About the Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC)

The Victorian Student Representative Council is the peak body representing students in Victoria. The VicSRC’s vision is a world where all children and young people have access to education that is student-led, student-driven and student-focused. The organisation exists to empower all student voices to be valued in every aspect of education. The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria, and funded through the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET), Newsboys Foundation and Catholic Education Melbourne.

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Executive Summary

Background

The state of Victoria has had an historical policy commitment to valuing the ‘voices’ of students. Under early legislation in Victoria, the Constituting Orders for the Education (School Councils) Act 1975, membership arrangements for school councils were reviewed. By the late 1970s, many government secondary school councils included elected students in the membership category of “student”, with membership decisions underpinned by a participatory democratic approach to local representation. This was endorsed in the requirements for membership outlined in Ministerial Papers issued between 1982 and 1984.

However, following a change of state government in 1992, further regulation changes in 1993 around ‘self-managing schools’ saw alterations to the membership of school councils, and the membership category of “student” disappeared.

More than a decade after “student” disappeared as a membership category, the Report on the Review of School Governance in Victorian Government Schools (Victoria State Government, 2006) suggested a need for clarification of the modes, purposes and functions of school councils. This review reported “unanimous agreement that school councils had a major role to play in community engagement and involvement”, but “less unanimity among stakeholders” regarding the composition of membership of school councils (Victoria State Government, 2006, p. 6). A recommendation of the review and a “priority action area” identified in the subsequent Response to the Review of School Governance in Victorian Government Schools (Allan, 2006) was that “[w]ays in which students can be involved in school council decision-making processes will be identified and promoted” (p. 5).

This report explores one approach to strengthening student participation in decision-making that has been identified as a priority by the VicSRC Executive and recommended by the Report on the Review of School Governance in Victorian Government Schools: the identification and promotion of student involvement in school councils. This report offers practical examples of how schools can, as the DET’s Framework for Improving Student Outcomes prioritises, “give students a greater say in the decisions that affect their learning and their lives at school” (Victoria State Government, 2015a, p. 12).

Aims and methodology

This study was undertaken with the following purposes:

- To gather the views of students and principals across a range of Victorian schools on the issue of student representation on school governance councils.
- To collect and create resources to support schools to initiate or extend meaningful student representation on school governance councils.
In accordance with the philosophy and history of the VicSRC, this study was participatory in its design, enactment and analysis, listening to and acting on the views and insights of students, as the “consequential stakeholders” (Groundwater-Smith, 2007, p. 113) whom schools are “ostensibly designed to serve” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3). A central feature in this participatory methodology was the partnership of adult researchers and six student researchers. Simultaneously, the study sought principals’ views and experiences, as those with deep understanding of school council structures, processes and practices, with these views and experiences to inform and deepen research activities with students.

Findings were assembled from a range of research activities:

- Secondary school students involved with the VicSRC were invited to be **Research Interns** on this study, and to be part of designing, doing, and analysing the data. **Six** Research Interns have been a central part of the research team.
- Two **student workshops** were held (one in metropolitan Melbourne and one in regional Victoria), designed and facilitated by Research Interns. **Twenty-one** students from Years 7-12 participated in these workshops, where they explored the potential benefits and challenges of student representation in school councils.
- **218** students filled out an **anonymous online survey**, sharing their experiences, views and ideas.
- **Ten principals** were also **interviewed** about their experiences of and perspectives on student representation on school councils.

**Findings**

**Awareness and attitudes**

A significant finding from the student online survey and the Student Workshops was that students generally had limited awareness of the work of school councils, and whether or not their schools include students as representatives on the school council. When asked, in the online survey, how much they knew about what happens on their school's council, 84.85% of respondents indicated that they knew “nothing” or “very little” about what happens on their school's governance council.

Notwithstanding this limited awareness, the overwhelming majority of students attending the Student Workshops and responding to the online survey articulated support for student representation on school councils. 80.16% of respondents to the online survey indicated that they thought students should be members of their school's council.

Principal, too, were supportive of having students on school councils, and 8 out of 10 of the interviewed principals already have student representatives on their councils. For 6 of these schools, the school captains were the default school council student representatives.
Benefits

From the Student Workshops, principal phone interviews, student online surveys, and the participatory analysis session, six key benefits of student representation on school councils have been synthesised.

- Benefit 1: Students have experiential knowledge that other adults may not have.
- Benefit 2: Young people and adults learn and connect through dialogue.
- Benefit 3: Students have a right to have influence on decisions that affect them.
- Benefit 4: Student representation can improve communication between the school council and the broader student body.
- Benefit 5: Student representatives benefit individually.
- Benefit 6: Students feel heard and valued when changes happen.

Challenges

Alongside discussing potential benefits of student representation on school councils, students and principals also raised concerns about the challenges of student representation.

- Challenge 1: Students’ experiential knowledge may not be recognised, trusted or valued.
- Challenge 2: There are relational, structural and spatial barriers to learning from and connecting with each other.
- Challenge 3: Choosing/ electing student representatives who will represent the range of students enrolled in the school and take the role seriously.
- Challenge 4: Student representatives can feel caught in the middle.
- Challenge 5: The time costs for student representatives on school council.
- Challenge 6: Student representation without action is tokenistic and potentially damaging.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Student representation on School Councils should be mandatory.

Recommendation #2: Students should be represented on school councils - as “students,” not “community members.”

Recommendation #3: Students representatives on school councils should be equally valued members, with schools moving towards students having full voting rights and membership responsibilities.

Recommendation #4: Students should be consulted in decisions about how to appoint/ elect student representatives, who should be the student representatives, and how many student representatives there should be.
Recommendation #5: Students and adults should both undertake training and receive support in school council work, to strengthen mutual respect and trust.

Recommendation #6: The structure of school council meetings should support student representatives’ meaningful contribution through, for example, the early distribution of meeting agendas, invitations to offer their feedback on other reports, and student involvement in sub-committees.

Recommendation #7: Student representatives should give a student report that represents students’ concerns, and should report back to the student body about other school council discussions and decisions.

Recommendation #8: Student representatives should be “equally seated” with other members of the school council.

Recommendation #9: Schools should be accountable to report how students are represented on their school council.

Recommendation #10: Student representation on school council should be one aspect of a whole school vision that meaningfully involves students in all aspects of their education.
Acknowledgements

The research team acknowledges and thanks the students who participated in student workshops and the online survey and shared their hopes, concerns and ideas. The team also thanks the principals who shared their insights and experiences in phone interviews.

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List of abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>Department of Education and Training</td>
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<td>N=</td>
<td>Number</td>
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<td>SRC</td>
<td>Student Representative Council</td>
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<td>UNRCRC</td>
<td>United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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List of abbreviations for research activities

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>FG</td>
<td>Focus Group (research activity)</td>
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<td>MSW</td>
<td>Metropolitan Student Workshop</td>
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<td>OS</td>
<td>Online Survey</td>
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<td>PI</td>
<td>Principal Interview</td>
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<td>PR</td>
<td>Post-it Reflections (research activity)</td>
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<td>RB</td>
<td>Recommendations Brainstorm (research activity)</td>
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<td>Research Intern</td>
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<td>RSW</td>
<td>Regional Student Workshop</td>
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<td>SCD</td>
<td>School Council Discussion (research activity)</td>
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<td>SW</td>
<td>Student Workshop</td>
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<td>SU</td>
<td>Stepping Up (research activity)</td>
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<td>TF</td>
<td>True/ False (research activity)</td>
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