



Supporting Student Voice, Agency and Wellbeing in Schools



Some teachers don't understand what is effective. Students should complete compulsory surveys about teachers. Teachers should explore more ways to teach. Make students more involved in activities rather than just writing.' (16 year old)

Commissioner's Introduction

A good education and relevant qualifications are critical to the future of every young person and are vital ingredients to success.

No young person should be launched into adulthood without the support of a good education, which is why access to education is enshrined within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a fundamental human right.

Under the UNCRC, all children throughout the world have the right to an education (Article 28) that develops each child's personality and talents to the full (Article 29). Children should also have a say in the decisions that affect their lives (Article 12).

Many students say they don't feel ready to become active citizens when they leave school. They want to be better prepared for life beyond school while still at school. They want teachers and adults to better prepare them to become active contributors to Australian society and they emphasise that they know they need proper guidance to be able to do so.

Students are passionate about their education and what choices completing it will offer them beyond school. They're also aware they need adults to look out for them as they transition from childhood to adolescence. They want to see fundamental changes made to the ways in which their schools engage with them, and they to be given more opportunities to become involved in influencing how their education is delivered, including how subjects are taught to them.

Students speak about the impact a good teacher can have on their lives and on their educational success. They describe good teachers as those who genuinely care about a young person's wellbeing and who take the time to understand the context and issues that young people face; both as a generation and as individuals within their particular age-groups.

Students say they enjoy spending time with teachers who are 'open minded', who 'listen, if you are stressed', or who are 'just there when you need someone to talk to'. Students speak about teachers needing to find a balance between treating children as competent human beings while still being mindful of their developmental needs and levels.

Students often show great self-awareness, acknowledging that they are always learning more about themselves, their world, and the curriculum, while also learning how to have effective relationships with their teachers and each other.

Students say they are more likely to be involved and engaged in school and schoolwork when teachers show empathy and compassion toward them. This creates an environment in which they feel safe, and where they don't worry about being judged for saying or doing something 'wrong'.

Students want a school that knows how to balance wellbeing and academic achievement. Across sectors, schools and ages, children and young people want schools to be places where:

- they are known
- they are valued
- they have a voice; and where
- they see the value in what they are learning.

The collective impact of a school being able to deliver on these things is to make children and young people feel positive about their future.

By adopting some small-scale practices at a school level we can create more participatory and inclusive classrooms, more kind and welcoming environments, more engaging and meaningful lessons, and more trusting and respectful relationships between students and teachers.



To feel known

Children and young people want every student to be given at least one reason to love their school for something it does that makes students ‘feel known’.

Students want schools that make them feel welcome, that value diversity, demonstrate kindness and trust, and actively involve them in decision-making. They also want to be engaged directly as individuals, and to be treated with mutual respect and understanding. And they want opportunities to become community leaders and to have a positive impact on the lives of others.

Students have many of their own ideas about different issues and they want their ideas and opinions to be heard and acted upon. They feel tokenised by schools that do not truly engage with them, particularly around those issues that affect them directly. Whatever their circumstances, students overwhelmingly want someone they can trust, as well as access to information that is clear, simple, detailed and unbiased.

Students also want a more personalised approach to schooling. They want educators who are prepared to take time to listen to their concerns, and to work more closely with them to create goals that align with their chosen interests and future career prospects. They want support that is tailored to individual learning needs, and suggest that regular check-ins to measure their progress against mutually agreed upon pre-set goals would be advantageous.

Students say that to be known you must first be heard and understood. They want teachers to know them, and to understand how busy and complex their lives outside the classroom are. They also want acknowledgement that these ‘outside’ things can impact on their everyday behaviour, mood, and attention, while at school, and for this to be factored into learning environments in ways that support them, rather than add stress to their lives.

‘Students have opinions and they matter. Don’t forget that they want to be listened to. Do not forget about us and [that] when you make decisions they do actually affect us.’ (13 year old)



To feel valued

To feel valued, students want teachers to care about them, their education, and their lives. They want teachers to do this by showing enthusiasm for them as individuals, enquiring about their situations, following up to see if they're okay, and by smiling and making eye contact with them every day.

Students want school staff, particularly teachers, to be more aware of the challenge students may be facing. They particularly want teachers to have better mental health awareness. They also want counsellors who can proactively read out to students who may be struggling with difficult issues at home, be under financial strain, or experiencing troubling relationships with peers. They want teachers to be able to pick up on key behaviours that might signify emerging problems and establish support networks designed with student input that can help students get through.

Students say they need 'dedicated and qualified counsellors who aren't already part of the teaching staff' to provide them with high quality support and to be more available. They also want individual coaching and support made available both inside and outside of school.

Students have said that student/teacher relationships are paramount to their education. They understand that teachers are human and value seeing that humanity being expressed whenever they interact with them. They don't expect teachers to be 'emotionless' and are surprised when they are. They do expect them to be honest and kind and want to mirror these values back to teachers. They also want teachers to advocate to senior leadership on their behalf, as well as to other adults in their lives.

