



youth affairs council
OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Purpose of Public Education Submission

March 2023

Introduction

The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia (YACSA) is the peak body in South Australia representing the interests of young people as well as youth organisations and networks throughout the State's non-government youth sector. Policy positions held by YACSA are independent and not aligned with any political party or movement. We advocate for the best interests of young people, and those working with and for them, to achieve meaningful improvements in the quality of young people's lives.

In 2020, YACSA partnered with the Department for Education on a two-year student-led bullying prevention project. The project included hosting student-led attendance and engagement forums where students discussed what helps and hinders their engagement, and what could be done to improve it. YACSA added to this work in 2021 by partnering with the Department for Education to facilitate additional consultations with students attending the STEM Aboriginal Student Congress. We have also facilitated consultations with young people for the Child Development Council's Outcomes Framework which included exploring what young people want from education, and we participated in the Minister roundtable exploring violence prevention in schools.

We have an ongoing interest in education and we welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Department for Education's consultation on the Purpose of Public Education.

Key Points

- All young people have a right to education.
- The purpose of education is to support the holistic development of young people.
- Public schools and the public education system can be assisted to provide holistic support to young people while they learn.

Young People in Context

The public education system in South Australia has a significant influence on young people's development. Outside of the impact on vocational preparation, public education can influence young people's approach to interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, and lifelong learning. All young people have the unconditional and equal right to education and the South Australian Government has a responsibility to ensure accessibility. Limited resources, remote locations, disability, behavioural concerns, or incarceration do not negate the right of young people to education nor the state's responsibility to ensure it. YACSA believes the public education system also provides an

opportunity to shift away from tertiary responses to issues young people experience and toward prevention and early intervention.

Priority Purpose of Public Education

The aim of education, as outlined in Article 29 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, is to support the holistic development of children and young people to their full potential so they can live full and satisfying lives as responsible members of a free society with respect for themselves, others and the environmentⁱ. If these aims are achieved, then many other rights can be safeguarded, thereby strengthening freedom and fairness in society. Therefore, the primary purpose of public education must be to act as a mechanism for the realisation of the rights of all children and young people.

Building Holistic Skills and Capacities

YACSA believes youth participation and civics education should be better supported in schools as they enable young people to influence issues and decision-making processes that are important to them.

Students report they do not feel their views are valued at schoolⁱⁱ. Improving youth participation is an effective way to rectify this and it would empower young people to engage in broader society. Youth participation is an ongoing process where young people can build on and express their views freely, and influence matters that affect them. Youth participation is both a right in itself and a means to access and exercise other rightsⁱⁱⁱ. Through youth participation, young people gain the necessary knowledge, skills and experiences needed in adulthood and for society to build future accountability and good governance. Full and meaningful participation provides young people with the opportunity to affect change, speak out about issues including violations of their rights, and to hold those in positions of power to account. Young people are experts in their own lives and their involvement in decision-making will lead to better decisions, services and outcomes for them and their communities. Evidence also shows that youth participation in schools can result in increased wellbeing, improved student-adult relationships, and better attitudes towards school^{iv}.

There are teachable skills that improve young people's ability to influence decision-making, however, the key factor for improving youth participation involves upskilling adults such as teachers, and reforming current practices to enable young people to have more influence, especially in decision-making processes that affect them.

Young people are deeply concerned about social and political issues like the environment, equity and discrimination and mental health^v, however, their ability to influence decisions on these issues is impeded by a limited understanding of Australian civics^{vi}. In the most recent national assessment program on civics and citizenship, only 38 per cent of year 10 students reached the proficient standard and year 10 is the last year of schooling that civics education is compulsory^{vii}. This demonstrates a lack of effective civics education in schools which must be addressed to support young people to be informed and responsible citizens. Primarily, if teachers' ability to provide effective civics education is limited because of their workload and competing curriculum priorities, an external source of civics education should be utilised to ensure this opportunity is not denied from young people.

