

# **Victorian Student Representative Council Submission**

regarding the

## **Victorian Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform**

### **Introduction to the VicSRC**

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is a democratic network of SRCs working to represent the views of secondary students in Victoria. Student Representative Councils (SRCs or sometimes known by other names) are the bodies that exist within most secondary schools to represent the opinions of students. The VicSRC has 59 member SRCs representing more than 40,000 secondary students. Our vision is to bring Student Representative Councils together across Victoria to make the voices of students heard at all levels and, through that process, enable students (and their organisations) to develop their vision and capacity for making a difference in their school and across the state.

The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria which is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people's issues in Victoria. The Youth Affairs Council provides a means through which the youth sector and young people voice their opinions and concerns in regards to policy issues affecting them. The Youth Affairs Council believes that strong student representative structures are essential for the continued achievement of improved student learning outcomes. These structures are the most effective way to engage with students where they are at and thus enhance teacher and school capacity to respond to changes in student learning needs.

As an organisation representing secondary students the content of this submission relates primarily to the ways in which the reform plans affect secondary schools. However, as Victorian primary students have no equivalent body to represent them, the VicSRC believes that the principles and perspectives expressed here are largely applicable to primary schools as well. In addition, we have addressed only the points of the Discussion Papers where we had a relevant contribution to make.

### **Overview**

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) welcomes the Victorian Government's release of discussion papers on Early Childhood Development and School Reform. The papers provide a good basis for discussion about the future of education in Victoria and the VicSRC is pleased to be able to offer a student perspective to the discussions. The VicSRC is supportive of the general directions outlined in the discussion papers and appreciates the earnest intention of the government in seeking to improve educational outcomes for all Victorian students. The moves to incorporate early childhood development within the education sector is important for engaging children in education from an early age and doing so with a consistent approach. This general direction is supported by the VicSRC, although it is largely outside our area of expertise and thus our comments about it are limited. We wish, however, to urge the Government to ensure that there is on-going reform in education for older children and young people, and that the Government is not distracted into believing that the major reforms in Early Childhood Development are the sole areas of need.

The primary concern that the VicSRC has with the Discussion Paper is the way in which students are treated throughout the paper. The paper can be seen as viewing students simply as recipients of education services, or as product outcomes of a successful (or unsuccessful) system. The VicSRC believes that this is an incorrect perception of young people and a badly missed opportunity for building on many positive practices that see students in other ways. In particular, the Blueprint should provide an opportunity to engage students as active partners in their own education, both individually and collectively. Such an approach clearly reflects the Principles of Learning and Teaching (PoLT) and the strands within the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) – both of which are based on current educational thinking about the needs of young people in today’s society. Such an approach also recognises the potential for schools to utilise and stimulate young people’s energies and to direct and support their participation towards enhancing their own educational outcomes.

There are many ways that this can be done within and between schools and some of these are outlined in our responses to the specific questions and proposals throughout the submission. However, we wish to point out that a key area in which this approach (of acknowledging students as active constructors of learning and partners in schools’ processes) is absent within the proposals about building school and community partnerships. Partnerships with parents and communities are appropriately identified, but these partnerships must also include the active participation of students and their representative organisations. Currently, there is very little mention of students in this section apart from, again, as recipients of the various proposals. From a student perspective, reading about partnerships between schools and parents without mention of students is a glaring omission. The VicSRC encourages the government to include students as important partners throughout the document, not only in their own personal education but also through their organised work in assisting to implement many of the reforms in the discussion papers. Students bring unique and vital perspectives to the work of schools: they know things that other partners do not know; they have views and attitudes that are critical to the successful implementation of policies and programs; and they have educational needs as active citizens within their communities.

A second suggestion of the VicSRC is the need for greater recognition of the expertise of the broader community sector. The community sector has expertise and interest to assist schools and students in meeting both wellbeing and educational student outcomes (and recognises that these are inextricably linked). The discussion paper goes some way to recognising the benefits of strengthened partnerships between schools and their community. However it could go much further in responding to what is already happening in some local areas by setting out a more comprehensive strategy for engagement between the education and community sectors.

We also recognise that the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development developed and circulated a research and issues paper in 2007 around ‘Student Voice’ in which the Department acknowledged the importance of this topic for student learning and indicated a strong commitment to recognising the importance of ‘student voice’ in both governance and curriculum areas. This paper provides a strong theoretical base on which the Blueprint now needs to build action and concrete models for student participation. The VicSRC is committed to working closely with the Department to achieve this.

## **Improvement Targets**

The improvement targets set in the discussion paper are all positive in direction. However we argue that many of them refer only to vague increases without actually setting real objectives. Important questions also remain about the strategies that may be used to implement these targets and what extra resources will be allocated to pursue them.

