

Consultations with children and young people on the Review of the Melbourne Declaration

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Background and Methodology

In July-August 2019, the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People conducted consultations with children and young people to inform the NSW Department of Education review of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians.

Consultations were held in two schools – one in regional NSW and one in South West Sydney. In total, 184 secondary school students participated in 26 focus groups discussions around the following four questions:

1. What is working well for you in your school?
2. What is not working well for you in your school?
3. What knowledge and skills should students develop for the future?
4. What do schools need to do to make sure that every student is known, valued and cared for?

Detailed Findings

What is working well for you in your school?

Students from both schools raised a variety of aspects of school that were working well for them. They reported enjoying socialising with their friends at recess and lunchtime, making new friends and positive relationships with students and teachers. Multiculturalism was also seen as working well; students enjoyed being exposed to cultural diversity in their schools and multicultural events.

Students also discussed the various programs and supports on offer in their schools as working well. These included breakfast clubs; sports programs; scholarships; Girls Academy; Intensive English Centre; Boot camp; Space camp; Gifted and Talented Program; Robotic Club; MAD night (performing arts); peer mentoring; Cadets; leadership programs (e.g. Xventure); homework centres and after school tutoring and the Women Empowerment Group.

Many groups reported that aspects of the curriculum were working well; including excursions and incursions, school sport, project-based learning, engaging in practical activities, being able to choose electives, using new technologies in the classroom and having a wide variety of subjects available. Some groups also reported being able to voice their opinions freely in class and through the school student voice meetings:

“We’re allowed to speak our voices.”

Linked to the curriculum, students raised that they enjoy learning new skills at school, sharing ideas, engaging in teamwork and gaining work and life experience:

“School is making me more mature.”

A few groups mentioned having good emotional support at school, strong support networks and a sense of safety at school:

“Teacher support outside the classroom. They listen and work around problems and hardships students might be facing.”

What is working not well for you in your school?

Students raised a range of aspects of school that were not working so well for them. First, students reported many physical aspects of the school environment that they would like to see improved. These included a lack of air-conditioning and heating, old and run-down classrooms, not enough shelter around the school, not enough lockers and the poor state of school toilets.

Many groups reported feeling under a great deal of pressure at school for a variety of reasons. Specifically, they raised feeling very stressed as a result of the structuring of exam and assessment timetables with sometimes having several on one day and often having assessments all due at the same time. Some groups also reported feeling under pressure to meet teacher and parent expectations. Others found time management very difficult due to having to balance school, work and home commitments. Several groups raised NAPLAN as too stressful and others discussed heavy workloads, too much homework and school stress and pressure in general:

“Less pressure to do well or gain top marks.”

“Get rid of NAPLAN because of the amount of stress it causes to younger kids.”

“Overloading of exams and assignments within a time period.”

Poor teacher-student relations was raised by several groups with students reporting that they would like better communication with their teachers, for teachers to care more about them, focus less on discipline and be more understanding of differences between students’ learning abilities:

“More communication between teachers and students.”

“When voicing our opinions we are shut down constantly.”

Students also raised several areas of the curriculum that were not working well for them. They reported wanting a more relevant syllabus that prepared them for life after school:

“Stop studying Shakespeare, we should study more modern texts.”

“More life skills related topics.”

Students also raised that they would like a more wide-reaching syllabus that accommodates all young people and a syllabus that is less theory-based and more practical:

“Too much academic focus, not enough practical, problem solving, creative thinking.”

“Less copying off the board.”

Students further discussed difficulties concentrating in some classes due to disruptive students and teachers not being able to control them:

“Not everyone wants to study and lot of mucking around.”

“Disruptive behaviour, lack of teacher discipline.”

Several groups reported that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are often excluded at school. Specifically, they discussed the high canteen prices and expensive school uniforms as particularly problematic:

“Some students are more disadvantaged than others – low SES.”

“Not all opportunities are given to everyone.”

Other aspects of school raised by students as not working well included a lack of inclusion due to racism, discrimination, homophobia and gender segregation; large class sizes; early start and late finish times and lessons being too long:

“Too many people in one class.”

