

LET US HAVE A SAY ON SA TOPICS

TALARA MCHUGH

Lowering the voting age, free public transport and greening our canteens are among issues that matter most to South Australian teens.

Made up of 150 of the state's brightest high school students, the South Australian Student Representative Council (SA SRC) is fighting to make it happen, running five campaigns to tackle the subjects of concern.

Year 10 St Mary's College student Tareeka Wickramasiri is one of many calling on the state government to lower the voting age to 16.

"If you can drive, you can work, you can fly a plane, you can pay taxes, you should be able to vote," she said.

"Everyone wants the best for their generation and we want to express that in our voting and hopefully make a difference."

A poll of 769 high school students, conducted by her team, found over half believed the age should be lowered, with two thirds likely to vote if there was change.

Those unsure of how to vote were less likely too, which Ms Wickramasiri said showed the importance of civics education in schools.

"We need to teach kids early on this is how parliament work and this is how voting works.

"Its so they get that in their minds that it's not a scary thing," she said.

The SA SRC also wants the government to provide free public transport and access to fitness and leisure centres for high school students, with their petitions collecting over a combined 2000 signatures.

Year 12 Avenues College student and 2024 Teen Parliament winner Denzel James said the growing cost of transport was a major barrier to education.

"I've seen the impacts with young people who cannot afford to pay for public transport," he said.

“As a student, this issue is really important since other states have a system where they provide free public transport for children and young people who live a certain distance away from schools.

“We’re wanting to advocate on this as children and young people deserve a fair right share of education with free public transport.”

For Maddison Polomka, 15, who has two heart conditions, keeping fit has been vital for her physical and mental wellbeing, but the cost has been a huge barrier.

“A lot of gyms around offer a 12-month membership that is around \$75-100 and people struggling financially can’t afford that,” the Birdwood student said.

“For the last four years my dad didn’t have a job, so having to figure out what to do with stuff around me, trying to help myself while not being able to get to a gym was hard.”

With over 200,000 tonnes of food waste sent to landfill in SA each year, Elena Wabnitz, 15, is fighting to green our canteens by ensuring all high schools have access to and use organic waste bins.

“In a growing world where temperatures, pollution and quality of life are on the decline, we should all be prepared to take action to care for this country,” she said.

“To care for the generations now and the generations to come means to take action against the little things; food wastage, food nutrition and food packaging.”

So far their petition has received over 450 signatures, with the Temple College student also co-creating an Eco-Club to foster passion in junior students and equip them with “the knowledge to make sustainable choices and avocation.”

Last but not least, the SA SRC is also campaigning for the widespread use of a diversity audit tool to be embedded in schools.

This would be used to audit their policies, curriculum, co-curricular groups and staff to promote inclusivity and celebrate diversity.

With the community being made up of so many different nationalities, disabilities, gender identities, sexualities, and religions, Year 11 student Nysa

Khanna from The Heights said celebrating diversity would only “make us stronger.”

“By promoting an inclusive environment, which is a right for every child, it makes us have better educational outcomes and it also promotes better social and mental development,” she said.

Jiya Iyer, 16, was born in Australia after her parents migrated from Mumbai and wants to see diversity not only recognised but celebrated wholeheartedly.

“Schools have got a lot better but there’s still a very long way to go definitely,” the Year 11 Mount Carmel Student said.

“High school students already have a lot on their plates at school and out of school pressures, so making school a more positive environment in terms of diversity and acceptance is very important to me”, said Jiya.

Greening our canteens

The campaign: All SA schools should be environmentally sustainable. This includes improving the waste and recycling practices of school canteens to reduce food waste going to landfill and carbon emissions going into the atmosphere. Suggested initiatives range from supplying organic waste bins to introducing recyclable or compostable canteen packaging products, such as mugs and cutlery.

“Food waste like fruit peels and vegetable scraps can be composted and used in the school garden. This reduces the amount of waste going to landfill and enriches the soil naturally,” a year 11 student said.

Our future our vote

The campaign: Young people want to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives and futures. They want to lower the voting age to 16 for local government elections and say doing so is a chance to make democracy fairer, improve civics education, recognise young people’s rights and strengthen young people’s participation in issues affecting them.

“Young people should be able to have a say in decisions that will ultimately affect them and the next generation. Youth have the best idea of current issues that are important to them,” a year 10 student said.

Fitness for free

The campaign: All SA high school students should have free access to swimming pools, gyms, leisure centres and fitness classes. Students say the prohibitive cost of fitness facilities presents a barrier to their capacity to maintain their mental health and wellbeing. Removing the cost barrier to participation in fitness and other sport activities would help high school students become more fit and active.

“My mental health is currently very stable, but I strongly believe this is due to sport, and that sport can have a similar impact on everyone who participates in it willingly,” a year 10 student said.

Free fares for our future

The campaign: All SA high school students should have free access to public transport. Students say affordable, reliable and safe transport is critical to their participation, wellbeing and inclusion. They rely on public transport for school, sport, healthcare, work, volunteering and social activities, but say the cost is prohibitive for many students and their families.

“Having free public transport would allow me to quit my job and be able to focus entirely on my studies without the stress of worrying on how to get to school,” a year 10 student said.

Seeing Ourselves

The campaign: All schools should regularly review their policies, curriculum, co-curricular groups and staff to ensure they embrace diversity and inclusiveness. The reviews should involve students, who say that many young people do not see themselves represented in the texts or subjects they study or in the events or holidays that schools promote and celebrate.

“It would celebrate and include everyone’s culture and religion, maybe having cultural days to celebrate people’s backgrounds,” a year 10 student said.