

# What young people think about diversity and inclusion in South Australian schools

Members of the South Australian Student Representative Council (SA SRC) want all South Australian schools to regularly undertake a review of their policies, curriculum, co-curricular groups and staff, to ensure they embrace diversity and inclusiveness. Importantly, the review must be undertaken using mechanisms that involve students as co-designers and contributors.

The South Australian community is comprised of people of many nationalities, cultures, disabilities and abilities, gender identities, sexual orientations, religions and backgrounds. This diversity strengthens our state and makes our schools better places in which to learn.

However, many young people do not see themselves in the texts or subjects they study, or in the holidays or events their school promotes and celebrates.

Neither do they have access to the facilities and social support they need. Consequently, when at school, they are not being fully supported to be – or celebrated as – their authentic selves.

All students deserve the right to learn in an inclusive environment that celebrates them for who they are. Inclusive school environments support better educational outcomes, the social and emotional development of young people, and their mental health and wellbeing.

Although many schools are doing their best, they just don't have the resources or tools they need to assess the scope of the situation, or the knowledge to determine what steps they could take to improve student inclusion.

Conducting regular diversity reviews would allow students and staff to self-assess their school's inclusivity. The review results would provide insight into the diversity of their school community and with student input, help to determine what steps to take to make it more inclusive.

### About the SA SRC

The SA SRC is an initiative of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, supported by the Foundation for Young Australians. The 2024 SA SRC cohort comprises 150 students from 80 schools representing 44 South Australian electorates.

The Year 10, 11, and 12 students, drawn from across the state, work together to create genuine, student-led change within their communities. The SA SRC brings together passionate young people who want to create a better future for themselves and for future generations of South Australians.

### About the Commissioner for Children and Young People

Established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*, the Commissioner for Children and Young People promotes and advocates at a systemic level for the rights, interests, and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. The work of the Commissioner is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and informed by the experiences and issues of South Australian children and young people themselves.

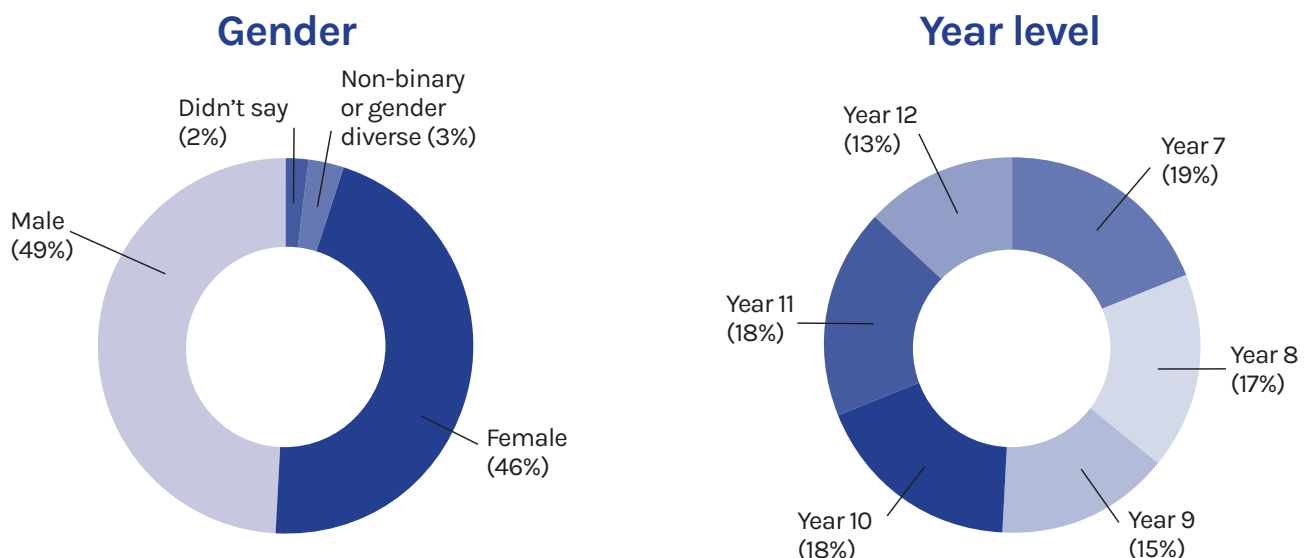
## What we did

To ensure the Seeing Ourselves campaign is representative of young people across the state, SA SRC members distributed a poll at schools throughout South Australia between March and May 2024.