As a set they have a strong emphasis on improvements in early childhood development. This is in keeping with the overall directions of discussion papers but the fact that there is only one target out of fourteen specific to secondary schooling does raise the concern that ongoing reform of the secondary sector is being put on hold.

The VicSRC encourages the government to set specific targets around student participation in education. Such targets need to go beyond definitions of participation in the sense of turning up or of reducing absence rates; they also need to go beyond participation in the sense of completing Year 12 or other equivalents. While these are valuable and necessary pre-conditions, the VicSRC argues that participation involves an active role for students in decisions about and implementation of learning activities for themselves and others. It would be appropriate to discuss setting targets for lifting student motivation for learning, for student confidence in schools and teachers, and for formal and active participation by students in school decision-making. These are the sorts of targets that would reflect an approach that sought to engage students as active partners in their own education.

More specifically, the VicSRC advocates the setting of targets for the creation and operation of Student Representative Councils (SRCs) that recognise the value and contribution of student-run structures within schools. Targets could relate to:

- the existence of SRCs (or equivalent student-run bodies);
- the regularity with which they meet;
- their representative nature within schools;
- their effectiveness in contributing to the school community;
- the representation of students within schools' decision-making structures;
- the support (specifically including teachers' time) provided to SRCs to assist them in operating these structures;
- the participation of students in school review and evaluation, including the existence and use of locally generated and student directed measures of student satisfaction.

## **Progress for all students**

The VicSRC notes the government's desire for better data, and the increased capacity of schools to measure student progress. While such directions are generally positive, caution needs to be taken to ensure that efforts towards increased accountability are firmly directed towards improved learning. There is a persistent danger that such data-driven approaches could be used to increase competition between schools, and to make incorrect judgements of capability. The VicSRC believes there is also further scope for students to be engaged (individually and collectively) in monitoring their own learning. Student roles can range through design of objectives and measures of outcomes, data collection, reportage, and analysis to the forming of recommendations and the implementation of the necessary changes. Effective approaches have been developed where young people are engaged and trained as peer researchers in investigating social and educational situations (through Student Action Teams and 'students as researchers' approaches). Where utilised, these have been effective both to deliver improved research outcomes and as learning experiences for

the young people involved. These sorts of approaches could be used within schools to achieve these benefits and also to strengthen student feelings of being valued as active partners.

Involving students as partners in the evaluation process would also contribute to improving the effectiveness of existing evaluative mechanisms. For example students report that current student attitude surveys, while positive in intent, do not appear to be having the desired effect of valid continuous evaluation and improvement. Students report filling out these surveys (with varying degrees of commitment or accuracy) but also complain about not hearing any results from them nor seeing any changes as a result. Some questions are seen as repetitive, badly written or allowing input of only quantitative data without any space for a qualitative explanation. In these cases, students doubt the validity of results and of the conclusions drawn. Their active participation in the process would increase our understanding of what such student attitudinal surveys show.

Often it is the teachers who already receive positive student feedback who act on and communicate with students about points for improvement. Meanwhile teachers who students perceive as having the most to 'gain' from their feedback make no reference to it. Including students in the process of survey design, analysis and implementation of results will not only improve the whole process but help to foster more positive and co-operative attitudes as students acquire a greater understanding and ownership of the process and the issues involved. Through their SRCs, students have indicated a willingness and interest to be involved in such evaluation. They have also demonstrated an understanding of the complexities and sensitivities involved with program evaluation, and an interest in improving learning rather than being involved in the simplistic and potentially destructive exercise of 'rating your teacher'.

Thirdly, there have been positive examples of students leading in the processes of individual assessment, through taking responsibility for the accumulation of assessments and evidence of learning within the reporting process between schools and homes. They have convened student-teacher-parent conversations, developed portfolios of evidence and addressed goals.

### **Mobilising Representative Voices of Students**

As well as being regarded as passive recipients of education, students are seen as individual participants in and recipients of that education. The VicSRC regards the collective and representative voices of students through Student Representative Councils (SRCs) and other such bodies, as being of high importance in education. Such bodies enable students to identify, discuss, debate and decide on issues of concern to them and others. They provide a way for students to participate in the formal processes of schools.

If such opportunities for partnerships and voices are to be realised, the VicSRC believes that the roles of students in decision-making at all levels must be recognised and also supported through the resourcing of individual SRCs, the provision of training for students and professional development for teachers, the creation of networking opportunities, the support of those who support SRCs, and the maintenance and resourcing of a student-run democratic and representative body at a state or system level.

