

Submission to the Inquiry into Civics Education, Engagement, and Participation in Australia

May 2024



251 Morphett Street, Adelaide, SA 5000

08 8226 3355 | commissionercyp@sa.gov.au

To: The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, Parliament of Australia

Email: em@aph.gov.au

Introduction

My role as Commissioner for Children and Young People was established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* to promote and advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people living in South Australia, and to help bring about improvements to systems that impact them.

I welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia. In response to the Joint Standing Committee's Terms of Reference, I will address these areas of interest to the Committee:

- the effectiveness of formalised civics education, the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education and opportunities for improvement;
- barriers to civic and electoral participation, and ways governments might address or circumvent these barriers;
- mechanisms for improving children and young people's access to information about Australia's democracy, electoral events, and voting;
- potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation.

Children and young people under 18 years of age make up 25 per cent of the Australian population.¹ They are citizens and contributors with unique experiences, perspectives and knowledge about the world around them, the schools they learn in, and the communities they inhabit.

However, children and young people have limited opportunities to shape the decisions that impact their lives, and their contributions are rarely regarded as equal to those of adults. They are frustrated with institutions that do not include them or represent their views, and which fail to take action on public policy issues they believe should be prioritised or provide opportunities for them to engage in a meaningful way.

Many children and young people want adults and institutions to show them greater respect, to teach them how to be active citizens, to take their views seriously, and act on their ideas.

We know that the quality, content and timing of school-based civics and citizenship education varies considerably across schools, if it is delivered at all. Civics education is not taken seriously in many schools and time constraints limit the opportunities for young people to develop the knowledge and skills they need to be active citizens. I am particularly concerned that students in regional schools and more disadvantaged communities are most likely to miss out.

Without awareness and experience of the practicalities of how to be an active citizen, it is impossible for anyone to advocate effectively either for their own rights or about the things that matter to them. At a very basic level, all children and young people should

understand how the political system works and why, and how to vote. This is not the case currently.

If we are to increase young people's civic and electoral participation, we need to recognise the rights of our youngest citizens and build trust in institutions from a young age. Engagement with democracy encompasses a range of experiences that lead to rather than begin with the act of voting. To this end, this submission highlights the importance of:

- ensuring children and young people have access to education and information to exercise their rights;
- providing children and young people with meaningful opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives and promoting the active citizenship of children and young people of all ages, including very young children; and
- recognising children and young people's engagement in non-traditional forms of civic participation.

This submission draws on my extensive engagement with tens of thousands of children and young people across metropolitan and regional South Australia since 2017, as well as with teachers and decision makers.

This includes engagement with my Advisory Council and state-wide Student Representative Council (SA SRC), as well as insights from children aged 8 to 12 years old as part of my annual Student Voice Postcards initiative. Excerpts of children's postcard responses and drawings are used throughout this submission, highlighting that young South Australians have valuable insights and want to have more of a say in shaping their communities.

Alongside this submission, I encourage you to consider the following publications and resources, which further explore systemic barriers to civic and electoral participation for children and young people as well as opportunities to improve the effectiveness and equity of civics education:

- 2023 [Issues Brief on Barriers to civic participation for children and young people](#).
- 2024 South Australian Student Representative Council Campaign Position Brief on lowering the voting age for local government elections (attached as an addendum to this submission).
- My [Civics and Citizenship website](#) and directory, which provides further information about yChange (South Australia's first curriculum-aligned action civics resource for educators), and the Civics in the City grant program.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia

The effectiveness of civics education, the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education and opportunities for improvement

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has repeatedly identified that civics and citizenship education across Australia is failing children and young people. In 2019, ACARA reported that just 38 per cent of year 10 students and 53 per cent of year 6 students achieved the proficient standard in its triennial national assessment of civics and citizenship.²

This means that our young people are leaving school without the capacity to be active citizens, which not only limits their ability to have a meaningful voice in society, it undermines our democratic system.

In line with the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration: all young Australians should be enabled to become 'confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community'.

What children and young people say

Children and young people want to understand the systems they live in, know how to engage in the world around them, and acquire the skills they need to transition into adulthood. They recognise that their understanding of civics, and particularly their ability to participate in elections, is central to being active citizens in Australia's democracy.

However, significant numbers of young people report making it through their years of schooling without being taught about the key systems and democratic processes that affect their lives. This includes a lack of information about local, state and federal electoral processes, how to enrol to vote and how to cast a valid vote once they are enrolled.

"Civics education in senior years of school (the years directly leading to adulthood) is severely lacking. In order to allow Australians to understand civics in their own elections and lives, education must be offered surrounding political systems, decision making, policy making, and decision responsibility, allowing voters to make the most honest and informed decisions."

