



The Things That Matter to Gender Diverse Primary Students

Since being appointed as South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People in 2017, I have spoken to many gender diverse children and young people in schools, in the broader community, and through other consultations and engagements.

I have been particularly pleased to hear the views of gender diverse teenagers on topics that include relationships and sexual health education and periods. Their voices are crucial to our understanding of what systemic changes are needed to ensure the full inclusion and support of gender diverse children and young people across the state.

My annual Student Voice Postcards initiative, which I commenced in 2019, asks primary school aged children aged 8–12 years (ie those in Years 2–6) to tell me what they're interested in, what matters to them, and what concerns they may have about their lives.

Throughout the six years over which the initiative has been undertaken, I have received several hundred responses from children who have described their gender on these postcards in ways that may be considered gender diverse. While it is clear these children share many similar life experiences to many other children their age, they also describe experiences which are clearly specific to their gender, including how other people understand and treat them in different settings that include home, school and out in the community.

It is important to note that in addition to the children who can be identified as gender diverse from their postcard responses, there are likely to be just as many who did not name or describe their gender, or who are transgender and wrote their gender as simply being a girl or a boy.

This snapshot summary takes a close look at the postcard responses of those children whose gender descriptions showed they were gender diverse. It examines their responses for key themes to see how their experiences compare to the many thousands of other children who have completed postcards via this annual initiative.

This snapshot has been written with a view to gaining a better understanding of gender diverse children's experiences and what they say could be done differently to uphold their rights.

In this snapshot the term 'gender diverse' is used to talk about the broad range of genders children shared with me in their postcard responses other than girl or boy, while also acknowledging that this doesn't include all gender diverse children. All quotes and drawings in the snapshot have come from children who provided responses that clearly show they are gender diverse.

There are likely to be children who are gender diverse in every school. Gender diverse children attending primary school are already known to be experiencing direct and indirect discrimination and judgement in relation to their gender. These negative experiences don't just start when they commence high school.

Understanding the experiences of gender diverse children is key to creating safe and inclusive environments and addressing issues of systemic discrimination. While this should be a priority for all systems and services catering for children and young people, it is schools and education settings where this is most crucial, not only because of the time children spend at school but also because of the important developmental role schools and education play in the lives of all children.

Some schools are already creating inclusive school environments, while others have more work to do to make their schools safe and welcoming for students of all genders.

It is important that primary school leaders and educators remain focused on creating inclusive and supportive whole-of-school environments that realise the rights of all children. This includes acknowledgement that gender diverse children are likely to be attending every school.

Recognising that gender diverse children often have similar interests and experiences as many other children their age is also key, as is recognising the many forms of diversity that exist amongst children. In other words, recognising that all children are so much more than their gender.

From the postcard responses received there are four key findings that schools and educators need to know about gender diverse children attending Government, Catholic and Independent primary schools throughout South Australia:

- 1. Gender diverse children describe their genders in many ways;**
- 2. Gender diverse children attend primary schools across the state;**
- 3. Gender diverse children share interests and experiences with many other children their age; and**
- 4. Gender diverse children can encounter discrimination and lack visibility.**

Gender diverse children want grownups to understand their gender. Many of their worries can be linked to experiences of discrimination or judgement that do not reflect how they view their own gender, but how others do.

The insights contained in this snapshot can support educators to meet their obligations under a range of policies and legislation. This includes the South Australian Department for Education's policy and procedure mandating for the safety, inclusion and support of all gender diverse children and young people in all government education settings across the state.¹

More broadly, this snapshot can also help school leaders and educators meet their obligations to support all children to enjoy their rights under the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 'without discrimination of any kind' (Article 2). This includes the right of all children to education to develop their personality, talents, and abilities to their fullest potential and to develop respect for human rights and freedoms (Articles 28 and 29). All children also have the right to express their views on all matters that impact on them (Article 12).

This snapshot summary complements consultations I have previously undertaken with gender diverse young people (primarily teenagers) in South Australia, as part of my advocacy around their rights. This work includes projects aimed at creating safer schools for LGBTQIA+ students ([No Exceptions](#)), supporting South Australia's healthcare system to better meet the needs of transgender and gender diverse children and young people ([First Port of Call](#)), and listening to the responses from LGBTQIA+ young people who completed my large surveys on relationships and sexual health education, periods, sport, work and public transport ([Listening to LGBTQIA+ Young People](#)).

