



Student Voice in Schools

REPORT





We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and cultures. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.



We would also like to acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal people and culture within the NSW community.

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Summary

The 2022-23 New South Wales (NSW) Youth Advisory Council (YAC) surveyed 1,561 children and young people across NSW regarding their school experience; focusing especially on voice and participation. The objective of this report is to promote greater and more meaningful student voice and engagement in the NSW education system.



■ Methodology

This report consisted of a 10-minute online survey, designed by the NSW YAC members with support from ACYP team members. ACYP promoted this survey through their network, including promotion to schools, other organisations and community groups that work with children and young people aged 12 to 24 years old. The NSW YAC members promoted the survey to their personal and school networks.

Charts have been included throughout the report to represent the qualitative and quantitative data collated from the polling results of the survey. It was completed by 1,561 children and young people. Of these:



99% were current school students



47% were from Greater Metropolitan Sydney and **53%** were from regional NSW



46% were from a government school and **54%** were from a non-government school



31% were members of their Student Representative Council (SRC)



22% spoke a language other than English with their family



17% identify as LGBTQIA+



10% live with disability



6% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

Introduction



In August 2022, the newly appointed members of the 2022-2023 NSW YAC met in Sydney for their first in-person meeting at the ACYP office. The team at ACYP presented the YAC with the opportunity to work on a collective project during their term; a project to create meaningful change for the children and young people of NSW. Excited by the opportunity, several ideas about what this project might look like were put forward by the passionate YAC members to discuss and determine their project report focus.

Later in the year, the focus of the project was agreed upon by the YAC: *to promote greater, more meaningful student voice in the education system*. Reflecting on their own schooling experiences in rural, regional and metro NSW and a range of Public, Catholic and Independent settings, all members of the YAC agreed that they felt unheard by their respective school systems and determined that this was their opportunity to create change.

To progress the project report, the YAC members were divided into groups to begin the first stages of development. One group focused on desktop research to provide the group with background knowledge on what is already being done in the NSW education system to provide students with the opportunity to have their voices heard.

With support from ACYP team members, the other group created a survey for children and young people in NSW to directly capture their thoughts and experiences about having their voices heard in their school setting and if the current methods of promoting student voice are effective. The 1,561 responses to the non-compulsory survey only further highlight how passionate the children and young people of NSW are about student voice. We acknowledge children and young people would not have participated if it was not important to them.

All 12 members of the 2022-2023 NSW YAC contributed to the creation of this report *Student Voice in Schools*, dedicating their time and energy to highlight how as young people, with support from those within the education system, this can create meaningful change in how children and young people have their voices heard and participate in our school settings. The YAC are immensely proud of the report and appreciate you taking the time to consider their research, evidence and recommendations.

01. How student voice is currently being heard in NSW schools

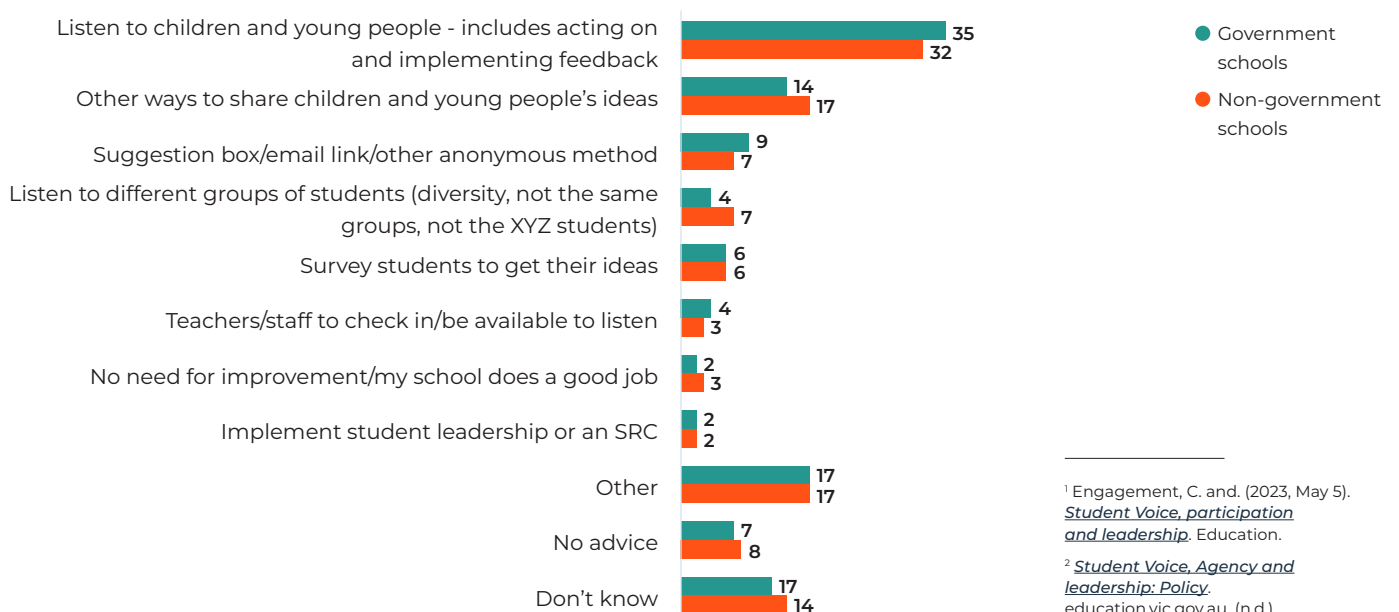
In schools across NSW, there are currently various methods that are used to provide opportunities for student voices to be heard in the education system. According to the NSW Government, student voice is defined as “students actively participating in decision-making at school on things which shape their education experience”. The NSW YAC supports this explanation, adding that it is important that students are directly involved and can see the influence and results that their voice and participation in decision-making has created, in order to feel heard and valued.¹

