



# Victorian Student Representative Council Submission

in response to the

## MCEETYA Action Plan 2009–2012

A companion document for the Melbourne Declaration on  
Educational Goals for Young Australians

### 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 – sometimes known by other names) are the bodies that exist within most secondary schools to represent the opinions of 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 has over 70 member SRCs representing more than 40,000 secondary students. This document is broadly informed by our consultations with SRC representatives at forums over successive years and has been written under the guidance of the VicSRC Student Executive elected at the VicSRC Congress in 2008.

As an organisation representing secondary students, the content of this submission relates primarily to the ways in which the National Declaration on Educational Goals affects 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.

### Introductory remarks

The VicSRC welcomes the release of the MCEETYA Action Plan 2009–2012. The Draft provides some positive directions for working towards the goals outlined in the Melbourne Declaration. The VicSRC supports the broad vision of the goals and the ambition in Goal 2 for young Australians to become '*successful learners*', '*confident individuals*' and in particular '*active and informed citizens*'. These three parts to Goal 2 provide a useful framework for the actions to be undertaken in each of the eight areas. We were also encouraged by the inclusion in the final declaration of students as partners in achieving these goals. We believe that it is only by engaging students in a partnership approach that they will grow to fully realise these goals. As such we have outlined below several ways in which various sections of the Action Plan can be strengthened to better equip teachers, parents, schools and governments to develop strong partnerships with students.

### Developing Stronger Partnerships

While the action points listed in this section are all positive they lack any mention of developing partnerships with students or their representative bodies. We believe the student should be at the center of these partnerships and they should have an active role not a passive one. Giving students a voice and a role to play in their own education will make a strong contribution to their development as individuals, learners and citizens. This can be done at the individual, school and system level but requires increased recognition of the value of students as partners. During the 2008 VicSRC Congress students passed resolutions calling for specialised training for SRCs and minimum requirements for teacher support of SRCs and similar student representative bodies. This

section should also include specific action commitments to resourcing, documenting and training measures that assist young Australians to develop and fulfill their role as active citizens. Operating student or community structures and forums, articulating opinions and policy positions, participating in broader community debates and political processes are all important citizenship skills that require specific development. Further measures need to be implemented if we want students to fulfill this goal of becoming active citizens with important and significant voices and actions to contribute.

Engagement with parents is important and supported by the VicSRC. The national Family-School Partnerships Framework contains some excellent principles and strategies for partnership building however it provides almost no guidance on how to apply these to building partnerships with students. Indeed from reading the document it is difficult to understand where the student fits in the school-family partnership. Are they perceived to be part of the school? the family? both? or neither? Students have expressed some worries about what might happen if their teachers and parents get together without including students in the partnership. As such this framework document could be considerably enhanced by the addition of further information and strategies relating to the inclusion of students within school-family partnerships.

While it is disappointing to us that student perspectives were left out of this document it is not particularly surprising because there is no national student body that could have partnered with government and the parent and school council peak bodies in its production. This is just one example of student voices being missing from important documents and processes due to the lack of established state and national structures to represent students. The recent biennial forum was another example where, while a single student was invited and given a place on the stakeholders' panel, no other students were able to participate in the event. It is our fervent hope that students will be better represented at future forums. Currently statewide student representative bodies exist only in Victoria and New South Wales. While it is our strong belief that these bodies should be set up independently of government, government has a role to play in encouraging and providing resources for their establishment as it has with parent and other bodies. We strongly assert that such student representation and participation represents international best practice, and that the establishment of appropriate forums and structures would make excellent action points.

### **Supporting quality teaching and school leadership**

1. In the section on 'supporting quality teaching and school leadership' (page 6), the action agreements need also to recognise the role of students as leaders in schools through a range of specific measures that parallel those outlined for teachers, administrators and others. This would include a commitment to the provision of appropriate and improved training for students as leaders, provision of improved support through the recognition of teacher/adviser positions, and the development of improved opportunities at school, regional/cluster and statewide levels for students to be seen as leaders within their schools.
2. Quality teaching needs to be paralleled by a commitment to 'quality learning' and this recognises the need for action to engage all students as leaders in implementation of educational goals.

### **Middle Years Development**

In the section on middle years development the action commitments should recognise that the most powerful means of engaging students at this level, is to provide enhanced opportunities for them to play active decision-making roles in their classes, schools and systems. We welcome the

commitment to providing students with "opportunities to negotiate their learning" and believe this needs to be extended in ways that actively involve students: through provision of improved training and support, and through documentation of best practice in this area.

