<sup>30</sup>, as they are not always provided with the additional supports they need to achieve their education goals alongside their peers. Students at Congress in 2023 listed this as one of their highest priorities in ensuring their learning needs were met<sup>31</sup>.

Advocating for Children with Disability (ACD) have also been working directly with students and families to understand their needs, and the degree to which the Disability Inclusion scheme is having positive impacts on outcomes for students with disability. According to ACD, many students still struggle to have their needs fully understood and responded to, and some students' outcomes suffered because of a lack of appropriate support<sup>32</sup>.

Meanwhile, almost 100% of teachers agreed as part of an AEU study that they needed more support to work with students with disability to help improve those students' outcomes<sup>33</sup>.

This evidence clearly highlights the need to respond to concerns raised by students at Congress<sup>34</sup>. To address this issue, VicSRC makes the following recommendation:

**Recommendation 6:** Develop a comprehensive training framework to equip all teachers with additional skills to recognise and respond to diverse learning needs, including improved skills in identifying when students might be in need of additional support.

**Recommendation 7:** Invest in improved student voice processes to empower students to engage in decisions regarding how they learn. This is particularly important for students with disability, students who are experiencing mental ill-health, students with English as a second or third language, and students who have disrupted education and experiences of trauma. Supporting students and teachers to approach curriculum development in a collaborative way will improve engagement of students and overall learning outcomes.

### **Improving the experience of students from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds**

Improved training for teachers will also make a meaningful difference for many other students who are struggling to thrive in school environments where they don't feel safe or included.

For example, students at Congress described what they saw as a narrow understanding of accessibility and inclusion in some school settings which diminish the importance of cultural safety. They also noted that some of the measures which have been implemented to address these issues feel tokenistic or ineffective<sup>35</sup>.

Students have specifically highlighted the need to better equip teachers and other school staff with the necessary skills and training to respond to the challenges faced by students from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds, with a particular focus on improving cultural and social inclusion at school<sup>36</sup>. In addition, recent work conducted by the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) not only reflects key

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<sup>30</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 9

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Association for Children with Disability (2024), 'Snapshot: Families' experience of the Disability Inclusion Profile process', acd.org.au, accessed 14 June 2024 ([link](#)), p. 4

<sup>33</sup> AEU 2023a, p. 13

<sup>34</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 9

<sup>35</sup> VicSRC 2023, pp. 9-10

<sup>36</sup> Monash University n.d

insights shared by students at Congress, but also further demonstrate the negative impacts of a lack of cultural safety on students' outcomes and wellbeing<sup>37</sup>.

Therefore, it is crucial the government commits to improving cultural responsiveness training for all Victorian teachers, to address the lack of safety and inclusion present across the Victorian school community.

**Recommendation 8:** Embed cultural responsiveness training into teachers' pre-service training, and ensure this training is made mandatory for every Victorian teacher.

Beyond training, students have emphasised the importance of providing schools with resources, support, and advice to move from passively accepting diversity and inclusion to genuinely celebrating it. Students have suggested additional initiatives such as extracurricular activities dedicated to cultural exchanges to foster this within the school environment<sup>38</sup>.

**Recommendation 9:** Invest in additional resources and support for schools to improve the safety and accessibility of the school environment for all students. Initiatives such as gender-neutral bathrooms, prayer rooms and extracurricular activities dedicated to cultural exchanges are some effective examples highlighted by students.

By equipping educators with additional tools to embed culturally responsive practice in the classroom, VicSRC is confident educators will improve their capability to effectively meet the needs of students from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds, improving school culture to be genuinely inclusive of all students and a place where diversity is celebrated.

### **Making school a safe and welcoming place for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students**

Cultural safety is also a priority for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) noting that a lack of cultural safety for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students is a "key driver of disengagement"<sup>39</sup>. The lack of culturally responsive and trauma-informed training has led some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students to feel alienated, belittled, or bullied by students and teachers when false and damaging information about First Nations perspectives is allowed to be taught<sup>40</sup>.

Unfortunately, these challenges also include forms of overt racism in schools which are a significant barrier for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students to engage positively at school, as it has significantly detrimental impacts on their safety and wellbeing. Data from the 2023 Attitudes to School Survey indicated that around one-in-four of all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students in Victoria experienced racism in school that year<sup>41</sup>, compared to 15% of the general student population.