- Year 11 student

"Civics education should start young rather than being an option in senior years. Making young people understand why voting and politics are important to their lives is crucial in changing things. Education around how to vote and how it's processed is important."

- Year 10 student

Young people have identified significant gaps in the depth, timing and relevance of civics education. They describe learning 'too little' and either 'too early' or 'too late' depending on their school and subject choices. While some students report valuable civic learning

and hands-on experiences in primary schools, these opportunities are not equally available to all students and tend to ‘drop off’ during high school.

Members of my Advisory Council and state-wide Student Representative Council (SA SRC) are calling for greater access to civics education for all students from a younger age and for this to be extended through to senior years. They are concerned that key information is only available to those who do certain elective subjects in the senior years, at a critical time when young people are expected to be enrolled and vote.

They have a range of ideas to ensure civics education is relevant, engaging and equitable to all students and in all schools across the state. In particular, children and young people want more opportunities to learn about and discuss:

- how democracy works and ‘what goes on in politics’, including democratic principles, human rights, the role of parliament, local government and other levels of government, and how decisions are made.
- issues affecting people and their communities locally and globally, including opportunities to take action.
- how voting works and what it means, including the process of enrolling, why it’s important, and how it is relevant to young people’s lives and communities.
- candidates and parties, including their values and their plan for the community, their background and motives, how well they understand or represent young people, and whether they can be trusted.

“Civic education needs to be equitable and equal for all young people across the state. The differences in civic opportunity and leadership need to be acknowledged and addressed ... Civic education in the state should be updated, relevant, in-depth and create a generation of young people who are informed and aware. Should include info on voting, responsibilities, referendums, etc.”

- Year 11 student

“not knowing about something makes it difficult for us to trust it. if young people were provided with opportunities to have a voice in the change that occurs and have an effective way to be informed of what occurs in politics and government would help trust.”

- Year 11 student

“A lack of knowledge about the workings of our political system and a lack of knowledge about the candidates’ and parties’ values causes many young people to feel disengaged in politics.”

- 17 year old

What educators say

A range of barriers limit the capacity of many schools to consistently and effectively deliver civics and citizenship education, and to see it as a central part of the curriculum. Comments I have heard from teachers in SA schools include:

- “Civics and Citizenship isn't being explicitly taught in our Middle School Year levels at the moment.”
- “Not ordinarily taught.”
- “Prior to this year, Civics and Citizenship is usually taught at the end of the school year, after the other HASS subjects if there is time.”
- “Civics and Citizenship has been taught sporadically at our school.”
- “Civics and Citizenship is taught in Year 7, 8 and 10.”
- “We are looking to expand our program into years 9-10.”
- “Civics & Citizenship is currently being refreshed within the school. It is usually taught very quickly due to time constraints.”

What the curriculum says

It is concerning that recent changes to the civics and citizenship curriculum (version 9.0 of the Australian Curriculum) reduce opportunities for students to learn how to be active citizens, to understand different viewpoints, and to consider their own values. These are all vital to young people if they are to understand how to participate in their communities, how to think about the issues affecting them, as well as having an awareness of themselves as global citizens.

Specifically, these changes have been made in version 9.0:

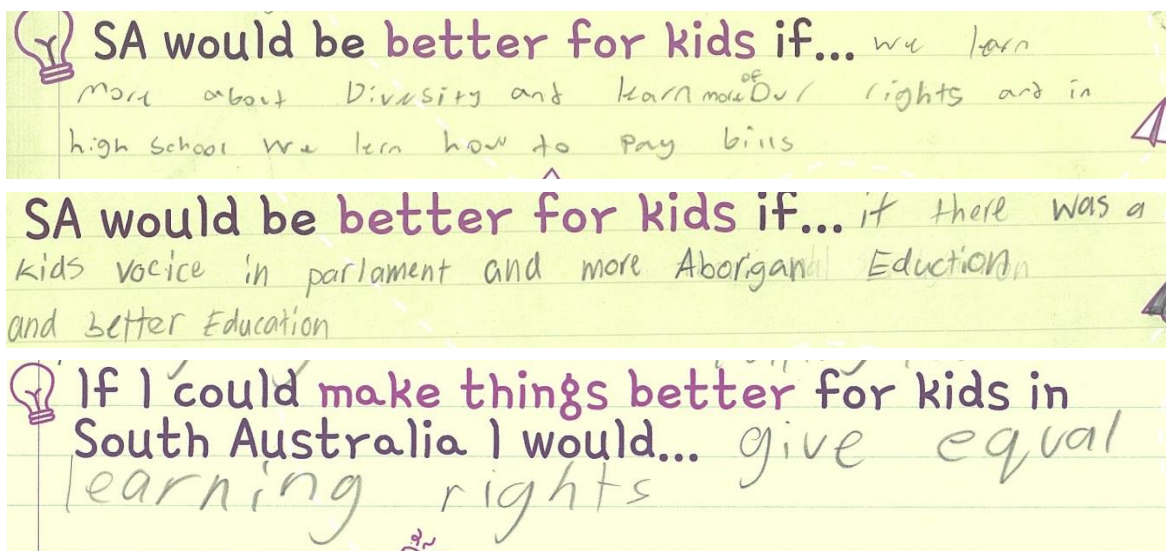
- The idea of making decisions democratically has been removed from the Year 3 curriculum.
- For Years 5 and 6, the critical civics skills of reflecting on different viewpoints, planning group action, and decision making have been removed.
- In Year 6 the content about “where ideas for new laws come from and how they become law” has been removed, taking away the opportunity for students to understand the role of advocacy, protest, petitions, and people power.
- In Year 6, the content about “the responsibilities of electors in Australia’s democracy” has also been removed reducing understanding of the legal responsibilities of citizens regarding voting and making informed election decisions.
- From Year 7 onwards, there was previously a requirement to “use democratic processes to reach consensus on a course of action and plan for that action” which has been removed. This denies students the opportunity to practice the processes at the heart of our democracy.
- Year 7 and 8 students have previously been asked to “Reflect on their role as a citizen in Australia’s democracy”, which gave them a useful opportunity to consider their identity as a citizen. This has been lost in the current version.
- Similarly, students in Years 7 to 9 have been deprived of the opportunity to consider diverse opinions by losing out on the consideration of “how groups, such

