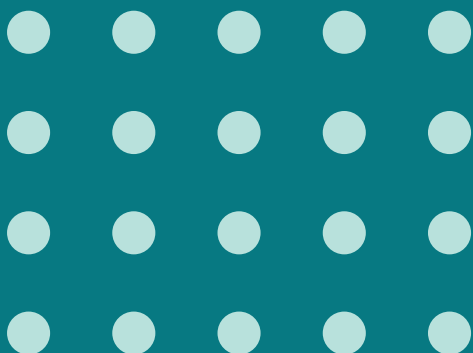


STUDENT VOICE REPORT

OUTCOMES FROM THE STUDENT FORUMS AND SUMMIT ON
VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND RESPONSES IN SCHOOLS

AUGUST 2023

'We have the right to education, and that education needs to be safe.'
(student participant 2023)



Government
of South Australia
Department for Education

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The concept of a student summit was initially proposed by Professor Barbara Spears (Child Development Council) and Professor Philip Slee (Flinders University) in August 2022 as a means to involve students in a discussion about mental health, wellbeing and violence in schools. Following a request from the Minister, department staff worked in partnership with Professors Spears and Slee to develop and refine the concept to focus on school-based violence. This allowed for the work to closely align with the evolving Plan of Action, a key outcome of the Minister's roundtable on violence prevention in schools.

The roundtable also highlighted the importance of student voice and agency, identifying that students are often the most knowledgeable about, and motivated to work together to help solve complex issues such as bullying and violence. To ensure best practice and diversity of student voice, the department worked with an advisory group comprising the Child Development Council (CDC) and other relevant organisations, including the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, the Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Guardian for Children and Young People, the Youth Advisory Council of SA and others to refine the concept for the summit.

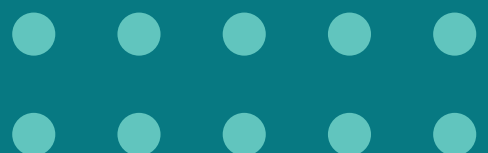
A two-fold approach was undertaken to maximise opportunities for student participation. A series of smaller student forums were held at a range of government schools to engage students from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Staff from the Engagement and Wellbeing directorate worked with the department's school liaison unit, Site Engagement, to identify a number of appropriate schools which would maximise opportunities to engage with the following identified priority cohorts:

- Aboriginal students
- Students with disability
- Students in care
- Students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- LGBTQIA+ students
- Students engaged in alternative education programs and settings.

The student forums were held in 2023, commencing in week 10, term 1, and concluding in Week 9, Term 2.

While the student forums were being conducted, the department engaged external engagement experts Think Human to lead the design of the summit, using a collaborative approach to scope and analyse work to date, define the desired and undesired outcomes, and set key objectives and possible methodologies. Considerations of student safety and wellbeing and the elevation of student voice were central to the process and decision-making about design. The summit was designed as an opportunity to discuss the findings of the forums and focus on understanding the causes, contributing factors and potential solutions to school-based violence. Think Human were provided with emerging key themes arising from the student forums to inform the design of the summit.

The department brought together a diverse group of school students from across the government, independent and Catholic education sectors to participate in the event. The summit was held on 6 June 2023 in The Sanctuary at the Adelaide Zoo with facilitation provided by Think Human and a group of skilled facilitators from the department.



