

VICSRC 2026 REGIONAL CONGRESS REPORT

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body and leading advocate representing school-aged students in Victoria. We were created by students to be a voice for all primary and secondary school students at the highest levels of decision making in Victorian education. Our vision is an education system that is student-led, student driven and student-focused.

The findings in this report were gathered through student-led consultations with 65 Victorian students. VicSRC thanks them for the time and expertise they shared with us in formulating this report.



VicSRC respectfully acknowledges and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the custodians of this land. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria and across the wider continent.

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT VICSRC

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing school-aged students in Victoria. We exist to empower every student to have their voice heard and valued in education.

VicSRC works alongside students, educators and decision-makers to build a more inclusive and collaborative education system. As Australia's only independent, student-led education advocacy organisation, we lead reform that is grounded in student experience and driven by student leadership.

Our programs help students build leadership and advocacy skills, and ensure their insights shape classrooms, school leadership and education policy.

ABOUT CONGRESS

For 20 years, Congress has been the cornerstone of VicSRC's mission to elevate student voice in education reform, as a student-led event. Each year, students from across Victoria come together to discuss the issues that matter most to them, identify solutions, and set priorities for change.

The 2025 Melbourne Congress marked the beginning of VicSRC's 20th Anniversary celebrations. Throughout 2026, we continued this milestone with regional Congress events in Swan Hill, Geelong, Wangaratta and Gippsland, amplifying voices from every corner of the state.

HOW CONGRESS SUPPORTS VICSRC'S REFORM OBJECTIVES

Congress plays a vital role in VicSRC's mission to drive student-led education reform in Victoria. It forms the foundation for our annual Congress Report, which captures and records students' voices and perspectives on the state of the Victorian education system. VicSRC's Regional Congress report will be followed by the 2026 Melbourne Congress report as another key piece of research.

Insights from Congress directly shape VicSRC's Policy Platform. This is our key mechanism for translating student voice into policy reform. The Platform's 22 student-driven recommendations outline a clear vision for a more inclusive, equitable and empowering education system.

As this Regional Congress Report demonstrates, student priorities across all focus areas strongly align with the recommendations in the Policy Platform. This alignment reinforces the Platform's ongoing relevance, credibility and impact as a blueprint for reform grounded in lived experience.

REGIONAL CONGRESS AT A GLANCE

Across 2026, VicSRC heard from 65 students across 15 schools from all school sectors, including:

- 64 per cent government school students
- 26 per cent Catholic school students
- 9 per cent TAFE students
- 1 per cent Independent school students

Students in attendance came from a range of year levels, including:

- 9 per cent in Year 7
- 23 per cent in Year 8
- 26 per cent in Year 9
- 8 per cent in Year 10
- 23 per cent in Year 11
- 11 per cent in Year 12

At each event, students discussed the big issues across each of VicSRC's priority areas.

Priority	What the issue is
Mental health and wellbeing	Trusted support is too hard to access, while bullying and academic pressure continue to cause harm.
Inclusive and accessible education	Students face discrimination, inaccessible environments, cost barriers and inflexible learning systems.
Definitions of success	Scores and narrow pathways are valued over growth, strengths, practical learning and informed choice.
Equitable access to quality education	Funding, staffing, infrastructure, transport and distance determine which opportunities students can reach.
Student voice	Students want real influence, not consultation without feedback, power or visible change.

These issues reinforce one another. Teacher shortages reduce subject choice, learning support and trusted relationships. Distance and cost reduce access to services, pathways and enrichment. When students cannot influence decisions about these conditions, inequity persists and trust falls.

REGIONAL REFLECTION

Regional students are not asking for more. They are asking for fair access, trusted support and a real say in the decisions that shape their education.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Students want support before crisis, relationships built on trust, and schools that act on bullying.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM STUDENTS

- **Support is not available early or consistently.** Students described long waits, too few wellbeing staff, uneven follow-up and limited awareness of available services.
- **Trust determines whether students seek help.** Strong student–teacher relationships matter, but workload, turnover and confidentiality concerns in small communities can make help-seeking harder.
- **Bullying and discrimination are not addressed reliably.** Students reported harm linked to race, disability, body image, religion, culture, gender, sexuality and socioeconomic status, alongside weak or inconsistent responses.
- **Academic pressure is normalised.** Heavy workloads, exams and the challenge of balancing school, work, family and social life contribute to burnout, disengagement and low attendance.
- **Isolation and stigma intensify the problem.** Regional distance, marginalisation, stereotypes about masculinity and negative attitudes to mental health can all reduce help-seeking.