as religious and cultural groups express their particular identities; and how this influences their perceptions of others” and how to “negotiate and resolve contentious issues” by having regard to “multiple perspectives”.

Improving support and resources for educators: yChange and professional development

I believe it is vital that we help all students to learn about civics in an active way as it is much more effective as a learning technique. This is why I developed yChange³ – South Australia’s first curriculum-aligned, project based, action civics resource for primary and secondary teachers. It has been designed to empower young South Australians with the attitudes, skills and knowledge they need to become active, responsible citizens. It was developed with significant input from students, educators and civics experts. Its focus is to build connections and relationships between young people and their community through development and implementation of their yChange project. This is achieved with guidance and support from teachers, the school and the broader community with whom they are encouraged to interact.

To inspire and support the teaching of civics and citizenship in SA schools I have run a series of annual professional development seminars in partnership with the South Australian Parliament and the Department for Education. The seminars cover a range of topics relevant to civics and citizenship to offer ideas and examples to enthuse and inform teachers on different topics that can be taught as humanities and other subject lessons.



Improving equitable access to civics education: Civics in the City grant program

I am committed to ensuring civics and citizenship learning opportunities are available to all South Australian children and young people, no matter where they live and what their parents' income.

Visits to Parliament House and other civic institutions provide memorable educational experiences for students which offer rich and long-lasting impact compared to classroom learning. However, many schools do not have the funding to provide this sort of opportunity to their students due to the distances involved and the inability of their parents to pay.

In partnership with Parliament House, I established a Civics in the City grant program to help students to visit Parliament House and other civics educational destinations in Adelaide. The program, which is now supported by the SA Department for Education has been running for three years. It offers funding of up to \$5000 towards transport and other expenses. It enables students to visit to the CBD to engage in active learning opportunities about how government works, the laws and systems that affect them, as well as how to be an active citizen.

I am concerned by the level of demand the Civics in the City grant has attracted from regional and disadvantaged schools. I have received 197 applications from SA schools over the past three years. While some of the applicant schools said they had previously visited Parliament House, the CBD or even Canberra, many said they did not visit anywhere because they could not expect the parents of their students to pay for transport and/or accommodation costs and the schools could not afford to cover these costs themselves.

For example, the following comments were made in applications:

- “They would love to visit Parliament House but can never afford it due to bus costs.”
- “We are unable to go on excursions or school camps as the vast majority of families simply cannot afford to pay for this to occur... the grant would assist the year 5/6 class to visit parliament house and see civics and citizenship in the “real world” often it is hard to connect this subject and its content to these students as the idea of politicians and government is detached from their daily life and out of reach for most of the students.”
- “Many children have rarely been into the city (if at all) and the opportunity to go to the city and visit the Parliament to learn about history, and the democratic system will be an amazing and lifelong experience for our children. “
- “Our school is approximately 300km from Adelaide and so educational excursions are expensive and often out of the reach of a number of our families, disadvantaging them in their learning...”
- “We do not do excursions outside our town so no families are put under financial pressure.”
- “As a small country school with a lot of parents struggling financially, our students don't get to participate in excursions like this. We fundraise ourselves for excursions.”