1 Gender diverse children describe their genders in many ways

On their postcards, primary school aged children described their genders in dozens of different ways.

Over a third of gender diverse children wrote that they were non-binary. Others described their gender as genderfluid, demigirl, bigender, boy/girl, both, other, or none. Some used pronouns to describe their gender, such as them/they, she/they, or he/him/it.

A range of these gender descriptions were used across the different ages of the children who participated.

Some children were very confident in expressing their gender, with one child writing that the best thing about being a kid is 'im trans'. Another included the reminder that 'you should always put in a non-binary option'.

While many children just wrote their gender, others provided an explanation of their gender or expressed that it was complex.

“ Non binary student < which means I dont identify as F or M (12, Southern Adelaide)

“ Female. (But I use the term nonbinary - Female is my birth sex.) (12, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island)

“ my Gender does not Fit on a Line (11, Northern Adelaide)

Male/Female/non-binary/gender fluid
(12, Western Adelaide)

She/him/nonbinary
(12, Eyre and Western)

girl but I identify as boy
(11, Northern Adelaide)

girl ^{Born} none gender
(11, Yorke and Mid North)

Demigirl
(she/her/they/them)
(12, Adelaide Hills)

(non-binary)
Person
(10, Southern Adelaide)

Genderfluid trans masc
(11, Eastern Adelaide)

Trans (F+M)
(12, Northern Adelaide)

She \ They
(10, Murray and Mallee)

non-binary
(11, Limestone Coast)

Others did not seem to be sure if they were allowed to share their gender on their postcard, with some originally writing 'girl' or 'boy', then crossing this out and replacing it with 'them'. Some wrote that their gender was a 'secret' or that they'd rather not say. Others wrote that they didn't know, or that they were questioning their gender.

“ female secret? Genderfluid (11, Eastern Adelaide)

“ questioning (asking myself what gender I am)
(11, Northern Adelaide)

There were a small number of children who wrote trans or transgender in their gender description sharing that they were 'trans male' or 'trans to a boy'. There are likely to be more gender diverse children who are not able to be considered. For example, transgender children who describe their gender as girl or boy.

There were also a wide range of gender responses that were ambiguous, such as 'human', 'person', 'student', or 'kid'. There were responses where children wrote their name or year level in response to gender, and on a number of postcards the gender section was left blank altogether. These postcards were only added to the gender diverse group if other content on the postcard could be related to gender, although more of these children were likely to be gender diverse.

Some gender diverse children mentioned their sexuality. This highlights that it is necessary to recognise the ways in which both gender and sexuality can be important to children at this age, and how gender and sexuality can sometimes be interwoven. Some children who weren't gender diverse mentioned their sexuality in terms of being gay or pansexual.

Gender diverse children wrote about wanting grownups to know their sexuality and for people to also be more supported if they are gay or pansexual.

“ I want grownups to know... I'm g a y (12, he/him/it, Southern Adelaide)