“School should start later.”

“Racism and discrimination.”

“Segregation between genders.”

What knowledge and skills should students develop for the future?

Life skills was overwhelmingly the most commonly reported desired knowledge and skills area by students across all focus groups. These included skills in financial management; general independent living skills and skills to support their emotional wellbeing:

“These are essential life skills we should be learning before leaving school.”

“Teachers teaching us useless stuff like algebra or trigonometry when we should be learning more basic stuff.”

With respect to financial management, students discussed the need for lessons on how to save money and budget, pay bills and taxes, purchase a car or home, as well as learning about bank accounts, mortgages and superannuation:

“How to save money.”

“Learning how to do taxes.”

“How to pay bills, buy houses, do taxes and superannuation.”

Students also brought up a wide range of general independent living skills that they would like to be taught at school; including cooking, managing a household, parenting skills, maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle, first aid, how to fill in legal documents, changing a tyre and how to make purchases online. Knowledge and skills related to mental health and wellbeing were also raised as desirable:

“More mental health information.”

“Stress management.”

“Resilience.”

“Coping mechanisms.”

Knowledge and skills to prepare students for future employment was also frequently raised. Young people reported wanting to receive more information about how to apply for a job, career options and pathways, more opportunities for work experience, how to prepare a resume and how to delegate jobs.

Interpersonal, problem-solving and higher order thinking and conceptual skills were raised as important to prepare students for the future. These included social skills, public speaking, engaging in teamwork, critical thinking, adapting to different situations, flexibility, open-mindedness, being respectful of different cultures and developing emotional intelligence.

Other areas that students raised the need for knowledge and skills in included STEM, human rights and rights as an Australian citizen, understanding laws and penalties, politics and how to vote.

What do schools need to do to make sure that every student is known, valued and cared for?

Student discussions around what schools can do to make sure that every student is known, valued and cared for centred on three key themes: ensuring all students have a voice, providing support to all students and celebrating student achievements.

First, providing every student in the school with a voice in decision making was raised by all groups as an important way for them to feel valued. Students want to be listened to and taken seriously:

"Listen to our voices."

"Take us seriously."

"There should be a person who asks for suggestions."

"Take what we say into consideration and make sure it goes into action."

Some groups suggested ways to ensure that students have a voice in their schools such as asking students to provide anonymous teacher evaluations once a term; completing general surveys asking for their opinions and holding year meetings for students to voice their opinions on school-related matters.

Second, students raised feeling supported as an essential way for them to be known, valued and cared for. Specifically, they discussed the provision of emotional support, supportive relationships with teachers, creating inclusive environments and ensuring support for disadvantaged students.

Regarding emotional support, students reported the need for more one to one check-ins on every student's wellbeing and more counsellor availability:

"Check on individual student's wellbeing and mental health."

"Baseline knowledge of students' personal life e.g. home life, culture and background."

"Counselling/check-ups for all students to ensure safe wellbeing/mental health."

Positive relationships with teachers were also viewed as important in creating a supportive environment for students. Young people want teachers to be understanding, treat them as individuals and demonstrate that they care about their students. Some felt that reduced class sizes would assist teachers to develop better relationships with students:

"Personal check-ups between teachers and students."

"Not having favourite kids in classes."

"Student to teacher ratio should be lowered so there is more time for teachers to show there is time for students."

"Asking kids if work is too hard."

"Teachers should be more involved in students' day."

"Building a bond between student and teacher."

Creating an inclusive school environment was another way raised for students to feel supported at school. Young people discussed the importance of school being a place where every student feels accepted and that they belong, including those that are most vulnerable and disadvantaged:

“Need to make sure that everyone isn’t isolated.”

“Whole school activities.”

“Be more critical on racial discrimination.”

“Support those who cannot afford meals.”

“Students should know they belong.”

Finally, some groups raised the importance of celebrating student achievements to ensure they are known, valued and cared for:

“More recognition for achievements.”

“In-class rewards to recognise student achievements.”