STUDENT INSIGHTS

"It took me weeks to get an appointment"

— **Student insight, Gippsland**

"Students only trust a few teachers"

— **Student insight, Swan Hill**

"Wellbeing support staff don't have the resources to support student needs"

— **Student insight, Wangaratta**

"No future care, only immediate help"

— **Student insight, Geelong**

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING: WHAT SHOULD CHANGE

HOW STUDENTS ENVISIONED SOLUTIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS

- Increase the number and availability of qualified wellbeing staff in regional schools.
- Provide regular, informal check-ins and visible, student-friendly information about support before a crisis.
- Give teachers time, training and resources to build trusted relationships and respond safely.
- Create clear, accessible and accountable bullying reporting processes, with transparent follow-up.
- Reduce avoidable workload pressure and explicitly teach study skills, time management and stress management.
- Build peer connection through clubs, study groups, wellbeing committees and safe social spaces.
- Ensure mental health education is inclusive, culturally responsive and addresses substance use without stigma.
- Involve students in designing, reviewing and evaluating wellbeing supports.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PRIORITY SETTING

Prioritise a regional student wellbeing and trust initiative that combines student-led service mapping, accessible bullying reporting, staff capacity building and ongoing feedback. Funding should support sustained relationships and follow-up—not one-off awareness activities alone.

REGIONAL REFLECTION

Talk to students about mental health and wellbeing. Trust students to have valuable input into these issues

INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION

Students should be safe, represented and able to participate without having to fit a one-size-fits-all system.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM STUDENTS

- **Discrimination shapes safety and belonging.** Students described racism, sexism, queerphobia, ableism, body shaming, religious exclusion and social exclusion, with inconsistent consequences.
- **Physical access remains unequal.** Outdated buildings, missing ramps or elevators, inaccessible bathrooms and poor-quality facilities restrict participation.
- **Support can depend on documentation, location and staffing.** Students with disability, medical conditions or diverse learning needs face administrative barriers and shortages of trained staff.
- **Cost excludes students.** Uniforms, camps, equipment, food and other required items can reduce participation and create stigma.
- **Teaching and assessment are often inflexible.** Students want more engaging, adaptive approaches and different ways to show learning.
- **Identity and culture need meaningful recognition.** Students called for more learning about First Nations histories and relationships multicultural representation as well as inclusive facilities and policies.

STUDENT INSIGHTS

"Racism is normalised at a young age. Ideas, comments and stereotypes"

— **Student insight, Gippsland**

"One size fits all approach"

— **Student insight, Swan Hill**

"We have outdated buildings, with no elevators"

— **Student insight, Wangaratta**

"People are falling through the gaps"

— **Student insight, Geelong**

INCLUSION AND ACCESS: WHAT SHOULD CHANGE

HOW STUDENTS ENVISIONED SOLUTIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS

- Act early and consistently on discrimination and bullying, and take student complaints seriously.
- Fund accessibility upgrades, including ramps, lifts, toilets and all-gender facilities.
- Simplify access to adjustments and provide enough Education Support staff and trained teachers.
- Build flexible teaching and assessment options around different ways of learning and demonstrating knowledge.
- Reduce cost barriers through free or subsidised food, uniforms, equipment, camps and participation support.
- Strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety through local relationships, identified roles, curriculum and leadership opportunities.
- Include students from marginalised groups in the design and review of inclusion and anti-discrimination programs.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PRIORITY SETTING

Prioritise regional accessibility and inclusion audits led with students. Funding should connect physical access, learning adjustments, anti-discrimination practice and participation costs, because students experience these barriers together.

REGIONAL REFLECTION

Support should fit each student—not the other way around.

DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS

Students want education to recognise growth, strengths and different pathways—not only scores and rankings.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM STUDENTS

- **Success is defined too narrowly.** Academic results, ATAR and standardised testing dominate, creating comparison and pressure while overlooking individual growth and different forms of intelligence.
- **Pathway decisions come too early and with too little guidance.** Students described feeling rushed, stuck or uncertain, and said careers information often privileges university over TAFE, VET, VCE VM and apprenticeships.
- **Regional subject choice is restricted.** Teacher shortages and small enrolments can prevent classes from running and limit the interests students can pursue.
- **Different pathways carry stigma.** Vocational pathways can be treated as less valuable, and some environments include gender discrimination or safety concerns.
- **Students need practical support to learn.** Explicit study skills, catch-up support, feedback after assessments and more flexible ways to demonstrate learning are critical

STUDENT INSIGHTS

"Feels like you're on a timeline with no Plan B"

— **Student insight, Geelong**

"Guessing your way through life"

— **Student insight, Swan Hill**

"It should matter about how you learn and the education you need, not only about your scores"

— **Student insight, Wangaratta**

DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS: WHAT SHOULD CHANGE

HOW STUDENTS ENVISIONED SOLUTIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS

- Provide earlier, clearer and unbiased pathways education, including work experience and direct contact with industry and tertiary providers.
- Promote equal respect for university, TAFE, VET, VCE VM, apprenticeships, work and other pathways.
- Use flexible assessment formats and recognise personal growth, community contribution and practical strengths.
- Expand subject access through staffing, cross-school collaboration, transport and supported flexible delivery.
- Teach study and learning strategies explicitly and provide timely catch-up and feedback.