Meeting Young People Where They Are

Improving youth participation is an effective way to remain responsive to young people's interests and the issues they experience, to build on their strengths and to foster their enjoyment of learning. Teachers, schools and the broader education system should actively seek input from young people about their education, genuinely consider their views, and work with young people on implementation. This can include involving young people in decisions about curriculums and school policies, and everyday activities like selecting topics for assignments or mechanisms for behaviour management. This participation should be ongoing, happen at the individual and collective levels, in a time, place and manner young people are comfortable with and be guided by what young people want rather than prioritising the interests of teachers, schools or the department.

Youth participation does not mean everything young people suggest must be implemented. While young people are experts in their own lives and experiences, they are not the only experts on young people or youth issues and they obviously do not have expertise in all areas. By combining young people's expertise with that of education professionals and the evidence-base available, an engaging, flexible and high-quality learning experience can be created that is relevant and responsive. Involving young people in decision-making about their education increases their sense of belonging, investment in their education and acknowledges them as valuable contributors.

Unfortunately, many young people are not adequately supported to access their right to education by the current mainstream public education system which can often treat young people as a homogenous group. The *Inquiry into Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion Processes in South Australian Government Schools*, also known as the Graham report, presented findings and recommendations which sought to support South Australia to deliver world-class public education^{viii}. Recommendations include changing policy to minimise the use of exclusionary discipline for all children and young people, meaningful student participation in decision-making, implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Support framework, and strengthening staff learning and practices related to effective and inclusive education^{ix}. The Department for Education previously committed to progressing key areas of work in relation to the Graham review which YACSA looks forward to seeing completed^x.

While the Graham report recommended decommissioning the Flexible Learning Options (FLO) program, we understand the department is not pursuing this and welcome that decision. YACSA acknowledges criticisms of FLO outlined in the Graham report, however, alternative education options are important as they provide targeted support and diverse learning options to meet the needs of identified students whose needs are not met in the current rigid mainstream model of education. The ideal situation would be for young people to be offered flexible and diverse learning options as part of mainstream public education, but until public education is sufficiently resourced and capable of providing education tailored for individuals as opposed to the majority, options like FLO remain essential. FLO also offers the opportunity for young people to work with professionals, such as youth workers, who are trained to and experienced in working with young people holistically as the priority, rather than delivering education like teachers.

Thriving in School and Beyond

For schools to be able to support young people to thrive holistically requires a focus on young people's whole wellbeing, rather than a single facet. The *Review of the National School Reform*

Agreement Study report describes wellbeing as a broad concept of how a person feels about themselves and their life^{xi} and discusses how wellbeing is influenced by a multitude of factors including mental and physical health, relationships, personal circumstances and home and school environments^{xii}. The report also identifies positive student wellbeing as a means to improved engagement and learning outcomes, but that a significant number of students have poor wellbeing or experience wellbeing challenges, and school wellbeing policies and programs often fail to provide teachers and students with the supports they need^{xiii}.

Schools offer a unique occasion to connect with young people and their families, which is an opportunity to provide support to improve young people's wellbeing, especially in prevention and early intervention spaces^{xiv}. Schools can support students to thrive by taking a holistic approach, such as providing proactive support to prevent issues from arising including establishing positive student-teacher relationships and teaching wellbeing skills, identifying the needs of students and their families early and providing or referring to effective support services. Schools cannot, nor should they be expected to support young people to thrive in isolation as it requires partnerships between schools, students, parents and caregivers, government and non-government services as well as the broader community.

Supporting the Whole Young Person: A Strong Youth Sector

The aims of education are diverse and require skilled implementation from a range of professionals. Teachers are experts in their area of teaching, but they cannot be expected to have the same level of expertise in all areas of teaching nor to have expertise and primary responsibility to support the holistic development of young people. YACSA acknowledges efforts to increase the capacity of schools to support students through dedicated positions to support key student groups as well as wellbeing positions, but more is needed.