- “We are a very remote school with approx. 58% of Aboriginal attendees... due to our distant location we miss out on a lot of hands on experiences, and online resources prove difficult for many Aboriginal learners... The grant funds would us help send our group of Year 4-6 students down to Adelaide to broaden their horizon on the varied experiences available in Adelaide. We will visit the Parliament House as well as engage in workshops provided by the State Library and SA Museum. We have many students who are interested in learning about the history of Australia and how our society operates today but we are very limited in our resources.”
- “Living 3 hours from our closest city and not having any real excursion points to visit withing a 100km radius, much of what we do/learn is theory based. Our students, staff and school would greatly benefit from grant funds and CBD opportunity in order to help us all engage with civics on a practical level. Many of our students are from low socio-economic backgrounds, so student-funded excursions are few and far between and many students miss out when they are undertaken.”

The 58 schools that have been successful in their applications for Civics in the City Grants over the last three years include some of the most disadvantaged schools in the State. This includes 39 schools in Categories 1-4 according to South Australia’s Index of Educational Disadvantage, with all but 5 of the schools having ICSEA scores of less than 1000. While some schools needed funding to visit from as little as 30 kilometres from the CBD due to a lack of access to suitable public transport, many of the schools were from regional and remote areas, with 44 of the successful schools being situated more than 200km from Adelaide. Most of the schools have never visited Parliament House in Adelaide or Canberra before, and many of these students have never had the opportunity to visit the city at all.

Barriers to electoral participation

Young people describe a lack of education or 'little education' as one of many barriers to enrolment and to voting. Many young people make a distinction between an 'uninformed vote' and an 'informed vote', and they are worried that their civics knowledge is insufficient to enable them to do the latter. They identify several other barriers to voting, including a lack of experience and motivation, inaccessible places to vote, income, family attitudes, and feeling excluded from decision-making.

What would help you feel more prepared to vote?

"Having more education on what goes on in politics, but from every perspective so there is less bias. Knowing that I have someone inside the parliament that understands what young people want. Maybe having more coverage in schools of programs like youth parliament so more kids understand they have a chance to get your voice and ideas heard."

- Year 10 student

"If school could teach us more about political matters and so we can understand what we are voting for, why we are voting, and who we are voting for"

- Year 8 student

"Expos at school and less secrecy around voting and how the government works"

- Year 10 student

"some high school education on the topic. We did it in primary school but the information is fading."

- Year 11 student

Traditionally young people have been at the centre of social change due to their openness to new ideas, appetite for change, their criticism of the present and their hope for possibilities. Young people's participation in formal policy development and decision making is a critical part of realising their rights, improving decision making and building trust in democracy.

Children and young people want to be informed, involved and empowered in decision making. Yet they are frequently excluded from policy discussions across the areas affecting their lives. The processes that governments currently use to seek feedback from the community, tend to be inaccessible to most children and young people and many describe how leaders and decision makers dismiss their views or life experiences. They also report not knowing how to participate and find it difficult to learn about opportunities for participation.

These systemic barriers to youth participation are explored further in my 2023 Issue Brief on barriers to civic participation for children and young people⁴ and include:

- Lack of youth-specific information on how to have their say and low awareness amongst young people about opportunities to participate;

- Processes that confine youth participation to a set of “youth issues” predetermined by government and don’t focus on solving a problem/achieving an outcome;
- Processes that prohibit participation by those aged under 18 years;
- Common perception among adults and in the community that children and young people’s age and lack of life experience invalidates their opinions;
- Using outdated platforms to seek and support young people’s input, and adults overlooking the legitimacy of the ways that young people like to provide input such as via Instagram polling, Tik Tok and SnapChat;
- Lack of skills, experience or flexibility among adults to accommodate young people’s schedules or preferred ways to provide input;
- Unrealistic expectations of young people’s contributions and lack of support for young people to participate meaningfully;
- Low incentives for young people to participate and low levels of trust as a result of having received no tangible outcomes or feedback following prior engagement experiences;
- The contributions of younger people are not as valued as those of adults.

“We can see that some of the decisions (decisions) made today by adults have very effectively screwed us over, and that is a big factor. Kids want to be included. The government & world leaders hold our future, yet exclude us from shaping it. If we are to trust others, they should trust us and include us in what may very well shape our lives. Trust is a two-way street.”

- 14 year old

“Making young people feel like they have a well supported community and a voice that is heard higher up would help ... We have many thoughts and ideas but it is difficult to get heard within the government.”

- Year 10 student

“If we had a say in what the government did, it would make many of us trust them and their decisions more.”

