

***Minister's Student Congress***  
***Thursday 28 June 2018***  
***Hedley Beare Centre for Teaching and Learning***

**EXECUTIVE REPORT**

**Written on behalf of the Minister's Student Congress Executive by  
Laura Mobini-Kesheh, Shaylah McClymont, and Lucy Francis.**

## **Executive Summary**

The Minister's Student Congress Executive Report provides a concise summary of the discussion held at the 11th Congress, convened at the Hedley Beare Centre for Teaching and Learning on 28 June 2018. The purpose of the Congress was twofold: first, to hear the students' thoughts on the state of student voice in their schools; and second, to instruct them in the facilitation of a workshop that they may take back and run at their schools. This dual purpose is reflective of the theme of action as a component of student voice, which formed part of the discussion on the day. The Executive report will convey the valuable opinions of current students to the ACT Minister for Education.

### **Student Congress Executive 28 June 2018**

Minister's Student Congress Chairs:

*Lucy Francis - Dickson College*

*Shaylah McClymont - Gungahlin College*

*Laura Mobini-Kesheh - Dickson College*

North Canberra and Gungahlin Network:

*Thom Hosie - Lyneham High School*

Belconnen Network

*Maya Osmond - Canberra High School*

Tuggeranong Network:

*Daniella Titular - Bonython Primary School*

*Tobey Krog - Bonython Primary School*

*Josh Simms - Gowrie Primary School*

South Canberra and Weston Network

*Rose Clarke - Melrose High School*

## Terms of Reference

### *Purpose*

The purpose of the *Minister's Student Congress* is for ACT Public school student leaders to keep the Minister for Education informed on issues that are important to them and to discuss and give advice on matters raised by the Minister.

The overall aim of the *Minister's Student Congress* (hereafter the Congress) is to support student leaders by providing a direct link to the Minister for Education.

### *Membership*

The general membership will consist of:

- Student representatives from each ACT Public School
- Representatives should come from student leadership (SRC or other)
- One school leader (staff) from each network
- Student Engagement representative

General members will have a one year term

The Executive membership will consist of:

- Three elected student members from each network
- One school leader (staff) optional
- Student Engagement representative

Executive members will be elected at the last meeting each year, unless special circumstances apply. Executive members will have a one year term.

### *Terms of reference*

1. The Congress will provide advice to the ACT Minister for Education on issues of interest and concern to students in Network groups.
2. The Congress will debate matters raised by the Minister for Education and report back to the Minister through an Executive.
3. The Congress will act as a reference group for major initiatives affecting ACT Government Schools.
4. The Congress may establish an online forum to facilitate communication between meetings. The Executive will mediate the online forum.
5. The Executive may form committees as necessary.

### *Procedures*

- The Congress will convene once per semester.
- The Congress will be chaired by a nominated Congress member known as 'the Chair'.
- The Chair may delegate authority to members to facilitate debate.
- The Executive will meet once per term in addition to Congress times.
- Written records of congress proceedings will be made available to Congress members through their school's staff representative.
- Supervising teachers may attend the Congress as necessary.

## **RULES OF THE CONGRESS – THE STANDING ORDERS**

The ACT Legislative Assembly has 280 rules, or 'standing orders', governing proceedings in the chamber. A modified version of these standing orders is used at the *Congress*, as follows:

1. Members shall refer to the Minister as 'Minister ...'
2. Members may only debate matters that are relevant to the question or topic of the congress.
3. Members shall show respect to all other members and guests.
4. Members shall not use any language which is coarse, disrespectful, discriminatory or bullying to another member.
5. Members shall not interrupt another member, or make any disturbance while another member or guest is speaking.
6. Members shall abide by the requirements of the *Code of Practice and Acceptable Use of Information Communication Technology*.
7. Members shall only interact with the media under the supervision of a teacher and with permission from their parent.

## Findings of the Congress

To begin the Congress, all students were asked “What is student voice to you?”. They identified several crucial elements of student voice. Most viewed student voice as a vehicle of expression, which allows them to share their thoughts, opinions and beliefs with others, specifically in the context of their education and in their schools. Students further qualified that having a say, a choice and a responsibility in their learning must occur in circumstances where teachers and other authority figures listen to and care about student voice. An additional element of student voice is that students are empowered to make change in their schools. In the words of one student:

*“Student voice is knowing and believing that you have the power and voice to make a change. This change may be big or small in their school or community. But knowing that you have a voice empowers and inspires us to be and do great things.”*

On the whole, student voice was defined as a mode of student expression, which should be acknowledged by teachers, and should create avenues for change.

