

The Social Deck

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As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People my mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* is to advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. It is also my role to ensure that the State, at all levels of government, satisfies its international obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Under the CRC all organisations concerned with children should work towards what is best for each child (Article 3) and governments should be making these rights available to children (Article 4). In respect to education, all children have the right to an education (Article 28) and this education should develop each child's personality and talents to the full (Article 29).

Through my work I continually engage with children and young people who tell me that learning and education is one of the most important things in their lives. Children and young people want to see some fundamental changes in relation to how education is delivered and what is offered in the curriculum.

To assist in re-framing the Melbourne Declaration I have provided feedback based on what children and young people have told me directly, what they think "good education" looks like and where changes need to occur. Since commencing as Commissioner I have had face to face conversations and consultations with more than 3,500 children and young people in South Australia. These conversations have been on topics including bullying, poverty, wellbeing, health and trust. Whatever the issues the topic of education is always a central theme.

Positive changes in the student-teacher relationship where student voice is heard and respected.

Article 12 of the CRC – Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account.

Article 31 – Children have the right to relax. Play and to join in a wide range of leisure activities.

Children and young people often tell me about the one "good teacher" that makes a difference to their learning and their life. This is especially so when they do not have a strong role model through a parent or other adult.

Unfortunately, from what children have told us it appears that this is an exception not the rule. This is reflected in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) "Sense of Belonging at School Index" that has seen a steady decline in Australian student's

sense of belonging at school since 2003. Further, students' sense of belonging is below the OECD average.¹

Children and young people want: *“Respect from teachers. More understanding teachers. More fun in the way they teach.”* Youth Hub Event (WCYCS EF ARC BCS), Listening Tour (2017).

“High school teachers care more about uniform than the child actually learning. They would rather test us than teach us.” Listening Tour (2017).

Children and young people would like to see teachers have the support and training they need to be the best role models to their students. This also means a rethink in the traditional way students are taught. This includes reconsidering class sizes, where lessons are taught and how lessons are taught.

They frequently talk about being more engaged in their learning and want teachers to use new and innovative methods to teach. Some current practices that include students taking notes whilst teachers talk is not helpful because in their words they just zone out. In particular students who are struggling in the mainstream system find this approach doesn't work. Many young people have said they want more support in schools for students, this includes help in class time and after-hours individual assistance.

It is often difficult for children and young people to ask for help and they want teachers to be more proactive in reaching out to students.

“Having class outside instead – when you learn outside it's more FUN! Which means we listen more, exercise more / engage more!” Listening Tour (2017)

A number of children and young people speak about teachers' needing to find a balance between treating children as competent but still mindful of their developmental levels. As young people have often stated they are still learning about themselves, their world and relationships and curriculum. Young people felt that their experience would be improved if teachers are trained with more emphasis on *“social studies/child development.”* Playford YAC (2019)

To help create a positive change to teaching methods and relationships there must be a mechanism so that students can give direct feedback on how effectively teachers help them learn. In most other service-based organisations, customers and clients are asked to give feedback to improve their service, so a review of teachers learning methods by students should be done annually.

In a small number of schools I have spoken with students that have sat in on classes and completed audits and surveyed other students with respect to teacher performance in a respectful and improvement focussed way. They reported significant engagement in the process and improvement in relationships with teachers. However, for this to be successful, it is important for teachers and schools to listen to the feedback from students and act upon

¹ OECD, “PISA 2015, Results in Focus”, 2015, accessed as www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf

it. Although we hear a lot about student participation and voice and the structured ways schools address this, the bulk of feedback I receive relates to the task of listening.

“Teachers! Some teachers don’t understand what is effective. Students should complete compulsory surveys about specific teachers. Teachers should explore more ways to teach. Make students more involved in activities rather than just writing.” Paralowie R-12 School, Listening Tour (2017)

“Students have opinions and they matter. Don’t forget that they want to be listened to. Do not forget about us and when you make decisions they do actually affect us.” Paralowie R-12 School.

“Actually listen to kids and not make changed based on your own opinion.”

That the quality of education should be the same, no matter what the background of the child, where they live or their socio-economic status and that those “doing it tough” have the support they need to attend and remain in school

Article 26 - The government should provide extra money for the children of families in need.

Article 29 – Education should develop each child’s personality and talents to the full.

Children and young people have consistently told me that they want all children and young people to have the same opportunities. They want those “doing it tough” to have the same quality of education and opportunities as more well-off children and young people in the community.

“More place and support for kids with no place to go or who are getting neglected and abused. Mental and physical help.” Youth Hub Event, Listening Tour (2017)

“Improve education – in general, raise standards of education – Equal opportunities for all children, no matter where you live, how much money you have. Improve education in rural areas – introduce highly educated teachers which they wouldn’t normally have. Equal opportunities.” Year 10, Listening Tour (2017)

Many children and young people are worried about the cost of living and asking for assistance to help support those that cannot afford it. They talk about the high cost of education (including uniforms and books), utilities and bills, food, health and medical bills and housing.

