cluster kit

a guide to assist schools in establishing a strong network of SRCS in their region
The VicSRC is a network of Student Representative Councils working to strengthen the capacity of SRCs to speak and take action on behalf of secondary students throughout Victoria.

The VicSRC is funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

Further copies of this Kit can be ordered from the VicSRC on (03) 9267 3744 or downloaded from our website at www.vicsrc.org.au.

We want an education system where learning is enjoyable, practical and meaningful and where SRCs are valued and supported to contribute to making this an ongoing reality.

We want a VicSRC that fosters connections between SRCs and is recognised as the peak body for secondary students in Victoria.

The VicSRC’s work is based on these principles:

- Student run, organised and initiated
- For the benefit of students
- Inclusive
- Not party political
- Not for profit
- Undertaking fair representation
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This document provides some information about SRC Clusters. The following summary includes the essential information, and the following pages expand on this and provide some supporting material.

Definition
An SRC Cluster is simply a local network – group of students from secondary school Student Representative Councils who meet regularly to share information, to discuss common concerns and issues, to plan joint initiatives and to share resources. Clusters can be any size, though it is suggested that at least three schools need to be represented for a Cluster to exist. Clusters should also meet regularly – at least once a term is useful, though this will depend on their location, purposes and the needs of its members.

Why?
Clusters exist so that SRCs can:
- Gain information about other schools and about wider education policies;
- Get ideas from each other;
- Support each other;
- Reflect together on their processes, successes and difficulties;
- Further develop skills in organisation, leadership and participation;
- Learn how to improve their operations;
- Learn about possibilities for student initiatives;
- Influence policy beyond individual schools;
- Provide student representation and voice in local networks such as local councils, LLENs and so on;
- Enter into local partnerships in education decision-making;
- Develop efficient training;
- Share resources.

A VicSRC Cluster
The VicSRC links individual SRCs and Clusters at a state-wide level. To be recognised as a VicSRC Cluster, the Cluster must:
- Invite all SRCs in the local area to join the Cluster;
- Have a minimum of three participating schools;
- Establish a representative link with the SRC in each participating school;
- Agree to the VicSRC’s statement of aims;
- Maintain regular communication with the VicSRC Executive (ie. after each Cluster meeting)
What is an SRC Cluster?
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Clusters are normally geographically based i.e. They are drawn from schools in the same area, where relatively convenient travel arrangements can be made. There are also other reasons for creating Clusters, such as being linked by a common interest or characteristic. However, the shared nature of the Cluster should be one that enables the SRCs to meet regularly.

Why are SRC Clusters important?
Clusters provide important opportunities for students and their SRCs to meet and share information and support. Students have identified the need to network between SRCs and the VicSRC is establishing and supporting a Cluster structure to enable this to happen.

Clusters can feed directly into the VicSRC decision making processes through development of proposals to the VicSRC Congress, and reports to the VicSRC Executive.

What can Clusters do?
Clusters exist so that SRCs can:

**Learn together:**
- Get ideas from each other;
- Support each other;
- Reflect together on their processes, successes and difficulties;
- Learn how to improve their operations;
- Develop skills in organisation, leadership and training;
- Develop efficient training.

**Work together:**
- Gain information about other schools and about wider education policies;
- Learn about possibilities for student initiatives;
- Influence policy beyond individual schools;
- Enter into local partnerships in education decision making;
- Provide student representation and voice in local networks such as local councils, LLENs etc;
- Share resources;
- Enjoy the challenges and experiences ... and have fun!

How often should Clusters meet?
Clusters meet according to the need of their members, though they should aim to meet regularly – it is suggested that at least once a term is useful – it is suggested that at least once a term is useful. However, this will depend on the location and purposes of the Cluster. In metropolitan areas it will be more possible for Clusters to meet regularly than will be the case in rural areas. Where schools are more isolated, it may also be possible for the Cluster to meet virtually via teleconferencing, phone hook-ups or e-mail-based chat rooms. In these cases, the Cluster may only come together face to face once or twice a year.