STUDENT FORUMS AND SUMMIT SNAPSHOT

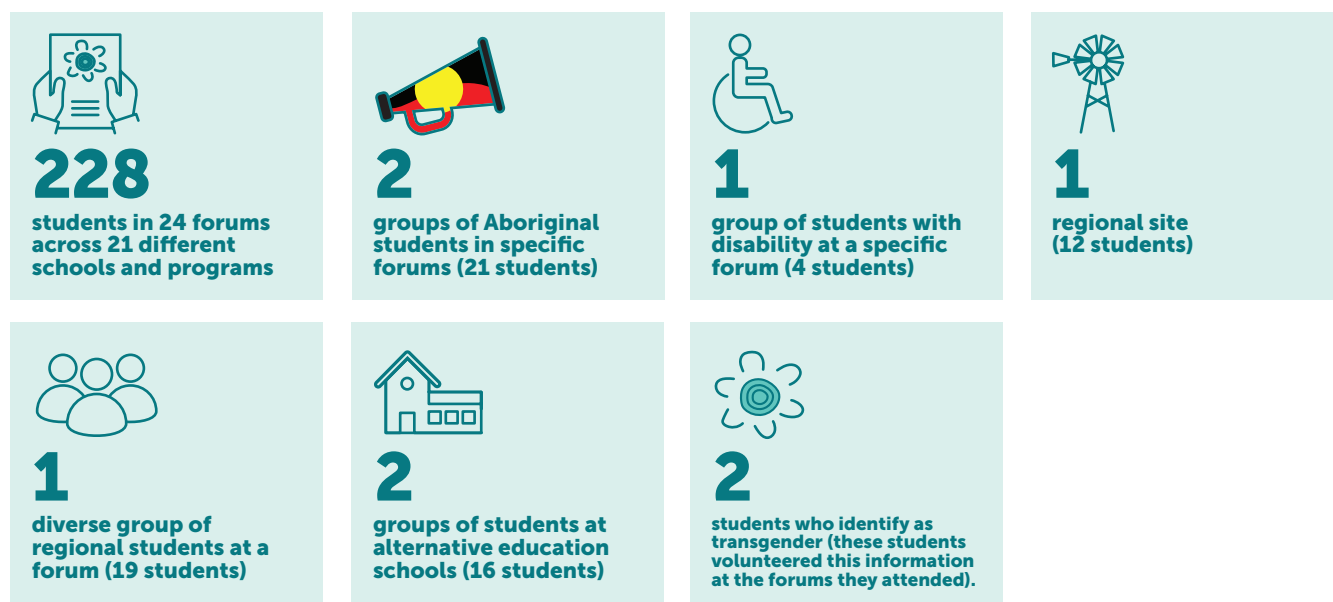
The student forums were designed to be an initial, informal conversation posing the same questions for students that were asked of adult stakeholders at the roundtable:

1. What causes violence in schools?
2. How might we best respond to violence in schools?
3. How can we prevent violence in schools?

The forums ranged in size from 5 to 19 students. Participants ranged in age from 12 to 17 and represented years 7-12. The forums were attended by one selected staff member at most schools, who was generally a wellbeing leader, or held another school leadership position. Some forums included additional school staff if required.

Students engaged enthusiastically in the forums and told us they would like us to consult with them whenever we are making decisions that impact their lives.

At the end of the consultation period, student forum facilitators had engaged with:



Participating schools were asked to select students based on the identified priority cohorts, so it is likely that many other students from priority cohorts were engaged as part of the general student forums. In some cases the demographics of those students were not known to facilitators. This ensured the protection of student privacy and confidentiality.

Port Augusta Secondary School, the Youth Education Centre and the Rural Youth Ambassadors Program engaged in student forums but were not included in the groups of students invited to the summit. All but three of the invited schools attended the summit with their students on 6 June. As school violence is a cross sector issue, a number of places were also allocated to the independent and Catholic sectors, to further ensure diversity of student voice and perspectives.

At the summit, facilitators engaged with students from 24 schools, including 55 students from government schools and 22 students from non-government schools.

PROCESS AND METHODS

During the process of the student forums and summit, data was collected in a range of ways. For the student forums, facilitators met with students and support staff to engage in an informal conversation. Students were asked to share their views, however, not share personal information about themselves or others to maintain their safety and that of others in the school community. Students were also provided with a range of options to debrief after the forums, acknowledging the sensitive nature of the conversation. These options included engaging with the supporting staff member present, who in most cases was a student wellbeing leader.

The conversations were audio recorded and detailed notes were taken. The audio recordings were subsequently transcribed, with a dedicated staff member identifying key themes during the transcribing process. Once transcribed, the original audio recordings were deleted.

At the summit, students undertook a range of activities at tables in groups supported by skilled table facilitators. These activities focused on:

- establishing ground rules and norms for the day, including reflecting on factors which support safety and individual power
- identifying where they fit on a continuum of safety – from 'feeling safe' to 'feeling unsafe'
- identifying key themes for making the school experience safer
- using these themes to generate a set of recommendations to present to the Minister.