Students say that when teachers value both students and learning, they explain themselves better and set tasks students can understand. This approach ensures students are not made to feel stupid or somehow 'less than'.

Students want school environments that inspire learning. They want teachers who foster their capacity to learn, and who remain flexible and adaptive to their diverse and sometimes substantial needs.

'Having [a] class outside instead – when you learn outside it's more FUN! Which means we listen more, exercise more / engage more!' (14 year old)



To have a voice

Students say it is important for teachers and schools to ask for feedback from students, and when they do, to listen to what students say and act upon it.

Although students hear a lot about opportunities for their participation and the importance of having a voice, much of the way in which schools address this is through only completing the first part of the task – that of listening.

Students say they are rarely asked for their ideas or suggestions for positive change, but that when they are, they are rarely acted upon. They also said that if they were asked, this would make a real difference to their lives.

One of the key areas in which students would like an opportunity to provide feedback, is on the effectiveness of teaching methods. Students report that some teachers don't understand the importance of applying effective teaching methods. They suggest that to support a teacher's professional development, students could be asked to complete an anonymous survey about their teachers'

teaching methods. This feedback would be constructive and framed in ways that describe what works well and what doesn't from a student's point of view, so that teachers could adjust their teaching methods accordingly.

By asking students what they think a good school looks like, and how they can work together with teachers and school staff to achieve this, they're given a voice at school and agency within it.

A small number of students shared their experiences of completing surveys that provided opportunities for them to provide feedback on teacher performance in respectful and improvement focused ways. They reported significant engagement in the process and equally significant improvement in their relationships with their teachers.

'A new teacher that was maybe more fun and engaging would be easier for students to focus and enjoy themselves. Spending more time on the history of drama would make it more interesting and intriguing. It would make us appreciate the subject more if we knew the background of it, where it came from.' (14 year old)



To see value in their learning

Students say they want to understand why a particular assignment is important – both to the lesson and the subject, but also to their lives.

Students want to know what skills they are developing and why those skills are important to their learning. They want an education that is relevant to the lives they are living now.

For many students this includes a need to be taught more life skills. Students say they often struggle to feel motivated by what they are being taught; that it often feels as though the lessons don't relate to the 'real world'.

They stress how important it is for them to be able to understand the connection a lesson has to their success outside of school, and for applicable life skills to be taught at school.

'Our education system needs to focus on teaching students about the world, not how to get a good grade. There's no grades in life, but there are morals, failures and successes, and education should overarching[ly] teach us how to deal with them.' (14 year old)

Practical ideas, suggested by students, to support voice, agency and wellbeing in primary and secondary schools

Voice

- Engage students as key stakeholders in the same way this is done in other aspects of their lives – ie where they are asked for feedback to improve services they receive.
- Setup exercises that allow students to have conversations with each other inside the classroom, so they learn how to collaborate more effectively.
- Support students to provide feedback to teachers – not using an individual rating system, but by providing opportunities for students to offer constructive feedback on how teachers can better meet the needs and interests of their students.
- Understand that young people have busy, complex lives too. Consider ways in which decision-making opportunities, that work around this reality, could be created. For example, perhaps students don't have time to sit on the Student Representative Council, but they could express their views by responding to a survey or poll.

Agency

- Allow students to walk around the class or take a 5-minute break when they disengage with what is being taught. Why? Because they might be tired and not able to concentrate, or they just need a moment to refocus.
- Allow students to use fidgets, food, music, and/or doodling to help them engage with their schoolwork. Even though they might try really hard to remain engaged, sometimes it's very challenging for students to focus on learning and schoolwork when other aspects of their lives are being impacted negatively. Being allowed to do these 'distracting' things can really help students become calm and focused.
- Introduce multiple methods to engage with students in the classroom to reflect the different ways in which children and young people learn best.
- Demonstrate democracy in the classroom through voting and building consensus on activities across lessons – for example, use methods such as 'This or That' or 'Fist-to-Five' straw polls.
- Support students to fundraise for causes and resources that matter to them.
- Don't pretend there is choice if there isn't. Explain any limits to the decisions students are invited to make. If the decision has already been made, or student input can only change something small, be sure to inform students about the parameters of their input so their expectations are met, and their trust is built; not eroded.
- Engage students as context experts. Why? Because they know their own experiences. They also understand that teachers are content experts.
- The 'WHAT' of learning is led by teachers, but the 'HOW' of learning could be informed and led by students.