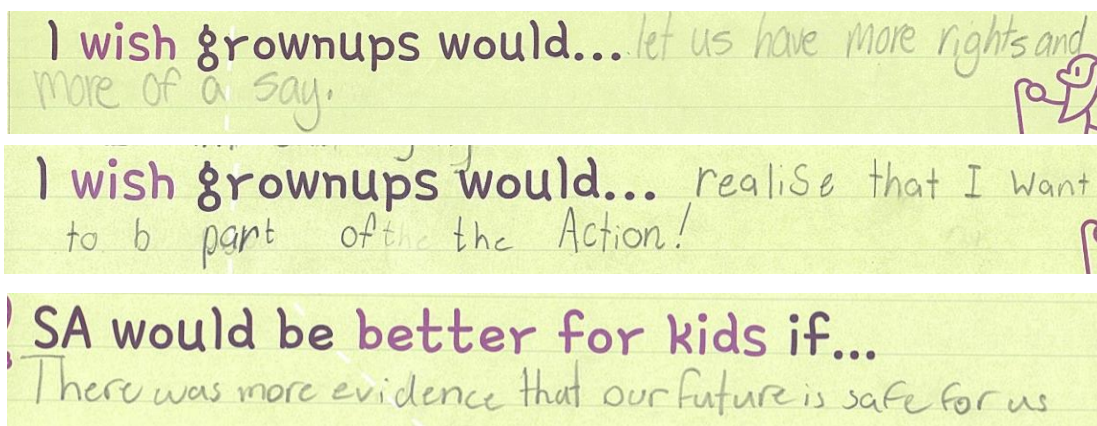
- 13 year old

Young people are concerned that key public policy issues of inequality, climate change, and mental health have not been prioritised by governments. They care deeply about their communities and the world around them, and they are clear about what they want to change to make lives better, what isn’t currently working for them and their ideas for a more sustainable future. They also say they do not feel heard, valued, or respected by the systems they engage with, and they are frustrated with institutions that do not include them, or represent their views.

The Scanlon Institute has identified that trust in government is lower among younger adults. In 2023, fewer than one-in-three people aged 18–24 believed the Federal Government could be trusted all or most of the time, compared with 43 per cent of people aged 65 years and over.⁵

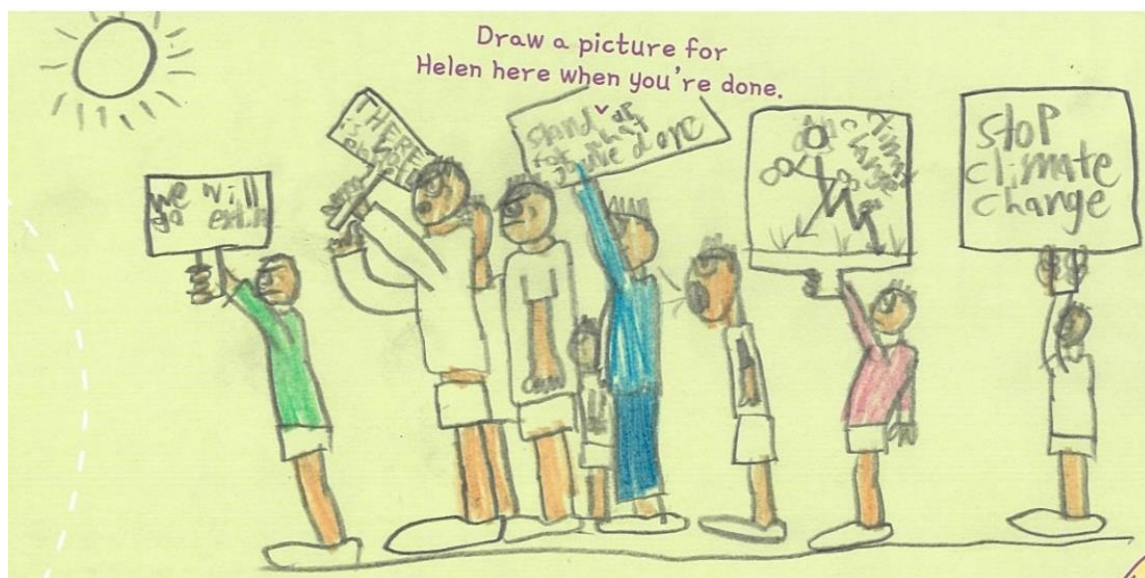
We know that young people aged 18 to 24 years old are least likely to be enrolled to vote. As of 24 April 2024, the total enrolment rate nationally was 98.2 per cent but only 87 per cent 18-24 year olds.⁶ Over one third of eligible South Australian 18 year olds (38.9 per cent) and one quarter of eligible 18 to 24 year olds (25.4 per cent) were not on the electoral roll at the time of the 2018 SA State election.⁷ Participation was also lowest among this age group, with only 76 per cent of enrolled 18-24 year olds casting a vote, and younger voters reported the lowest levels of confidence about completing their ballot papers.