These challenges continue to hold Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders students back from achieving their education goals. While just over 91% of all young people in Victoria aged between 20-24 had attained a Year 12 qualification or equivalent, that figure reduces to 72.6% of Aboriginal and/or

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<sup>37</sup> Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) 2023, 'Submission to the inquiry into state education system in Victoria', accessed 25 June 2024, ([link](#)), p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 9

<sup>39</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) (2023), 'Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria', [parliament.vic.gov.au](http://parliament.vic.gov.au), accessed 16 April 2024 ([link](#)), p. 7

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp. 7-8.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

Torres Strait Islander young people<sup>42</sup> in the same age group. Despite strong efforts from the state government to deliver additional support for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, the percentage of those who are engaged in education, employment, or training has lifted by just 0.1% between 2016 and 2021<sup>43</sup>.

Not only do these alarming reflections add further urgency to the need for culturally responsive training to be delivered to all teachers, but they also present the need for additional action to achieve proactively anti-racist schools in Victoria.

In response to this need, the Victorian Government made a commitment to develop a state-wide anti-racism framework and release it by the end of 2023. Unfortunately, they have not done so as of June 2024<sup>44</sup>.

More urgency is needed to address this situation. This was also reflected by students at Congress, who listed the need for increased efforts to address bullying and discrimination based on their identities as one of their key priorities<sup>45</sup>.

**Recommendation 10:** Prioritise the development of a community-led School Cultural Safety and Anti-Racism Framework to be applied across all Victorian schools. This framework should:

- a) Deliver on students' recommendation that schools are provided with additional resources to make their schools safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive places of learning<sup>46</sup>.
- b) Further ensure that culturally responsive training is delivered effectively to school staff and Department of Education officials.
- c) Provide additional support to community organisations to offer cultural awareness and anti-racism modules included in the Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu.
- d) Ensure that the Framework is implemented with targeted and community-led measures to lift outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.
- e) Strengthen accountability mechanisms to track and respond to instances of racism in school.

Providing schools with a robust and community-driven framework to combat racism and discrimination against Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students within school communities will provide much-needed additional resources, guidance, and confidence among educators to deliver culturally appropriate and inclusive education for all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

### **Supporting students in out-of-home care to thrive at school**

The government should also take further steps to ensure that children and young people in out-of-home care receive the support they need to remain engaged with education throughout the course of their studies.

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<sup>42</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency (VACCA) (2024), 'Nuther-mooyoop to Yoorrook Justice Commission on systemic injustice experienced in the school system', vacca.org, accessed 12 June 2024 (link), p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Students in out-of-home care experience substantially higher rates of disengagement from school compared to their peers, with 64% experiencing chronic absence in 2022<sup>47</sup>, and only 25% progressing from Year 10 to Year 12, as compared to 80% of students from the general population<sup>48</sup>. Furthermore, in the same period, students in out-of-home care were five times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school compared to students in the general population<sup>49</sup>.

In response to this urgent crisis, the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) recently engaged with more than 450 children, young people, and other key stakeholders<sup>50</sup> to produce the *Let Us Learn* report, a comprehensive assessment of the needs of children and young people living in out-of-home care to support their education.

The report centred the voices of students in out-of-home care by shining a light on the unique challenges they face. Students who engaged with CCYP through this process spoke about the following challenges:

- The impacts that trauma has on their ability to learn and remain engaged in education.
- Negative attitudes and perceptions from other students and staff at school.
- Experiences of racism and exposure to culturally unsafe practices at school<sup>51</sup>.

Findings from the *Let Us Learn* report validate feedback from students previously heard by VicSRC regarding barriers to education faced by marginalised students. It is critical the Victorian Government respond to the *Let Us Learn* report, whilst also taking immediate action to boost support for children and young people in out-of-home care to engage in education.

**Recommendation 11:** Work with relevant students and carers to remove the financial barriers that impact the ability of students in out-of-home care to engage in education.

**Recommendation 12:** Improve key policies to ensure students are directly involved in shaping the support and interventions they need to improve their engagement at school.

### **Ensuring that students who experience trauma feel safe and supported at school**

Listening to students about their needs in the classroom and at school highlights how many students are dealing with the impacts of trauma. These students' education has the potential to be a transformative opportunity which empowers them with new skills and strategies to persevere and achieve. Unfortunately, however, students in these circumstances often do not find adequate support around them while at school.

