

# WHAT WE HEARD

## The purpose and value of public education in South Australia

Nov 2022 – May 2023



Government  
of South Australia

Department for Education



# The purpose of public education

In November 2022, we embarked on a statewide conversation with the community of South Australia on the purpose and value of public education.

More than 12,000 views and perspectives were provided by learners, staff, families, industry and interested organisations and peak bodies over a 7 month period.

Through a series of forums, meetings, discussions, surveys and submissions, we received views on:

- Our **learners** hopes for the future and how education can help with that, and what they want to learn more of at school to support them to thrive in the future.
- What **parents and carers** think public education should prioritise and how education can help their children have a bright future.
- The skills, tools and support our **staff** need to benefit learners and what they would change to make the biggest impact on public education for the young people of South Australia.
- The role of **industry and non-government organisations** support public education and to help learners prepare for life after school.

This document provides a summary of the views we received, which we used to create 'Our Strategy for Public Education in South Australia'.

You will see colour coding throughout, which shows examples of how we used what we heard to develop our areas of impact:



**Wellbeing**



**Equity and excellence**



**Effective learners**



**Learner agency**

These areas of impact describe what we will prioritise and resource to deliver on our purpose.

# What our learners told us

We engaged with more than 850 learners across the state from kindergarten through to year 12

## Data snapshot

- 62% want to learn more **life skills** at school and think these are most important
- 38% hope for people to be **confident in learning**
- 77% hope to be happy, healthy and have lots of family and friends.
- 58% hope to find a good job.
- 44% hope school might help them learn the qualities need for a particular job.
- 44% hoped school might help them achieve their hopes for the future by giving them heaps of **opportunities and ways to explore what they love.**
- Children at kindergarten said they most enjoy the play aspects of kindergarten, such as the swings, slides and sandpit and **connecting with others.**

## Emerging themes

- More **active learning** and opportunities beyond the classroom
- Value **collaboration and discussions with their peers**
- Seek **flexibility in learning** connected to their world and passions
- Want all to have **agency in learning** and the **confidence to participate**
- Crave the **belonging** and **curiosity** present in earlier years.

"I want schools to introduce learning in really fun ways while keeping everything simple. Classrooms can also be more active by **creativity** and **shared ideas from children.**"

"Creativity and **innovative problem solving.** Working well with others and collaborating. Specific subject knowledge eg maths, science, arts."

"More hands on stuff: more fun, more engaging and help **build connections with others.** Also get to show your **learning how you want to.**"

"**Empowering students** to stand up for what needs changing."

"How to become a better person in this world and to get a good job and be successful in life and to pursue your dreams."

"**Learning more about technology** because I'm pretty sure in the future the society we will need more people to work with technology.

"By understanding every student for their ideas and thoughts, Making sure they feel comfortable because school is supposed to be a **safe place and telling them it's ok to make mistakes.**"

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## In smaller student groups, we heard from:

### Children in care

- Participants saw a direct connection between school and their future, with the belief that their education would help them to **achieve their specific hopes**.
- School was also **safe space** away from the difficulties experienced at home, with teachers providing support
- They also outlined the purpose of school as helping them “to learn how to live and how to do things that will lead you to be a better person. To **learn how to grow.**”
- The participants indicated that they want to learn to be able to teach the next generation, and understood that education was the key to a successful life
- Many of the participants referenced struggling with concentration and overstimulation in the school environment – and the need for **quiet safe spaces** for them to **decompress and re-engage** in the learning environment.

### Students with a disability

- Many of the students indicated that friendship and being able to **socialise in a safe environment** was most important in their schooling. This included help **from SSO's** in developing those social skills
- Others indicated that the role of school is to prepare you for life in the “real world” through the teaching of useful information like taxes, as well as hands-on skills like cooking
- Some suggestions for change included allowing students to bring their own laptops to school, as well as **engagement in their particular interest areas** (Pokémon etc.). This follows a common theme of students wanting to be engaged through the things they are interested about
- They also talked about having larger play and outdoor areas, and more engaging content.

### Students learning at the Kurlana Tapa Youth Justice Centre

- Students indicated that they would prefer a change to the daily routine in school, so that students could start with **something active like PE or relaxing like listening to music**
- They also shared a desire to **learn skills that are transferrable** to life outside of school, like handling money, being able to run household finances and taxes
- There was also a call for **more hands-on learning** as well as career pathway type progression to learning that helped students prepare for the career pathway they want and engage them in topics that interest them.

