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South Australian students campaign for financially accessible fitness and leisure facilities

This week, members of the South Australian Student Representative Council (SA SRC) launched their Fitness for Free campaign, **calling on the South Australian Government to remove barriers for high school students to access pools, gyms, leisure centres and fitness classes to support their mental wellbeing.**

The SA SRC is pushing for the change to encourage social connection, and a proactive approach to dealing with stress and promote healthy school-life balance.

For many young people, the cost of regularly attending facilities such as pools, gyms and fitness classes is prohibitive. Every young person deserves access to spaces to be physically and socially active, regardless of their financial situation or location.

Much more needs to be done to support young people dealing with a wide range of mental health challenges. From more affordable psychologist visits to accessible clinic hours, qualified mental health professionals in schools and youth-centred services, professionals, experts, and community organisations are advocating for crucial, comprehensive mental health reform. Removing the cost barriers to fitness and leisure facilities is a proactive, rather than reactive, step that governments and businesses can take to genuinely support the wellbeing of the young people in their communities.

SRC member, Elysia Parker, says, “I have autism, and suffer from depression and anxiety. Going to the gym has saved my life, as it gives me something to look forward to everyday.”

“As soon as I step foot in the gym environment my brain switches off from my current situation I am going through and I am just able to focus on exercising. The gym is one of my happy places, and since going I have been a lot happier in myself and been doing a lot better mentally.”

“There is a monthly membership at the gym I go to that gives me access to classes and equipment. The gym fee gets expensive, especially when the prices keep increasing, and we have to pay monthly. If I didn't start going to the gym outside of school I would be still stuck in the low place I was in. That's why it's so important to

make gyms more affordable for myself and other young people whose mental health counts on it”.

South Australia’s Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen

Connolly, agrees the benefits of providing young people with financially accessible fitness spaces and places will have a positive impact on many young people.

The connection between regular exercise and building and maintaining positive mental health is well documented. The benefits will outweigh the costs. If more young people can maintain their own mental health through access to fitness centres as a result of government putting in place a mechanism that could minimise their financial burden in this regard, there will be a positive flow on effect across the mental health system. Sports Vouchers have proven to work well and perhaps there is potential to extend this to include gym and fitness centre membership for those in most need.

The campaign is being supported by the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA). FYA’s **SA SRC Program Coordinator, Maddie Diamond**, said, “Young people are informed and care deeply about the issues that affect them.”

“We know that mental health and wellbeing is a priority for our governments. Spearheading this campaign shows decision-makers that young people have ideas and solutions to improve the way we deal with the issue of mental health that are proactive.”

All South Australians, no matter their age, are encouraged to [sign the petition](#) and take action to make fitness and leisure facilities financially accessible for high school students.

Additional quotes attributable to those listed

Helen Connolly, Commissioner for Children and Young People

“High School Students have been telling me that cost is a big barrier to their participation in physical activity that would otherwise help with their school/life balance. In fact, it was identified as one of the top five barriers preventing young people from spending their free time in the ways they would like,”

“Many described costs associated with organised sport or other hobbies as ‘too expensive’ for them and their families, including purchasing of equipment, uniforms, classes and club or gym memberships.”

“The importance of youth-friendly affordable and accessible infrastructure in supporting young people’s development and making them feel valued as important members of the community cannot be overestimated.”

“Many reported that ‘having more free opportunities to play or engage in physical activity’ and ‘making it less expensive’ would increase their participation. Young people’s ability to engage and be included in leisure and recreation activities is being eroded as a result of rising poverty levels and greater socio-economic inequality.”

Jazmin Bingham, SRC Member

“I have had tough times with anxiety, depression to suicidal ideation. Recreational services are not accessible for all young people. I know from personal experience recreational activities haven’t ‘solved my problems’ but they have certainly helped me along my way, in a way they have ‘healed’ me. Being able to have the comfort and reliability of these services after a long day have helped me feel reassured and gives me a peace of mind. Not only do recreational services give you comfort in yourself but it allows you to build relationships with people in the community and help you feel more connected”

“Personally, after dealing with my own battles, I used recreational services to help me. They allowed me to have a connection within myself to distract my mind and relax my thoughts.”

Fitness for Free Petition: bit.ly/fitnessforfreesa

[Related Links](#)

<https://www.ccyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Press-Play-Activating-Young-Peoples-Health-and-Wellbeing-Through-Play.pdf>

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About the SA SRC

The [South Australian Student Representative Council](#) (SA SRC) is a body of 160+ high school students from across South Australia who are coming together to create real, student-led change in their schools and communities through student-led projects and campaigns.

About CCYP

[Commissioner for Children and Young People SA](#) promotes and advocates for the rights, development and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia and seeks to change laws, policies, systems and practice to uphold children's rights. The work of the Commissioner is guided by the [UNCRC](#), the core international treaty which sets out the civic, political, economic, social and cultural rights of children around the world.

About FYA

The [Foundation for Young Australians](#) (FYA), is the pre-eminent national organisation dedicated to backing young people. Our vision is that young people have the power to beat injustice and transform the future. In pursuit of this vision, our purpose is to back young people with the trust, resources, skills, and connections to make change.