This was made clear by students at Congress who, in 2022, identified the need for trauma-informed practice training for teachers as their biggest priority<sup>52</sup> because of what they described as a lack of support and capabilities within schools to appropriately deal with challenges arising from trauma.

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<sup>47</sup> Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) (2023), 'Let us learn: Systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care', ccyp.vic.gov.au, accessed 16 April 2024 ([link](#)), p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, pp. 23-24.

<sup>51</sup> CCYP 2023, pp. 37-41.

<sup>52</sup> VicSRC (2023c), 'VicSRC Advocacy Platform 2023', vicsrc.org.au, accessed 14 June 2024 ([link](#)), p. 5.

Students in other forums have continued to make this need clear, including students who spoke with CCYP about how a lack of understanding of trauma led to inappropriate and punitive measures taken by schools which often worsened students' situations<sup>53</sup>.

Meanwhile, Aboriginal young people have explained that a lack of trauma-informed practice can compound a lack of safety felt by those students at school, when they are made to feel misunderstood and unsupported<sup>54</sup>.

The lack of trauma-informed practice in Victorian schools is clearly having an impact on the wellbeing and outcomes of students. Students have made it clear that more should be done to provide students who have experienced trauma with the care they need, and that this should be delivered through additional training for teachers to ensure they know the signs of trauma and are prepared to deliver appropriate support. The Victorian Government must ensure this occurs.

**Recommendation 13:** Mandate trauma-informed training for all Victorian teachers and ensure it features as part of teachers' pre-service training.

VicSRC believes that in taking these steps, the Victorian Government will make a powerful demonstration of not only their commitment to improve inclusion and access to education for every Victorian student, but to do so in an open, accountable, and collaborative way, which will ultimately deliver better outcomes for everyone.

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<sup>53</sup> CCYP 2023, p. 38.

<sup>54</sup> VACCA 2024, p. 17-18.

## Definitions of Success

### *Changing our understanding of what success looks and feels like at school.*

Victorian students are finding it difficult to gain a sense of achievement at school when there is an overwhelming focus on the need for academic success over other measures of success and personal development<sup>55</sup>.

According to students, this practice has the effect of alienating their development in other areas, and contributes to problems of self-esteem and anxiety when they are made to feel that the progress they have personally observed is not valid or useful in the context of their education journey<sup>56</sup>.

Students have reflected on the many negative impacts of such a narrow focus, including fostering tensions between classmates as they compete to outperform each other, as well as the burden of study stress and anxiety about their future, which stems from the culture of associating future success with academic performance<sup>57</sup>.

So overwhelming has this pressure become that the proportion of Victorian students choosing to undertake their VCE 'unscored' (i.e. without undertaking examinations or receiving an ATAR at the conclusion of their studies) is higher than ever, rising to 11% in 2022<sup>58</sup>, and more than doubling since 2018<sup>59</sup>.

These persistent reminders not only erode students' self-esteem and confidence in their aspirations, but also fuel longstanding stigma associated with vocational and other career choices which deviate from university-centred pathways. Furthermore, students say that career and pathways education require significant improvement, citing a lack of available information and resources which reinforces biases against vocational and other pathways<sup>60</sup>.

Problems also exist in testing and assessment, with many students expressing their view that the ATAR system is not perceived as fair and equitable because it seems to unevenly reward performance in some areas, like maths and science, while diminishing achievement in other areas, like humanities and the arts<sup>61</sup>.

Many students also believe that the breadth of their growth at school cannot be conveyed by a single ranking, and have emphasised the need to re-think how assessment is undertaken to ensure a holistic range of capabilities are considered when assessing a students' achievements and strengths.

Students are not alone in this regard. The University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education described the state of assessment and credentialing as in need of a "paradigm shift" because "what

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<sup>55</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 10

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Precel, N (2023), 'VCE exams kick off as increased options leave many choosing to go unscored', *The Age*, 2 October, accessed 16 April 2024 ([link](#))

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> VicSRC (2023b), 'Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training (VET)', VicSRC, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

is valued most is not measured" under current assessment schemes<sup>62</sup>. The Australian Centre for Education Research has shared a similar sentiment<sup>63</sup>.

The University of Melbourne's own solution, the *New Metrics for Success* initiative, has produced a new comprehensive and holistic assessment model which assesses students' competencies in key areas including emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and active citizenship. This particular program is already operating in 40 Victorian schools, and while the pilot is still underway, many of those schools have spoken enthusiastically about the project's value within their school settings<sup>64</sup>.