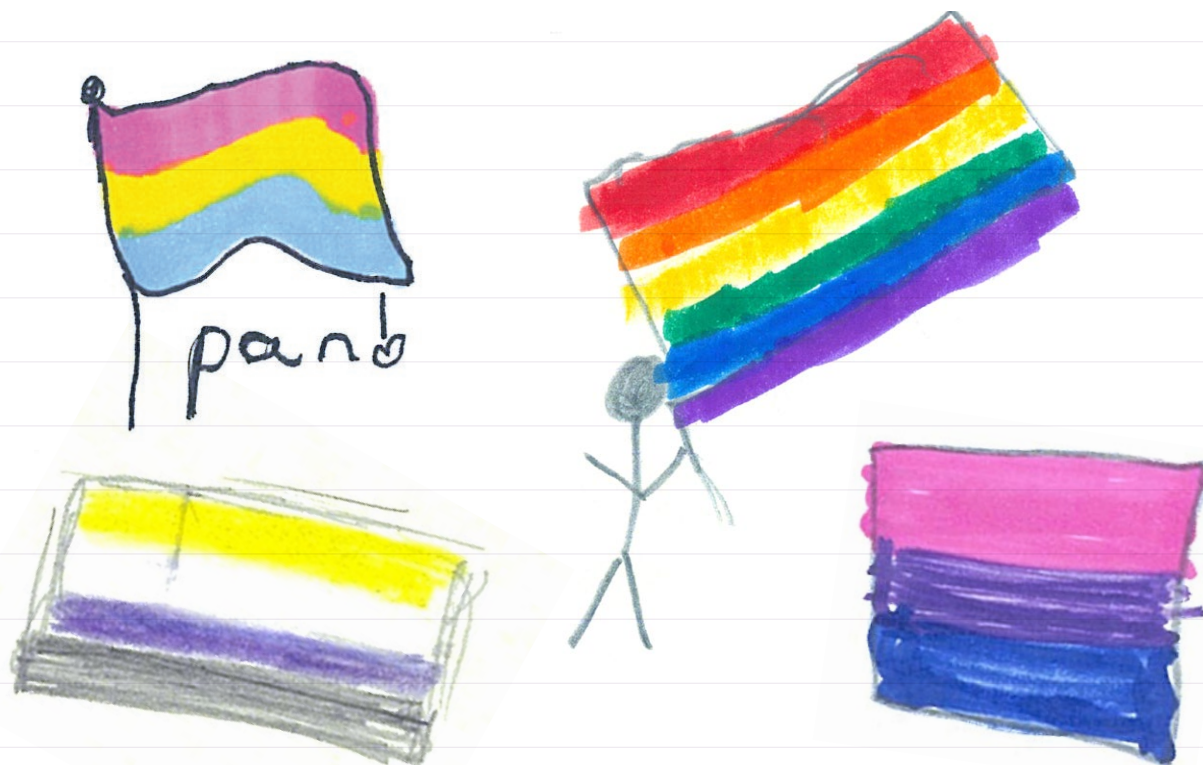
“ I want grownups to know... How my sexuality effects my life. (11, non-binary, Barossa, Light and Lower North)

“ I want grownups to know... I am Bisexual (10, she/they, Barossa, Light and Lower North)

“ I want grownups to know... I Am Bi (12, she/him/non-binary, Eyre and Western)

“ I want grownups to know... im a gay (12, trans man, Northern Adelaide)

“ A good friend is someone who... Support you when you are in the family if you are gay or pan or whatever your lover is. (10, non-binary, Eyre and Western)



2

Gender diverse children attend primary schools across the state



South Australian gender diverse children returned completed postcards from hundreds of different schools across the state.

They came from children attending metropolitan, rural, regional, and remote Government, Catholic, and Independent primary and combined schools throughout the state.

The state's Index of Educational Disadvantage divides South Australian government schools into seven categories of relative disadvantage. Postcards were received from children attending schools in all seven categories.

Although the postcards are intended for children aged 8–12 years (Years 2–6) sometimes they are completed by children outside this age range. While most postcards coming from gender diverse children were from those aged 10–12 years, there have also been postcards completed by gender diverse children aged 5 to 14 years. This highlights the need for school leaders and educators to pay attention to providing affirming and knowledgeable support to the youngest children attending primary schools in South Australia who may be gender diverse. School leaders and educators need to be advocating for a safe environment where all children can feel comfortable and positive about themselves.

3

Gender diverse children share interests and experiences with many other children their age

It is clear from their postcard responses that gender diverse children have a range of interests and experiences that are similar to many other children their age.

They have hobbies and homework, and some have siblings and/or pets. Some come from another country, live with a disability, have mental health concerns and/or live in foster care. These are some of the things that are covered in my annual *Things That Matter* reports.

But while children of all genders who attend the same school and live in the same area are likely to have many things in common, gender diverse children also describe a range of negative experiences that allude to discrimination, or indicate that they were being treated differently to other children because of their gender.

Having and spending time with family and friends

Over the years, many children of all genders have written about the importance of family and friends. Gender diverse children mentioned how much they appreciated having family and friends, enjoyed spending time with them, and worried about anything happening to them. They shared that for them, the best thing about being a kid is 'Having a graet mum' and 'my mum and dad look after me'.

“ The best thing about being a kid is... vido games and haveing a dog haveing a soportive mum (11, they/them, Eastern Adelaide)

“ My favourite thing about being a kid is... that im always with my mummy and daddy. (10, rather not say, Yorke and Mid North)

“ I care about... my family, friends, school and our world. (12, non-binary, Far North)

Several children mentioned their friends and friendships in response to what they liked most about being a kid, including how they liked 'making real friends' and 'hanging out with friends'.