Building on these definitions, the Victorian State Government recognises that students have unique insights into teaching, learning and schooling, proposing that active participation in school, communities and education systems can collectively influence outcomes and decision-making processes.² The four methods currently aimed at promoting this participation across the various school systems in NSW are the:

- Tell Them From Me Survey;
- Student-led teams;
- Student involvement in decision-making; and
- Department of Student Voices in Education and Schools.

A brief outline of these tools, the implementation and efficacy will be explored further throughout Section 1. Students during the survey were asked to reflect on how their voices are currently being heard in their respective schools to determine how they best believed this can be improved. As seen in Figure 1, the preferred way to improve student voice was to listen to children and young people, act on and implement feedback. Young people also asked for other ways for children and young people to share ideas. Ideas and preferences were similar across both government and non-government schools. These responses further elevated the need for more practical and inclusive methods of providing students with the opportunity to be heard and make change.

Figure 1: Top advice about how to improve student voice (%)



■ Tell Them From Me Survey

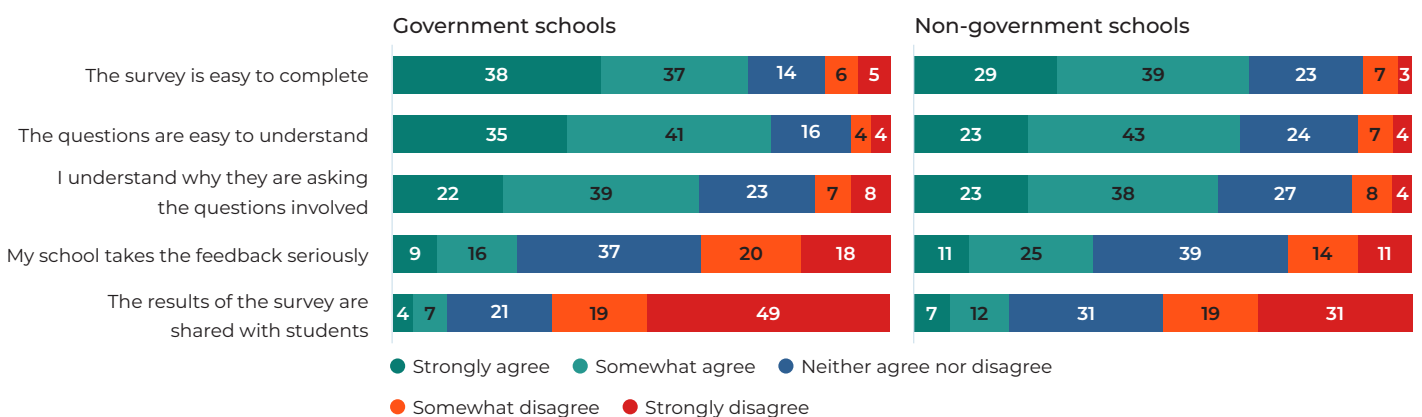
The Tell Them From Me (TTFM) survey is perhaps one of the most widely applied tools used to collect student voice across NSW schools. The survey was developed by Dr Doug Williams and has been accessed by over 6,300 schools globally, reaching over 13 million students worldwide. TTFM was first launched in NSW by the State Government and the Learning Bar in 2013 with the aim of creating “thriving school communities”.³ The suite of TTFM surveys – the Student Survey, the Parent Survey and the Teacher Survey – all capture the voices of the diverse core stakeholders of the education system in one report. However, this report is often only accessible by the school executive teams, with the results rarely being shared with the students who have used their voice and participated to better influence and encourage change in their schools.

The Student Survey invites students in Years 4 through 12 to participate by answering a range of questions reflective of their social, intellectual, and institutional engagement level within their respective school community. This anonymous survey is administered twice yearly to provide school executive staff with understanding and awareness into student wellbeing and engagement, along with teaching practices from the perspective of students.⁴

TTFM provides timely evidence that can be used to inform school policies and procedures that are directly reflective of the student experience. When used annually, the longitudinal survey data highlights important trends across a whole school community. The data and reports founded from this survey have great potential to further support the influence and increased significance of student voice in schools to further create healthy, safe and positive learning environments that are reflective of the needs of their most fundamental stakeholders – that of the students.⁵

The following graphic outlines the attributes of the TTFM survey. The survey results highlight that in NSW Government schools, up to 38 per cent of students somewhat agree or strongly agree that their school doesn't take the feedback from the TTFM survey seriously compared to the 25% of students in non-government schools.