The revolution in assessment is clearly already underway. The time has now come for the government to embrace these advancements which put students' most valuable attributes at the centre of their assessment.

Additionally, students have also spoken about the longstanding systemic inequalities they perceive in VCE, along with the fact that senior secondary education is taking a significant toll on their mental health and wellbeing.

In order to effectively address these concerns, the Victorian Government must listen to students to understand the shortcomings of the current system.

**Recommendation 14:** Conduct a review into assessment and credentialing practices which puts the voices of students at the centre, to ensure that Victoria's approach enables students to thrive in whatever post-school pathway they choose. The review should consider what students have already identified as their key priorities for such reform<sup>65</sup>, which include:

- a) Methods of including student voice and continual improvement practices into VCE assessment schemes.
- b) The negative mental health and wellbeing impacts of the current assessment scheme.
- c) The effectiveness of current VCE assessment schemes to provide modern, inclusive, and strengths-based outcomes including credentials.
- d) The need for teachers to be able to tailor assessments to students' needs, and for them to have varied and accessible means of achieving progress through their assessments according to their needs.

Together these initiatives will send a strong signal that the government is serious about the concerns of students, involving them in the reform process to build a stronger and more inclusive VCE which delivers for all Victorian students.

Finally, to address the longstanding concerns of students relating to the quality and effectiveness of careers education in schools, the government should implement a suite of initiatives which take a strong focus on addressing stigma surrounding vocational pathways, and that these initiatives

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<sup>62</sup> University of Melbourne n.d., 'New Metrics for Success', University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education, accessed 19 March 2024, ([link](#))

<sup>63</sup> Australian Council for Education Research n.d., 'Assessment reform and innovation', ACER, accessed 19 March 2024, ([link](#))

<sup>64</sup> University of Melbourne n.d., 'Australian Learner Competency Credential', University of Melbourne School of Education, accessed 16 April 2024 ([link](#))

<sup>65</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 11.

recognise the need to reach students earlier in their education journey, to put them a step ahead once the time comes to consider their post-school pathways.

These new initiatives should also be guided by students, who have already made clear their most urgent needs to address this problem<sup>66</sup>.

**Recommendation 15:** Develop new, student-led strategies to improve pathways and careers education in both primary and secondary school settings to address stigma and elevate vocational pathways alongside academic and other pathways by:

- a) Requiring schools to provide relevant and accessible information about VET to students and their families at equal measure to the information they provide about non-VET subjects.
- b) Encouraging schools to diversify the guest speakers they invite to speak to their students, ensuring genuine diversity of lived experience, education background and chosen career pathway.
- c) Establishing minimum qualification requirements for careers specialists in Victorian schools and expand career education professional learning initiatives to ensure all prospective careers specialists have access to this training.

Given the rapidly changing, and increasingly uncertain nature of the future of work and life, VicSRC believes that the only way for the government to keep pace with the aspirations and needs of students is by working closely together with them, which is what these recommendations seek to achieve.

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<sup>66</sup> VicSRC (2023d), 'Improving Student Pathways to VET', accessed 25 June 2024, p. 3

## **Equitable Access to Quality Education**

*Greater investments and stronger systems to ensure equitable access to quality education experiences for Victorian students, teachers, and schools.*

Equitable access to quality education is about ensuring all students, no matter their postcode, school type, or background, have the same opportunities to a high-quality learning experience. This includes eliminating structural and financial barriers that create inequity between schools and across regions. Equitable access ensures that every student, regardless of where they live or the resources of their school, can benefit from the same standard of teaching, infrastructure, enrichment programs, and overall educational experiences.

While high-quality policy initiatives developed collaboratively with students will ensure the best possible outcome when addressing these challenges, it is imperative to also recognise that Victoria's education system is fundamentally under-resourced.

### **Boosting access to school for students who rely on public transport**

As economic conditions continue to put additional pressures on Victorian families, there is a rising need for interventions from the government to ensure economic barriers do not limit access to free, high quality education for Victorian students.

Recent schemes like the School Savings Bonus represent positive steps in this direction – providing some relief for students and families to manage the costs of education. These schemes, however, also serve to highlight the increasingly unaffordable nature of education in Victoria. More must be done to alleviate these pressures, with an emphasis on addressing the root cause of education inequality, rather than providing one-off schemes like the School Savings Bonus.