“A lot of young people can’t even afford the things they need (health, food, clean water, school uniforms, school supplies).”

“Food should be cheaper and shops should not throw food away to minimise on the Australians sleeping on an empty stomach.”

“Making house less expensive.”

The cost of education is a big issue for many children and young people that I have spoken to, especially those children that come from households that are struggling both financially and emotionally. They worry about whether their parents or guardians can afford to get everything they need for education, sport, etc. and this affects their own well-being.

“Education costs: uniform costs, tutoring, supplies, extra curricula, transport, food, internet to do homework.” Playford YAC (2019)

In Australia, students in public schools in lower socio economic areas often have poorer outcomes than students from higher socioeconomic areas. According to the Grattan Institute’s Measuring Progress Report on schools it is the ICSEA “disadvantaged school”² students are far worse off than “advantaged schools” and that priority, support and investment needs to be prioritised to these schools³ in-line with Article 12 of the CRC.

Quality infrastructure and amenities for all schools

The amenities and physical condition of a school also has an effect on children and young people’s ability to learn. Having access to good facilities can positively affect children and young people’s learning and confidence. In my experience of visiting hundreds of schools I have seen many public schools lacking even basic facilities like computers, let alone state-of-the-art STEM or sporting facilities that encourage learning. Children and young people need good quality infrastructure to enjoy learning and for their teachers to enjoy teaching. In this students also want a say about what facilities they want in their schools:

“To tell schools that the children should be able to choose what new facilities we want so we can have a better learning environment.” Listening Tour (2017)

Research has revealed there is a positive relationship between increased school spending and better student outcomes.⁴ There needs to be more equity in funding and infrastructure so that public schools are able to provide the same quality as more affluent schools, including private schools. Recent analysis by ABC revealed that half of the \$22 billion spent on capital projects in Australian schools between 2013 and 2017 was spent on 10% of schools.

² Meaning ICSEA disadvantage which stands for the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage. ICSEA provides an indication of the socio-educational backgrounds of students; it has nothing to do with the staff, school facilities or teaching programs at the school. ICSEA isn’t a school rating.

³ See chapter 4 and Recommendation 3 of Goss P., Sonnenmann J., *Measuring student progress: A state-by-state report card*, Grattan Institute accessed at https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Mapping_Student_Progress.pdf

⁴ Kirabo Jackson C., *Does School Spending Matter? The New Literature on an Old Question*, The National Bureau of Economic Research”, December 2018, accessed at <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25368>

Of these schools, over 70% of the students are from a low socio economic background and these are the schools that only received 28% of the total capital funding by government.

A survey also undertaken by the ABC resulted in an overwhelming response from principals in public schools saying they are struggling to even maintain ageing infrastructure. Like the article states:

“You don’t have to look far to find that inequity. About half an hour’s drive north is Saint Ignatius’ College in Athelstone, a Catholic school among the richest 10 per cent in Australia. It spent just over \$30 million on capital projects (including \$124,000 from the federal government) in the same period Sheidow Park spent \$25,005.”⁵

A diverse curriculum that aligns with community, further education, work and gets students ready for the ‘real world’ and are ‘active and informed citizens’

Article 14 – Children have the right to think and believe what they want and to practise their religion. As long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights.

Article 30 – Children have the right to learn and use the language and customs of their families As long as it does not harm others.

Community and culture

Children and young people are asking for more diversity in the curriculum to understand their local community. As one young person from a multicultural background said:

“Don’t learn anything (about Australian Culture) from school, they teach you whatever you can write in a book, don’t teach you what pathway is for you, or if depressed how to get up in life.”
Youth Group, Listening Tour (2017)

Diversity is the foundation of our multicultural society and it should be celebrated, both past and present. Australia’s past is an important topic the history of Australia is important to young people, enabling them to understand the world around them.

“History. It is important to learn amazing part in time could be there on the ground you’re stepping on. Should focus a bit more of history in the school curriculum.” Years 5 and 6,
Listening Tour (2017)

⁵ Ting J., Palmer A. and Scott N., “Rich School, poor school: Australia’s great education divide”, ABC News, 14 August 2019 accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-13/rich-school-poor-school-australias-great-education-divide/11383384>.

Although the curriculum has a broader view of history, children and young people have told me that it focuses too much on the arrival of the first fleet. Mentions of Aboriginal perspectives, such as “invasion and other, often “darker” aspects of what happened in this country, including the impacts of white Australian Policy, slavery and frontier wars on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is addressed in some schools. However, many young people from a diversity of backgrounds believe it is not universal. For young Aboriginal people I have spoken to their connection to identity and culture is supported when they are there non-Aboriginal peers learn about their history and experiences as first nation people.