Figure 2: Attributes of the Tell Them From Me survey



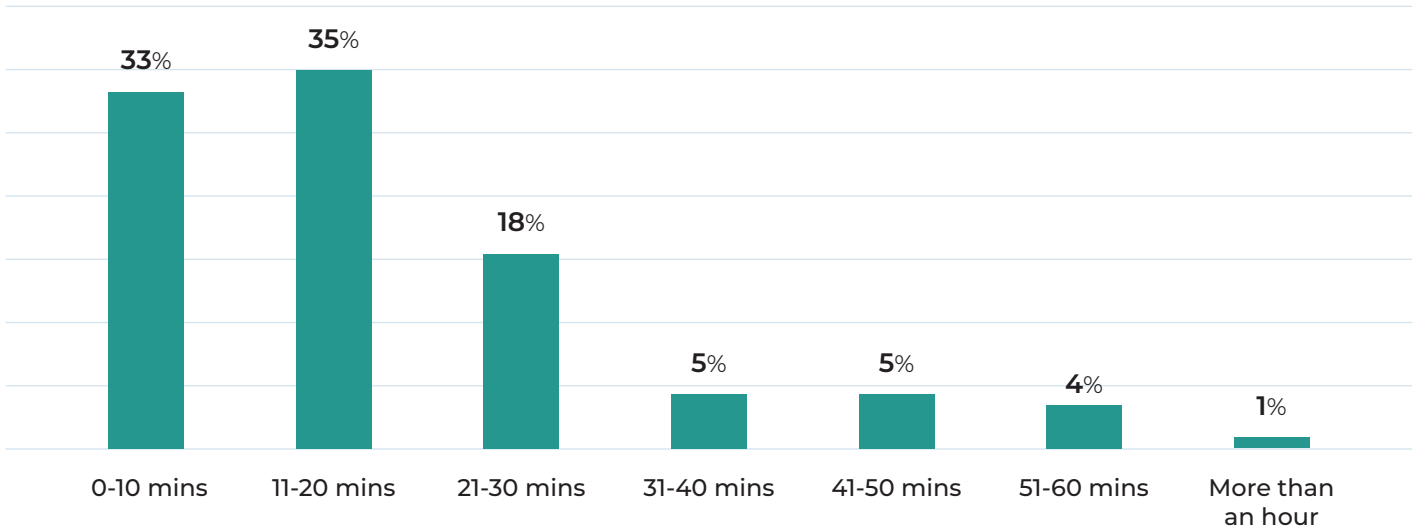
³ *Tell them from me*. The Learning Bar. (2023, October 24).

⁴ Wellbeing, I. and. (2023, March 16). *Student Resources*. Education.

⁵ NSW Government (2023 February 14). *Tell Them From Me*.

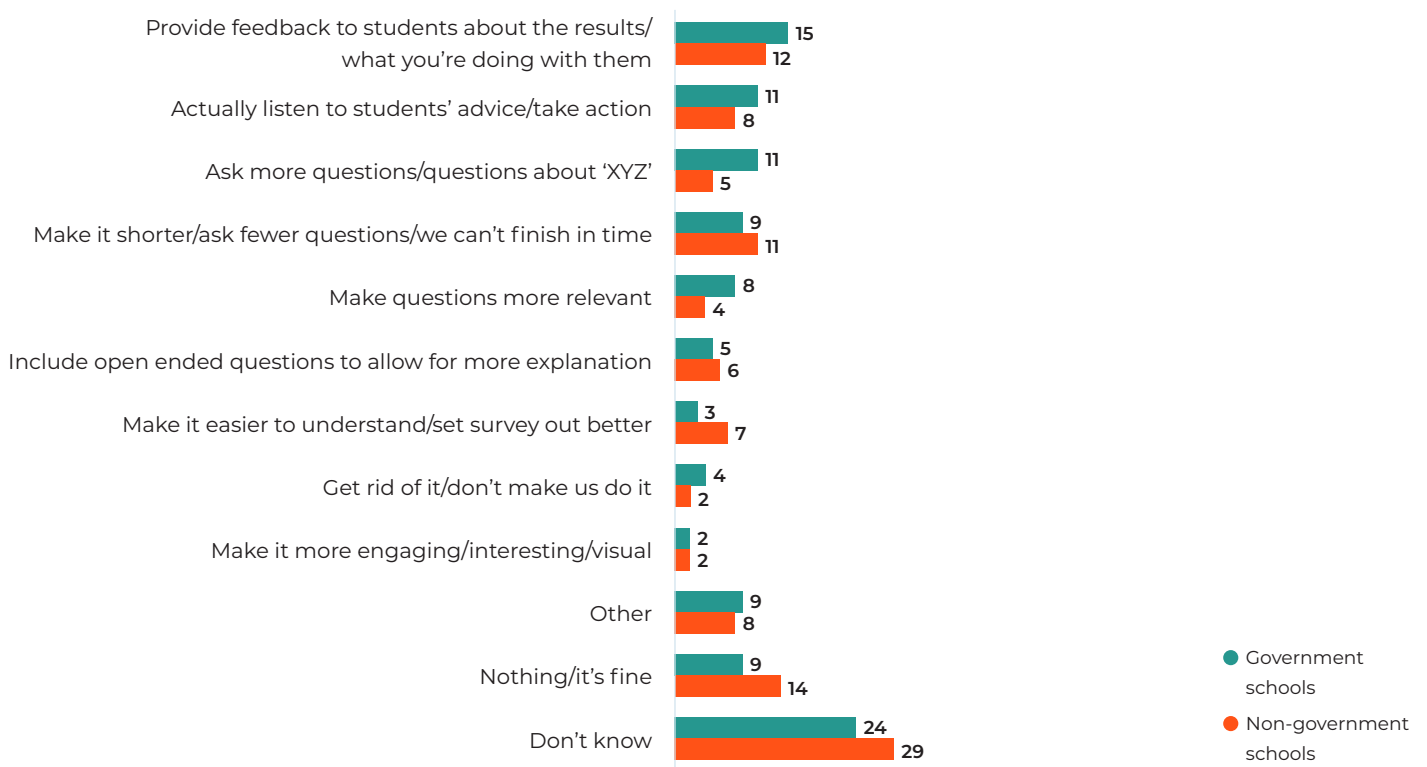
Students were also asked to provide feedback on how they think the TTFM survey could be improved. 15% of students in NSW Government schools believe that the TTFM survey could be improved by schools providing feedback to students about the results and how they will be utilised. Seeing results from their voices being heard, encourages students to share their voice.

