Why do we value student voice?

Student voice is firmly based within values that reflect the Catholic tradition – where students are empowered to seek truth, and to question, critique and act on the prevailing cultural, political and philosophical ideas within their world.

Catholic Education Melbourne is committed to the active participation and voice of students in all aspects of school life. This is both a right for young people (as endorsed in the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child) but also recognises that student participation achieves and enhances important outcomes in learning, empowerment and engagement.

Student voice reflects the belief of a school or organisation in the value of the contributions that students are able to make to their faith, their school, their community and the common good.

Young people today want to hold responsibility for constructing their own beliefs. The challenge for Catholic educators is to create communities of learning which engage young people with a Catholic faith that is filled with life, hope and meaning within this diverse context (CEM 2016a p. 10).

Student voice and participation improves learning for all though three major intentions:

1. It improves teacher quality and practice through feedback, which leads to improved practice by teachers as they seek, listen to and act on students' responses.
2. It builds students' (re)engagement and commitment to learning through their active participation in decision-making within the classroom and school, leading to improved outcomes for learning and wellbeing.
3. It improves and transforms educational approaches where students are active partners with others to investigate and develop approaches that improve the learning of all.

What are the intended outcomes of student voice and participation?

Student voice and **participation** improve outcomes for teachers, students and school communities/systems in learning, wellbeing and self-awareness (Kirby & Bryson 2002).

For teachers: the feedback and advice that teachers gain from students enables them to improve their practices and to better meet the learning and wellbeing needs of all through students' unique perspectives.

For students: active participation of students in decision-making about their education enables greater commitment to learning and the development of more self-aware, self-confident and self-sufficient people.

For schools and communities/systems: active partnerships with students and their representatives create better functioning schools where students, parents and teachers transform schools through an improved understanding and shared commitment.

Where will we find student voice and participation?

Catholic Education Melbourne commits to forming partnerships with students and their organisations through listening, responding to and acting on their concerns.

School communities are encouraged to reflect on their classroom and whole-school approaches, and consider ways in which students are empowered to be active contributors in all aspects of the school.

'Approaches such as classroom negotiation and inquiry learning enable students to define common areas of interest and questions, and formulate learning approaches to discover answers.' (Beane & Brodhagen 2001 p. 1157)

Students are at the centre of our approaches to learning and teaching. It follows they should have their voices listened to and be active participants about all issues, at all levels of the school and its wider community. An inclusive education sees students having a say in **all** matters that affect them.

The opportunities for students – to provide feedback, to hear and express opinions, to co-plan and initiate learning, to contribute ideas and form partnerships – appear in various ways at different levels and for different purposes. This has implications for both whole-school planning and for day-to-day classroom pedagogy.

Strategies that foster effective student–adult partnerships for meaningful student engagement see all members contribute to pedagogical decisions in a number of areas, students as well as teachers are supported to be: witnesses, specialists, moderators, co-inquirers, designers and activators (CEM 2016b p. 8).

How will we evaluate student voice and participation?

Critical reflection and evaluation of our approaches should be built into all we do. Such reflection will examine both the practice and the outcomes. Authentic student voice sees students as central and active participants in the evaluation process at both classroom and whole-school levels, with students leading the reflection and evaluation (See VicSRC's 'Teach the Teacher').

In negotiating their learning, students contribute to the assessment and evaluation processes. They contribute suggestions as to how they will demonstrate their knowledge for a particular task, project or learning approach. To enable this, teachers should ensure that time is built in for critical reflection where both students and teachers consider the key questions and how they may be addressed. In the planning process, guiding questions for students and teachers informing this learning community could include:

Process of student voice and participation:

- Is the learning process inclusive? Do all students have a say in this lesson or activity?
- Does the learning reflect the student's context of culture, family life and community?
- Are there unknown outcomes through inquiry to elicit deep understanding and investigation?
- Is the learning meaningful? Is there a purpose to the inquiry, will the findings be of interest to others?
- What have been the outcomes (expected or unexpected) for students/parents/teachers/community?