Students then shared some aspects of student voice that were working well (or could be working better) in their schools. They followed up by thinking of ways to help student voice turn into action to address other issues in their schools.

In terms of extra-curricular activities, many students believed that student groups such as breakfast club, green team/eco rangers and action club (a self-guided, project-based student group that focuses on global issues and helps the world around them) are effective in empowering students to make change in their schools. SRC and other similar systems (referred to only as SRC from here on), such as primary school parliaments, were also said to provide students with a voice. Although a few parliaments were praised for giving every student a role, most primary school students felt that only year 6 students have a say and an opportunity to lead. SRC systems more broadly were critiqued for not initiating action or change, for being inefficient in the production and development of new ideas, and for isolating students who do not feel comfortable speaking in large groups. The general sentiment was that all students should have equal opportunities to have their voices heard, and that schools should be “acknowledging more leadership of all ages”. Primary schoolers added that older students could help younger ones with ideas.

Flexibility in both classroom seating and the use of devices give individual students a voice within their classes. Non-verbal systems for students, such as the inclusion of “ideas boxes” in each classroom, were working in some schools. Class meetings and the sharing of ideas were seen to be effective ways to introduce student voice to everyone, rather than having it accessible only to students who participate in SRC.

Attitude, however, presented an obstacle to obtaining useful information and ideas from such meetings. Many students are not aware of what is happening in their schools, and a few are detached and unenthusiastic about making improvements. The employment of engaging methods of communication between involved students and the wider student body were suggested as a remedy

to the lack of participation - not just by students, but by staff and parents in some cases - in student voice activities. Such methods included: videos in student-chaired assemblies; posters; social media posts, e.g. on school facebook pages; notice boards and announcements; newsletters and notes to parents; and speeches at staff meetings. Students believed that once they understood the problem and informed the student body of the situation, motivation to take action would increase.

Furthermore, students thought that the effectiveness of student voice meetings would be improved with the involvement of the principal and teachers. Their roles would ideally be to listen to ideas and help make them more realistic, and to clarify their expectations of the students' responsibilities when putting their plans into action. The students conceded that they currently have issues with chasing up teachers and maintaining momentum on their projects, especially when collaborating with uncooperative or busy teachers. It was acknowledged that students must take some responsibility for action though, as the teachers' workloads are full enough.

Additional ideas raised by the students to improve student voice could be grouped into 3 categories.

To enhance productivity in student voice meetings, the students considered: creating a meeting chart with rules; forming teams of dedicated, like-minded people; occasionally representing ideas as art; and dedicating more time to meetings, as an extra-curricular subject or club if need be.

To increase involvement across the school, they felt involved students should: visit classes to ask for input and check in every term; meet with teachers to discuss and plan their ideas/actions; organise whole school activity days; and write letters to teachers (and politicians) so they do not forget ideas.

To support students in turning student voice into action, schools could: provide space for a "reminder wall" (similar to a noticeboard) in classrooms; ensure the presence of a quality Student Support Space; and help facilitate activity days and "mini student congress days" in which subjects or entire days are dedicated to student voice.

Finally, students were asked to complete a "Three Statements" template, in which they identified areas in their schools where they felt change was needed. The main topics were student behaviour, school infrastructure and resources, school culture and student voice systems. Students then created short clips describing the issue they wrote about and some possible solutions. A selection of responses were compiled into a video by the Executive, and was sent to the Media and Communications Department for approval.

## **Feedback**

At the end of the day, students provided feedback on the Congress, and suggested big ideas that they would like to see addressed in future congresses. It was found that across all the sectors, there was a strong emphasis on mental health and wellbeing. Students believed that congress could advocate for better mental health support systems in schools and for considerations on wellbeing in regard to workloads and commitments to be integrated into the curriculum. There was also a recurring theme of leadership and student voice throughout all the sectors. Students highlighted the

importance of empowerment not only in a leadership sense but also in the everyday classroom. They identified the need for student voice to govern classroom decisions as well as administrative ones. Congress also brought to light the students' desire to focus on the environment and sustainability at future gatherings. They acknowledged the increasing significance of environmental issues and believed that the Congress would be a good way for schools to share and collaborate on ways to make schools more environmentally friendly and sustainable.