Clusters can also meet during school hours or after school, depending on local possibilities. During school hours it will be necessary to meet with the formal approval of the schools and with direct teacher support (including for transport). In some cases, especially in metropolitan areas, Clusters may be able to meet after school hours, with students attending as individuals (using public transport).

Cluster meetings can also vary from one hour to three hours, depending on the business to be conducted, on the location and on the time of day.
Where should Clusters meet?
Clusters normally meet at one of the schools involved. Where possible, this venue should be rotated between schools so that students get to see different schools. The school hosting the Cluster meeting might like to show students round the school and provide some refreshments. However, Clusters can also meet at local venues such as Council offices or meeting rooms of support organisations. These provide venues that might be more central and neutral.

Clusters might decide to share the roles of calling meetings, with the host school chairing the Cluster meeting, and the next host school taking minutes of meetings.

Recognition Requirements
To be recognised as a VicSRC Cluster, the Cluster must:

- **Invite all SRCs in the local area to join the Cluster;**
  The VicSRC includes student organisations from schools in the Government, Catholic and Independent systems;

- It is important that Clusters are inclusive and do not deliberately or accidentally overlook a school that could be in the Cluster;

- Don’t forget to invite, where possible, representatives from Special Development Schools and out-of mainstream schools such as community VCAL, Koori schools, pre-CALs etc;

- Not all these schools may want to be active in the Cluster, but they should be given the opportunity to do so.

- **Have a minimum of three participating schools;**
  While Clusters can be of any size, according to local needs, there should be at least three schools involved to provide reasonable representation beyond the individual school level.

- **Establish a representative link with the SRC in each participating school;**
  The Cluster needs to be formally recognised by the SRC (or equivalent body) in each of the participating schools – the SRC must make a decision to join the Cluster;

- The students who attend Cluster meetings do not have to be formally members of the SRC; there is value if they are, but also danger of a few students taking on too many roles; so:

  - The students who attend Cluster meetings from that school should report back to the SRC in their school about what happens, and bring information to the Cluster from their school.

  - **Agree to the VicSRC’s statement of aims;**
    Any group of schools can form a Cluster; however to be recognised as a VicSRC Cluster, the Cluster needs to agree to the four aims of the VicSRC.

  - **Maintain regular communication with the VicSRC Executive (ie after each Cluster meeting).**
    The Cluster should maintain regular contact with the VicSRC, including letting the VicSRC know about meetings and their outcomes; this communication can happen with the VicSRC staff, or with the member of the VicSRC Student Executive with the Cluster Portfolio (responsibility).
Here is a summary of some steps that you could use to set up a local SRC Cluster or network. More detailed suggestions are included within this Kit. The processes will depend on where you are, what support you have, how enthusiastic people are and time people are willing to commit. There are many more tasks involved in each step:

1. Propose the idea of a meeting and training day for local SRCs and get agreement from your Student Council. Set up a small organising committee.

2. Clear the proposal with the school administration and negotiate a suitable date and spaces. Book rooms.

3. Draw up a list of the local schools you want involved. You should include all relevant schools. Contact the VicSRC Office for a contact list of local schools and supporters.

4. Send out invitations well in advance – at least one month before the day. Decide about: How many people from each school? Will there be a charge to cover lunch etc? How long? (Remember to allow for travel time.)

5. Work out a program: what do you want to cover on the day? How do you want students to share experiences and information?

There’s a sample agenda provided on page 9 and 10 in this Kit if you want some ideas.

Invite someone from the VicSRC to attend to help and facilitate if appropriate, including talking about what the VicSRC does and what Clusters can do.

6. Find support from teachers, or the local Council, or the district or regional Education Department. Define what support you need – and what you want them to do.

7. Send out the program with a reminder notice approximately two weeks before the date.

8. Organise workshops and a large group session to consider any action proposals from workshop groups.

9. What will we do with the outcomes of the day? How will we follow these up? Do we need to set up some on-going group of students on the proposals, to keep these ideas going?