Public transport presents one such economic barrier for students who rely on it to access their education. The public transport system provides critical infrastructure for students to attend school in circumstances where they may otherwise struggle to remain engaged. Unfortunately, Victorian students are left to bear the cost of utilising public transport when attending school. This is compared to other jurisdictions like New South Wales, where most school-aged students have access to fee-free travel<sup>67</sup>.

Moreover, when students seek out concessions to reduce the financial burden of attending school, they are faced with a complex, inaccessible, lengthy and costly process<sup>68</sup>. A recent report from WEstJustice demonstrated this, while highlighting the negative impacts of this process which alienates students who are already at higher risk of disengagement from school because of their economic circumstances<sup>69</sup>.

Removing these barriers would represent a common sense approach to boosting access and inclusion at school, while bringing Victoria into line with other jurisdictions in Australia who are already leading the way in this area.

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<sup>67</sup> Transport NSW (n.d.), 'School student travel', transportnsw.info, accessed 16 April 2024, ([link](#))

<sup>68</sup> WEstJustice (2017), 'Fare Go: Myki, Transport Poverty and Access to Education in Melbourne's West', westjustice.org.au, accessed 16 April 2024 ([link](#))

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, pp. 12-13.

What's more, students have consistently shared with VicSRC that providing free access to public transport would make a meaningful difference to their education<sup>70</sup>. The call for free public transport for students represented one of the most popular recommendations generated by students at Congress in 2022<sup>71</sup>, and has been raised in consequent years.

**Recommendation 16:** Implement fee-free public transport for all Victorian students, and empower schools to issue fee-free Myki cards to students without additional charges.

### **Supporting regional and rural students**

Regional and rural students have long faced complex barriers to full access to education based on many factors. The Australian Government's recent Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education found that regional and rural students had not achieved the same level of positive academic or social outcomes as compared to their metropolitan peers for decades, and that there was a clear and persistent relationship between location and outcomes for students across key measures<sup>72</sup>. For example, regional and rural students in Victoria are nine and 18 months behind respectively, compared to their metropolitan peers in reading and maths<sup>73</sup>.

State-wide challenges like the teacher shortage are even more serious in regional and rural areas<sup>74</sup>, which puts additional strains on already overstretched small schools.

Students attending school in rural and regional areas feel the impacts of fewer opportunities and less access to a diverse range of education pathways which suit their strengths and aspirations. VicSRC has heard from regional students who have pointed to a lack of access to opportunities and information regarding their available options at school as a key barrier to achievement and satisfaction with their education<sup>75</sup>.

Clearly, additional measures are required in order to boost the availability of resources and opportunities available to regional and rural students to ensure they are not disadvantaged based on the location they live and attend school.

It is also clear, however, that the voices of regional and rural students are not being sufficiently heard. Barriers to access and inclusion for students from rural and regional areas mean that their perspectives on the issues which affect them are not properly understood, and adequate solutions are not achieved.

That is why the Victorian Government needs to work closely with VicSRC to support a meaningful effort to de-centralise student voice expertise, and facilitate deeper engagement with regional and rural students to ensure they have meaningful opportunities to collaborate on addressing the many challenges they face in achieving a high-quality and inclusive education.

If we do this, we can ensure that place-based solutions not only reach regional and rural students more effectively, but that those solutions truly meet their needs.

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<sup>70</sup> VicSRC 2023c, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Hasey, J (2019), 'Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education - Final Report', accessed 12 June 2024, ([link](#)), p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Thompson, S, et al. (2018), 'PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's Results. Volume I Student Performance: Data tables'.

<sup>74</sup> AEU 2023a, p. 24

<sup>75</sup> VicSRC 2023, 'VET Delivered to School Students (VDSS): Surveying VET Student Attitudes and Reflections on VET At School', p. 6.

**Recommendation 17:** De-centralise student voice practice and expertise by supporting VicSRC in reaching regional and rural students to better understand their needs and ensure that they have an equal opportunity to shape the future of their education.

### **Student voice in solving the teacher workforce shortage**

Students told VicSRC that highly effective and available teachers represent one of the most important foundations of their success at school, through the development of mutual understanding and the implementation of effective strategies for them to achieve success in the classroom<sup>76</sup>.

