

Student Representation on School Governance Councils

A snapshot of the report

Why was this study done?

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, many Victorian government schools had elected student members on their school governance councils. However, in the 1990s, changes to regulations meant that the “student” membership category disappeared.

The Victorian State Government recently reviewed the purposes, functions and membership categories of school councils, and recommended that schools learn more about ways that students can be involved in school council processes.

This study spoke to students and principals, with these two aims:

- To find out what students and principals across a range of Victorian schools think about students being part of school councils.
- To collect and create resources to help schools to start or do more to make sure that students are meaningfully involved in school councils.

Who was involved & what happened?

- Six secondary school students involved with the VicSRC were Research Interns - designing, doing, and analysing the data.
- Two student workshops, designed and facilitated by the Research Interns, were held in metro and regional Victoria. 21 students from Years 7-12 participated.
- 218 students filled out an online survey, sharing their stories, opinions and ideas.
- Ten principals were interviewed about their views and experiences of student involvement on school councils.

What did students & principals say?

Awareness & attitudes

The majority of students supported the idea of students being part of school councils. 80.16% of respondents to the online survey responded that they thought students should be members of their school's council.

Principals, too, were supportive of having students on school councils, and eight out of ten already have student representatives on their councils. For six of these schools, the school captains were the default school council student representatives.

Benefits

- 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

- Challenge 1: Students' 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.

See the full report:
<http://ow.ly/u67f30747N8>

Recommendations

- #1 Student representation on School Councils should be mandatory.
- #2 Students should be represented on school councils - as "students," not "community members."
- #3 Students representatives on school councils should be equally valued members, moving towards full voting rights and membership responsibilities.
- #4 Students should be consulted about how to appoint/elect student representatives, who, and how many student representatives there should be.
- #5 Students and adults should both undertake training and receive support in school council work.
- #6 The structure of school council meetings should support students' 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.
- #7 Student representatives should give a student report that represents their concerns, and should report back to the student body about other school council discussions and decisions.
- #8 Student representatives should be "equally seated" with other members of the school council.
- #9 Schools should be accountable to report how students are represented on their school council.
- #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.

THANK YOU to all the students, principals and researchers who shared their experiences, ideas and insights! Your work informs these recommendations made directly to the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