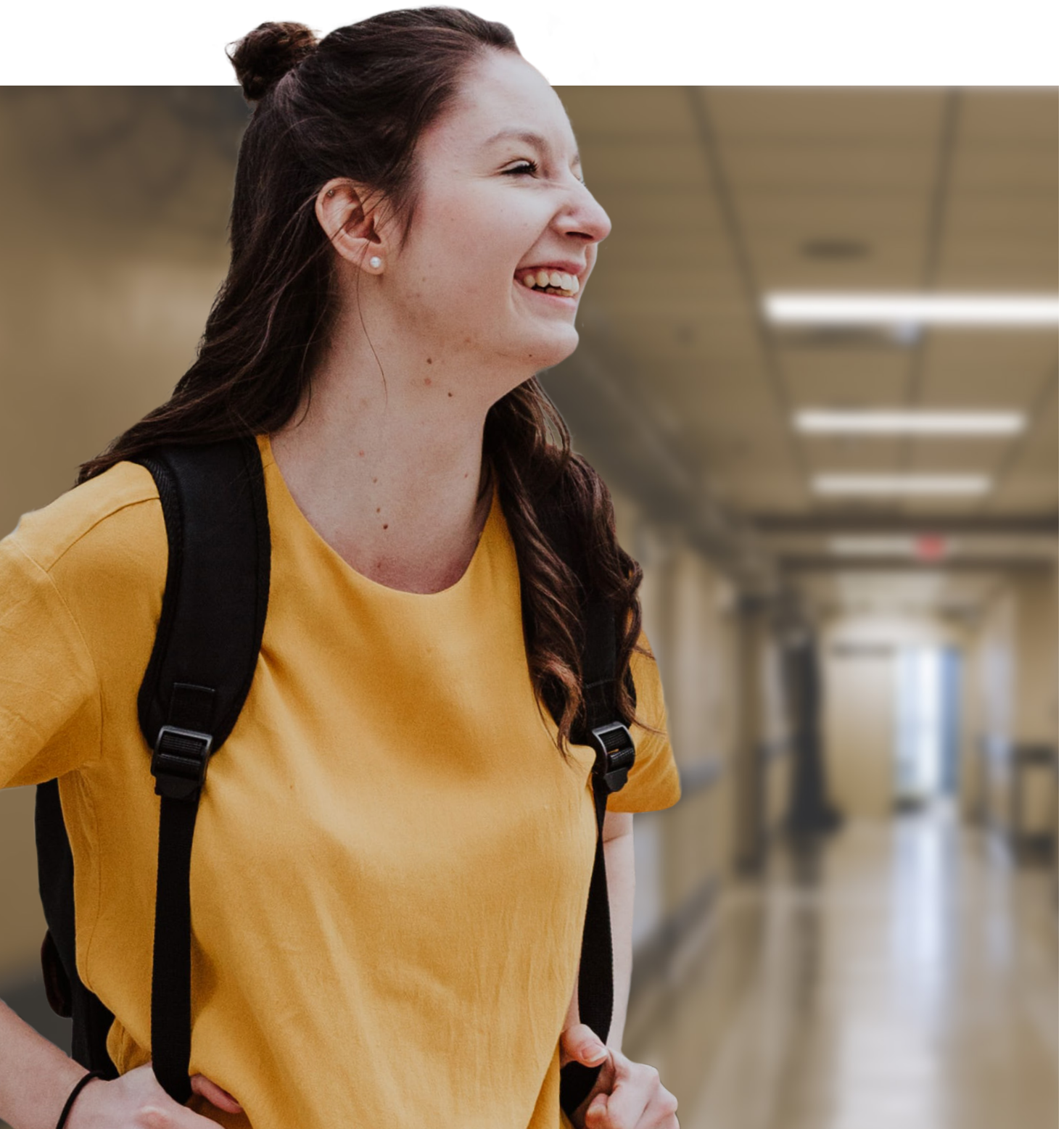
'You can have fun whilst learning – eg using skittles to sort groups.' (10 year old)

Wellbeing

- Realise it is difficult for students to ask for help and that they want teachers to be more proactive in reaching out to students they think might be struggling.
- Display student assignments and artwork in prominent places throughout the school to actively celebrate their achievements.
- Have age appropriate information on subjects students might need more information about, available throughout the school, eg where to get support for mental illness, or what to do if they urgently need a period product.
- Have symbols of acceptance on display, particularly those showcasing the school's commitment to diversity.
- Provide more peer mentoring opportunities so that students can ask other students what matters to them most, and how their school can achieve better outcomes for students overall.
- Provide opportunities for students to change their learning environments more regularly – even classroom configurations can be changed from time to time. Arrange excursions to 'mix things up a bit'. Going on excursions sends a strong message to students that their teachers and school are prepared to invest in making their learning more exciting.

'Actually listen to kids and not make changes based on your own opinion.' (12 year old)





‘Student in schools are too focused on getting good grades not [on] learning itself and [how] that’s really going to affect them in the real world. Feeling stresses everyday about school makes you not wanna go to school everytime you wake.’ (16 year old)

The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* ('the Act').

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation in the adult world.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that relate to delivery of services aimed directly at them.

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