The youth sector of South Australia is best placed to support the needs of young people outside of education. Public schools across South Australia can support the holistic needs of young people via the co-location of support services within campus. Building community capacity allows services to provide students and families with diverse support across the school, community and home environment. This model was developed to allow schools to be a hub around which the community revolves and a place where students and parents can access government services, counselling and whatever other supports are needed^{xv}. Full-service schools also assist to overcome issues arising from fragmented service delivery by forming partnerships between government, non-government organisations and local schools. The benefits of this collaborative approach include improved access for young people, their families, service providers, administrative and funding bodies; and a longer-term shift away from crisis response and towards prevention and early intervention.

YACSA commends efforts by many schools in partnering with local services and organisations to provide holistic support to young people as they learn. This approach helps schools and the wider community to address retention and participation more fully. In particular, YACSA believes that service provision taking place in the context of education could have a positive impact on the capacity of individuals, families, and community members to respond to the needs of young people and provide them with the services, resources, skills, and connections they need to grow and learn in a safe and positive way. YACSA supports further development and refinement of partnerships

between schools and the youth sector across South Australia, however, non-government services require appropriate funding to partner with schools and provide effective support for young people.

YACSA would welcome the opportunity to be involved in future discussions about public education in South Australia. YACSA can provide expertise on working with young people, issues impacting young people and youth participation. This includes but is not limited to facilitating consultations with staff and students, reviewing existing participation initiatives, such as student voice, supporting implementation of best practice youth participation, providing professional development to staff, and providing capacity building to young people on topics such as peer-consultation, driving change and civics.

ⁱ United Nations 1989, *Treaty No. 27531 - Convention on the Rights of the Child*, available at:

https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf

ⁱⁱ Connolly, H 2021, *Supporting Student Voice, Agency and Wellbeing in Schools*, Commissioner for Children and Young People South Australia, Adelaide.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lansdown, G 2011, *Every Child's Right to be Heard: Resource Guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child – General Comment No. 12*, Save the Children, London.

^{iv} Mager, U & Nowak, P 2012, 'Effects of Student Participation in Decision-Making at School: A Systematic Review and Synthesis of Empirical Research', *Educational Research Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 38-61.

^v Leung, S, Brennan, N, Freeburn, T, Waugh, W & Christie, R 2022, *Youth Survey Report 2022*, Mission Australia, Sydney.

^{vi} Ghazarian, Z, Laughland-Booy, J, De Lazzari, C & Skrbis, Z 2020, 'How Are Young Australians Learning About Politics at School?: The Student Perspective', *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 192-208, doi: 10.1007/s43151-020-00011-7.

^{vii} Fraillon, J, Friedman, T, Ockwell, L, O'Malley, K, Nixon, J & McAndrew, M 2020, *National Assessment Program (NAP): Civics and Citizenship National Report 2019*, Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), Sydney.

^{viii} Graham, L, McCarthy, T, Killingly, C, Tancredi, H & Poed, S 2020, *Inquiry into Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion Processes in South Australian Government Schools – Final Report*, The Centre for Inclusive Education (QUT), Brisbane.

^{ix} *ibid*

^x South Australian Parliament, House of Assembly 2022, *Estimates Committee Hearing A, 22 June, viewed 16 March 2023*, <https://hansardsearch.parliament.sa.gov.au/daily/eca/2022-06-22/2>.

^{xi} Productivity Commission 2022, *Review of the National School Reform Agreement – Study Report*, Productivity Commission, Canberra, p. 71.

^{xii} *ibid*

^{xiii} *ibid*, p. 137.

^{xiv} Berger, E, Reupert, A & Allen, K 2020, *School-Based Prevention and Early Intervention for Student Mental Health and Wellbeing – Evidence Brief*, Monash University, Clayton.

^{xv} Collie, R, Martin, A & Frydenberg, E 2017, 'Social and Emotional Learning: A Brief Overview and Issues Relevant to Australia and the Asia-Pacific', in R Collie, A Martin & E Frydenberg (eds), *Social and Emotional Learning in Australia and the Asia-Pacific: Perspectives, Programs and Approaches*, Springer Singapore, Singapore, pp. 1-13.

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