

Victorian Student Representative Council Submission

regarding the

National 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. The VicSRC has over 70 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 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. In addition, we have addressed only the points of the Draft Declaration where we had a relevant contribution to make.

Overview

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) welcomes the release of the *Draft National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. The Draft provides a good basis for discussion about the goals, priorities and directions for education in Australia 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 Draft Declaration, particularly in relation to the nature of the Goals.

The primary concern that the VicSRC has with the Draft Statement is in the area of its Commitment to Action, and the ways in which students are regarded throughout this section of the Declaration. The Declaration 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 in general, particularly in light of the Declaration's

recognition of fundamental changes in how students learn, and in recognition of the Goals of young people being ‘confident individuals’ and ‘active and informed citizens’. These commitments require education systems to build on many positive practices that see students in other ways. In particular, the Declaration should provide an opportunity to engage students as active partners in their own education, both individually and collectively. Such an approach clearly reflects the Goals within the Declaration, as well as addressing the various guidelines and principles of learning and teaching in operation across Australia. 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 and therefore meeting these educational goals.

There are many ways that this can be done within and between schools and by education systems, and some of these are outlined in our responses to the two specific areas addressed in the Focus Questions. In particular, there are two key areas in which this approach (of acknowledging students as active constructors of learning and partners in educational processes) is absent within the Draft Declaration: around developing stronger partnerships and in improving the quality of school leadership.

Educational Goals

While we broadly endorse the statement of educational goals, we believe that further clarification is needed between the ‘public’ goals of an education system (goals for Australian society) and the ‘private’ (or personal) goals of an education system (goals for individuals within that society). While these may coincide in many areas, there would be value in identifying the specific focus for goals – in answering the question ‘**why** do we have these goals?’

This is particularly important in recognising young people as active citizens within Australia today – not citizens in waiting, or ‘unformed’ adults. Consequently, the formation and achievement of these goals (both societal and individual) needs to be shared with young people; these are not goals that someone else imposes upon young people, or things to be ‘done to’ young people. If we are to truly ‘place young Australians at the centre’ of these Goals (as the Draft Declaration says), there must be a rethinking of the active role of young people in the collaboration of goal-setting and educational implementation.

The *Educational Goals for Young Australians* need to specify both personal development (‘Confident individuals ...’) and social contribution (‘Active and informed citizens...’); the goals around ‘Successful learners ...’ and ‘Promoting equity ...’ are then important in their contribution to those core goals. We would strongly endorse the need for goals around working together collaboratively, as well as developing individually. We would argue that successful learners – and active citizens – not only ‘make sense of the world and think about how things became the way they are’, but are also committed to dreaming about the way things could and should be, and committed to their participation in working for desirable futures. We would like to see this included in the Goals.

It is also important to us that the Goals include areas to do with respecting and celebrating diversity within our society – and this has direct implications for the response of Australian Governments in ensuring that resourcing addresses areas of greatest need, and that positive initiatives are taken to ensure that **all** young people are able to achieve individual goals and make contributions to public goals.

Commitments to Action

We note that the preamble to the 'Commitment to Action' section of the Draft Declaration includes students as part of the group with 'collective responsibility' for education. This is extremely important to us, and must be reflected in the remainder of this section. Unfortunately, in two key sections – partnerships and school leadership – this is not currently followed through. These areas need particular attention.

Personalised learning

The emphasis on 'a personalised approach to learning' needs to be explained and expanded upon in the preamble to this section. For us, personalisation means that learning is person-centred, not that it is individualised. It is important that learning is also collaborative and social, encouraging us to work together, rather than setting us up in competition with each other.

Partnerships

Partnerships with parents, communities and business are appropriately identified in the Draft Statement; however 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 our student perspective, reading about partnerships between schools and parents without mention of students is a glaring omission. The VicSRC encourages the inclusion of students as important partners throughout the document – on a par with parents and other stakeholders – not only in their own personal education but also through their organised work in assisting to achieve the Goals in the Declaration. Students bring unique and vital perspectives to the work of schools and education systems: 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; hence they have educational needs as active citizens within their communities.

