

# Recommendations to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation

- The National Student Voice Council (NSVC) supported by the Secretariat (Katrina Stuve) and Council Facilitator (Summer Howarth) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to the Consultation Paper (the paper) to assist the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System.
- The NSVC is a council composed of state and territory students who are representatives of all sectors of schooling. The NSVC was initiated in as a direct response to the request of the EMM; December 10 2022. The Council will continue to provide information, consultation and co-design advice to EMM.
- We commend the Expert Panel for a well-developed paper that discusses the challenges of the current education system; and presents opportunities to help address these in the next National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA).
- Our submission was co-developed by members of the NSVC in a workshop following the convening of the Ministerial Reference Group (*some members of the MRG are also members of the NSVG*). We are responding to three specific questions and providing some big bold ideas as well.
- **Our submission provides responses to questions:**
  - 4. Should the next NSRA add additional priority equity cohorts? For example, should it add children and young people living in out-of-home care and students who speak English as an additional language or dialect? What are the risks and benefits of identifying additional cohorts?
  - 8. What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively? What is needed from schools, systems, government and the community to deliver this?
  - 11. Would there be benefit in surveying students to help understand student perceptions of safety and belonging at school, subjective state of wellbeing, school climate and classroom disruption? Would there be value in incorporating this into existing National Assessment Program surveys such as NAPLAN?

## **The National Student Voice Council (NSVC) offers the following recommendations to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation:**

- Ensure all students have access to quality education, with a particular focus on those at risk of entering or already involved in the justice system and young people without parental support for life skills learning. The NSVC believes that every student deserves the opportunity to access high-quality education regardless of their background or circumstances. ***We emphasise the need to provide targeted support and resources to students who may face additional challenges in their education journey.***
- Maintain equity within the learning environment while avoiding student seclusion. The NSVC recognises the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment where all students feel valued and included. ***We advocate for practices that promote equity, diversity, and belonging without isolating or segregating students from each other.***
- Prioritise support for at-risk students, including First Nations' students and those who have experienced family violence, and provide necessary support even if it falls outside a teacher's primary responsibilities. The NSVC emphasises the need to focus on at-risk students to ensure they receive the support and assistance they require to succeed in their education. ***We particularly highlight the importance of supporting First Nations' students and students facing family violence, recognising that this may require a collective effort from schools and the education system.***
- Support students with disabilities and avoid grouping students into uncomfortable cohorts with unnecessary resources. The NSVC stresses the importance of providing adequate support for students with disabilities to ensure they have equal access to education. ***We caution against grouping students into cohorts that may make them uncomfortable, advocating for individualised approaches that address specific needs.***
- Consider the addition of new priority equity cohorts in the future, such as children in out-of-home care and students with English as an additional language, while being mindful of potential labelling stigma and promoting inclusion for all groups. The NSVC raises the question of expanding priority equity cohorts to include other groups that may require additional support. ***However, we also highlight the potential risk of creating stigma through labelling and emphasise the importance of fostering an inclusive and non-discriminatory educational environment.***

- Evaluate the impact of adding new cohorts on student well-being. The NSVC stresses the importance of conducting evaluations to determine how the addition of new priority equity cohorts impacts student well-being and overall educational outcomes. **We advocate for evidence-based decision-making to ensure that initiatives effectively support student needs.**
- Enhance support for regional and rural students who face limited resources in their areas, and prioritise students lacking a supportive home life or experiencing challenges like hunger, disruptive behaviour, or misbehaviour at school. The NSVC emphasises the unique challenges faced by students in regional and rural areas and those with challenging home environments. **We call for targeted support to address these specific needs and ensure that all students have equal opportunities to succeed in their education.**
- Support the work of the NSVC and local student voice councils by engaging students with diverse experiences, especially Indigenous students, to bridge the education gap and support those disengaged from the current system. The NSVC believes that incorporating diverse student perspectives, including those of Indigenous students, is crucial in shaping education policies and initiatives that cater to the needs of all students. **We advocate for creating platforms for students to voice their opinions and actively participate in decision-making processes.**

**Specifically regarding student mental health and well-being, the NSVC recommends:**

- Developing resilience in dealing with social systems and empowering students to take care of their mental health, providing further support when needed. The NSVC acknowledges the importance of building resilience in students to navigate social challenges effectively. **We advocate for empowering students to take responsibility for their mental health while ensuring that necessary support is available when needed.**
- Ensuring staff in leadership and support roles undergo mental health training to better assist students. The NSVC emphasises the crucial role of teachers and school staff in supporting students' mental health. **We recommend providing training to equip educators with the necessary skills to address students' mental health needs effectively.**
- Prioritising student well-being over grades, focusing on factual discussions about mental health without political biases. The NSVC advocates for shifting the focus from grades and academic performance to prioritise students' overall well-being. **We stress the**