Questions assisting both students and teachers to reflect on their school experience (see Dan Haesler, resources):

- When are we at our best in our school with regard to learning and participation?
- Wouldn't it be great if...?
- What are some of the barriers?
- Which of these can I influence?

Similarly, questions such as the following can also help students reflect on how they feel about their wellbeing and engagement in learning:

- Can I be myself at this school?
- When is our class working well?
- When do I feel I'm at my best?

RESOURCES

Sound Out (Adam Fletcher) promotes meaningful student involvement, voice and engagement **soundout.org**

Connect magazine is a bi-monthly publication supporting student participation in primary and secondary schools **asprinworld.com**

Dan Haesler on issues relating to engagement, mindset, wellbeing and leadership **danhaesler.com**

The Australian Human Rights Commission Convention on the Rights of the Child **www.humanrights.gov.au/convention-rights-child**

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing school aged students in Victoria **www.vicsrc.org.au**

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CATHOLIC EDUCATION MELBOURNE

Student Voice Statement

FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Context and Rationale

At the very heart of each Catholic school is a desire for the full flourishing of each student, across religious, physical, cognitive, emotional and social domains. Here we support students to grow in virtue and to embrace a view of themselves and the world that leads to peace, justice, and the prospering of the whole of creation. It is a journey that is enlightened by faith, animated by love and leading to hope (CEM 2016a, p. 5).

Catholic Education Melbourne commits to lead and serve schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne to develop positive relationships between all members of their Catholic school communities. These relationships respect the dignity, perspectives and contribution of every person.

We seek to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, hope and optimism to live meaningful lives, and to shape and enrich the world around them. In doing so, we see young people as active and authentic co-contributors to their learning, and to the learning of others.

The development of opportunities for students' active **participation** in their own and others' learning, within their school communities and within the wider world, gives **voice** and **agency** to students' needs, concerns, ideas, knowledge, skills, hopes and initiatives.

This sense of belonging and being in a relationship with others builds and strengthens the ability of learners to understand and manage their emotions, develop their sense of self, their agency and their resilience in the face of difficulty, challenge or adversity (CEM 2016a, p. 12).

Foreword

Catholic Education Melbourne recognises that student voice is a critical element of student engagement, where young people's opinions and unique perspectives are heard and valued as a key element in the learning and teaching process.

Students in our care are supported on their life journey, empowered by knowledge and enlightened by their faith. They are valued for their contribution to learning and to the school community.

Through student voice we recognise and embrace students' unique perspectives. This *Student Voice Statement* will help guide teachers and school leaders in working alongside students as co-contributors for their learning and, guided by our shared values, we can build a culture of 'learning together'.

I commend this Statement to you and acknowledge the outstanding commitment of Catholic schools to student voice. By forging cultures where students' contributions matter, our young people can embrace their future with hope and optimism to shape and enrich the world around them.

Stephen Elder

Stephen Elder
Executive Director of Catholic Education

What do we mean by student voice?

The term **student voice** is often used interchangeably along with others such as **participation**, **involvement**, **agency**, **leadership**, **representation**, **empowerment** and **engagement**. These terms each have their own meaning and history; they can also be used in ways that describe outcomes and/or processes (Holdsworth 2017, p. 18–21).

Student voice and **participation** encompass opportunities for students to have a say about things that affect them (voice), to make decisions about their learning and its context (agency or empowerment), and to improve their wellbeing, sense of self and connection to learning (engagement).

In practice, these 'approaches for action' see students providing feedback to their teachers, actively negotiating their learning and working in partnership with teachers and others to improve the learning of all, and building a culture of learning together. (See Table: Suggested Approaches and Learning Strategies).