Students in Years 7-12 were asked how inclusive they think their schools are, how their schools celebrate diversity, and what they imagine an inclusive school to be like, including in relation to curriculum, celebrations, clothing, and activities.

## Who responded?

A total of 751 students from 25 secondary schools across South Australia responded to the poll, representing all three school sectors (Government, Catholic and Independent). Schools were located in 17 local government areas, and responses came from students in various year levels and with different genders.



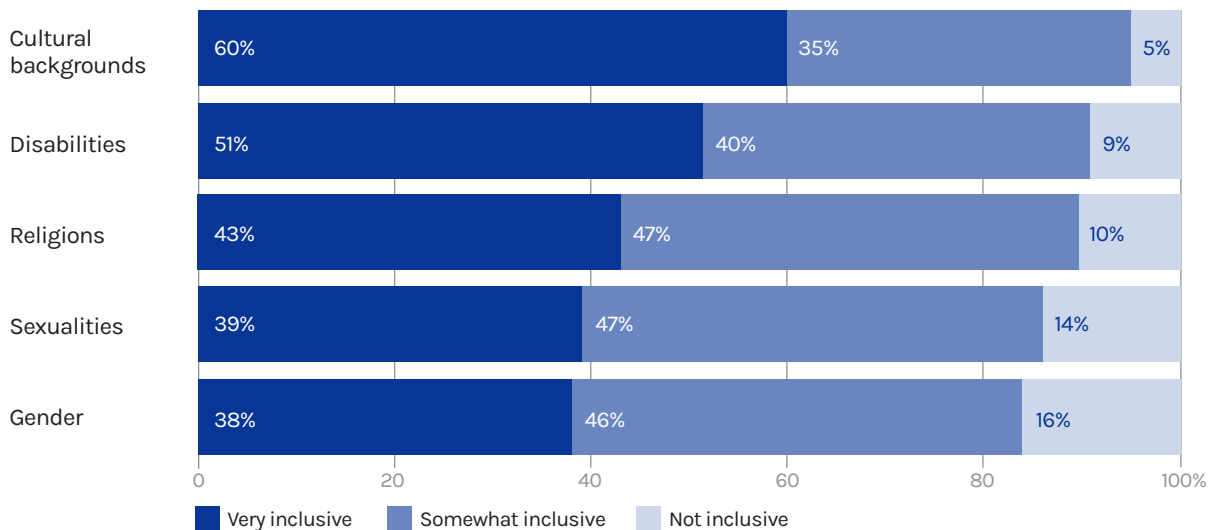
# How inclusive do students think their school is?

Across the five categories that students were asked to assess their school's inclusivity (cultural backgrounds, disabilities, religions, sexualities, gender), students reported that 35-45% of schools were 'somewhat inclusive'.

Comparatively, they responded that their school is less inclusive of diverse religions (43% 'very inclusive'), and least inclusive of diverse sexualities (39% 'very inclusive') and genders (38% 'very inclusive').

Comparing 'very inclusive' and 'not inclusive' responses, students reported that their school is most inclusive of cultural backgrounds (60% 'very inclusive') and disabilities (51% 'very inclusive').

## How inclusive do you think schools are of diverse...



# How do schools celebrate diversity?

One quarter (25%) of students who participated in the poll said that their schools either didn't, didn't really, or that they don't know whether their school celebrates diversity. Those who said their schools did celebrate diversity provided a range of examples:

Celebrating events and special days and weeks, including Harmony Day, Wear it Purple Day, languages weeks, Reconciliation Week, and Pride Month.

“ An example of this would be the recent Harmony Day celebration which was conducted in school during break times.

There were cultural performances, activities (eg, mehndi), music, and several other activities included to celebrate diversity in our school.” - Year 10

“ On days like harmony day and throughout that week as well, as some other days they have done henna, and held cultural dances (from the students mostly) they talk to us and make sure we accept all wonderful cultures. In Pride month they have a Pride dress up day (I loved this) and stick posters up around the school.” - Year 10

“ Aside from the typical holidays and celebrations in Australia, many holidays from non-western cultures are celebrated, for example, Diwali and Eid” - Year 11

Providing dedicated time, spaces, and resources, such as prayer rooms and private rooms with relevant resources for our disabled peers.

