

HIGH SCHOOLS ACTIVATE



OUR MANIFESTO

Our vision

is for an education system and society which centres the needs, learning, and agency of every young person.

This manifesto is a living document and this version was last updated in December 2024.

Feel free to share any part of this manifesto, but please link to the live document at

<https://tinyurl.com/hsactivate-manifesto>

so that everyone can see the latest version.

We welcome your contributions and ideas. We are also always looking for more students to join our team, so shoot us a message if you would like to get involved.

You can contact us at HSActivate@outlook.com.au and follow us on Instagram (where we are most active) at [@HS.Activate](#) or Twitter at [@HS_Activate](#).

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Introduction

This manifesto is written as a statement of beliefs held by High Schools Activate, but we see it as a manifesto for all young Australians (and exclusively for us, sorry teachers, parents, governments and whoever else might want to intrude on our education!). Any student who wishes to contribute their ideas (including disagreement) to this manifesto is welcome to get in touch at HSActivate@outlook.com.au.

We are High Schools Activate, and our mission is to build student power and a 🌱 grassroots radical student movement for



Free, secular, compulsory education



Students' say in students' affairs



School-based activism tactics

Right now is a critical time for Australia's youth, especially us school students. Climate change, cost of living and right wing conservative extremism are just a few of the crises being left to us.

In education, this moment will be pivotal as governments and stakeholders deal with an array of challenges: teacher shortages, declining student outcomes, government school underfunding, broken ATAR systems, the rising cost of education, classroom disruption, the return of international university students, the Universities Accord, et cetera and et cetera.

It is so vital that student voice is an integral part of this conversation. Activate will push for bold, fearless, genuine

reform and action to fix education. We believe that schools can be leveraged for protest on all issues hurting us.

We will be critical of failed policies, ineffective structures, and governments who are too happy to just ignore tackling inconvenient problems that will directly affect young Australians.

To do this, we will need to build a politically conscious student movement in the interests of the students of both today and tomorrow. Lasting change depends on a resilient movement that can continue even as each generation of students graduates.

Join us! Follow [@HS.Activate](#) on Instagram and share your ideas for education.

Nothing about us without us.

Free education

Quality primary and secondary (and tertiary) education should be made fully free for all students and families, regardless of socio-economic status or income (that includes the most wealthy as well if they prefer the guaranteed government school education). That means there cannot be any cost to going to school and participating in all school activities.

Free means free.

The low standards of funding for most government schools undermines the system by pushing families (who can afford it) and teachers into the non-government sector. This cycle entrenches intergenerational poverty, as government school conditions get lower and lower and the exodus of families from the system gets greater and greater.

We do not reject the idea of non-government schools. The ability of communities to run independent community or alternative schools is a good thing. Letting governments have a monopoly over schooling is dangerous in both complacency affecting quality and giving governments unchecked authoritarian control over what we learn.

However, non-government schools should be completely free with no compulsory fees. It is shameful that government funding is being allocated in such a way that high-fee schools can benefit at the expense of the least well-off.

- 1) School funding should become the sole responsibility of each state, with federal income direct to state budgets increased to account for that.

The current government funding model of divided contributions from both federal and state governments is inefficient and undermining the principle of free education.

State governments have an incentive to encourage non-government schools, since under state-Commonwealth funding agreements they are responsible for a lower proportion of the funding compared to government schools.

Increased funding is held up by negotiations between state and Commonwealth governments that delay and hinder reform. Most states and the Commonwealth have agreed on a timeline to fully fund non-government schools, but not government schools which remain underfunded. It also means that important reforms are being held to ransom by the Commonwealth.

- 2) Fully fund all government schools to at least the Gonski Schooling Resource Standard now, without delay, and preferably on a timeline to funding levels well above the SRS.

The SRS is an estimate of the funding required for a school to meet the basic needs of its students. All major political parties have committed to the SRS as defined by the 2011 Gonski report.

If necessary, there must be no hesitancy to partially or fully defund high-fee independent schools to allow for appropriate government schools funding. It is disgusting

that there is no urgency to provide government schools the bare minimum.

Government schools should not be relying on donations from student families or be unable to afford core activities and facilities. Maintaining a baseline decent standard for government schools and low-fee schools must be a higher priority than bonus facilities for high-fee schools.

3) Reform non-government school funding.

Currently non-government schools are practically forced to charge fees in order to offer a decent standard of education, even if the school communities prefer they not, since government funding is capped at 90% of SRS.

Non-government schools should be banned from charging compulsory fees. All non-government schools, especially those servicing communities of lowest advantage, should be able to access 100% SRS funding. This comes after prioritising full funding of government schools.

4) End auxiliary fees.