However, Victorian teachers have never been under greater strain. Victoria continues to struggle to recruit and retain teachers, with an average of 3.1 vacant teaching positions in Victorian schools<sup>77</sup>. Meanwhile, 86% of teachers say their workloads are unmanageable<sup>78</sup>, and the majority are considering leaving the profession in the next 12 months<sup>79</sup>.

Students have explained that the teacher workforce shortage is having a direct impact on the quality of their education. Some of the most significant concerns raised by students include:

- The lack of support they feel when teachers do not have sufficient time to support them in one-on-one settings.
- The barriers which take teachers away from them and negatively impact the ability to develop effective and empathic relationships.
- The need to prioritise expertise and capabilities among teachers to address individual students' needs in the classroom.

It is no wonder that both students and teachers now strongly agree that these overwhelming pressures are having an impact. For teachers, their mental health suffers, and their commitment to the profession is jeopardised<sup>80</sup>. For students, the quality of their instruction and classroom-based support declines, their motivation to seek out support is diminished, and their expectations are lowered<sup>81,82</sup>.

VicSRC is greatly encouraged by national and Victorian initiatives launched in response to these growing problems, but we must ensure that we achieve and maintain an ambitious, 'everything on the table' approach to responding to these complex challenges.

Education stakeholders like the Australian Education Union detailed what this approach may look like, urging the Victorian Government to consider new initiatives like boosting the number of administrative staff in schools, retention payments and additional financial assistance for pre-service teachers to support their introduction into the profession<sup>83</sup>.

Though we're encouraged by progress made so far, it is clear that student voice is one missing link when it comes to finding innovative and effective solutions to the teacher workforce shortage.

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<sup>76</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 8

<sup>77</sup> Australian Education Union (2023a), 'Investing in Australia's Future : For Every Child', [foreverychild.au](http://foreverychild.au), p. 10

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>79</sup> Longmuir, F., Gallo Cordoba, B., Phillips, M., Allen, K.A. & Moharami, M. (2022), 'Australian Teachers' Perceptions of their Work in 2022', Monash University, p. 4

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 19

<sup>81</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 7

<sup>82</sup> VicSRC (2023a), 'Improving School-Based Support Services For Students With ADHD', VicSRC, p. 14-15

<sup>83</sup> AEU 2023, p. 3

Collaborating with students to achieve solutions to this challenge is essential in ensuring that the government's responses achieve their ultimate objective – of providing Victorian students with a high-quality education delivered by well-supported educators. One of the best ways we can ensure that teachers feel well-supported in achieving this objective is by dealing with students directly to understand what their needs are, and incorporating this into teacher recruitment and retention strategies.

Students can also provide a critical voice in finding ways to elevate the esteem of the teaching profession. Because students are the next generation of teachers, after all, and experiences in the classroom will have a direct impact on their decision to pursue a career in teaching.

Furthermore, students stand to provide invaluable insights into what the major barriers are in making the decision to study teaching. Hearing these insights will provide government with additional and targeted advice in developing strategies to effectively open pathways to teaching for emerging educators.

By ensuring that students are collaborators in developing solutions to the teacher workforce shortage, the Victorian Government can effectively respond to the concerns raised by students about the impacts of this problem while addressing the major concerns of teachers in a more practical and meaningful way.

**Recommendation 18:** Invest in student voice processes as a core component of Victoria's approach to address the teacher workforce shortage.

### **Support for access to enrichment activities**

The under-resourcing of schools has also led to other strains on the system which are becoming increasingly apparent to students. For example, students at Congress 2023 noted that many of their schools were offering fewer opportunities to engage in experiential learning such as camps and excursions, with their schools citing rising costs as a key barrier to delivering those programs<sup>84</sup>.

Students have made it clear that experiential learning opportunities are not merely 'nice-to-have'. Instead, they see these opportunities as valuable and enriching experiences that boost their engagement and give them important additional reasons to look forward to their school experience.

Indeed, the benefits of experiential learning are far-reaching, and such programs have proven to deliver positive impacts on engagement as well as broader social outcomes for students<sup>85</sup>. These benefits have been noted as especially impactful for students from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds<sup>86</sup>, who benefit even more so from opportunities to access learning in diverse cultural settings, outside of the classroom.

Though the Victorian Government have made an admirable investment to improve the availability of these programs through more than \$160 million in investments to the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, this fund does not address the underlying problem of schools making the decision to stop offering such programs because of the increasing financial strain imposed in delivering them.

