



Victorian Student
Representative Council

VicSRC submission

To the Victorian Parliamentary
Education and Training Committee's

**INQUIRY INTO DRESS CODES
AND SCHOOL UNIFORMS
IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS**

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 49 member SRCs representing more than 35,000 secondary students. Our vision is to bring Student Representative Councils together across Victoria to make their voice heard at all levels and in the process grow their vision and capacity for making a difference in their school and across the state.

As an organisation representing secondary students the content of this submission relates primarily to uniform and dress code policies in 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. We have addressed only the points where we had a relevant contribution to make.

Opening statement

The primary concern of the VicSRC with regard to school uniforms and dress codes is that students have meaningful involvement in the decision making process at an individual school level. Students should be treated as partners in the process as they are people who are most affected by the decisions, they wear the uniforms.

The recent VicSRC Congress representing over 25,000 students from 39 Victorian secondary schools resolved with overwhelming agreement that the student body should have a say in decisions about uniforms and that school uniforms should be approved by the SRC before implementation. The Congress debated further but did not agree to any specific directions for what uniform and dress codes should contain. This reflects the diversity of student opinion across Victoria and the fact that each school has its own unique culture of which uniforms and dress codes are a reflection. This does not mean however that all students are happy and content with the culture or uniform policy of their school. Many students feel that the imposition upon them of a particular policy is an attempt to coerce them into a culture that does not reflect their personal values or identity. By involving students in the decision making process schools can arrive at a policy that students have a sense of ownership over and that reflects the values of the whole community.

With regard to the terms of reference:

a) the benefits and costs of mandatory school uniforms;

Secondary students hold a diverse range of views in regard to the benefits of school uniforms and dress codes. Some students express a sense of oppression in having a uniform imposed upon them. They believe this places a serious constraint on their ability to express their individuality and feel that their school does not respect them for whom they are. Many of these students would like to have a degree of choice about whether or not to wear their uniform. Other students believe that having a compulsory school uniform has useful benefits. It helps present a positive image to the community and in preventing students from being subjected to peer pressure about what they

wear and the potential stress of choosing new clothes everyday. For these students having an optional uniform would defeat the purpose of having one at all. Students from schools without uniforms report that not having a uniform works well for them and that peer pressure is not an issue as students eventually become comfortable in their own identity and dress sense.

Students generally agree that uniforms do represent a significant financial cost to families especially where more formal items such as school blazers are part of the uniform. Support in purchasing uniforms should be provided to families who need it. The VicSRC commends the work of the State Schools Relief Committee in providing this support to families attending state schools but is concerned that this leaves a gap in the independent and catholic school systems where there are also families in need of this support.

b) the views of school communities about dress codes and school uniforms;

The VicSRC appreciates the notion that a student's physical appearance demonstrates a level of respect for the school and the wider community. However we believe this needs to be balanced by a school's respect for student individuality and their right to express this within school and community contexts. These two principles should be taken into account in each school community as they discuss and develop their own set of uniform and dress code policies.

In particular most students accept that extreme items such as offensive tattoos, or nazi symbols should at the very least be covered out of respect for others. However, some students question where such lines can be drawn, eg. is a hair style such as a mowhawk offensive, or is it just different? They point out that part of being a young person in the community is testing social norms and boundaries and argue that schools and the community should demonstrate a degree of tolerance to this behaviour.

d) matters which need to be considered to ensure dress codes and uniform policies are consistent with anti-discrimination legislation and health promotion policies;

There are a range of areas that need to be considered in regards to preventing discrimination. Religious and cultural practices are the most obvious concerns. The VicSRC believes these should be respected in all policies as a matter of importance to ensure that students can easily comply with all relevant sets of requirements.

There are also matters to be considered with regard to health promotion. In particular one case reported a student who had been a committed participant in the Leukaemia Foundation's *Shave for a Cure* campaign over several years while at primary school. However at secondary school she was prohibited from participating in the event on the grounds that shaving her head was in

violation of the schools dress code. The VicSRC believes this demonstrates a lack of flexibility in the school's policies, which should not be used to prevent students from participating in positive causes.

The VicSRC emphasises that involving students in the decision-making process enables all of these concerns to be raised as the policy is being formulated thus resulting in a more effective policy.

e) appropriate enforcement and sanctions;

Where a uniform or dress code policy exists a system of enforcement and sanctions should be implemented. Again this should be done on an agreed basis, involving students in decisions about systems that impact upon them and if agreed the enforcement of such policies. In some cases, punishments imposed by a representative panel of students are more effective than those imposed by teachers or principals. However this process would need to be carefully managed and completely transparent to avoid placing undue pressure on the students involved. The VicSRC recommends that in general a system of tiered sanctions or penalties is most effective, giving students a chance to make good and allowing the appropriate flexibility to reflect the nature and circumstances of the offence.

f) appropriate exemption criteria and processes; and

The VicSRC recommends that these should be established at the individual school level with student input. They need to make provision for issues such as discrimination and health promotion as outlined above as well as individual student circumstances such as financial and physical ability to comply.

Final comments

The VicSRC believes that students can make excellent partners in forming policies at a local and state level, if they are given the chance to make a meaningful contribution. We encourage all schools to make use of student expertise in formulating a range of school policies.

The VicSRC would like to thank the committee for conducting this inquiry and seeking student views. However we would like to request that in future more time be given for groups to respond. We note this inquiry allowed four weeks for a response two of which were school holidays. This makes it almost impossible for us to effectively consult with our members and limits the potential feedback we can give. The VicSRC recommends that at least two months be the minimum time allotted for seeking public submissions.