

4.5 Choices and a say on decisions that affect us

Including children and young people in decision making processes benefits the individual, organisations and the community.¹¹¹ Whilst formal schooling is structured by daily routines, school settings and the interactions that occur within also provide a range of opportunities for meaningful participation. Participation builds student's social and democratic skills, self-esteem, relationships with others, and contributes positively to school culture and student safety.^{112 113 114}

Survey findings

One-half of Year 7 to Year 12 students (51.0%) agreed with the statement that students at their school have a say in how things work. One in five students (20.9%) disagreed with this.

Female students were the group most likely to agree with this statement (53.2%) while Aboriginal students were the group most likely to disagree (29.5%).

Table 4.11: Proportion of Year 7 to Year 12 students agreeing, disagreeing or neither with statement 'Students in this school have a say in how things work', by selected characteristics

	Male	Female	Metropolitan	Regional	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	All
Strongly agree or agree	48.8	53.2	49.5	51.7	51.3	45.5	51.0
Neither agree nor disagree	29.1	27.0	30.8	26.9	28.3	25.0	28.1
Disagree or strongly disagree	22.1	19.8	19.7	21.4	20.4	29.5	20.9

Narrative responses in the survey indicate that students strongly welcomed and appreciated opportunities to have a say and give their input to a range of matters affecting their school and learning.

Many students who said that they don't like school or feel like they don't belong gave reasons such as not being listened to, not being consulted or not being given the opportunity to effect change:

"I don't feel I'm being listened to."

"I feel not a part of the school because we are never consulted about changes up until the very last second."

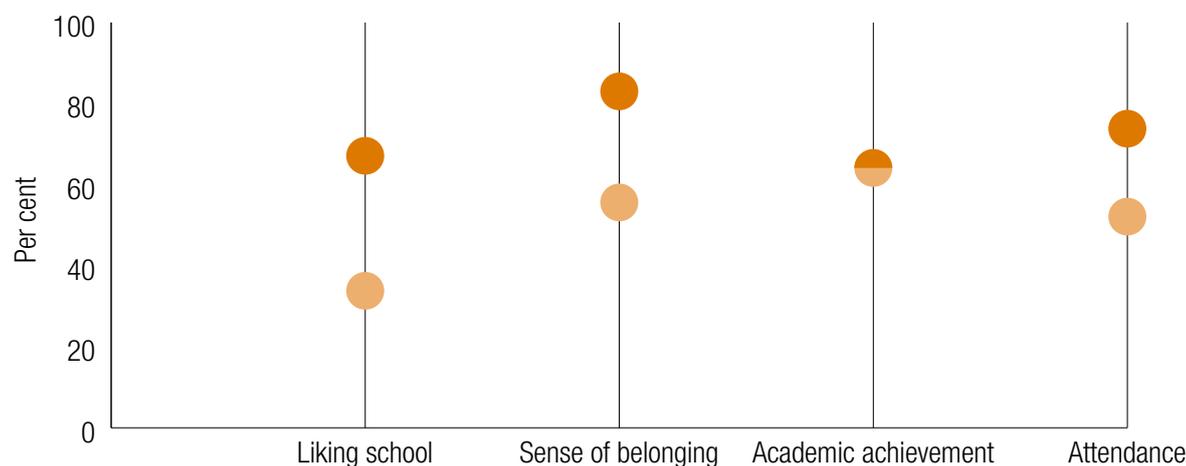
"I have no impact towards the school [...]."

The survey for Year 3 to Year 6 students did not include any specific questions about whether students are given a say at their school in matters that affect them.

Students who have a say

Year 7 to Year 12 students who agreed with the statement that students at their school have a say in how things work were more likely than students who disagreed with it to say that they like school, feel part of their school, and that being at school every day is very important to them. The data showed no relationship between this factor and high academic achievement.

Graph 4.10: Selected engagement indicators for Year 7 to Year 12 students agreeing or disagreeing with the statement that ‘Students in this school have a say in how things work’



Note: Liking school includes students who said they like school ‘a lot’ or ‘a bit’, sense of belonging includes students who said they feel like they are part of their school, academic achievement includes students who said they achieve ‘above average’ or ‘near the top’ in their school results and attendance includes students who said it is ‘very important’ to them to be at school every day.

Group discussion findings

“To have a say about what needs improvement in the school. So basically our ideas and thoughts should be heard and utilised.” (Year 7 to Year 12)

Having their voice heard mattered to students across all year levels. Students indicated when they were provided with opportunities to have a say about school and learning it:

- developed their confidence
- increased their level of responsibility and ownership of their learning outcomes
- created an environment that reflects their lives and identities, in which they felt valued and comfortable to learn.

Throughout the consultation, students expressed a desire to be able to have their views heard and to influence school processes, the school environment and learning.

Teachers were highly valued when they sought the views of students, listened to their opinions and responded to their suggestions. This was particularly true for students in Year 7 to Year 12; their increasing desire for autonomy underscoring the importance of having their views and ideas respected.

Year 7 to Year 12

“Make use of your ideas and thoughts.”

“They treat us more like young adults and less like students.”

Participation supports learning

Students were enthusiastic about learning and described a sense of empowerment when they were provided with opportunities to exercise choice in their learning.