Figure 3: Total length of time (approx.) to complete the Tell Them From Me survey



Students in non-government schools believed that the survey needed to be shorter, with fewer questions as some experienced being unable to complete the survey with the time that is currently given. Following on from this feedback, our results show that 33 per cent of students took between 0-10 minutes to complete the TTFM sufficiently, compared to the 35 per cent who took between 11-20 minutes.

Figure 4: Top ideas for how the Tell Them From Me survey could be improved (%)



■ Student-led teams

Used as an umbrella term covering various student-led programs in NSW schools, student-led teams are small groups of select students that represent their peers in authentic leadership roles and in decision-making processes. Successful student-led teams aim to promote meaningful student involvement in educational settings through authentic and engaging learning and leadership experiences. At their core, these teams provide the opportunity for children and young people to build leadership skills and positive relationships within their school community between staff and students.⁶

Student Representative Councils (SRCs) are likely the most widely used and known form of student-led teams across NSW schools. Whether students are elected by their peers, staff or at random, the purpose of the SRC is to represent the student body and their voices, and to be the direct link between their peers and the school staff. An effective SRC consists of student leaders that influence action and promote meaningful engagement in their school and wider community.

In the survey, students were asked to provide feedback on the improvement of the SRC from those who were and were not members of those school student representative councils. Surprisingly, students who were members of the SRC currently wanted to be able to listen to other peers (those who were non-SRC students) more. The majority of students not involved in the SRC were not sure what could be done to improve it however, they also wanted to be listened to more.

As Figure 5 demonstrates, student voice and leadership exist on a continuum. Most students in student-led teams merely express their thoughts and are used as data sources, without truly being ‘heard’ by the staff in their education community.⁷ Responsibility, influence, trust and shared opportunity are vital to student-led teams to create effective and positive student leadership engagement, and the ability for school staff to learn directly from their students.⁷

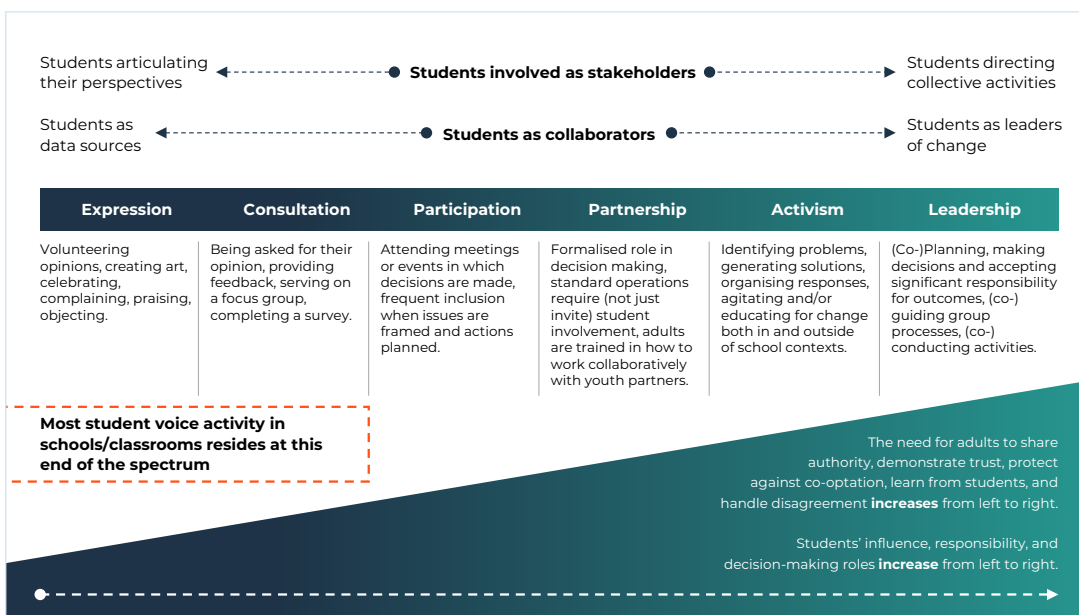


Figure 5:
Spectrum of Student Voice (The Students At The Center Series, 2012).