REGIONAL REFLECTION

Let students define success for themselves—and give them real options to pursue it.

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION

Where a student lives should not determine the teachers, subjects, facilities or opportunities they can access.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM STUDENTS

- **Funding inequity is visible in daily school life.** Students pointed to old equipment, shared laptops, poor toilets, cancelled camps, limited practical learning and differences between school sectors.
- **The teacher workforce crisis reduces opportunity.** Shortages, turnover and out-of-field teaching affect continuity, subject choice, class size, trusted relationships and student support.
- **Distance has a cost.** Transport, accommodation and travel time restrict access to school, TAFE, work experience, events, specialist services and extracurricular opportunities.
- **Regional infrastructure limits participation.** Some schools cannot host events or provide suitable learning and accessibility facilities.
- **Financial disadvantage can become entrenched.** Students linked present-day exclusion from education and work opportunities with longer-term and generational disadvantage.
- **Transparency is vital.** Students asked to understand how funding decisions are made and to have input into budgets and priorities.

STUDENT INSIGHTS

"Students from remote and rural schools can't pay bus fees to access schools in Geelong or Melbourne, so have to go to schools with less opportunities"

— **Student insight, Geelong**

"Rural schools don't have enough teachers and supports and resources"

— **Student insight, Swan Hill**

"Students stuck in poverty stay in poverty"

— **Student insight, Gippsland**

"We should know where the school's money goes"

— **Student insight, Wangaratta**

EQUITABLE ACCESS: WHAT SHOULD CHANGE

HOW STUDENTS ENVISIONED SOLUTIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS

- Fully fund schools and direct additional investment to regional staffing, infrastructure, equipment and learning support.
- Provide incentives, housing or accommodation support and sustainable workloads to attract and retain teachers in regional communities.
- Fund student transport, accommodation and participation costs for TAFE, work experience, events, camps and specialist opportunities.
- Expand cross-school sharing, regional hosting capacity, Tech School access and extracurricular opportunities.
- Maintain safe, clean and accessible facilities, including toilets, practical learning spaces and reliable technology.
- Make school funding and resource decisions transparent and include diverse students in planning and review.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PRIORITY SETTING

Advocate for a regional equity loading that recognises the real costs of distance, thin service markets, workforce attraction and smaller enrolments. Funding requests should include student participation costs and student-led monitoring—not only capital or program delivery.

REGIONAL REFLECTION

Everyone has the right to learn. Regional students should not have fewer choices because of postcode, distance or family income.

STUDENT VOICE

Students want the space, time, support and power to shape decisions—and to see what changed because they spoke.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM STUDENTS

- **Formal leadership does not reach everyone.** Students outside SRCs and leadership groups can be unaware of opportunities or find it harder to speak up.
- **Student voice often lacks decision-making power.** Students described staff voices carrying more weight and consultation occurring without clear influence or feedback.
- **Structures are inconsistent and sometimes ineffective.** Some schools lack meaningful student voice structures; others have SRCs that do not represent the wider student body or individual needs.
- **Students do not know how to reach system decision makers.** Pathways to the Department of Education, local representatives and policy processes are not visible or accessible.
- **Representation matters.** Students want leadership and decision-making structures to reflect cultural diversity and include students who are marginalised or less confident speaking in groups.

STUDENT INSIGHTS

"More power, more people, and more people with the power for change"

— **Student insight, Gippsland**

"It's harder to speak up without a group or if you're not a student leader"

— **Student insight, Swan Hill**

"[Student voice is] having the space and time to say what you feel, think or need"

— **Student insight, Wangaratta**

STUDENT VOICE: WHAT SHOULD CHANGE

HOW STUDENTS ENVISIONED SOLUTIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS

- Establish supported and inclusive student voice structures in every school.
- Create multiple ways to participate, including classroom conversations, anonymous feedback, surveys, direct meetings and representative groups.
- Fund dedicated staff time to support student participation and close the feedback loop.
- Increase diversity, accessibility and transparency in student leadership selection and representation.
- Give students meaningful roles in school councils, budgeting, curriculum, inclusion, wellbeing and policy review.
- Create regular regional pathways for students to meet the Department of Education, local representatives and other decision makers.

REGIONAL REFLECTION

Student voice is not an event. It is an ongoing relationship with visible influence and accountability.

REGIONAL DISTINCTIONS

Shared priorities need local responses.

Region	Distinctive considerations raised in the key findings
Geelong	Transport costs and access to Geelong or Melbourne; pathway pressure and VET gender discrimination; uneven support between sectors and stages of schooling.
Gippsland	Long waits for wellbeing support; racism and First Nations community relationships; public transport and work experience costs; stronger student power in schools.
Swan Hill	Distance, infrastructure and teacher continuity; rural eligibility rules; study skills and transition support; transparent funding and access to TAFE.
Wangaratta	Confidentiality and isolation in tight-knit communities; diverse representation; outdated and inaccessible buildings; substance-use education and regional opportunity.