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<sup>84</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 9

<sup>85</sup> Zyngier, D (2017), 'How experiential learning in an informal setting promotes class equity and social and economic justice for children from "communities at promise": An Australian perspective', *International Review of Education*, 63, p. 23.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Without a reversal of this trend, Victorian students will go without the powerful benefits of a rich education experience provided by experiential learning opportunities.

**Recommendation 19:** Collaborate with schools to identify the major barriers to accessing education enrichment activities and commit to provide the additional support required to deliver these opportunities, recognising that they are central to a full and rich education experience for Victorian students.

### **Student involvement in school infrastructure planning**

Meanwhile, the Victorian Government's recent investments into school infrastructure have been substantial, reflecting the essential need to ensure that Victoria's growing student population have access to the kind of high-quality, accessible infrastructure they need to thrive at school. However, students at Congress in 2023 made it clear that their voices are not being heard when it comes to the look and feel of their schools, and that they are eager to take a more active role in determining how school infrastructure spending is directed<sup>87</sup>. According to students, decisions about the look and feel of a school can have real impacts on their motivation and engagement<sup>88</sup>, and they have ideas to share about how their classrooms may operate – as well as classroom alternatives which may be more conducive to learning in some circumstances – that would support their achievement and their wellbeing.

Clearly, students need to have a seat at the table when decisions are made about the direction of Victoria's school infrastructure spending, as it will help to ensure schools are designed in a way that meets students' needs whilst maximising available resources.

**Recommendation 20:** Provide students with real opportunities to shape new school builds and other infrastructure investments through student voice practices.

### **Greater funding investments for every Victorian school**

Alongside these targeted measures, VicSRC believes that the time has come to finally address the overarching problem of school funding in Victoria.

Government schools in Victoria went without an estimated \$1.6 billion in 2023<sup>89</sup> due to a longstanding gap in school funding which has yet to be addressed by state and federal governments, despite a national benchmark being initially set out more than a decade ago through the Gonski review.

The result of this underfunding means that Victorian students are not supported through their education to the level that has already been agreed upon by state and federal governments. This in turn puts undue strain on all elements of the education system when teachers and school-based services are left to make do with the funding they have. Students often encounter the worst of these impacts, with students at Congress 2023 explaining that staff and services at their schools are constantly overstretched.

In recognition of the urgency of this challenge, VicSRC calls upon the state and federal governments work collaboratively to deliver 100% of funding according to the Schooling Resourcing Standard (SRS)

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<sup>87</sup> VicSRC 2023, p. 13.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Cobbold, T (2023), 'The Facts About School Funding in Victoria: An Update', *Save Our Schools*, October 12, 2023, accessed 16 April 2024 ([link](#))

to all Victorian schools, and that this effort includes a needs-based approach whereby the schools most in need of additional funding (such as schools with disproportionately large groups of vulnerable students and students with additional needs) get access to funding first.

The state of school funding is made worse by a key clause of the Agreement which allows for state governments to claim non-school expenses like capital depreciation against the school funding contributions that they are obligated to provide<sup>90,91</sup>. This further reduces the amount of money flowing into schools to directly support students.

Therefore, VicSRC recommends that this loophole is closed as part of any new agreement on school funding which is reached between the Victorian and Federal governments.

This will ensure that public investment in education serves its intended purpose, to deliver and improve education for Victorian students. In taking these steps, we recognise that visionary policy and decision-making, while imperative, can only stand to optimise our education system to an extent. Beyond this, additional baseline support is needed to ensure that schools have the financial resources they need to deliver meaningful progress.

Not only will these reforms provide urgently needed relief to schools' and allow for additional support to flow through schools and into classrooms, they will also work to ensure that schools have the resources they need to deliver high-quality experiences for students outside the classroom, such as camps and excursions, to boost the richness of students' learning experience.

**Recommendation 21:** Achieve 100% of funding for every Victorian school according to the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) by 2028.

**Recommendation 22:** Close the current loophole which allows for non-education spending to be counted as part of Victoria's contribution to funding the SRS.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> University of Melbourne & Australian Government Primary Principals Association (2023), 'A Better and Fairer Start for All: A case for funding all government primary schools to their Schooling Resource Standard as soon as possible.', *vpa.org.au*, accessed 19 July 2024 ([link](#)), p. 26.