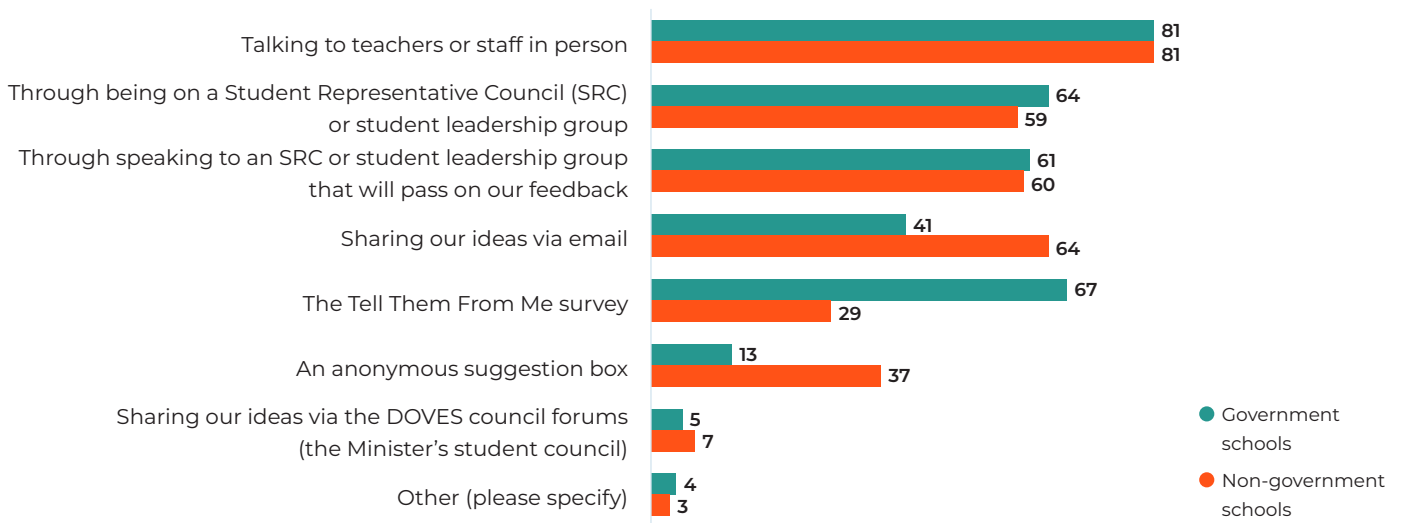
⁶ NSW Government (2023 Mar 16). [Student resources](#).

⁷ Students at the Center (2012). [Spectrum of student voice](#), p. 30.

1. Opportunities for Student Voice at School

The graph below displays that talking to teachers or staff in person is the most common opportunity to be heard at both government and non-government schools, with SRC programs coming in at a close second. It was more common for students from non-government schools, compared to government schools, to say that they can share their ideas via email. However, over double the number of government school students said that they have the opportunity to complete the Tell Them From Me survey. Given the size of the DOVES Council, it is unsurprising very few students from government or non-government schools selected this as an available opportunity at their school.

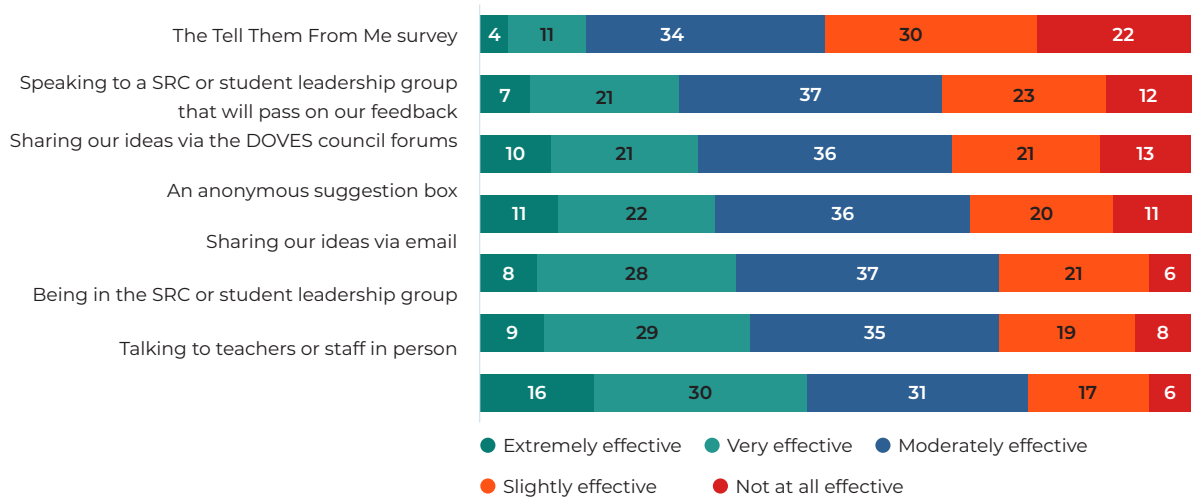
Figure 6: Which of the following opportunities for student voice are available at your school? (%)