Having a say in their learning decreased frustration and increased interest, ownership and engagement with learning. Participation also developed behaviours, dispositions and skills conducive to learning like self-efficacy, responsibility and self-directed learning.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>"In Year 2 we could make our own choices and it let us be a little bit more responsible."</i></p> <p><i>"It helps when the teacher asks if this is the way that you like to work."</i></p> <p><i>"We got to decide our own choices to learn better."</i></p>	<p><i>"When I got to choose the study method/ type of activities which I had to do in order to work as productively and efficiently as possible."</i></p> <p><i>"When I get to have a say in what I learn about."</i></p>

Suggestions from students

"[...] if we choose the books we would like to read, more students might want to read books." (Year 3 to Year 6)

Students wished to provide input into areas that influence the student experience and their suggestions for change across the primary and secondary factors demonstrate the important insight student's offer when provided the opportunity. Comments about being heard and having choices were largely raised in response to the question, "If there was one thing you could change about your school, what would that be?" Students had many suggestions that would influence their level of comfort at school, their engagement with learning and their relationships with school staff.

Students, particularly in Year 7 to Year 12, wanted a school culture that valued and demonstrated respect for students through participation. Being enabled and supported to have a say within the school also supported relationships with school staff, as discussed further in Chapter 3.2 – Teachers who have a genuine interest in our wellbeing and future. Students in Year 7 to Year 12 suggested cooperative relationships to support students having more of a say in their learning, to be able to give feedback to school staff and to have input into employment processes.

Year 7 to Year 12

"The way the students are involved in decision making process in relation to student experience."

"A free period on certain days to show the teachers and to let the school know what we want to learn."

"I want to be able to give my teachers feedback because some do not realise the effect they have on students (ANONYMOUSLY)."

"Give us more freedom/power. We are controlled and treated like babies too much."

"We can't stand up for what we believe in because if we do we get in trouble."

"We should have more say in sporting activities and activities in general so we have more fun and are more interested in what we are doing."

Students across Year 3 to Year 12 valued exercising choice within learning experiences to cater to ability or interest, to make learning more meaningful, and to discuss the focus of learning (what to learn within the curriculum; interest and needs of students). Choice within learning experiences is discussed further in Chapter 4.3 – Teaching and learning that is interesting and Chapter 4.4 – Teaching and learning that is relevant. Students also had various views on homework; some wanting more, some wanting less and some emphasising homework should be purposeful and easily understood.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<i>“Less homework, like one day a week because it will give more time to discover and interact.”</i>	<i>“Homework – we learn all day, we don’t need to go home and learn more. “</i>
<i>“Only homework if we don’t finish it in class.”</i>	<i>“Want them to know that we have other stuff going on and don’t have 5 hours to do homework.”</i>
<i>“Less homework because I have a tonne of jobs at home.”</i>	<i>“Less homework and assignments because we do have a life outside of school.”</i>
<i>“More challenging homework for the smarter people in the class.”</i>	

Changes to school uniforms and uniform policies were a common suggestion, particularly from students in Year 7 to Year 12. Students raised concerns that uniforms were not functional, of poor quality, uncomfortable, too expensive and gendered. Students suggested they could design uniforms and that they wanted uniforms that were comfortable, practical, fit-for-purpose and affordable.

Students also noted that some uniform policies were restrictive and felt some schools were overly focused on the uniform and student appearance rather than education. Students suggested greater choice could be afforded to students which would increase their physical and emotional comfort at school. Suggestions were also made for students to be able to wear generic clothing rather than one bearing the school logo which would reduce the cost, for school staff to also wear uniforms, or for students to be able to dress in a similar fashion to school staff – appropriately dressed and wearing a name badge. Sports uniforms were generally viewed positively and students requested to be able to wear sport uniforms more often or for the whole day when they have sports.

Year 3 to Year 6	Year 7 to Year 12
<p><i>“The uniform to [be] more comfortable!”</i></p> <p><i>“Teachers have to wear school uniform too.”</i></p> <p><i>“Provide clothing.”</i></p> <p><i>“I would have more choice of uniform.”</i></p> <p><i>“To wear any type of black shoes.”</i></p> <p><i>“Any type of hair things (lackys).”</i></p> <p><i>“The winter uniform because it doesn’t keep you warm when it’s really cold (regularly).”</i></p> <p><i>“Different uniforms because they make you sweaty and itchy.”</i></p> <p><i>“Untuck our shirts.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Gendered uniforms suck – subjugate and stereotype. They’re also archaic. (Not the dress for girls for summer).”</i></p> <p><i>“I would like for the school uniform to be changed or altered. Maybe designed appropriately by the kids.”</i></p> <p><i>“I wish we didn’t have uniforms at our school because we need to express ourselves because there aren’t any other ways to show who we are. I think there should be rules and boundaries in what is appropriate for us to wear. I know it would improve my attitude towards school because I would feel more confident and happier in class when learning! (PLEASE!) (PLEASE!) (PLEASE!).”</i></p> <p><i>“The school’s uniform – students are often left freezing cold in winter due to the lack of warmth provided by the jumpers. For the price we pay we deserve to be given a better quality jacket. Additionally, students are being told off for wearing incorrect uniform. But why should we be told off for seeking basic human needs? We deserve to be given a good quality jacket that provides us with warmth during those cold winter months. For example: look at [name of school] uniform. Their jackets are good quality and have more than one design to choose from. Additionally, they provide student with tracksuits. This is important to female students as they are usually provided with just a skirt.”</i></p> <p><i>“I would change the fact that this school seems to care more about uniform than student’s actual education.”</i></p>

Finally, children and young people have different perceptions on safety than adults and listening to their views on safety permeates child safe organisations.¹¹⁵ Students in this consultation wanted to be provided with opportunities to share their perspectives on how to make schools safer places. Students discussed a range of ways to enhance safety and expressed a desire to have a selection of strategies that they could choose from to put in place when they felt unsafe, including ways to discuss concerns with school staff. Specific student suggestions are discussed further in Chapter 4.6 – Feeling safe.