“ My favourite thing about being a kid is... Playing with my friends and chatting with them. (11, female (gender fluid), Far North)

“ The best thing about being a kid is... When I can see my friends. (9, genderfluid, Yorke and Mid North)

As with several other children, gender diverse children sometimes shared negative experiences they had with family and friends, mentioning incidents of bullying and difficulties with some relationships.

“ In the future I hope that... my dad talkes to me more and I have a god time at high school and I don't be egnord [ignored] (12, non-binary, Southern Adelaide)

“ I worry about... When one of my uncle's comes home because he's sometimes mean to me. (9, genderfluid, Yorke and Mid North)



“ The world would be better if... i had Real friends who would Not Leave me and Losing a Loved one (soon to be 12, female Pronouns they/her, Barossa, Light and Lower North)

“ I worry about... lossing freinds -> Being alone and not being able to make friends (11, non-binary, Far North)



Increasing kindness and equality, including support for LGBTQIA+ people

Many children completing postcards wrote about the need for more kindness and equality. Gender diverse children wrote that the world would be better if 'we are all kind to each other', 'We treat everyone equally', and 'we accepted everyone'.

“ The world would be better if... everyone would stop judging each other and got Along. (11, non-binary, Eyre and Western)

“ SA would be better for kids is... Everyone was respectful, kind and supportive. (11, female (gender fluid), Far North)

Several children, including some gender diverse children, wrote about the importance of respecting LGBTQIA+ people and their rights, including the need to be addressing homophobia and transphobia. This was sometimes written about in addition to other forms of discrimination they observed or experienced, such as racism.

“ The world would be better if.... things like COVID-19, racism, homophobia, transphobia and sexism doesn't exist. (12, demigirl, Eastern Adelaide)

“ I care about... my friends, human rights and books, L.g.b.t.q.l+. (12, non-binary they/them, Western Adelaide)

“ I worry about... LGBTQ community, gender equalilty, racism and poverty. (12, I dont know. (Nonbinary, Genderfluid), Southern Adelaide)

“ In the future I hope that... the lgbtq+ community is accepted more. (11, genderfluid, Adelaide Hills)

“ In the future I hope that... I become a fomous youtuber and I also hope that more people will support LGBQ+. (10, girl. Call me "it" please, Murray and Mallee)

Listening to and understanding children

Like many other children, gender diverse children wanted grownups to listen more and have a better understanding of them. They shared they wanted grownups to 'understand me' and to know that 'kids opinions matter'. Some gender diverse children wanted grownups to understand their gender better.

“ I wish grownups would... Understand me and believe me at least twice as much as they do. (10, trans to a boy – Yorke and Mid North)

“ SA would be better for kids if... They heard more kids voices, like you are! So thanks. (12, non-binary, Adelaide Hills)

“ I wish grownups would... Listen to me more, I Don't get noticed much. (11, genderfluid, Northern Adelaide)

“ SA would be better for kids if... the adults understand their children more. (10, trans male, Far North)

“ I want grownups to know that they need to take me seriously and never compare me to others. (12, Boy & Girl <- (Bi-gender), Southern Adelaide)

Caring for the environment

The postcards provide an opportunity for many South Australian children to share the concerns they have for the environment. As with many other children, several gender diverse children mentioned how they worry about pollution and littering, and about the welfare of animals. They want action taken on climate change and want more nature, forests, and greenery.

“ I worry about...The enviroment, we litter alot and it hurts the enviroment so we Should Stop. (9, non-binary, Yorke and Mid North)

“ The world would be better if climate change and the ecosystem where supported and OK! (11, non-binary, Northern Adelaide)

“ My neighbourhood would be better for kids if... there was more nature for people to explore and have fun. (11, female (she/they), Eyre and Western)

“ I want to know more about... ENDangend Animals and how we can save them (11, they/them, Southern Adelaide)

Having fun and doing activities

The postcards also provide an opportunity for children to detail a wide range of activities they enjoy and to share their love of fun things to do. Gender diverse children mentioned enjoying playing video games, playing sports like basketball and soccer, playing with Lego, and riding dirt bikes. They shared they also liked playing with friends and with their pets.

“ The best thing about being a kid is... we can more fun then adats [adults] (9, non-binary, Limestone Coast)

Children often mentioned creative activities in their responses, particularly art, drawing, dancing, singing, writing, reading and creating stories.