2. Efficacy of Voice Opportunities

It is clear from this graph that the vast majority of students believe that the Tell Them From Me survey is 'moderately' to 'not at all' effective as an opportunity for student voices to be heard. Student voice opportunities such as being on an SRC or DOVES council, sharing ideas via email or an anonymous suggestion box and speaking to an SRC member were widely regarded as being 'moderately' effective. Talking to teachers or staff in person is considered the most effective way of expressing student voice.

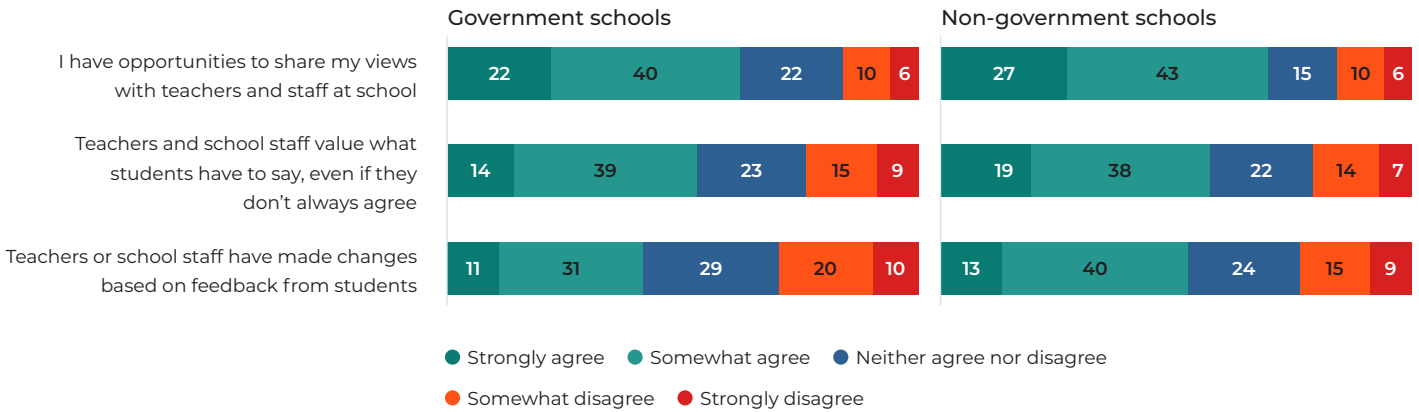
Figure 7: How effective are the following opportunities for student voice at your school? (%)



3. Feeling Heard at School

This graph showcases that there is little difference between the opinions of students from government and non-government schools as to whether they feel that their voices are heard at school. The graph further illustrates that although the majority of students say that they have the opportunity to share their views with students and staff at school, they do not believe that their opinions are valued by students and staff due to the lack of action and results.

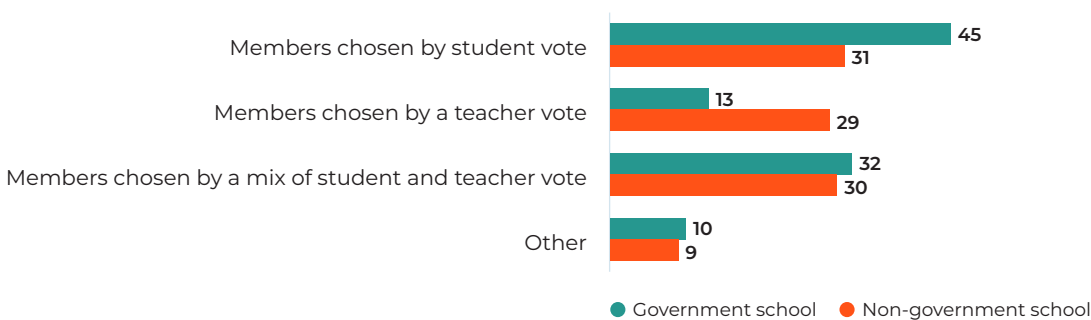
Figure 8: Feeling heard at school (%)



4. Student Representative Council (SRC) Selection

Based on this graph we can see that there is a substantial difference between the way that the selection of a SRC occurs within government and non-government schools. In government schools for example, we can see that the majority of students say that their school's SRC is chosen purely by the students, with far less saying that their school's SRC are chosen only by a teacher's vote. At non-government schools however, an equal number of students say that the SRC is chosen by teachers, students and a mix of both. It should also be noted that a similar number of students at government and non-government schools say that their school uses a mix of teachers' and students' votes to determine their school's SRC.