10. If there is general agreement to the proposal to set up an on-going Cluster (maybe you need to propose this formally and ask each school if it will support the idea), ask each school to then nominate one or two (or more) people to form an ‘interim Cluster committee’. Each SRC might have to take the idea back to its next meeting to formally decide whether to be part of it. This small group meets briefly to set a meeting time, and swaps names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses.

11. Set a meeting date for the first Cluster meeting, perhaps about two weeks away. One school (it’d be good if it were a different one) offers to host, convene and chair the meeting (and send out reminders). Work out a suitable time: it could be after school or during school hours.

12. At this meeting, talk about why you want a local network, and what it could do. How will you work? Who will be involved?

13. Ask each school to formally appoint network liaison persons who will come to meetings or keep in touch.

14. Set a meeting and task schedule for the group. There will be things to follow up from the training day such as action on common problems an SRC faces.

15. Identify people who can help you organise – by sending out notices, organising a place to meet, assisting with transport.

16. Set up some communication links with the schools eg a local SRC newsletter, to keep all schools in touch with what’s happening.
Like individual SRCs, Clusters are student run. However, in most cases, students will require some basic support to help them organise a Cluster – because they are on separate sites, because there is travel involved, because communication is more difficult.

The VicSRC can act as a catalyst to help students initiate and set up a Cluster. However, the VicSRC does not have the resources to provide full or on-going support for every Cluster in Victoria. Therefore the VicSRC seeks local partners who can assist students to organise and facilitate their local Cluster meetings. In practice, this means organising tasks such as:

- Maintaining communication between the participating schools;
- Setting dates for meetings and sending out notices;
- Organising a venue (ideally provided by the school);
- Following up meetings with the circulation of minutes;
- Assisting students to convene any other working groups required.

It also involves facilitating the actual meetings as required:

- Making sure each meeting has an agenda;
- Appointing a meeting chairperson or facilitator;
- Supporting students in their roles.

Most tasks within meetings will be able to be done by students, particularly as the Cluster develops. There may be continuing support needed, the level of which will depend on the group and individual students.

The VicSRC can provide sample agendas and guidance about how these tasks are carried out, drawing upon our experience from around the state.

The VicSRC can also provide co-facilitation for the first two or three meetings of a Cluster (depending on demand) to assist the Cluster to establish itself.

Sources of Ongoing Support

There are broadly two ways that on-going support for these organisation and facilitation tasks may be obtained. The first is that a local organisation or person provides time and expertise as part of their existing job. The second is that special funding is obtained to employ someone to provide that support.

In either case, the VicSRC can work with groups to assist in applications and in formulation of appropriate job descriptions.

The following local groups or regional groups are possibilities for supporting SRC Clusters: Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENS), Regional Youth Affairs Councils (RYANs), local Council Youth Services, School Focused Youth Services (SFYS) - but this is not a complete list of possibilities. In each case, the Cluster can also provide a young people’s reference or advisory role to the group in return for the practical support.

Steps involved in developing on-going local support are:

1. Identify possible sources of local support, either financial or human;
2. If there is appropriate support staff already existing, approach the local organisation and negotiate for allocation of a regular time or work commitment within existing job descriptions;
3. If extra staffing is required, work with local groups to apply for local funding to employ a Cluster facilitator and organiser;
4. Identify and approach an appropriate auspice agency for funding.
Clusters and those providing support should be aware of the possibilities for the following concerns and maintain an alert for them:

**Adults taking over:**
A Cluster should be student-run; there is a careful line between support and guidance and domination. Some Clusters limit opportunities for non-students to speak when this has proved a particular problem.

**The ‘Cluster Club’:**
The cluster can become an in-group for a few relatively empowered students, serving to exclude some schools or some students. Clusters should be seeking new people and new schools, thinking about ‘shadowing’ roles for younger students etc;

**Lacking purpose:**
Once the initial reasons for meeting as a Cluster have been met (sharing), the Cluster may lack a clear purpose for its continuing existence and not be seen as achieving anything. At least each Cluster meeting should involve SRCs sharing about their individual initiatives, identifying issues within specific SRCs and schools, and asking about whether any of these would benefit from wider discussion and action. Cluster meetings can also be venues for reporting on Departmental initiatives and gaining feedback on local and wider system proposals eg by having a speaker or running a workshop – this may need to be arranged, at least in the first instance.