Provide every student with free uniform, stationery, textbooks, computers, and anything they require to fully participate at school, or sufficient value vouchers to fully cover these items.

Fully fund excursions and incursions so that no student is excluded from any activity due to an inability to pay.

Secular education

- 1) All timetabled and mandatory activities in government schools must be completely secular, including assemblies.

Any religious activities conducted on school grounds must be opt-in and occur entirely outside of school times.

- 2) All students should receive education on religions (including atheist, agnostic and philosophical traditions) from a neutral secular point of view.

This should reflect and celebrate the diversity of religious traditions amongst members of the school and the wider community, and Indigenous perspectives on spirituality.

- 3) Religious and cultural beliefs are no excuse for discrimination.

Discrimination - including but not only on the basis of ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, disability - is incredibly damaging to our most vulnerable friends and is intolerable in all forms.

Schools and school communities must be a safe and non-discriminatory environment for everyone, including students, families, staff (both current and prospective), and principals. It is the responsibility of the entire school community, including governments, staff, school boards

and councils, parents, and students to foster and enforce a culture that is welcoming to all.

4) Ban religious schools.

Schools should be about education for all, not about religious indoctrination. Do the religion at church and at home.

Compulsory education

All of us deserve a good education.

However, we reject the assumption, arising from exploitative (and in our context, capitalist) paradigms, that compulsory education is for the benefit of the economy/society (under capitalism, the employers).

Instead, we see compulsory education as similar to compulsory voting as purely for the student/voter's benefit, in applying the mutual-compulsory principle - if it is compulsory, it must be accessible. So the government needs to take measures to remove barriers and guarantee that every single student can access a good education, specifically at a government school.

- 1) Governments must offer a free virtual school to all students, for both full time enrolment and single subjects.

Free virtual schools must offer all subject areas of the curriculum at all year levels, including all year 11-12 subjects. By their nature, virtual schools must not require any attendance. Virtual schools must not compromise on quality of education and engagement.

- 2) In metropolitan areas, every student must be able to attend a government school within at most 20 minutes from their home by walking, public transport and/or school-supplied transport.

- 3) Every regional town must have a no-fee school covering every year level.
- 4) Free fares on public transport for all students and school aged children.
- 5) Free, healthy meals at school for all students.
- 6) Curriculum reform.

The curriculum must clearly and concisely outline the standards that students should achieve. There is no need for bloat or specifying pedagogy. Respect teacher autonomy.

It is silly to have an Australian Curriculum, not least when its latest version has been extensively criticised. State curriculums should be sufficient for prep to grade 10.

- 7) Assessment reform.

Abolish NAPLAN.

Students should as far as practical be offered and be able to choose from many different ways to be assessed at all levels of school, recognising each of our individual, unique needs and strengths. This is most pressing for centrally run assessments like external “exams” which have access to more resources to write and mark assessment material.

Student voice

Our position is that education is for students exclusively, not for parents, politicians, “society”, teachers, academics, churches, media commentators, employers, nor anyone else. Following this principle, students must have the first say in every decision that affects us. Essentially, nothing about us without us.

- 1) We support the establishment of independent statewide student representative councils or student unions in every state and territory, representing students at all year levels and in all sectors.

State SRCs should not be government programmes, and ideally should not be sponsored by governments (we are talking about the administration of schools, which might be for instance the Victorian government or Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools). Governments must recognise state SRCs as the legitimate organisations representing all students, and consult first with state SRCs, and a larger representative sample of students if advised by the state SRC, prior to any decision affecting our education system.

State SRCs must be student led and governed, with solely students determining policy direction and advocacy strategies. State SRCs must be led by a group of students determined by mass elections open to all students.

State SRCs should be bold and fearless in advocating for students’ best interests. This is why they should be independent of governments.

2) We support independent student media, including student newspapers and social media pages covering news within schools.

No censorship. Free student speech.

3) Student representative councils in every school.

Representation in SRCs must be determined in free and transparent elections open to all students. SRC elections must have no interference from non-students (i.e. staff), whether in the form of vetting/filtering nominations or non-students having some form of vote.

Meetings of school SRCs should be open to all students. SRC resolutions should be determined by a vote of SRC representatives, must never be vetoed by non-students, and should be publicised to all students.

School administrations must recognise the school SRC as the legitimate organisation representing their students, and consult first with the SRC prior to any major decision.

4) Student control of school governing councils and boards through student representatives.

School council student representatives must have full speaking and voting rights and must be determined in elections open to all students. School council student representative elections must have no interference from non-students (i.e. staff), whether in the form of vetting/filtering nominations or non-students having some form of vote.

Governments and bureaucrats should respect school autonomy as long as schools are adhering to the principles of this manifesto.