Table 1: Suggested approaches and learning strategies

Overall Objectives	In the classroom	In the department/year level/faculty	In the whole school	In the community and/or system
Improving teacher practice	**Students as data sources:** existing information from students is used as feedback to teachers. **Survey students** for their preferred learning styles and approaches. Students then present their findings to teachers/leaders.	**Active feedback:** teachers actively seek feedback from students across a year level or faculty through surveys or discussion forums. **Faculty meetings:** student representatives are invited to present to faculty, subject or year level staff meetings contributing to curriculum development and subject content. **Classroom observation:** students and teachers observe others to provide feedback on teaching and learning approaches. This could include *peer assessment* for a new skill and/or *peer coaching*.	**Student attitude survey:** all students complete an annual survey of their attitudes to school. **Traditional Student Representative Councils:** provide feedback about student views to school's leadership and school decision-making bodies and in consultation. **Teach the Teacher:** students are invited to lead professional learning for teachers, to provide feedback on learning approaches. **Interview panels:** students views are represented on selection panels as direct or indirect panel members.	**Organisational partnerships:** students are invited to meet with education and system decision-makers to discuss student and system perspectives. **Catholic Education Melbourne and VicSRC** work together to enable schools to embed student voice as a central part of school and system practices. **VicSRC Regional Conferences:** students meet at a regional level to discuss and determine issues of relevance to students generally – and feed into other action forums. **Social justice, volunteering and faith:** Promoting Catholic values through community service.
Improving participants' engagement and learning	**Negotiated learning:** students contribute to planning, goals, content, methods, assessment and evaluation for their class. **Media:** students produce and disseminate information, views, comments through print, radio, social media, etc. **Leadership:** students are leaders, coaches and coordinators of a sporting competition within the Physical Education or sport program.	**Faith based learning:** students lead religious education discussion about faith comparison within classrooms. **Student-led reviews of individual learning:** students lead discussions with their parents and teachers at annual reviews of learning. **Learning walks:** a teacher directed and student led activity where young people introduce their families to the school or classroom and guide their families through the learning process for a project, theme or whole-school activity.	**Investigate a health, social or community issue.** **Students research an issue impacting the wellbeing of families or communities** and present their findings at a parent forum, e.g the damaging effects of tobacco, impact of social media or benefits of physical activity. **Speak up:** students investigate and report on a whole-school approach such as 'restorative practice' and present their findings to a staff meeting.	**Conversation:** students meet with religious leaders involving inter-school conversations, prayer and reflection. **Victorian Student Parliament:** students meet within a formal parliamentary setting to debate current contentious issues. **Aged Care, Men's Sheds and Neighbourhood Houses – intergenerational work:** students work within community facilities to support aged citizens, child care, etc.
Improving and transforming education practices for all	**Class meetings/circles:** students and teachers meet regularly to plan and review classroom processes and practices – including adopting overall purposes, learning intentions, examining inclusion/exclusion, etc. **Students as Researchers:** students form a research team to investigate and act on a classroom or school issue. The teacher, as facilitator, provides the prompts for dialogue in which students actively listen, critically analyse responses and make recommendations. **Joint teacher–student research:** students and teachers together define a shared issue of concern and propose joint recommendations.	**Year Level Councils:** student representatives meet within year levels or sub-schools to plan changes and improvement in partnership with teachers. **Critical friends:** students in classes act as critical friends to each other on a whole or part school project/initiative. **Family engagement:** students share their learning outcomes with their families and identify the strengths they offer for improved learning at school. Students can research the skills and knowledge families may want to develop and report to the school leaders.	**Student Councils/SRCs:** student representatives meet regularly to discuss and take action on student-centred issues across the school. **School Governance bodies:** student representatives sit on school governance councils to represent student views, to inform and share in decision-making. **Whole-school meetings:** students, parents and teachers meet together to decide on school wide decisions affecting young people, e.g. proposed buildings, canteen options. **Student Action Teams:** students investigate and act to address social issues, e.g. mental health, bullying, sustainability and engagement.	**VicSRC:** student representatives maintain a statewide organisation to advocate and enter into partnerships to improve student voice and participation across the sector. **VicSRC Congress:** student representatives meet at an annual conferences to discuss, debate and decide on education issues, and to elect an executive body to implement those decisions. **Sustainability:** students and teachers investigate issues within the wider community and act to educate and improve community practices for waste, recycling, biodiversity, etc.