**Over-commitment:**
The same students can be active at SRC, Cluster and state-wide levels and become individually overcommitted. Share the roles, with good communication between those students active at different levels.

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**Some Useful Stuff**

- a) Sample Cluster Meeting Agendas – first meeting, subsequent meeting
- b) Sample job description for a Cluster Support Person
- c) Sample SRC Cluster Group Questionnaire
- d] ‘Why Student Networking’ – from *Student Councils and Beyond*, p 60
- e] ‘20 Steps to Set up a Student Network’ – from *Student Councils and Beyond*, pp 61-62
- f] ‘Working Together to be More Effective’ – from *Connect 163*, pages 8-9
Sample Cluster Agenda: First Meeting
2 hours; adapt to the time available

Meeting Opens

Introduction and Apologies

1. Ice Breakers: meeting people and getting to know each other  15 mins

2. Information sharing  30 mins
   - Reports from each SRC: What are we doing?
   - What is the VicSRC?
   - Relevant community groups
   - Positive, negative and dreams: comments on our SRCs.

3. Brainstorming the VicSRC Cluster  20 mins
   - What could it do?
   - What would be the benefits? What commitments?
   - Is this something students want?

Break  15 mins

4. Forming a Cluster  20 mins
   - How will it work?
   - Who will take responsibility for it?
   - Making a commitment
   - Ratifying the VicSRC aims

5. Planning  20 mins
   - Where to from here?
   - Next Meeting: date and venue

Meeting Close
Meeting Opens

Introduction and Apologies

1. Ice Breakers: meeting people and getting to know each other 15 mins

2. Information sharing 20 mins
   - Updated from each SRC: What new has happened?
   - Any news from others (example: VicSRC, relevant community groups)

3. Reports from schools on tasks taken on: 20 mins
   What have we found out?
   What do we want to do with this information?
   Ideas for action
   Is this something students want? – checking back

Break 15 mins

4. Speaker or Training Session 20 mins
   - Outline of a program for which student responses are wanted; or
   - Discussion topic around which students might want to take group action; or
   - Feed-in to VicSRC Congress etc

5. Planning 30 mins
   - Where to from here? – topics or tasks for the next meeting
   - Next Meeting: date and venue

Meeting Close
The **Cluster Support Worker** will support and assist students in the Cluster to maintain the work of the Cluster through:

- Preparing for and facilitating SRC Cluster meetings throughout the school year (at times and places as decided by the Cluster);
- Coordinating the operation of the Cluster, including by establishing and maintaining effective internal communication, forwarding reminder notices to members about Cluster meetings, booking venues, negotiating support and ensuring that meeting agendas and minutes are completed and distributed on time;
- Regularly attending and, where appropriate, facilitating the operation of Cluster meetings;
- Providing guidance and advice to students about conducting the Cluster and its initiatives;
- Providing consultancy and guidance to all stakeholders (including schools and teachers) about the Cluster and associated issues;
- Assisting in the application for funds to maintain the Cluster.
- Maintain communication with the VicSRC.

**Participating students will:**

- Regularly attend Cluster meetings and/or arrange for suitable students to represent their school in their absence;
- Actively contribute to and be responsible for the planning, implementation and evaluation of the Cluster and its activities;
- Produce and distribute Cluster agendas and minutes for each meeting;
- Take responsibility for developing SRC resources, research and actions as decided by the Cluster.

**Participating schools will:**

- Ensure that the school is represented by students at scheduled Cluster meetings;
- Nominate a staff member to be responsible for and undertake duties associated with the SRC Cluster;
- Provide students with transportation to and from each Cluster meeting;
- Prepare students for participation in each meeting;
- Provide students with information, guidance and support for their participation in the Cluster, as required;
- Ensure that appropriate permission is obtained for students’ participation in Cluster meetings and activities;
- Provide a venue and light refreshments (eg drinks and biscuits) for each meeting, in rotation between Cluster schools.