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## Aboriginal Students (metro forum)

- When discussing the themes of accessibility and responsiveness, the participants called for a **greater focus on indigenous culture and language** in the school syllabus, along with a **greater connection to community** through elders visiting and excursions.
- There was also a focus on **greater cultural understanding** and respect from the teachers, which in turn promotes a **feeling of belonging** in the students.
- The participants wanted more of a **voice in their learning**, with teachers urged to listen to student suggestions
- A greater focus on **creative approaches to learning** – including hands-on activities and music in classrooms.
- The students expressed a desire for more **flexibility in their learning**, as well as a greater individual focus on how to prepare students for their unique career/further study goals. This included an acknowledgement of different pathways (even when they diverge from the traditional), as well as **space for students to lead lessons** and be more active in sharing their views and opinions in class.

## Anangu students

For Anangu students the most important aspects of their schooling includes learning new things, **gaining the necessary skills** for the career they want, and access to equipment and tools for sports and art activities

They also highlighted their **friends as a key driver** to coming to school, along with a feeling of **safety and access to food**

Anangu students called for a great focus on **creative subjects**, like music, art, dance and cooking, along with clothing design and sewing

They also wanted **more connection and learning from elders in the community**, as well as the introduction of new and updated technology like computers and interactive whiteboards.

## Cultural and linguistically diverse students

- When asked about what was most important to them in their schooling, the participants indicated that **learning and language acquisition (English)** were key among those predominant aspects.
- Within their learning, students were particularly concerned with career prospects and reaching their future goals – with an understanding that school is meant to set them up for their lives outside of study.
- Many of the participants also indicated that school was an environment that they could socialise in and create **meaningful relationships with their peers**, while also being **exposed to different cultures**.
- Teacher-student relationships were also of high value, and were seen as the key to a safe and comfortable learning environment.
- Sports and extra-curricular activities also featured prominently.

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# What our staff told us

We heard from a broad range of staff including executives, school principal, teachers and staff

## Data snapshot

71% hope that children and students develop a love for **life-long learning**, a passion for **problem solving**, an ability to collaborate and have respect for all adults and peers

56% believe helping students to be **creative, innovative and resourceful**, able to solve problems in ways that draw upon a range of learning areas, disciplines and deep content knowledge is the most important purpose of public education

45% believe public education should prioritise helping children and students develop as successful and confident **lifelong learners**.

42% believe public education should prioritise children and students learning about themselves and how they could contribute to a vibrant, thriving community while acting with moral and ethical integrity.

51% hope that **every child and student gets an opportunity to find their strength** and the thing that gives them a chance to shine.

## Emerging themes

- Funding and resources
- Student and staff **well-being**
- **Inclusion and diversity**
- Focus on **foundational skills** (literacy and numeracy)
- **Personalised learning**
- Reduction of administrative workload on teachers
- **Equitable education** for all
- **Early intervention and support** for students with learning difficulties
- Teaching and learning practices
- Evaluation of standardised modes of assessment and testing.

"Importance of equipping learners with knowledge, skills, capabilities to navigate the world. **Empower students** to make create opportunities for fulfilling life of their choosing."

"A deeper focus on **inclusion** of those that may be at risk of being excluded from school. e.g. those with disability, LGBTIQ+, from culturally diverse backgrounds, experiencing disadvantage."

"A focus on **student well-being, resilience and regulation.**"

"A more **equitable approach** to students, understanding that personal success can look different. Students should feel great about their school experience because it is catered to them, not for them."

"A stronger focus on partnering with families and communities. This means educating everyone. Teacher impact is redundant if families/communities don't work together."

"Acknowledge that children and young people don't develop at the same pace, they all don't have access to the same resources. Adopt equitable approaches that allow all children to demonstrate success."

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# What our parents and carers told us

## Data snapshot

- 62% believe ensuring students graduate with the **foundational skills** needed for work, further study and life is the most important purpose of public education
- 57% believe school might help children and young people have a bright future by teaching them how to **problem solve** and not just with lessons – with other things too.
- 47% hope school encourages **an environment where it's okay to make mistakes**
- 17% think public education in SA should prioritise helping students find a pathway to a specific job, career or further education opportunity.
- 41% agreed that in the future school is a place where every student gets their own **individual ways to learn** and improve their learning.
- 48% think the most important aspect of school is teaching children empathy and compassion for one another. **Mental health, wellbeing, socialisation** and team building are essential.

## Emerging themes

- Prioritising **student mental health and well-being**
- Providing better resources and funding for schools
- Creating a **safe and secure** learning environment
- Emphasising **life skills**
- Customising learning, increasing **personalised and tailor-made** study plans
- Fostering an **inclusive** environment
- Greater recognition of teacher importance
- Improving communication between schools, teachers, and parents.