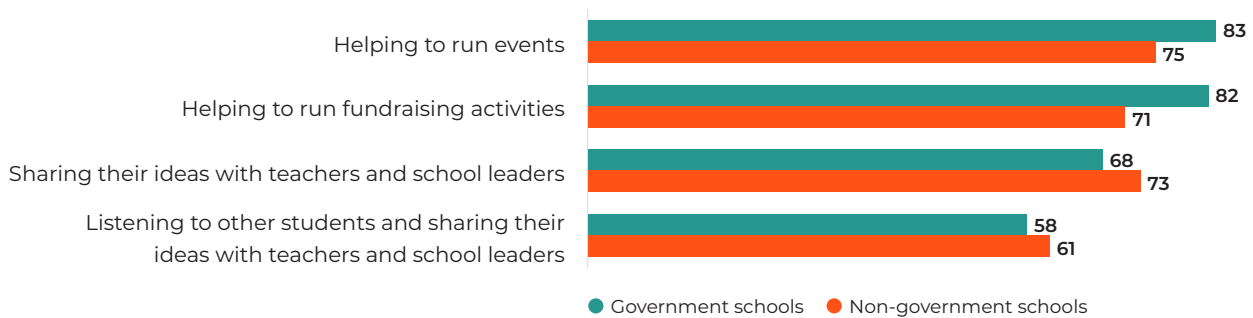
Figure 9: Student Representative Council Selection (%)



5. SRC Activities

The following graph shows that government and non-government school students share similar views as to what their schools' SRC does. We can see that most students believe that their school's SRC participates in activities such as helping to run events and fundraising activities, as well as sharing their ideas with teachers, with a slightly smaller amount saying that their school's SRC listens to non-SRC students and share their opinions with teachers and school leaders.

Figure 10: Which of the following do your SRC/student leadership group participate in? (%)



While student-led teams vary from school-to-school across NSW, at the heart of these teams is the value of listening and taking action on student voice and participation. A fair and authentic student-led team, when supported by trusting school staff, provides the opportunity for students to give back to their school community. They do this by using their voice in a purposeful way that also develops real-world skills of teamwork and leadership.

02. From the students: What is and isn't working in our schools

■ Student Involvement in School Decision Making

Typically, decisions that affect the educational experience of students are made exclusively by school staff. Children and young people need opportunities to feel valued and empowered by their school community. This could be achieved by involving students in decision making and giving them the opportunity to play a role in influencing change, whether it be through consulting on the location of a new playground or being looped into the process of recruiting a new staff member. When students are actively involved in decision making and collaboration on matters that directly impact them within their school and community, their overall engagement and academic success can be dramatically enhanced.⁸ Building trusting and positive relationships empowers students to have greater ownership through their voices being heard.⁹

“One way to build trust and let students know their opinions are important is to have students interview new staff members.”⁹ When students are involved in the interview process, they are able to provide a unique perspective that is not traditionally found in the education hiring process – that of a student. Students are one of the main stakeholders that new staff will be working directly with, so utilising their insight of how a potential applicant may engage and respond to students and their fellow peers is an invaluable contribution to the recruitment process. By training young people in the art of formal interviews, important life skills of listening and character judgement are strengthened, which is of great benefit to the student and society at large.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) asserts that children and young people have the right to express their views on matters affecting them. While educational experience significantly impacts young people, schools across NSW have been slow in valuing this right, with student involvement in decision making being a poorly underutilised resource in many education communities.¹⁰ Ultimately, when young people are authentically involved in student-centred decision making, school communities are strengthened, and positive student engagement increases.

⁸ Mati, A., Gatumnu, J. C., & Chandi, J. R. (2016). *Students' involvement in decision-making and their academic performance in Embu West Sub-County of Kenya*.

⁹ Quaglia, R. J., & Corso, M. J. (2014). *Student voice: Pump it up*. Principal Leadership, September, p. 28-32.

¹⁰ Southern Cross University (n.d.). *Improving wellbeing through student participation at school*.

■ The Department of Student Voices in Education and Schools

The Department of Student Voices in Education and Schools (DOVES) was established in 2021 as a formal initiative for interaction and engagement between students and the NSW Government from the educational directorates, by the Department of Education and then Minister for Education in NSW. DOVES is a diverse group of young people representing the student voices of NSW schools to design, implement and contribute to inclusion and positive changes in the NSW education system. Also often known as The Minister's Student Council, the DOVES aim to collect and collate information from students, being a core stakeholder in the education system, to have direct input and influence through consultation and discussion with the Minister of Education and NSW Education stakeholders.

Running on a two-yearly term, the DOVES meet twice per school term to address matters concerning NSW students, such as workshops, policy development, initiatives, and educational programs. While the members of the DOVES represent students from metro, regional and rural NSW, the committee is only open to students in the public education system in Years 5 to 9.

The three main objectives of the DOVES council include:



Providing forums relating to education and schooling.



Representing a diverse range of voices to directly influence education and school policy.



Advocating for positive student engagement and inclusivity through improvement and innovation in NSW educational settings.¹¹

Through being an “*innovative student voice that designs, implements, and contributes to inclusive and positive change in the NSW education system*”, the DOVES is a leading student-centred voice that engages directly with key educational authorities in NSW.¹¹

¹¹ NSW Government (2023 March 28). [About the Minister's student council](#).

DOVES involves 27 elected student advocates from each of the nine educational directorates in NSW including Connected Communities.