**The VicSRC will:**

- Provide a Cluster with initial contacts within its area;
- Assist the Cluster (on request) with initial facilitation of meeting;
- Provide on-going linkages with the State Executive and other Clusters as appropriate;
- Assist with advice on funding, auspice arrangements, operation and so on;

**Note:** These are simply suggestions for possible roles. They will vary according to the capacity of students to operate the Cluster, distances involved, and size of the Cluster etc. There may be occasions when students can maintain a Cluster without a Support Worker.
Sample SRC Cluster Questionnaire

This is a sample initial questionnaire (courtesy of Whittlesea SRC Cluster) to find out what schools want from a cluster. Adapt it for your own use.

What do you think are the benefits are for having a SRC Cluster?

What kind of activities would help the school reps at the SRC Cluster Meeting?

How could you rate the following ideas for the SRC Cluster Meetings? Rate 1 for low, 5 for high.

- Sharing of ideas and activities for each school
- Developing team building skills through games and activities
- Developing leadership skills through activities and workshops
- Developing strategies for tackling issues
- Developing interpersonal skills through activities and workshops
- Inviting guest speakers to address the meeting
- Discussing how other SRCs operate in schools
- Discussing how different SRCs get projects up and running
- Developing ideas for motions to be presented at the VicSRC Congress

Which if the following would you like presented for discussion at SRC Cluster Meetings?

- Running Effective Meetings
- Ideas for Community Projects
- Communication Skills
- Connect with Other Groups
- Ideas for Fundraising
- Health and Safety
- Public Speaking
- Leadership Qualities
- Improve Fundraising
- Connect with Other Clusters
What other topics/ideas would you suggest?

Who do you think could be invited as a guest speaker?

Have you had any difficulties attending SRC Cluster Meetings? If so, how could this be resolved?

Do you have any comments to make about the SRC Cluster Meetings?
**What is a Student Network?**

A Student Network exists when students from two or more schools (SRCs, Student Councils, JSCs) get together around shared needs and interests. It can be a formal network - meetings or conferences - or an informal network with casual contacts and shared resources, face to face and/or by e-mail. It can be local, regional, statewide or national.

**Why is networking important?**

Here are some ideas suggested by students and others:

**Sharing Resources**

Students can share information (eg about Student Council constitutions, publications, meeting procedures) and physical resources (eg 'how to' kits, equipment) - and this will help each Student Council group operate better.

**Learning How**

Information can be gained (often best done in face-to-face discussions) from other students about how to make decisions, how to take part in school committees, how to organise things and so on.

**Reflecting Together**

Students learn about making their Student Councils better by reflecting on and thinking about what they have done. Talking about a Student Council to other students is a useful way of thinking about what's working, what's not, and why. Other students can help this process: 'we are not alone'; 'we found that too'; 'that's different to what happened to us'; 'because' ...

**Supporting Each Other**

When students and Student Councils are having problems in one school - in being heard, in getting things organised, in keeping focused, in getting motivated - other students can help with encouragement or advice or visits or ideas or letters or phone calls or e-mails or SMS or ...

**Efficient Training**

A training day shared between representatives from several schools can be an efficient use of scarce resources. For example, several schools can share the cost of hiring a venue or employing a trainer. Training each other is also an economical use of human resources.

**Influencing Policy**

Education decisions that affect schools are often made outside the school - they are the bigger issues within which individual schools operate. If students want to have an influence over these policies, they need to be represented at the levels at which they are made - regional, statewide, national etc. And a local network can be a first stepping stone towards student participation in these big issues.

**Partnerships in Decision-Making**

At Regional and Statewide level, Education Department committees and officers are often interested to consult with students, to invite students to form advisory groups, or to share in decision-making through student membership of those committees. But who do these student represent? Students need to meet to understand these issues, to talk over their views, to hear and present the diversity of student voices, and to advise their representatives. Otherwise these students will only be able to represent their own ideas.

