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Government and fitness industry should work together to benefit young people's mental health

A poll of more than 617 South Australian high school students reveals two-thirds of them believe their mental health would benefit from free access to gyms while they are in high school, particularly for those who are living with mental health issues.

The poll also revealed that a third of students who responded want more access to swimming pools, public sports fields and courts, fitness classes, school sports, club sports and recreation centres, and more time to participate in fitness activities overall.

Students described a range of barriers they face to participating in more sport and fitness activities while in high school. These barriers included cost, opening times, availability of sessions, and transport. They also reported gender barriers that included a lack of female teams, poor quality community courts and fields, and age-related restrictions at some facilities and recreation centres.

Members of the SA SRC's Fitness for Free campaign are highlighting that much more needs to be done to support young people with mental health challenges, and that providing free access to gyms and other fitness facilities for those who need it is a positive step that government and the fitness industry can take to provide practical support for high school students.

To ensure their campaign is representative of young people across the state, the poll asked students in Years 7–12 to share their thoughts on what fitness facilities they would like more access to, what makes it difficult for them to participate in fitness activities, and how having greater access to fitness facilities would help their mental health and wellbeing, as well as their physical health.

SA SRC Campaign members canvassed their peers' opinions throughout March, April and May at 18 secondary schools across South Australia representing Government, Catholic and Independent sectors. The schools polled were in 13 local government areas, with responses coming from students in various year levels and with different genders.

The SA SRC Fitness for Free campaign operates on the premise that free access to fitness facilities would support high school students to engage in regular fitness activities and enjoy the benefits this would bring through establishing exercise routines and fitness habits that may then become lifelong.

Being able to access a local gym or swimming pool, or to participate in a professional fitness class or sporting activity at no cost, sends the message that high school students are seen, welcomed, and supported within their local communities.

The SA SRC Fitness for Free campaign is one of five key issues identified by SA SRC representatives for student-led action this year with the other four being: Free Fares for Our Future; Seeing Ourselves; Our Future Our Vote; and Greening Our Canteens. Details of the 2024 SA SRC Campaigns can be found at: <https://civicsandcitizenshipsa.com.au/young-people/sa-src/>

Quotes attributable to Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly: It's during their teenage years that young peoples' mental health is arguably under greatest stress. We know there is a clear link between exercise and positive mental health, which is why we need to find ways to support young people to access fitness facilities when they need them most. If we can provide sports vouchers for team sports, we can provide gym membership for those who prefer gyms and other fitness centres. The fitness industry could assist by offering sessions that cater specifically to high school students' schedules and made fee free through adoption of a community benefits approach.

Quotes attributable to members of the SA SRC Fitness for Free Campaign:

Amani Nunan (Year 12)

Having the opportunity to go to the gym each week has allowed me to learn how to take care of myself in a safe way rather than sitting in my bed and bingeing Netflix. It provides me with mental and physical support and shows me how important it is to take care of my wellbeing.

Elysia Parker (Year 12)

The gym has saved my life and is a place I can go to clear my head and be myself in a safe and supportive environment.

Emily Alexander (Year 12)

Going to the gym has given me the opportunity to not only find enjoyment in physical activity, but it's also enabled me to enjoy connecting with others. It offered me a community and a space where I feel accepted.

Percy McGuire (Year 11)

Specified areas and groups built around fitness add so much enrichment to a young person's life. It can build structure and discipline in an environment outside of school, which helps immensely in personal growth into adulthood. Fitness allows individuals to blow off steam and emotionally regulate while being in the middle of such a rocky time for their development.

Lilli Sampson (Year 10)

This opportunity would provide many with a safe space to be themselves and take a break from intense forms of learning without worry of extreme costs at such a young age, where we may not be able to be supported financially.

Download the [SA SRC Fitness for Free Campaign Position Brief here](#).

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