This should not necessarily be surprising, given that many young people describe how it can be difficult to ‘care about politics and voting’ when adults or institutions do not seem to respect their views or experiences. It does not seem reasonable to expect young people to enrol and vote without ensuring our systems and institutions are actively including, empowering and building trust with children and young people from a young age.



That said, young people’s disenfranchisement with traditional methods of civic participation should not necessarily be interpreted as disengagement from politics as a whole. Young people in the twenty-first century are engaged in many forms of civic and political participation beyond those that are institutional and traditional.⁸ This underscores the importance of engaging with young people directly to better recognise and understand shifting citizenship norms and practices.

Whilst many young people have sought to engage policy makers and influence change through participation in processes organised by government authorities, schools, and NGOs (e.g. Youth Parliament), others have chosen participation in social movements. School Strike 4 Climate is a good example of a movement designed to affect change in government decision making processes through direct action. The movement gathered momentum because of its appeal to young people who connected to the action-oriented process and non-traditional participatory practices.



Ways governments might address or circumvent these barriers

The consequences of a growing lack of trust when combined with a growing lack of civics proficiency is worrying for the future of our democracy and the ideals and values it represents. However, this is not inevitable. Democracy works best when citizens actively engage with and participate in decision-making to uphold agreed ideals and values. Where this is not happening, this is a reflection on us as adults and how our political institutions and educational institutions are falling short in catering to young people's needs.

We know that democratic ideals and values are not created by osmosis, but rather through learning and practicing them. For children and young people to understand the importance of democracy, they need to have opportunities to participate in it.

It is up to us as adult leaders, community representatives and decision makers to ensure systems are designed in a way that enables every person to be informed and active citizens, regardless of age and circumstance. This requires adults to understand the practical, cultural and attitudinal barriers that explain the low youth enrolment and participation rates, and to commit to addressing these barriers in a way that meets young people's needs.

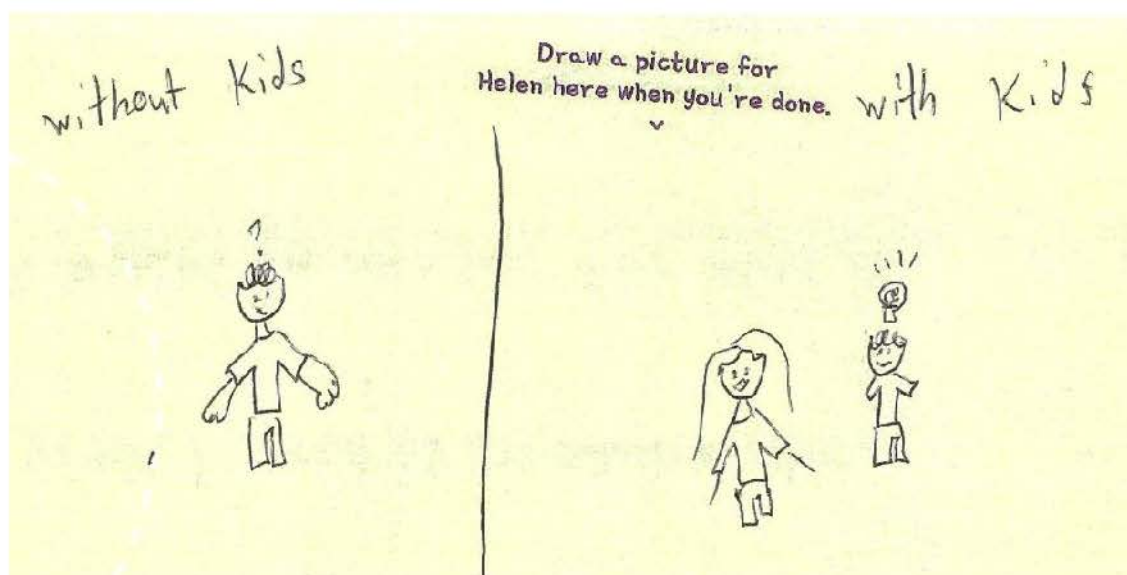
At a community level, participation is the building block of democracy. By empowering children and young people to influence policy and be involved in decision making about issues that affect their lives, we reinforce their role as key stakeholders and citizens entitled to have their voices heard and their ideas acted upon.

We need to explore different ways of increasing children and young people's participation in their communities, as well as in formal policy and decision making. This means considering changes to institutions, policies and processes to view children and young people as active citizens from birth and facilitating opportunities for children to inform decision-making as critical stakeholders from a young age.

We want young people to feel empowered and included in policy making in ways that will lead to them have higher levels of trust in government and the decision making processes it uses. Key to this is developing innovative, impactful and scalable approaches that will increase youth participation in policy and decision making processes.

I wish grownups would... Respect children because we are all human beings.

SA would be better for kids if... the adults listen to us and take us seriously.