**Learning About What's Possible**

Student groups can 'get in a rut' and be limited by what they've done or thought about in the past. In particular, some Student Councils get trapped into thinking that they can only be involved in fund-raising or social events. They might dismiss some other possible actions as 'impossible' because they've never tried them! Or they might never think of them at all! Hearing from other schools can 'shake up' a student group and encourage it to think of new possibilities.

**Information Paths**

Network meetings provide efficient and alternative pathways for information to students about education policies and programs. Students and student groups may not always receive this information or realise its significance through individual school sources. Speakers are more likely to be available to talk with inter-school groups, than with each individual Student Council.

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Here are some suggested steps - one way that a local Student Network can be set up. How you do it will depend on what your local needs are, where you are situated (in rural areas you will probably meet less often and communicate more by e-mail etc), what support you have, how enthusiastic people are and so on. This is also just an outline and there are many more tasks involved in each step:

1. Propose an idea to your Student Council/SRC: that you hold a local meeting and training day for local SRCs. Get agreement from the Student Council that it will sponsor this. Set up a small organising committee. (Make sure you report back regularly to your Student Council.)

2. Clear the proposal with the school administration and negotiate a suitable date and spaces. Book rooms; if it is to be very big, you might want to book a hall or look for a community venue.

3. Draw up a list of the local schools you want involved. You should include all relevant schools. Decide if it will be primary or secondary Student Councils or both. (If both, you might need separate sessions for primary and secondary students.)

4. Send out invitations well in advance - at least one month before the day. You will need to have made some decisions: How many people from each school? Will there be a charge to cover lunch etc? How long? (Remember to allow for travel time.)

5. Work out a program: what do you want to cover on the day? Do you want 'experts' to lead groups? Or students to share experiences and information? (See the box - next page - for a sample program.)

6. Who can you get to help you? Contact your local Council, the district or regional Education Department, community groups etc for speakers, workshop leaders and so on.

7. Send out the program with a reminder notice approximately two weeks before the date.

8. Organise the details of the day. You will need to think about: catering (lunch, tea/coffee/ juices, biscuits), name-tags, information material/booklets, group facilitators, equipment, people to greet and guide visitors, recording outcomes etc.

9. Enjoy the day.

10. Make sure there is a large group session to consider any action proposals from workshop groups. (Perhaps these are reported, not voted on, but referred to an on-going group ... see below.)

11. Ask the key questions:

   What will we do with the outcomes of the day?

   How will we follow these up?

   Do we need to set up some on-going group of students on the proposals, to keep these ideas going?

12. If there is general agreement to this proposal (maybe even propose this formally and ask each school if it will support the idea), ask each school to then nominate one or two (or more) people to form an 'interim network committee'. Each Student Council might have to take the idea back to its next meeting to formally decide whether to be part of it. This small group meets briefly to set a meeting time. Swap names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses.
Here are two examples of local student networks in Victoria that have operated in the past:

**Western Region Student Network**

Student representatives from many of the secondary schools in Melbourne’s western region met regularly for several years. Each meeting was hosted by a different school, with another school acting as secretary for the meeting and then sending out minutes and the invitation for the next meeting - which they then hosted. They were supported by workers from the local Education Centre, who assisted with mailings and arranging transport.

Meetings usually went for one to two hours, about once a month, after school. Each school reported on what the SRC (or other groups) had been doing, what difficulties had been met and asked for ideas and support. In one case, the Student Network wrote to a School Council at one of the schools, in support of the SRC at that school, until a satisfactory outcome was achieved (about locks on toilet doors). At other meetings, students asked Education Department and others to attend to provide information about programs.

The students decided that Network meetings would be entirely student-run, with non-students only allowed to speak at the request of the meeting, and then for a maximum of three minutes.

Roger Holdsworth

**SOS**

Students at secondary schools in Shepparton set up a group called Students of Shepparton (SOS). (There were several other local groups in the Region: like the Student Network of Wodonga: SNOW, and the Student Network of Ovens-King: SNOOK.)

These met at training days, with an executive that organised the days and kept in touch with the schools. They were supported by workers from the local Education Centre, who assisted with mailings and arranging transport.