“ I am good at... Art, it is calming for me. (10, non-binary, Eastern Adelaide)

“ My favourite thing about being a kid is... being really creative (12, non-binary, Adelaide Hills)

“ The best thing about being a kid is... Drawing and colouring without being Judged. (11, non-binary, Far North)

“ I want to know more about... art and physics and how to write a great story (10, non-binary, Murray and Mallee)

Experiencing school in different ways

Gender diverse children had different experiences of school. While some enjoyed school, they more often wrote about negative experiences they had at school. This often included wanting more action to be taken on bullying and going to school less.

Although these negative experiences were similar to those described by several other children, some may have been related to how children were being treated because of their gender.

- “ My favourite thing about being a kid is... I get to go to school & make new friends! (9, girl/non-binary, Northern Adelaide)
- “ SA would be better for kids if... Schools had a better system for bullying (10, she/they, Eastern Adelaide)
- “ I worry about... getting hurt at school (12, dont want to say, Adelaide Hills)
- “ I wish grownups would... care more about their students mental health (12, non-binary, Southern Adelaide)
- “ The world would be better if... school was 2 days or there is no school (11, non-binary, Limestone Coast)

Being free from adult responsibilities

Several gender diverse children were happy to be children because they don't have any adult responsibilities like paying taxes or bills, having a job, and/or worrying about money. This has been a common theme expressed by many of the children who have completed a postcard.

- “ The best thing about being a kid is... You don't have to worry about taxes or driving or Having to put food on your table. (11, transgender, Eastern Adelaide)
- “ My favourite thing about being a kid is... not dealing with taxes and the bills. Also not worrying about how expensive things are. (10, non-binary, Eyre and Western)
- “ The best thing about being a kid is... You have lots of free time, Everythings for free, you don't have to worry about some things, and its just easier being a kid. (12, she/they, Barossa, Light and Lower North)

4

Gender diverse children can encounter discrimination and lack visibility

Some gender diverse children wrote about negative experiences relating to their gender, particularly how they were misunderstood and treated by others.

While many gender diverse children wrote about a range of experiences and issues that were similar to many other children, some explicitly wrote about the worries, discrimination, and difficulties they've experienced relating to their gender. Others wrote about the lack of visibility they experience and their desire to know more about other gender diverse people like them.

Wanting grownups to hear and understand their gender

While many children shared they wanted to be listened to and understood more, some gender diverse children explicitly mentioned their gender as being something they felt grownups needed to recognise and know more about.

They wanted grownups to understand more about them and their gender, including what their pronouns are. They also wanted grownups to recognise that children know their own gender, and that it is not a 'phase' they are going through even though they are young.

- “ I want grownups to know... that i identifiy as a boy and girl (8, it, Eastern Adelaide)
- “ I want grownups to know... that my pronouns are they/ them (12, non-binary they/them, Western Adelaide)



“ I wish grownups would... acknowledge being queer at a younger age. and actually listen to them. (12, Female. (But I use the term nonbinary - Female is my birth sex.), Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island)

“ I want grownups to know... Just because we are young it doesnt mean we are wrong, confused or not valid. (12, agender/non-binary, Southern Adelaide)

“ The worst thing about being a kid is... Peapole tell me its “just a phase” and not having a voice in court. (11, non-binary, Southern Adelaide)

Experiencing discrimination and judgement

Children wrote about a range of ways they experience discrimination and judgement because of their gender. They expressed concerns about how they are treated and about having to conform to narrow views about gender.

“ The world would be better if... People did'ent judge people because of their gender and what they look like. (10, non-binary, Barossa, Light and Lower North)

“ The world would be better if.... Everyone could live in peace and wherever you go not be judged by your gender. (12, demigirl, Southern Adelaide)

“ The world would be better if.... People could just live their life without being mocked for it. (12, Trans (FtM), Northern Adelaide)

“ The world would be better if... we didn't have to fit in to boxes to apease socitey and could exist. (11, non-binary, Western Adelaide)

“ I worry about....- My private info being leaked (given or told) - people thinking theres something 'wrong' with me. (12, genderfluid, Eastern Adelaide)

“ I worry about... being teased because of supporting lbgtQA+ and having two mum's. (10, non-binary, Barossa, Light and Lower North)

“ I wish grownups would... stop descrimnating against people in the LGBTQ+ community. (12, rather not say, Eastern Adelaide)

Worrying about gender

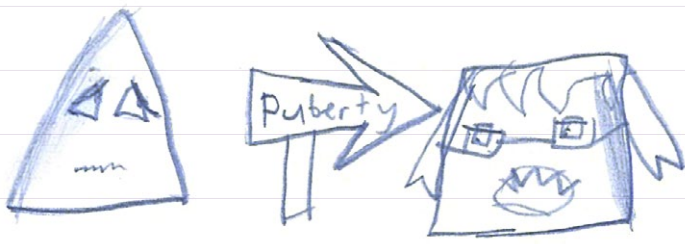
A small number of children specifically mentioned the worries they had about their gender. These worries were not always about experiencing direct discrimination but were more likely related to indirect discrimination and messages they had received from others about gender and gender diversity more broadly. This had an impact on how they thought about being gender diverse, and what this might mean for them in their lives.