We advocate an approach that goes beyond 'innovative learning technologies' to provide ways in which students can lead in structuring these technologies towards purposes that meet young people's aspirations and needs. Students generally welcome new technology but often observe that they could have vastly improved its implementation if given the chance. Similarly, we seek a commitment to including students as leaders in 'supporting school leaders and teachers to provide motivating programs' and developing a 'positive school culture'. The importance of engaging all stakeholders in these sort of changes is now well recognised in many sectors of society. Implementing such programs from the top down without consultation can often create antagonism. In school communities need to recognise the pivotal role students can play in developing ideas and action and thus shaping a school's cultural development. We advocate that such programs include an active role for young people in their design, management and implementation.

### **Supporting Senior Years**

Our concern with the action points for supporting senior students is the heavy emphasis on preparing students for participation in the economy. While this is important and contributes towards the goals of young Australians becoming confident individuals and successful learners, there are no initiatives here that continue to assist young Australians to become active and informed citizens. This is particularly concerning as this is the stage when students approach the time in which their continuing citizenship becomes formalised in the eligibility to vote. The overwhelming message we receive from senior students concerns their high workload, stress levels and sacrifices they feel pressured to make in pursuit of higher grades. There is such a heavy emphasis in students' final years at school on attaining a 'place' in further training or employment that participation in community activities is squeezed out of young Australian's lives. This community participation is important not just for the social outcomes of developing confident individuals and active citizens but should also be recognised for providing important learning and potential career pathways as well. Furthermore lifting the Year 12 'attainment rate' will require more than simply providing more pathways, support and advice. Ultimately students will continue to leave school if they feel it is not responsive to their needs or an environment in which they can meet their goals. We believe the best way to encourage students to stay at school is to engage them in a partnership that gives them real ownership of their own learning journey. Naturally this needs to begin long before the senior years to have maximum impact.

### **Promoting world-class curriculum and assessment.**

The VicSRC welcomes the drive for continuous improvement in this area, however we believe an important aspect is being overlooked in these action points. We believe there needs to be an action commitment that supports the development of curriculum approaches that actively engage young people as partners in their education. These approaches are developing momentum around the world but governments should do more to assist the rapid innovation taking place in isolated pockets to permeate the wider system. It should be understood that these changes consist of more than just the adoption of new technology or assessment mechanisms. Most importantly they include a change in the perception and valuing of the roles students can play in their own learning and assessment. This leads to the development of engaging teaching and learning relationships and methods that cross over all learning areas. We have previously noted, and welcome, the inclusion in the middle years section of an action point regarding the provision of "student opportunities to negotiate their learning...". This is no small shift and we strongly recommend that action needs to be taken to assist schools, teachers and students in making the transition to these new approaches. The provision of both documentation and professional development for teachers AND for students in developing and participating in these approaches would be a good start.

## **Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians**

3. It is important that all of these actions do not focus solely upon those already empowered and advantaged young Australians who already have access to some partnership, participation and leadership opportunities. Action commitments must include measures that build such partnerships, participation and leadership for those young Australians traditionally excluded. Thus personalised planning must regard young people as active contributors and be specifically directed towards enhancing the citizenship capacities and opportunities for **all** young Australians.

### **Strengthening accountability and transparency**

Both students and teachers have reported to us that the steady stream of assessment requirements and emphasis on measurable output reduces their sense of being valued as individuals. Our concern is that the growing emphasis on assessment and reporting is placing increasing pressure on the sense of community that has existed within schools. This is potentially a hindrance to achieving the goals of confident individuals and active citizens. This could be overcome through action that includes students as active contributors to educational assessment, both at individual and program levels. Engaging students in their own assessment will also assist in their development as successful learners. Added to this students have valuable perspectives to offer in assessing the operation of schools and teachers. Providing opportunities for them to offer their perspective in appropriate ways would be an excellent learning opportunity as part of their development as active citizens. Action commitments could include supporting reflection, self-assessment, and inclusion of student perspectives both in assessment and in reporting.

The VicSRC is very keen to contribute to the development of these action commitments both at a national level and within the Victorian jurisdictions. Secondary students, want to be actively involved as partners in the realisation of the Educational Goals for Young Australians and we hope that these recommendations can provide some constructive additions to the draft Action Plan.