■ Conclusion

The Tell Them From Me Survey, Student-led teams, student involvement in decision-making and the DOVES are just four methods that provide a solid foundation for meaningful student voice and participation in decision making processes, in the NSW education system. Through a deeper exploration of these tools and how they are used throughout schools, it is evident that the research presented is from the perspective of those who work in education rather than those who have experience as a student. When assessing the effectiveness of each of the initiatives founded at capturing student voice in order to affect meaningful change, it is essential to hear directly from the students, not just those who are a part of the implementation, development and sourcing of the initiatives. As Fletcher (2003)¹² states, *“It is not enough to simply listen to student voice. Educators have an ethical imperative to do something with students, and that is why meaningful student involvement is vital to school improvement.”* Therefore, in order for educators to authentically engage with student voice, they must provide timely action and crucial feedback. Doing so ensures students feel heard and supported in their school environments, so as to continue to actively participate and encourage more positive, healthy and engaging learning communities.

■ Recommendations

The following recommendations were formed during meetings of the Youth Advisory Council (YAC). These were created to reflect evidence from the survey results, in discussion with YAC members. They were focused on incorporating the YAC’s core values of elevating the voices of children and young people in NSW as well as their own diversity and experiences.

The recommendations are divided by relevance to stakeholders such as the Department of Education, schools, and the Office of The Advocate for Children and Young People, as well as the recommendation focus area such as Student Representative Council (SRC), ‘Tell Them From Me’ Survey, and ‘Other’.

¹² Fletcher, A. F. C. (2003). *Meaningful student involvement: Guide to students as partners in school change*. CommonAction Consulting.



Recommendations regarding the Student Representative Council (SRC)

Recommendation

- 1.1 DoE to provide clarity to schools on the role, responsibility and process of the SRC and, to be reviewed by the YAC and communicated to schools and students.
- 1.2 DoE to make sure the Department of Student Voices in Education and Schools (DOVES) selection criteria is clear and that the DOVES are inclusive of all students, to ensure greater diverse representation of children and young people.
- 1.3 Schools to further promote mixed selection process for SRC.
- 1.4 ACYP to develop guidelines and information toolkits for schools on how to involve students in decision making and voice participation by June 2024.
- 1.5 ACYP to offer Advocacy and Child Rights Training to SRCs in 2024.

Responsibility

NSW Department of Education

NSW Department of Education schools

The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP)



Recommendations regarding the Tell Them From Me Survey (TTFMS)

Recommendation

- 2.1 DoE to review the questions within the TTFMS in consultation with the YAC, DOVES and students, and re-examine the length of the survey.
- 2.2 DoE to put in place processes which include schools reporting back on the results and the school's implementation of any changes within 6 months of the result being made available.
- 2.3 Promote the TTFMS in the school setting, newsletter and encourage all members of the school community to complete the survey to guarantee a more representative data collation.

Responsibility

NSW Department of Education

NSW Department of Education schools



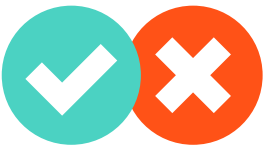
Recommendations regarding the Tell Them From Me Survey (TTFMS) cont.

Recommendation

- 2.4 ACYP to propose the YAC as a review panel for the TTFMS questions in collaboration with DoE.
- 2.5 ACYP to continue to provide advice and report back insights and experiences of children and young people to inform DoE's work.
- 2.6 ACYP to provide support to the DoE regarding event planning and other methods of increasing student voice in schools.
- 2.7 Offer the yearly YAC report as an example of reporting the TTFMS.

Responsibility

The Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP)



'Other' recommendations suggested by the YAC

Recommendation

- 3.1 Improve capture of 'voice' by creating other avenues to share students' opinions on schooling.
- 3.2 Implement the ability for anonymous feedback in schools.

Responsibility

NSW Department of Education

NSW Department of Education schools

References

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NSW Youth Advisory Council

2022-2023 Members



Amelie Paech, 12
Female
Regional – Walla Walla
Albury



Billy Bofinger, 12
Male
Metro – Caringbah South
Cronulla



Amelia Sedwell, 14
Female
Metro – Epping
Epping



Shelby Mitchell, 16
Female
Regional – Gladston
Oxley



Ruken Onay-Gurbuz, 16
Non-Binary
Metro - Greystanes
Granville



Kale Puata, 16
Male
Regional – North Avoca
Terrigal



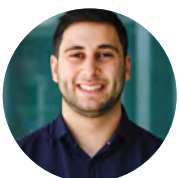
Hal Canute, 16
Male
Regional – Bowral
Wollondilly



Dylan Farr, 17
Male
Regional – Walgett
Barwon



Brady Endemi, 18
Male
Regional – Calala
Tamworth



Melik Ibrahim, 20
Male
Metro – South Granville
Auburn



Ben Regan, 21
Male
Regional – Wollongong
Wollongong



Sereena Zanuso, 22
Female
Regional – Girards Hill
Lismore

Office of the Advocate for
Children and Young People

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2022-23 NSW Youth Advisory Council

With support from the Office of the
Advocate for Children and Young People

Report:

Student Voices in Schools Report

Date:

December 2023

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