“ They do have places in school where people with disability go and have resources for them to thrive.” - Year 10

“ We do because when people are going through Ramada[n] they get the time to do there prayers.” - Year 8

Teaching us about different religions and cultures, racial diversity and anti-racism, refugees, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, gender and sexuality in classes and assemblies.

“ Chapels about racial diversity, incursions about anti-racism, one discussion about gender and sexuality in Health.” - Year 10

“ We are taught in religion to celebrate our differences. We hear other people's stories which provides different perspectives.” - Year 9

Taking pride in being inclusive, setting goals to make the school more diverse, not labelling people, and supporting us and respecting our choices.

“ We are over all a very culturally inclusive school that prides ourselves on our inclusivity.” - Year 10

Establishing clubs to bring us together, including clubs for students of different religions and cultures, LGBTQIA+ clubs, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘learner meetings’.

“ We have many different clubs and groups that bring diverse groups together.” - Year 11

Providing accessible infrastructure and putting up displays around the school, including flags, posters, decorations, and murals.

“ There are ramps located all around the school.” - Year 12

Selecting school leadership and teachers of different backgrounds, religions, and genders, and who speak different languages.

“ We have students of different backgrounds and religions in leadership positions.” - Year 9

## What would a school that's inclusive of diversity look like?

**While some schools are already actively promoting inclusivity and celebrating diversity, it is important that this becomes the norm in every school. According to the 751 students polled, a school that is inclusive of diversity is a school that:**

Celebrates days and weeks of significance with education about the date, activities, food, art, dancing, games, dressing up, wearing traditional/cultural clothing, and celebrating people's differences.

“ It would celebrate and include everyone's culture and religion, maybe having cultural days to celebrate people[s] backgrounds.” - Year 10

“ Celebrating all cultural holidays equally in the school and not just focusing mainly on the christian ones.” - Year 12

Educates students about minorities and challenges stereotypes.

“ More education so people are free of judgement towards things they don't fully understand.” - Year 11

- “ Learn history from different perspectives (get taught by different teachers, different perspectives).” – Year 11
- “ More diverse topics would be incorporated into the curriculum including topics regarding LGBTQIA+ people, mre topics on other cultures around the world, more about different religions or mythologies, more awareness for disabilities, information [that is] more relevant to the current generation.” – Year 11
- “ Different cultures, celebrating their holidays, learning about their traditions and ways of living, including them as a voice.” – Year 12

Has a gender neutral uniform or has the option to mix and match masculine and feminine uniform items, as well as allowing students to wear culturally significant clothing.

- “ People would be able to wear whatever they need to, including items of clothing that align with their identity, culture, religion, etc.” – Year 10
- “ Unisex clothing.” – Year 10
- “ Uniforms would be offered in masculine and feminine options, not male and female, and students would be able to wear whichever option they chose, or mix and match the two. There would also be regular casual clothes days such as once a month.” – Year 11

Employs diverse school staff.

- “ Having more diversity within students and staff.” – Year 11

Designs and delivers activities that are inclusive of everyone.

- “ The activities we would do would be related to school work but inclusive of people who need extended help.” – Year 7

Provides dedicated times and spaces for prayer and worship, clubs, and bathrooms.

- “ We would have opportunities for people to worship their own religion and god during school time.” – Year 10
- “ Gender neutral bathrooms.” – Year 10
- “ There wouldn't be any gender segregated classes.” – Year 11
- “ I think that a school that's inclusive of diversity would have ramps and slopes to help disabled people.” – Year 8

Has mechanisms in place to ensure that concerns about non-inclusive behaviours are taken seriously and addressed by and in accordance with appropriate policies.

- “ Discrimination of any kind wouldn't be dismissed or normalised as something just to deal with / harmless comments. Issues in inclusivity would be actively talked about and not avoided as an uncomfortable topic.” – Year 11
- “ A diversity inclusive school would have strict policies in regards to dealing with behaviours that are non-inclusive.” – Year 11

## For more information

For more information about Seeing Ourselves and other SA SRC campaigns please contact Niav Andrews, Engagement and Participation Officer, at [Niav.Andrews@sa.gov.au](mailto:Niav.Andrews@sa.gov.au)