After the summit, the raw data collected was synthesised and included a detailed report prepared by Think Human.



KEY THEMES

At the summit, students identified eight key themes (later distilled to seven) that described what they felt was needed to move towards a safer school experience for all. These were then expanded into a series of recommendations falling under each overarching theme. Students presented these recommendations to the Minister at the end of the day.

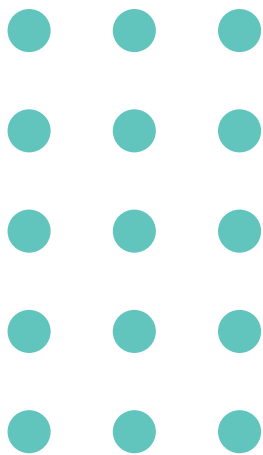
An analysis of the transcripts and note summaries from the student forums was then undertaken to identify how closely the key themes of these conversations aligned with those identified at the summit, and to highlight any gaps and additional points of interest.

The key themes from the student forums and summit were then refined to remove duplicated information and ensure clarity. One of the initial themes (self-awareness) was combined with health and wellbeing, as the recommendations related to self-awareness were focused on enhanced awareness of student wellbeing.

The final seven themes are:

- health and wellbeing
- connections and inclusion
- creating safe spaces
- media influence
- understanding and responding to bullying
- support systems
- avoiding violence.

These themes (including some student insights) are outlined below, with the recommendations and additional data distilled into simple points that can be easily translated into tangible initiatives and actions for consideration.



HEALTH AND WELLBEING

'There is more of a focus on mental health and taking care of yourself now, but we don't really have the resources to support it'.

'We want to have say in how we are taught about wellbeing'.

Students told us they want an enhanced focus on their holistic health and wellbeing and that they believe there are not enough wellbeing staff to support all students. They strongly believe that mental health issues in particular, are key drivers of violence in schools and this needs to be addressed with additional resources and greater flexibility. They also told us student wellbeing is enhanced by positive trusting relationships with teachers, which take time and commitment to develop and sustain.

They asked us to:

- support student wellbeing through a dedicated wellbeing curriculum that is embedded in daily school routines and practices
- support teachers to provide consistent and meaningful wellbeing instruction to students and engage in good quality self-care
- support teacher connection to students through improved resources and professional education
- provide additional funding for mental health and wellbeing staff within schools
- implement online booking systems for wellbeing support and develop/promote educational wellbeing applications.

CONNECTIONS AND INCLUSION

'The level of trust with teachers is very big, like in primary school you trust a lot of teachers, then when it comes to high school it's very hard to trust the teachers.'

'A lot of students build relationships with SSOs, they come in the classroom and help you with your work if you're struggling.'

Students told us the social isolation and discrimination experienced by some students is an ongoing issue that needs more attention. They told us that racism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia in particular, are visible in bullying behaviour and violent incidents and that this has a significant negative impact on marginalised groups.

They asked us to:

- spread awareness of diversity through education programs including teacher education
- introduce professional development for educators about wellbeing and mental health for marginalised student groups
- support the creation of support networks for marginalised groups, such as LGBTQIA+, culturally and linguistically diverse, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students with disability.

CREATING SAFE SPACES

'Let the kids go out for 20 minutes...and come back calm and ready to actually interact in the classroom setting, rather than have that one kid get to their breaking point and then have this create a long term issue that lasts for a few weeks.'

Students told us that situations can become more volatile and unsafe for some students when they feel confined or are forced to be in crowded spaces. These feelings can arise in classrooms and in common areas. They advised that whole, dedicated spaces in schools for quiet group work, time alone or to seek support help them to manage their emotions and feel safe.

They asked us to:

- include processes for students to access these spaces in departmental policies and procedures (including defining what the spaces are used for and who to contact if you need another option)
- create more safe spaces for students to be able to remove themselves from stressful situations
- provide more opportunities for structured use of spaces during breaks that encourage safe and respectful interactions.