The students decided that Network meetings would be entirely student-run, with non-students only allowed to speak at the request of the meeting, and then for a maximum of three minutes.

Roger Holdsworth

**Network Day: A Possible Program Outline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>Welcome and intentions of the day; housekeeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.40</td>
<td>‘Meeting each other’ activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>Sharing Information about what’s happening in the Student Councils: each school presents a brief report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.30</td>
<td>Break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>Defining the important issues (for future meetings): schools suggest topics and the group decides on the main ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.30</td>
<td>Workshop session 1: On topics previously suggested by schools: discussion/decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.15</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>Keynote Speaker: &quot;A Challenge to Student Councils&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>Workshop session 2: Repeat the topics or new ones eg skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>Action Proposals from Workshops (plenary session)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>Thanks and next steps; evaluation of the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>Close</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Originally from *Connect* 142, August
Student Councils have found that working together in a local cluster group, enables them... we shared resources...

“We were trying to organise a training day for our Student Council, but it was too expensive ... the trainer’s fees, the hire of the hall and all that. So we got together with some other Student Councils from nearby schools and shared the cost.”

“We found we already had resources like constitutions and documents to share with each other. What one school had, could be used by others.”

... we got ideas from others...

“We heard about what some other schools were doing. This wasn’t just about ideas for fund-raising days or about meeting procedures. We also got ideas about what Student Councils COULD and SHOULD be doing. It sharpened up our thoughts.”

“We realise now that we were in a rut - we were limited by what we had done in the past ... what we thought SRCs should do. We got ideas from other schools about new possibilities!”

... we realised that we weren’t the only ones...

“For a long time our SRC wondered if other students had faced the same problems we had. We’d read about what SRCs had done in some places, but that wasn’t the same as hearing directly about it. Then we met up with some representatives from other schools ... and the sorts of things they were doing were pretty much the same as what we were worried about. Some had some ideas that helped ... but just talking about the same stuff was useful. We were on the same wavelength!”

“If you’re on a Student Council you’re sort of on your own. In the school, you sometimes feel a bit different if you care about these sort of things. It was good to meet up with others who were interested in the same things. Hopefully some will stay friends - but with others it just helps to know they exist!”

These accounts are real stories and comments from students from several different clusters and schools. They show how students are forming and using cluster groups to support the work of Student Councils.
... we were listened to ...

"Some people came to our interschool meeting from the local Council and from community groups, and they asked us what we thought about schools and stuff in the area. It really seemed they were interested to hear what we thought and they listened to us."

"Because we weren't just from one school, I think people thought our ideas were more important - like we really were representing what students thought."

"They were willing to listen to us because there was a big group of us."

... we were consulted about bigger issues ...

"The Education Department wanted to consult with students about some changes they were proposing. Because we had a cluster of schools, it was easy and convenient for them to come along to some meetings and tell us all what was happening and ask us to be involved. And they knew we were thinking bigger than individual schools and would understand the issues more."

"Some students from the cluster group have now been asked to be regular student representatives on regional committees."

... we supported each other ...

"There was one school where the locks had been taken off the toilet doors. The students mentioned this at a regional meeting and we all went 'WHAT!?' and thought it was terrible. In fact I think we were more angry about it than the students from that school ... because they had got used to being treated like that."

"So we wrote as a group to the School Council at that school and protested on behalf of students from the whole region. Well, a bit later we got a reply - and we also heard this from student representatives from the school - that the school had asked the SRC to pay to have the locks put back on the toilet doors!

"At our next meeting we talked about this again and thought this still sucked. So we wrote again to the School Council and said we thought it wasn't good enough. And eventually ... it took a couple of months ... the School Council agreed to replace the locks and to pay for it themselves. It showed us how students could support each other and, even though it took a long time, that we can be effective together."
**Setting Up and Supporting an SRC Cluster**

Students Councils are meeting locally to share information and advice about their work and to provide support for each other. Such local SRC Clusters can also support a lot of other activities, such as training and common action.