“ I worry about... Life in genral. My gender disforia. my anxiety, my “habits” my iner-critic. war. (12, Male/Female/ non-binary/gender fluid, Western Adelaide)

“ I worry about... my gender. (11, transformed boy, Western Adelaide)

“ I worry about: my thoughts of being transgender. (12, [gender not asked], Northern Adelaide)

“ I want to know more about... if is ok to be how I am. (11, he/they, Barossa, Light and Lower North)



A few children were worried about puberty, and while this was a response received from some children generally, it seemed to be more of a concern for gender diverse children who were facing (or already experiencing) changes to their body that may or did not align with their gender.

“ I worry about... Adulthood and PuBety (10 3/4, non-binary, Adelaide Hills)

Wanting gender diverse people to be more visible

Gender diverse children wanted more visibility and to know more about other gender diverse and LGBTQIA+ people. These children, and the people in their lives, would benefit from increased visibility of gender diverse people, along with better access to affirming information about gender diverse people.

“ In the future I hope that... trans people will be more noticed. (11, transgender, Northern Adelaide)

“ I want to know more about... the Lgbtq+ community (11, genderfluid, Adelaide Hills)

“ I want to know more about... the minority communities is SA. (12, non-binary-masc, Eastern Adelaide)

“ I want to know more about... pride festivals (10, she/they, Murray and Mallee)

Ways we can better support gender diverse children at school

School leaders and educators don't need to wait until they are aware of a gender diverse child attending their school before making it more inclusive and welcoming to children of all genders.

Given the likelihood of there being gender diverse children enrolled at every primary and combined school throughout South Australia, placing a focus on welcoming and fostering inclusiveness for gender diverse children should be the norm.

The negative experiences gender diverse children describe in their postcard responses highlight the need for increased knowledge and more affirming practices in support of gender diverse children to be introduced to people of all ages.

For gender diverse children, schools can play an important role in supporting them when other key people in their lives, who sometimes include parents and/or carers, do not understand or affirm their gender.

It is so important that as adults we do not make assumptions about a child's gender, or how they experience their gender. It is also important that we recognise that gender diverse children experience their gender in many ways.

Many gender diverse children were able to express their gender clearly, with a few also providing an explanation or definition of what their gender description meant. Others appeared less familiar with language around gender diversity. We know there are likely to be more children who did not share their feelings or thoughts about being gender diverse because they were not sure they were allowed to or were still questioning their gender.

It is so important that we listen to what gender diverse children have told us about their lived experiences, and that we act on what they have also told us they need.

At the same time, gender diverse children (and their families) should not be responsible for educating schools. It is the responsibility of schools to educate themselves in relation to what it means to be gender diverse, and to develop the policies and procedures that will ensure gender diverse children always feel safe and supported when they are amongst their peers and with their teachers.



Finally, it is crucial to remember that gender diverse children are children. They share many of the same interests, experiences, and worries that many other children do. They simply reflect the gender diversity that exists amongst people throughout societies around the world. They have the same rights as all other children and young people everywhere. Our role is to ensure these rights are respected and upheld.

Endnotes

- 1 Department for Education, *Gender diverse and intersex children and young people support procedure*, 2024, <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/policies/shared/gender-diverse-intersex-children-young-people-support-procedure.pdf>; Department for Education, *Supporting gender diverse, intersex and sexually diverse children and young people policy*, 2024, <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/policies/shared/supporting-gender-diverse-intersex-sexually-diverse-children-young-people-policy.pdf>.

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.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda, including ways in which children and young people can have greater input into the design and delivery of policies, programs and practices that affect their lives.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the South Australian schools who supported children to participate in the Commissioner's Student Voice Postcards initiative and to all of the children who participated.

Please note: All quotes in this snapshot summary are reproduced verbatim.

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