“Receive a better understanding of Aboriginal culture for the non-aboriginal people.”
Homelessness Service, Listening Tour (2017)

“Would like Aboriginal language to be taught in schools at a young age.” Young Parent Group, Hopes and Dreams (2018)

“More Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander education in SA schools- we learn many things about the first fleet and the aboriginal culture, from non aboriginal / Torres Strait Islander peoples. I think more speakers could come to schools to talk about their personal experiences. Aboriginal culture is the oldest culture and should be treasured.” Year 7, Listening Tour (2017)

Children and young people want more “truth telling”⁶ and want to also know more about what happened within their local community.

“What would I change? The views of other cultures and religions. Racism should be stopped! Stop bullying – spread kindness. Teach to be kind.” Year 10, Listening Tour (2017)

Better civic education

Article 42 – Governments should make the Convention on the Rights of the Child known to all parents and Children.

Many young people are telling us that they do not feel like they are ready to be engaged citizens as they have not been taught about Australia’s democracy and their rights, and how to be active citizens. This is reflected in the National Assessment Program (NAP) civics and citizenship literacy assessment where only “the proportion of participating year 6 and year 10 students who achieved at or above the proficient standards in civics and citizenship literacy performance was 54.5% and 38.3% respectively.”⁷

⁶ Reconciliation Australia, *The Five Dimensions of Reconciliation*, accessed at <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/what-is-reconciliation/>

⁷ Productivity Commission, “Report on Government Services – School Education, 2018”, accessed at <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2018/child-care-education-and-training/school-education>

Children and young people want to be informed adults who actively contribute to Australian society and need guidance to do this. This should start from primary school and should also include education on the UNCRC rights and the UN system.

“Comprehensive civics education – what are taxes, what is voting, how do I vote, what is the point of democracy, why should I care?” Listening Tour (2017)

“Schools should teach politics.” Key Assets, Listening Tour (2017)

It is noted that in the Australian Curriculum, examples of what should be taught, includes a recommendations about teaching the Westminster system and the Australian Constitution. However, there is no recommendation on teaching children practical things so that they can be engaged, such as how to vote, how to enrol, how to voice your opinion to your local member, etc.

Further, there should be more understanding of international bodies and mechanisms, such as the creation of the United Nations⁸, OECD or ASEAN. It should look at their history and what it means in relation to the government’s responsibilities to its own citizens. It also does not appear to discuss why international conventions have been created in the first place, including the UN Declaration on Human Rights.⁹ In the curriculum “rights and responsibilities” appear to be treated as ethical considerations¹⁰ when Australia has ratified many United Nation Conventions protecting human rights, and some of these rights are now part of local law, including anti-discrimination law.

Ensuring resilience, wellbeing and respectful relationships

Article 6 – Children have the right to live a full life. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.

Students want to be better prepared for life outside school and to have the tools to overcome any challenges that occur. Students today are experiencing more mental health issues and anxiety than in the previous 10 years. They want a school that balances wellbeing and academic achievement.

⁸ ACARA, Year 10 Civics and Citizenship, <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/curriculum-connections/dimensions/?id=46510&YearLevels=42680&searchTerm=United+nations#dimension-content>

⁹ See <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/civics-and-citizenship/?year=12494&year=12495&year=12496&year=12497&strand=Civics+and+Citizenship+Knowledge+and+Understanding&strand=Civics+and+Citizenship+Skills&capability=ignore&capability=Literacy&capability=Numeracy&capability=Information+and+Communication+Technology+%28ICT%29+Capability&capability=Critical+and+Creative+Thinking&capability=Personal+and+Social+Capability&capability=Ethical+Understanding&capability=Intercultural+Understanding&priority=ignore&priority=Aboriginal+and+Torres+Strait+Islander+Histories+and+Cultures&priority=Asia+and+Australia%E2%80%99s+Engagement+with+Asia&priority=Sustainability&elaborations=true&elaborations=false&scotterms=false&isFirstPageLoad=false>

¹⁰ ACARA, Search for Human Rights, <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Search/?q=human%20rights>

“Students need a balance of academic focus, and personal wellbeing, instead of focusing on only one which can often affect a student’s overall performance. Things such as mental health may be more promoted, and this ties in which (with) academic success.” Listening Tour (2017)

Young people also want to learn about respectful relationships and specifically have ongoing access to sex education. In the context of physical, mental and emotional wellbeing young people have told me that the current lesson centred content, rather than an integrated approach underpinning curriculum, is problematic. Consequently they feel unprepared and at risk.