## **Partnerships with parents and families**

The VicSRC welcomes these proposals that recognise that student learning and development are not limited to school and encourage integration of school and community life. However the VicSRC is again concerned that there is no mention of the student's role in these partnerships. The discussion paper again appears to view students as no more than mere recipients of education services provided by teachers, schools and parents, who will work together to do everything *for* the child. This approach fails to recognise the educational benefits that would arise from an active role for students in their own and others' education. The VicSRC recognises that students need the support of their parents as they take on life's challenges including education, and that relationships between parents and teachers are essential for both groups to provide the best possible support to students. We also recognise that some students do not have supportive families, and that these students are already playing key roles in the determination of their own educational pathways. In all cases, students need to be included in the process of establishing and facilitating these relationships. This is essential if students are to develop cooperative and supportive relationships with adults (rather than age-based antagonisms). It will also enhance student receptiveness to support and advice and thus the effectiveness of the support that both teachers and parents seek to provide.

At the very least the VicSRC encourages the government to articulate how it perceives the role of students within these relationships. In its current form the discussion paper leaves it unclear whether the student is part of the family, the school, both or neither. Students want to know where the government thinks they fit; the VicSRC believes that students have great potential to be active partners in these relationships in their own right.

## **Mobilising Community Resources**

The VicSRC particularly welcomes the direction of these proposals and calls on the government to go much further. Communities and the community sector have so much to offer and gain from stronger engagement with schools. The proposals around post-compulsory education, community hubs and early childhood services are just the tip of the iceberg and really only address limited educational outcomes.

The VicSRC notes with some concern the increasing expectations society has placed on schools in recent years. Schools are now the only institutions where a diversity of groups within society can access almost all young people. As a result schools are now expected to fulfil a variety of social roles that are quite different to the achievement of traditional (and also increasing) educational demands. Health Departments, traffic safety, social welfare, transport and other areas all specify (without consultation) goals for education and schools to meet. These are expectations for which many teachers (and the education system in general) have not been prepared, although schools are making an effort to respond appropriately. The VicSRC calls on the Victorian Government to acknowledge this dramatic shift for what it is and to respond accordingly. To begin with, two responses are required. One is a significant increase in resources for schools to match this significant increase in society's expectations: if various sectors of Government require outcomes from schools, they should be prepared to finance their achievement. The other is the need for substantial engagement of schools with the broader community sector – a sector that has much of the expertise and experience required to meet these desired social outcomes. For example, in 2007, the VicSRC Congress passed a resolution calling for an increase in the number of "student welfare workers to alleviate pressure and stress in schools". As such the VicSRC welcomes the recent state budget announcement of an extra 70 Student Support Officers and 10 Support Coordinators to work with schools across Victoria. This is a small

step in the right direction and only one of many school roles in which the community sector can assist schools.

This engagement with community is already happening in many places at a grass roots level. The VicSRC itself has benefited significantly from its partnership with the Youth Affairs Council and has facilitated several similar partnerships between local youth agencies and school networks. These have been largely mutually beneficial but have also drawn attention to the issues that naturally arise from the different structures and imperatives of the community and educational sectors. These issues can range from the practical to the philosophical and are not insurmountable, but they do need to be worked through. In general there has been a willingness from both schools and community sector partners to make the relationship work. The community sector in general is keen to establish stronger links with education and how to nest engage with schools is a common discussion point within that sector. However this has not been adequately matched at a system level by the education sector. For this reason the VicSRC welcomes the exploration of these issues within the discussion papers and encourages the government to continue boldly in breaking down the boundaries between sectors and silos. In particular, the government needs to facilitate such discussions at a system level and look to developing partnership frameworks to enable these relationships to occur. Again, it is essential that this discussion include student perspectives on how the education and community sectors can best work together to support them. The VicSRC recognises that students are active community members through employment, sporting and recreational groups, service clubs and so on. Many of them already play important leadership roles here, and schools need to build on these roles in their linkage with this sector. Students can be 'bridges' between educational and broader community sectors both in terms of what they gain, but also in terms of what they contribute. Planning for partnership frameworks should also take place in a way that recognises the many partnerships that are already bearing fruit and to support grassroots initiatives rather than imposing something from the top down.

### **Key Recommendations**

- Students should be seen as active partners in education both individually and collectively.
- Targets should be set for meaningful student participation in schools and the existence and effectiveness of Student Representative Councils.
- Organised student bodies deserve greater recognition and support for the important contributions they make to educational and social outcomes.
- Schools and students would benefit from including students as partners in monitoring both individual student learning and school improvement processes.
- Students have a crucial role to play in building stronger relationships between teachers and parents.
- Greater recognition is needed of the growing social expectations placed on schools and of the expertise the community sector has to offer in meeting these expectations.
- The Education Department should develop partnership frameworks for school and community sector engagement drawing on existing initiatives and student perspectives.