***importance of providing factual and evidence-based information on mental health to avoid causing distress among students.***

- Introducing mental health education programs and early intervention strategies to prevent mental health issues and promote well-being. The NSVC calls for comprehensive mental health education in schools, starting at an early age. ***We believe that early intervention is essential in identifying and addressing mental health issues before they escalate.***
- Incorporating student surveys to understand perceptions of safety, belonging, well-being, and school climate, and evaluating the impact of adding these surveys to existing national assessment programs like NAPLAN. The NSVC proposes utilising student surveys as a valuable tool to gauge student well-being, experiences, and perceptions of their learning environment. ***We emphasise the need for evaluating the impact of incorporating such surveys into existing assessment programs and will need clarity on the use/privacy of responses students might provide.***
- Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in surveys, valuing students' perspectives, and utilising student data for evidence-based decision-making. The NSVC emphasises the importance of ensuring confidentiality and anonymity in student surveys to encourage honest and open feedback. ***We believe that student perspectives are crucial in informing educational policies and practices.***

**As big, bold ideas, the NSVC proposes:**

- Recognising the value and validity of vocational education, real-world learning, volunteering, work placements, and other alternative forms of education beyond university pathways. ***The NSVC advocates for a more diverse and inclusive approach to education that recognises various pathways to success beyond traditional university routes.***
- Establishing alternative education institutes to support students requiring different learning approaches and transforming the education system. ***The NSVC proposes creating alternative education facilities that cater to the needs of students who require additional support or prefer different modes of learning outside the standard classroom experience.***
- Adopting a holistic university admissions process beyond ATAR scores, encouraging inquiry-based learning, and making university more accessible with simplified applications and multiple pathways to degrees. ***The NSVC recommends a more inclusive and flexible approach to university admissions that considers students' overall capabilities, interests, and experiences.***

- Providing students with access to trained mental health professionals whenever they need support, offering confidentiality and widespread availability. ***The NSVC stresses the need for readily available and confidential mental health support services to ensure students can seek help when needed.***
- Creating a student-driven curriculum with choices and opportunities for practical skills development. ***The NSVC advocates for a curriculum that allows students to have a say in what they learn, incorporating practical skills that are relevant and meaningful to their lives.***
- Ensuring early engagement and support for students in primary school to foster greater engagement in secondary school. ***The NSVC highlights the importance of early intervention and support to ensure students are engaged and motivated throughout their educational journey.***
- Incorporating co-curricular activities throughout the day to balance academics and passions. ***The NSVC proposes integrating co-curricular activities into the daily schedule to provide students with opportunities to pursue their interests and passions alongside their academic studies.***
- Prioritising equal opportunities and resources for all students regardless of their background or identity. ***The NSVC stresses the importance of providing equal opportunities and resources to ensure that every student can thrive and succeed in their education.***
- Implementing transition weeks for students starting at new schools to ease the adjustment process. ***The NSVC proposes establishing transition weeks to help students adjust to new school environments and foster a sense of belonging.***
- Introducing competencies as pass or fail assessments to reduce burnout. ***The NSVC proposes reevaluating assessment methods to focus on competencies rather than traditional letter grades, aiming to reduce academic pressure and student burnout.***
- Adapting a range of assessment tools that promote choice and voice; allowing students to be assessed in ways that work best for them. ***The NSVC believes in accommodating diverse learning preferences and contexts to ensure fair and accurate assessments for all students.***

## ***Our top 10 points, IN SUMMARY.***

1. Recognise that there are different pathways to success beyond university. Vocational education, work placements, and volunteering are valuable options too.
2. Create different schools for students who need different learning support or approaches. That way, everyone gets the support they need to succeed.
3. Universities should look at more than just ATAR scores when admitting students. Design a more inclusive admissions process that considers our interests and experiences.
4. Mental health support should be easily accessible for all students whenever we need it. We should feel comfortable seeking help when we need it.
5. We want a curriculum that allows us to have a say in what we learn. Support us to learn practical skills that are relevant to our lives.
6. We should have co-curricular activities during the day to balance academics with our passions. Learning should be fun and exciting!
7. Make sure every student has equal opportunities and resources, no matter where they come from or who they are.
8. Transition weeks when starting new schools will help us feel more comfortable and welcomed. Further to this, early engagement and support in primary school will help us stay engaged in secondary school. Help all students to have a smooth transition.
9. Assessments should focus on competencies, not just grades. We need a fair and less stressful way to show what we've learned.
10. We want to see a range of ways for teachers to assess our learning, and for us to show our learning. We should feel comfortable when being evaluated.

These recommendations aim to create an inclusive and supportive education system that offers student to take on the role as partners in their learning & schools. It focuses on priorities of wellbeing, diverse pathways, and student input. The NSVC envisions an education system that not only fosters academic growth but also nurtures the mental health, individuality, and personal development of students & teachers alike.