Contemporary youth enfranchisement beyond the existing governance structures of councils, advisory groups and committees largely eludes us, as does active citizenship for those under 18 years. We must involve more youth-led initiatives with access to resources and involvement in decision making processes that include 'participatory budgeting' and project-based active citizenship to empower teenagers and address their current dissatisfaction with formal government processes.

We must also build the confidence, skills and knowledge of both children and young people in the process of government, and of the people working with children and young people. This includes teachers, health and youth workers, in particular, alongside those who don't ordinarily work with children and young people directly but whose work impacts their lives. This group includes policy officers and public service personnel working behind the scenes to deliver services.

A new and different approach must be taken to help young citizens access government engagement opportunities more easily. In this way we can start to develop a dialogue with policy makers that encourages young people's participation in the design of policies, laws and even budgets. Providing multiple pathways and touchpoints for young people

to engage with adult decision makers in the physical and digital places and spaces they frequent, would see services tailored to meet their identified needs, rather than making assumptions about what these are.

We need to create a culture and environment where young people are trusted and heard as active citizens in the present rather than as ‘future’ citizens or leaders. We need to support adult leaders and decision makers to provide allyship and create space for young people to have genuine impact and influence.

Government agencies should be encouraging genuine dialogue and the creation of new pathways to capture the value, views and experiences of young people and respect, acknowledge and amplify the advocacy agendas established by young people.

Practical ways to demonstrate commitment to engagement and participation of young people include:

- Ensuring services that directly connect to children and young people have a structured way for them to provide input and feedback on policies and operations.
- Consider using contractual agreements with non-government service providers to implement mechanisms for active involvement of children and young people in their service level decision making.
- Ensure general community engagement and participation activities have specific and targeted ways to include young people.
- Include skills and commitment to child and youth participation in position descriptions of key community engagement staff.

In order to improve engagement and participation of young people departments could:

- Have a direct relationship with youth organisations and leadership programs and work with them to directly seek the voices of young people on policy process and practice.
- Provide resources to organisations that are genuinely youth led, have a youth participation and empowerment approach to programs and services and/or provide youth leadership programs to extend their reach.
- Strengthen youth led organisations and structures already established by young people, through building networks and alliances, and support sharing of resources and expertise.
- Partner with existing youth leadership development programs and advocacy groups to reach decision makers and create new ways for children and young people who have been unrepresented to have a voice and influence.

My civics and citizenship website⁹ offers a range of good practice, tools and resources for all levels of government to help them to engage meaningfully and appropriately with children and young people to ensure their voices are heard in relation to the decisions that affect them. This builds on work I have funded via my Community Conversation Grants, which enable community organisations and local councils to engage more effectively with young people about issues that matter to them.

Mechanisms for sharing child- and youth-friendly information about Australia's democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting

Children and young people consistently highlight the importance of education when asked what would make it easier for them to enrol to vote and to participate in elections. They highlight the important role of schools in providing critical information, as well as the need to reach young people through both traditional media and social media platforms.

Alongside more equitable and comprehensive school-based civics education, children and young people want more access to information guides and online resources outside of school that are aimed at people their age. This includes information about electoral campaigns and events that is:

- designed by and for young people
- clear and accessible, including on a centralised platform or website
- from a neutral and unbiased perspective
- helpful, transparent, trustworthy and practical rather than overwhelming, secret or focused on 'hate' or 'political rivalries'.

What would help you feel more prepared to vote?

"Proper discussion of political issues and how voting would benefit things"
 - Year 7 student

"providing more accessible resources and information about Australian politics and the candidates/ their policies... also reduced amount of propaganda in the media during voting time, otherwise it makes it even more confusing and stressful"
 - Year 12 student

"More useful and accessible information in campaigning, opposed to ads that throw dirt on rival politicians."
 - Year 8 student

Young people also want more opportunities to enrol and to practice voting, including through 'open votes' with people we trust, 'mock voting' and practice ballots at school, as well as video tutorials and in-depth instructional guides.

There is a host of information available online about civics and citizenship, but only a few of these sources are tailored to younger audiences, and they can be hard to find without some knowledge about where to look and what to look for. They are also rarely marketed to young people in the places where they tend to spend their time online. The prevalence of US politics on popular social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram means that Australian young people are often more likely to understand American political systems than those in their own country.

In order to do what I can to help this situation, I have established a new website¹⁰ which provides a hub for civics and citizenship resources, tools and opportunities which I have promoted via schools and my social media channels. It contains information for young people, teachers and parents with links to educational resources, learning destinations, how to find out more and how to participate. It also showcases the work of institutions offering active citizenship and leadership programs in SA and beyond.

As highlighted throughout the Electoral Commission SA's 2018 and 2022 State Election Reports,¹¹ there must be commitment to developing and implementing a comprehensive voter education program with a particular focus on first-time voters and young voters.