"Developing **social values, resilience and social and emotional wellbeing** are also vitally important, especially for boys."

"Ensure students develop **critical thinking skills** to become independent thinkers."

"Help all children understand and **value different minds** and different ways of learning, **understand neurodiversity** and teach inclusion."

"Building positive relationships. Getting to know each child's strengths, interests and abilities and building on these."

"Priority to **mental health, wellbeing and engagement**. An emphasis on the enjoyment of learning and challenging students, **showing it is ok to make mistakes and build resilience, perseverance.**"

"Ability to learn through individual learning style and use own **individual expression/creative flair.**"

"Building resilience, encourage vulnerability, **challenge children to move outside their comfort zone** and reward brave behaviours."

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# What industry skills councils told us

## Data snapshot

When asked – what are the skills and capabilities needed for students to create a vibrant industry and economy in SA.

- 32% ranked 1st: **creativity, innovation, problem solving, and adapting to change**
- 28% ranked 1st: a **solid foundation in numeracy, literacy and digital skills**

When asked – what is the first priority of public education:

- 37% ranked 1st - ensuring students graduate with **foundational skills** needed for work, further study and participation in society.
- 31% ranked 1st - developing competencies to help students make their way in an uncertain future, including **how to learn, problem solve, collaboration and innovation**
- 7% ranked 1st - placing students on a pathway to a specific job, career or further education opportunity.

## Emerging themes

- Focus on **personal needs** and support for success
- Life skills and real-world experience for workforce readiness
- Smaller class sizes and **individual attention**
- Collaboration between education and industry for career guidance, mentoring and pathways
- Emphasis on **literacy, numeracy**, and **resilience** as foundational skills.

“Teaching life skills - like **sleep, nutrition, physical and mental development, safe environments**, citizen, exercise, red flags, where to go for help, financial literacy, etc.”

“Show stronger link between school and a productive positive future involving work and contribution to society.”

“Focus on the individual and how to support them to **succeed**.”

“A complete redesign of the education, skills and training system. A system that supports **life-long learning**, enhancing creativity and opportunities.”

“Engagement across all sectors to support our kids. **Integration** and **wellbeing**.”

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# What associations and peak bodies told us

## Leader and principal associations

- Cultivating **connectedness and belonging** was viewed as being an important role of schools. Exploring the correlation between connectedness and outcomes was thought to be worthwhile.
- The main difference in public education compared with other sectors is the aim to **'equalise'** across society. The purpose should be about helping young people to discover their possibilities, **helping them learn what motivates them** to grow the desire to direct their own futures, **rather than feeling like their life is directed by their background, experiences** or by other
- There was hope the new purpose would give staff permission to get to know each child as an individual and knowing what their different outcomes could be. Without this effort, knowing can be replaced with assumptions. Really knowing a child could raise the expectations of some of our children.

## Oversight and Advocacy Bodies

- Children at the centre and the system should be flexible around them.
- Priority should be on supporting young people to grow up **mentally strong** to be prepared for their future, yet **literacy and numeracy** cannot be lost.
- Be the **safety net for children**. Ensure interaction and connection with other government areas and other services.
- Support future **inclusivity and cultural awareness in the community**.

## Educators SA

The most important purpose of public education in SA:

1. A broad focus on **social and emotional wellbeing**
2. Developing **positive learning dispositions**
3. A changed focus on learning
4. A feeling of **belonging** and being **valued**
5. Fairness and **equity**
6. Support learners as individuals.

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# What interested organisations told us

We also received written submissions and responses from more than 31 organisations, including NGOs, universities, associations and research bodies.

## Emerging themes:

### Prepare students for the future

- Instilling **critical thinking, problem solving**, and **practical life skills** in students to prepare them for the adult world.
- Building **resilience, empathy, and social and emotional robustness** in students.

### Provide essential skills and capabilities

- **Strong collaborative time management and organisational skills, computer/digital literacy**, leadership development, **adaptability**, and work/life balance.

### Nurture personalised learning

- Personalised learning to recognise and **utilise individual strengths and needs**
- Provide access to industry-specific subjects and move away from standardised testing systems
- Specialised professionals to **help students with various needs**.

### Engaging and meaningful learning

- Making learning engaging and **tied to students' interests**
- Implementing **project-based learning** and decreasing the emphasis on written assignments and tests
- **Deep thinking** and activities that showcase individual students' strengths.

### Support teachers

- **Collaboration and knowledge sharing among teachers**
- **Wellbeing support**, investing in technology integration and professional development, and reducing administrative workload to build relevant and engaging lessons tailored to their class
- Teacher recruitment and retention initiatives.

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