MEDIA INFLUENCE

'Year 5 to 7 is the age you get social media for the first time, but you don't know how to use it properly, so if an argument breaks out online, you don't know who to trust.'

'Most parents don't even know about social media platforms and parental controls.'

Students told us unsafe use of social media and technology makes school violence worse and more challenging to manage, and they need support and education to be safe online.

They asked us to:

- work with social media companies to improve regulation of social media, such as raising minimum age
- introduce parent education on how to support safe social media use for their children
- introduce student education on safe social media and technology use, encompassing limiting screen time and normalising time spent without phones. This should include educational seminars with individuals/groups who have credibility with students, such as youth ambassadors
- promote media and mobile regulation in educational environments through an array of media (such as videos) to raise awareness
- revise the student use of mobile phones and personal devices policy to include more flexibility that allows appropriate use of phones and devices in educational settings.

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO BULLYING

'If someone's different, people with disorders or autism or ADHD and all those sorts of stuff, anything that's not what people deem a normal perfect teenager, then it's very easy for someone to be mean towards them and that can very easily lead to violence.'

'Restorative practice was a bit intimidating at first, but once we got comfortable, we were able to talk and listen to each other's point of view.'

Students told us bullying is still an important issue and that seeking the right support can be difficult. They told us that bullying is often discriminatory in nature, including racist, homophobic, transphobic and ableist behaviour. They told us that bullying can have serious impacts on the mental health of students and their ability to engage in learning. Restorative approaches were seen to be useful.

They asked us to:

- implement more education programs on recognising and responding to bullying behaviour for students and teachers
- introduce better avenues for communication between parents, students and school staff and the community about bullying
- provide more options to report bullying, including options for trusted peers and adults, to emails and anonymous online forms/reporting mechanisms.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

'The wellbeing team are there to talk to, to help you. They get called down for situations like violence or if someone's experiencing bullying or not feeling well. Their sole purpose is to do the wellbeing stuff so they're able to actually get on to it and focus on it.'

'Most people trust the youth workers, they create a bond with them, sometimes they're the only people they can trust. If that youth worker is not there, who else are they gonna talk to?'

Students told us teachers are dealing with lots of complex and unsafe behaviours, and they require more resources and support to focus on teaching and to have the time to build strong connections with their students. It was important to have staff in schools with a wellbeing focus. They told us it was important that they felt connected and could relate to and trust the people in the school supporting them.

They asked us to:

- provide teachers and other school staff with professional education around supporting students with diverse needs
- provide funding for additional support staff in schools, such as Student Services Officers (SSOs) and youth workers.

AVOIDING VIOLENCE

'Support should also be in the community as well; it shouldn't just be up to kids and teachers.'

'When kids come back from suspension, they need more focus on re-entry and rehabilitation so they can come back in smoothly instead of just having a meeting and going straight back into class.'

Students told us preventing violence is very complex and needs a coordinated approach between schools and the wider community. They told us that experiences at home and in the community impact students' attitudes to and propensity to engage in violent behaviour.

They asked us to:

- introduce programs for students and teachers to develop skills in conflict resolution, such as peer mentor training and social and emotional learning programs
- include families and communities in these learning programs
- ensure accountability for those engaging in violent behaviour by using evidence based programs and initiatives such as restorative practices
- provide more options for structured activities before, during and after school, including in the wider community.



NEXT STEPS

The key themes identified by students during the forums and summit align closely with the immediate actions announced in the summary report of the Minister's roundtable on violence prevention in schools earlier this year. This gives the department confidence the work is heading in the right direction and provides a strong foundation on which to build.

The forums and summit have provided rich and critical information about what students need to feel safe and supported at school. This data will now be used to inform the evolving Plan of Action to be released later in 2023.

The next steps in this process are:

- a comparative analysis of the findings of the forums and summit with those of the adult stakeholder consultation, including further refinement of the themes and development of possible actions
- application of the findings to existing departmental initiatives and the immediate actions currently being implemented to identify any gaps and where additional attention needs to be focused
- internal consultation regarding the findings to explore the feasibility of emerging actions
- development of a clear set of recommended actions to be considered for inclusion in the Plan of Action.