“Better sex + consent education in schools – better training for teachers on how to teach this – consent education for everyone (yes means yes) – inclusive education for LGBTQIA people – better/more publicised support for survivors of sexual assault.”* Young Leaders, Listening Tour (2017)

“Teach adults not to tone down the topic of alcohol, sex, drugs because they push us further away and we rebel against them and do it.” Year 10, Listening Tour (2017)

Allowing opportunities and access for those with disabilities

Article 23 – Children who have any kind of disability should receive special care and support so that they can live a full and independent life.

Despite anti-discrimination laws that are there to protect children’s with disabilities there are still too many of these children and young people being excluded from schools or specific activities. Through my conversations with children, parents and support organisations, I have heard of many instances of children being excluded from school or activities due to their disability.

For example:

“Not being able to attend youth parliament due to the fact that Disabilities SA wouldn’t approve my trip to go to Adelaide, so I missed the application dates. It’s not acceptable. I am a young lady who is wanting to experience life but yet I’m being held back.” YAC, Hopes and Dreams (2018)

Due to current laws and policies and practices many children with a disability are being informally and/or formally excluded, and government and education departments levels need to address this and ensure education is available for all children and young people¹¹. This includes data on exclusions – informal and formal – and the basis of these exclusions.

¹¹ SA Parliament, “Report of the Select Committee on Access to the South Australian Education System for Students with a Disability”, May 2017, accessed at <http://www.parliament.sa.gov.au/Committees/Pages/Committees.aspx?CTId=3&PIId=53&CIId=320>.

Exclusions from camping trips and other extra curricula activity, and restricted hours of attendance should also be recorded and monitored. The regular exclusion of children with a disability from education is problematic and must be considered in the new Declaration. With the increasing number of students with a disability in mainstream education the system must acknowledge the long term damage exclusion is doing to the individual child and the family unit.

I have heard from many children and families about the impacts of all forms of exclusion, including restricted hours, being at school in the office but not engaged in activities or learning and more formal approaches. If the current school/classroom environment is unable to uphold the education rights of children then the new Declaration should tackle this head on and identify how the rights of children with a disability will be met.

Better connection between school and career and training

Young people I have spoken to are worried about the future. They realise that the job market is rapidly changing, but the school curriculum is not changing with it. Skills in Science, Technology, Maths and Engineering (STEM) will be important but they are not the only skills that will be needed. Education needs to also help build essentially human skills such as teamwork, entrepreneurship, communication and creativity.¹² Young people want schools and governments to be more innovative in this, connecting primary and high school education to higher learning and industry supporting the development of the skills that are relevant to them.

“Also make careers more accessible and more specific to the students.” Hopes and Dreams (2018)

“No job opportunities that are related to STEM in the Adelaide Hills, if I wanted one it’d be an hour away at least. You can’t get a job outside of the hills unless you have your license (better public transport please)”. Hopes and Dreams (2018).

In addition children and young people have told us that in South Australia it is very difficult to undertake further learning or training unless you live in Adelaide. There are very few opportunities for higher education in rural areas and the time and expense of relocating or commuting can put these opportunities beyond regional young people. Access to further education that is accessible must be factored into genuine attempts to improve pathways.

Young people are facing a future that will be full of change and the old model of preparing for one career is no longer a reality. They will be required to adapt to this change and need to be equipped with the skills to manage it and the transitions they will face over their lives, potentially working for up to 17 employers over 5 careers.¹³

¹² Foundation for Young Australians. ‘The New Work Reality’, 2018. Accessed 10th August 2019 <https://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/FYA_TheNewWorkReality_sml.pdf>

¹³ Foundation for Young Australians. ‘The New Work Smarts’, 2017. Accessed 10th August 2019 <https://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/FYA_TheNewWorkSmarts_July2017.pdf>

“We don’t learn about real life things, therefore when situations occur we are unaware and more vulnerable.” Listening Tour (2017)

In this they are also worried that they will be “taken advantage” of:

“Unpaid work experience/internships/clerkships. Students are expected to do them to gain employment but many can’t afford to give up this time for unpaid experience or even afford to travel to the required location. Even subsidised or honorary amount would be better than nothing.” Young Leaders Consultation (2019)

To better support young people and reduce their vulnerability to workforce changes, career advice and mentoring needs to be improved. This is important to help young people prepare for future opportunities and to inspire them about the possibilities open to them.

“teachers that have the same career pathways as your future job.” Listening Tour (2017)

“I think it’d be invaluable to provide more support of young people in relation to finding work, maintaining a job and their legal rights as a young person working.”

Rights in the future of education

Children and young people are passionate about their education and what the future can give them. They are also aware that they need educators and government to look out for them as they navigate their way through. Unsurprisingly the things that are important to them are consistent with the rights and responsibilities stated in the CRC.

Therefore, adopting the principals within the CRC will better assist with any reframing of the Melbourne Declaration helping to make education accessible, equitable, and inclusive and a better place to be for students and teachers.

Yours sincerely



Helen Connolly, SA Commissioner for Children and Young People