In the run-up to recent elections, I have worked in partnership with the SA Electoral Commission to give young people the practical skills to enrol and vote through my Democracy in Action program.¹² This has helped to address low levels of registration and voting among younger South Australians. Such a program requires adequate funding and will benefit from collaboration with other State authorities, such as the Department for Education.

Potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation

Allowing enrolment until polling day

Young people have a number of suggestions about how to improve electoral participation. For example, they have suggested that allowing enrolment closer to the election would make it easier for young people to enrol and to vote.

The SA Electoral Commission has found that allowing people to enrol after the close of the rolls and up until polling day has been successful at addressing falling participation rates in other parts of Australia and internationally, including New South Wales, New Zealand, Queensland and Victoria. Electoral Commissions in these jurisdictions consider enrolment on the day to be a success.¹³

Young people also seek targeted, practical and age-appropriate information about elections, and would like to see more contact between the government and young people to 'let them know how to enrol and why it is important', greater transparency, and polling booths set up in 'youth organisations to ensure it is accessible and easy'.

Lowering the voting age

Young people across Australia are campaigning to reduce the voting age to 16.¹⁴ Young people are only allowed to vote at 18 years of age, while at the same time they are viewed as criminally responsible in South Australia at the age of 10, they can get their Learner's Permit from 16 years of age and they have the power to either consent to, or refuse, medical treatment from the same age. They can apply to join the Australian Defence Force from 16.5 years of age, and they can legally have sexual intercourse from 17 years of age. The law also explicitly treats young people like adults in certain situations.

For example, if children and young people choose to work, they are still required to pay income tax for every dollar they earn above the tax-free threshold.

In particular, I support lowering the voting age to 16 years old for local government elections to improve enrolment overall, and to improve turnout at local government elections.

The 2024 South Australian Student Representative Council (SA SRC) is working on a campaign to lower the local government voting age in South Australia. Arguments against lowering the age tend to rely more on prejudice and stereotypes than empirical evidence. Such arguments tend to imply that voting requires a certain level of knowledge, maturity and judgment, but such a standard is rarely applied to people 18 and over.

Lowering the voting age is an opportunity to strengthen civic engagement and better educate and enfranchise voters of all ages and future generations. This would mean many young people would still be at school so schools could play a critical role in supporting young people to learn about local government processes, enrolment and voting.

SA would be better for kids if...

We could vote in election days and if there were more activities for us to do.

“Having young people’s voices heard means that the people who have to live in the future will get to have a say in the future. If we can get jobs, pay taxes, and drive, then why can’t we vote.”

– Year 10 student

“We as a society have arbitrarily made 18 the age of political maturity and old enough to be in charge of oneself – why that number specifically? You don’t gain anything special at 18 years old ... so why is it so held onto in matters of political decision-making? People mature at different stages, and choosing an age seemingly at random won’t change that.”

– Year 12 student

¹ Population, Australian Bureau of Statistics, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population>

² NAP Civics and Citizenship National Report 2019, ACARA, <https://nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/20210121-nap-cc-2019-public-report.pdf>

³ yChange, CCYP, <https://ychange.com.au/>

⁴ Issue Brief: Barriers to civic participation for children and young people, CCYP, 2023, <https://www.ccyp.com.au/publications/barriers-to-civic-participation-for-children-and-young-people/>

-
- ⁵ Mapping Social Cohesion 2023, The Scanlon Institute, 2023, <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/mapping-social-cohesion-2023>
- ⁶ National youth enrolment rate, Australian Electoral Commission, 24 April 2024, https://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/Enrolment_stats/performance/national-youth.htm
- ⁷ Election Report: 2018 South Australian State Election, Electoral Commission SA, 2019, <https://ecsa.sa.gov.au/state-and-by-election-reports>
- ⁸ Ariadne Vromen and Philippa Collin, 'Everyday youth participation? Contrasting views from Australian policymakers and young people', *Young Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 2010, 18(1):97-112, <https://doi.org/10.1177/110330880901800107>.
- ⁹ Civics and Citizenship SA, CCYP, <https://civicsandcitizenshipsa.com.au/>
- ¹⁰ Civics and Citizenship SA, CCYP, <https://civicsandcitizenshipsa.com.au/>
- ¹¹ Election Report: 2018 South Australian State Election, Electoral Commission SA, 2019, <https://ecsa.sa.gov.au/state-and-by-election-reports>
- ¹² Democracy in Action, CCYP, <https://www.ccyp.com.au/democracy-in-action/>
- ¹³ Election Report: 2018 South Australian State Election, Electoral Commission SA, 2019, <https://ecsa.sa.gov.au/state-and-by-election-reports>
- ¹⁴ Make it 16, <https://www.makeit16.au/>