To do otherwise is to ignore the educational benefits that arise from an active role for students in their own and others' education. The VicSRC recognises that students need the support of their parents in many areas including education, and that positive relationships between parents, teachers and students are essential 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 governments to articulate how they perceive the role of students within these relationships. In its current form, the Draft Document is very unclear as to whether the student is part of the family, the school, both or neither. Students have the right to know where governments think they fit; the VicSRC believes that students have great potential to be active partners in these relationships in their own right.

Transitions

Students are increasingly making or contributing to decisions about important transitions in their lives, particularly from primary to secondary school, through the 'middle years' and to further study and/or employment. They must be supported in these roles through provision of information, skills, time and advice, but also recognised as the central person involved in making those decisions.

Quality of teaching

The reference to ‘instruction’ in this section seems to us to be strongly at odds with the intentions of the rest of this document – and with current approaches to teaching and learning. We understand much more now about the processes of education and what effective teaching means; we argue that systems must deliver ‘the best possible education’ rather than simply ‘the best possible instruction’.

School leadership

The VicSRC also urges the Declaration to give greater recognition of the role of students as leaders within educational communities. This has implications within individual schools, where ideas of ‘distributed leadership’ have included the individual and collective roles of students and involve shared responsibility for achieving a school’s educational goals. It also has implications system wide, where student organisations have important contributions to educational decision-making on all levels – with shared responsibility for achieving National Educational Goals.

Therefore, alongside suggestions for the selection and training of teachers and school leaders, the VicSRC is committed to the adequate resourcing of student leadership:

- structural opportunities for student participation at school, regional, state and national levels;
- appropriate and affordable training for student leadership and participation;
- provision of resources to enable student voices and views to be heard and listened to at all levels;
- provision of practical support, at all levels, for student initiatives in 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. The existence of networks of these organisations also enables students to participate more formally in the establishment of goals, strategies, actions and evaluations at a system, state or national level.

In planning action around this Declaration, the VicSRC encourages all governments to set specific targets around student participation in education. Such targets need to go beyond definitions of participation (or engagement) 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 – again, this merely reinforces ideas that students are simply passive recipients of education. 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 in the areas of student-run organisations: the creation and operation of the 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) in all schools;
- their representative nature within schools;
- the regularity with which they meet;
- 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.

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 student-run democratic and representative bodies at state, system and national levels.

Accountability

The VicSRC recognises the importance of building schools as communities. As such, the primary accountability of schools is within those communities and principally to the students of the school.

The VicSRC notes governments' desires for better data, and the increased capacity of schools to measure student progress in many areas. 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.

Accountability measures need to recognise the complexity of Goals within this Declaration; schools and systems need to be accountable in terms of those complex goals. To focus and publicly report on simplistic measures of 'learning' or only on some areas, does not serve to recognise the range of National Goals included in this Declaration. It may, in fact, both distract schools and systems from their broad responsibilities and also have enormous negative implications for individual learning as well as for the social role of schools. We support accountability measures that do not allow for punitive comparisons to be made between individuals or schools, but that are focused on enabling system, school and individual improvement.

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 and systems to achieve these benefits and also to strengthen student feelings of being valued as active partners.

Involving students as partners in the evaluation process – at all levels of education – 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 neither 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 – and other accountability mechanisms – show.

In addition, students know that it is often the teachers who already receive positive student feedback who act on and communicate with students about points for improvement; 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 a simplistic and potentially destructive exercise of ‘rating your teacher’.

Thirdly, there have been positive examples of students leading in the processes of individual assessment and reporting, 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.

Action Plan

The VicSRC welcomes the commitment to develop an Action Plan to support the achievement of these educational goals. We would welcome the opportunity for students and their representative organisations to enter into partnerships in forming, implementing and reviewing such Action Plans. After all, we have the most to gain or lose; after all, we have the most sense of how such plans can remain relevant and appropriate.

Key Recommendations

Goals

- The National Goals should recognise both public and private (or individual) goals of education.
- The National Goals should include the development of capacity and inclination to form individual and collective views of desirable futures.

Commitment to Action

- Students should be seen as active partners in education both individually and collectively.
- The importance of the leadership role of students within schools and education systems should be recognised.
- Targets should be set for meaningful student participation in schools and the existence and effectiveness of Student Representative Councils.
- Organised student bodies should be provided with 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.

Action Plans

- Students should have a recognised role within the development and implementation of Action Plans for this Declaration.