However, forming and maintaining such clusters has often been difficult for students. Sometimes they meet with enthusiasm, then struggle to keep going. Some find it hard to identify the support that is needed. In particular, there are practical difficulties with keeping in contact, circulating minutes, calling effective meetings and so on.

And while there is encouragement at a statewide level for student clusters, there is a limit to what a single organisation can do. There must be local solutions, with local funding (if required).

Let’s look at one example, and see what this shows us. And we should stress that this is just one way of developing a supporter a cluster - there maybe many different ways to do this.

**Greater Dandenong SRC Cluster**

Students from five secondary schools in Melbourne’s south-east have recently been meeting to form the Greater Dandenong SRC Cluster. They are still sorting out their journey, but are enthusiastic about the possibilities for working together.

They have identified the following issues as important stages in starting off their group:

1. **Kicking off the cluster**
   The initiative to set up the first meeting was taken by the local coordinator of the School Focused Youth Services (SFYS) program; he sees such a network as meeting the program’s goals of supporting active student participation. The coordinator called the first meetings in contact with the VicSRC, and continues to play a key role in these early stages: reminding schools about meetings and facilitating the students’ discussions. The early meetings have focused on establishing clear understandings of **why** various people - the students, the schools, SFYS - want to set up a local student network. As some of these schools are actively planning school amalgamations, they see the network as complementing and feeding into this.

2. **Identifying the potential schools**
   There are about 12 secondary schools in the local area (defined by the School Focused Youth Services’ area of responsibility), within relatively easy travel distances. All of these are invited to meetings and a core group continues to be active. As the group develops, further consideration will be given to inviting other schools into more active participation.

3. **Identifying a focus for discussions and action**
   Students initially discussed what a network or cluster could do, and decided on a focus around combatting bullying. They went back to their schools and did some research to find out about the issue, and about what schools were already doing. They shared their research at their next meeting, along with reports on the status of their SRCs. While they continue to plan student-led responses to bullying, they also then realised it was important that their SRCs are strong and effective - and hence **able** to act on these issues, so have decided to concentrate on building this competence at the start of 2008.

4. **Identifying on-going support**
   The students recognised that it would be difficult for them to facilitate the inter-school meetings and to carry out the back-up secretarial work. Some of this can be done at a school level, with students hosting meetings and providing refreshments, and with teachers providing transport (and sometimes staying for meetings or, in other cases, dropping students off at the host school). But someone has to phone round with reminders and send minutes round. Also, until students become more experienced in chairing meetings, they decided that someone was needed to facilitate the actual meetings. SFYS can provide short-term meetings, SFYS can provide short-term support, but this is one of several local initiatives for them.

   So the students have applied for local SFYS funding to support their network. If successful, they will use that money to pay for organisational and meeting work and expenses (including facilitation support), so that the students can **direct** their network without getting bogged down in its administration. They have identified an appropriate funding source and also possibilities for the part-time employment of someone to assist the group.

5. **A formal arrangement**
   A formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been drawn up to specify the responsibilities and expectation of schools (through their SRC support teachers), students (as representatives of their SRCs) and School Focused Youth Services. With funding, this MOU will be extended to specify the role of the employed facilitator and support person.

6. **Links with other students**
   The Cluster group has decided to see themselves as a local cluster of the statewide VicSRC, thus linking in with (and supporting) other students across the state. This also provides them with access to the knowledge and resources of the VicSRC.

   The VicSRC is supporting many other local clusters or networks of student representatives to develop across Victoria. They are identifying key persons within each area who can take the initiative to call such clusters together, and then assist students to identify local funding sources that will enable them to continue a network - to support the improved operation of SRCs, and to address issues in common. The experiences of each of these clusters - such as the Greater Dandenong SRC Cluster - adds to our knowledge of the different ways in which this can be done.

Roger Holdsworth

For more information about the Greater Dandenong SRC Cluster, contact the VicSRC, or Troy Macris at:

Troy.Macris@southernhealth.org.au
Further copies of this kit can be ordered from the VicSRC on (03) 9267 3744 or downloaded from www.vicsrc.org.au/publication.

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