The primary school sector placed emphasis on acknowledging diversity in our schooling system and believed that the diverse range of students in the ACT should be better represented through the Student Congress. Students in this sector also discussed effective transitions between individual year groups as well as between schools. As this was a key foundation in the future of education conversation, they believed that this could be further evaluated to ensure the best flow for all students. Some other key points raised were student-teacher relationships, peer mentoring and the use of technology in a school setting as well as at Congress.

High school students stressed their desire to have a say in the issues in their broader community. they believed that future congresses could provide an idea forum to discuss a wider range of topics that branch outside of schools and education. Students also wanted to be able to raise current issues for youth and how these can have effects on education. This sector also stressed the need for flexible learning, especially in the high school years. They acknowledged that this age group are transitioning towards independence and should be given a voice in their education accordingly. They also believe that this should be mirrored in congress, with the congress providing the opportunity for flexible delivery in the content and a choice in topics as well as in the presentation.

The college sector discussed school pride in relation to how it differs between schools and expressed school pride as an area that would be valuable to improve. Transitions between high school and college was also discussed in regard to consistencies and inconsistencies between networks and schools. Transitions was another area that the college students expressed an interest in exploring further in future congresses to allow for better flow between years, schools and sectors. The college students placed emphasis on communication between students and teachers, particularly on how students would like to have discussions about assessments and class structure to help personalise the classes and create stronger relationships between students and teachers.

On the whole, students thoroughly enjoyed the Congress and believed the theme to be effective and the discussion insightful. They believed that it was a good opportunity to interact with students from other schools as well as gain insight into what different schools are doing in regards to student voice. Students also saw the congress as an opportunity to develop leadership skills and empower each other to take on issues not only in their school but in the wider community. In the future, students would like to see more interaction with the Minister, with the possibility of a mini question time brought up in the congress feedback. Together with this, there was also discussion of groups being split into sectors with primary, high and college as well as a dedicated group for students from early childhood learning schools and students with learning difficulties and disabilities. This would ensure

that a diverse and inclusive range of students are represented, and that content can be better tailored to the demographic it is being delivered to.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of Congress 11 was to get students thinking about student voice and how it could be used to address issues in their schools. During the Congress, students formed definitions and key characteristics of genuine student voice. They then reflected on the state of student voice in their own schools, and shared about positive practices and the struggles they face. The next session was run as a workshop: the Congress Executive facilitated activities which provided a framework for students to brainstorm ideas on how to address the target issue of student voice, and asked students to create videos to be used as building blocks for a plan of action. All facilitator notes and resources were given to students at the end of the day, in the hope that they may use this workshop structure to inspire the members of their student leadership to identify and take action on an issue affecting their school.

## **Recommendations from the Congress**

The Student Executive recommends that the Minister's Student Congress continue to be used as a platform for student voice. It connects the Education Minister to the students in the public education system, who are most greatly impacted by the Minister's decisions. To increase transparency and validate the opinions of students, we ask that the Congress have a page on the ACT Directorate Website. This would facilitate communication between the Congress and the public, and make each Executive Report accessible to the wider student body, whose views it represents. This particular report contains a variety of ideas regarding student voice, which could be useful to student leaders across the system. The Student Executive therefore believes it would be beneficial for students to be able to access this report.

The feedback received during the consultation about the condition of student voice in schools indicated to the Executive that all schools need to be strongly encouraged to take a serious approach to student voice. Principals and teachers must acknowledge that merely listening to the students is not enough; the power to influence decisions and create change is an integral part of student voice.

A renewed investment in student voice should be accompanied by more inter-school collaboration between student leaders and their supporting teachers. One of the highlights of the Congress was hearing about the diverse range of practices occurring across the system, and the Executive firmly believes that student leaders would benefit greatly from being able to interact with other leaders in their networks and sectors. Collaborative spaces would provide an opportunity for student leaders to exchange ideas and develop projects, thereby enabling them to increase student agency in their individual schools. This would demonstrate the commitment of the Directorate to student voice.