- 5) Student voice embedded within education departments and governments.
- 6) Recognition of student rights.

These include rights

- a. To free, secular, compulsory education.
- b. To quality and equitable education, including quality teachers and facilities.
- c. To a safe, non-discriminatory, and comfortable school environment and culture.
- d. To freedom of speech and press.
- e. To freedom of association.
- f. To due process when faced with disciplinary action.
- g. To democratically and freely elected student representative councils at individual schools and system-wide.
- h. To active participation in school governance.
- i. To direct action in defence of our rights and interests, both as students and generally as young people.

Activism

Being a young person is inherently political. Students must be able and prepared to take direct action inside and outside our schools to support our needs, not least because we are denied the right to vote.

- 1) School-based activism, including postering, speeches, and strikes, are valid and legitimate methods of protest.
- 2) Students should use school-based activism to fight for our political interests.

School Strike 4 Climate is so valid.

- 3) Schools and governments have no right to retaliate against students who engage in direct action.
- 4) State SRCs should provide personal advocacy and advice services to protect students who face disciplinary action from schools, including for activism.
- 5) Full access to social media.

Social media is essential to connecting young people and amplifying our voices. Banning social media is a deliberate tactic to isolate us, prevent the youth from developing a collective radical consciousness, and suppress organisation of activism.

- 6) Make it 16.

Teachers

As much as we owe our education to the work of teachers, it is important to recognise that teaching is a job like any other and should be treated with the same dignity and boundaries.

The quality of our education reflects the quality of our teachers and the conditions in which they work.

Underpaying, overworking, and an unsafe (physically, emotionally, and mentally) environment for teachers and school staff hurts students, because

- a. When they are suffering and demotivated they cannot possibly teach as well as they could and want to.
- b. We are seeing a teacher shortage because teachers at all stages of their career are leaving, and students deciding their careers are seeing how we treat teachers and decide against starting or finishing a teaching degree.

These conditions are caused by official policies of neglect from governments and school administrations. They are not our teachers' fault. Teachers are right to call it out, and when they are forced to use disruptive tactics to protect our future, only the government and school administrations are to blame.

Therefore, it is in the interests of students, and the wider community, to stand with teachers. School staff working conditions are student learning conditions.

- 1) Teachers must have the right to take direct action (e.g. strike) at any time over any issue.

Australia has among the most draconian and imbalanced laws governing industrial action in the so-called “democratic” world, where industrial action is limited to only during enterprise bargaining and even then has severe restrictions designed to protect employers.

We must recognise that workers, especially teachers who are the ones defending our education system, can and do have genuine interests (including financial and political interests) outside enterprise bargaining periods.

It is absurd that, for example, teachers are banned from taking action and seeking revisions to enterprise agreements over issues like the teacher shortages and the cost of living crisis which are directly harming not only teachers themselves, but the students they teach as well.

- 2) Solidarity actions are a legitimate strategy to protect shared interests.

If teachers walk out, then what is the point of students staying? Students should strike with teachers.

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We also believe that teachers and workers in different sectors have the right to take action, including strikes, in solidarity with their colleagues. The outcome of industrial action in one sector will influence industrial relations across the board.

General strikes for our education should be on the table.

3) For as long as the recognised union is unable or unwilling to call direct action, we support teachers taking wildcat action.

A fund should also be established if industrial action is taken to allow teachers, students, families, and the community to contribute to supporting teachers for legal defences and penalties, and lost pay.

4)Teacher education reform.

Abolish minimum ATAR requirements for entry into teaching degrees. ATAR is neither a perfect indication of academic ability nor teaching ability, all it reflects is competitive success in traditional year 12, a style of learning that prospective teachers may not even end up teaching in.

As it stands, hopeful teachers can waste years of time and money into the degree then not be able to teach because they fail their LANTITE. Passing the literacy and numeracy tests should be a requirement for entry into teaching degrees in the first place.

Teachers must be taught evidence-based best practice, not just unsupported ideological ideals. Universities must show that their teaching content for education degrees is based on evidence from research, not use student teachers as guinea pigs for experiments. Unless it is research informing degree content and not the other way around, governments should seriously consider abolishing university teaching degrees and restore separate specialised teacher training colleges.

Teacher training should incorporate all aspects of the job of the teacher, including pedagogy, behaviour

management, and planning. This should reflect the practical reality of teaching across the whole range of environments, not the idealised classroom.

5) Respect teacher autonomy.

It is inappropriate for governments and the curriculum to dictate how students are to be taught, they should only outline clearly what students should know and be able to do.

We should respect teachers as professionals who know what is best for their own students. External interference is disruptive and increases teacher workload.

6) Pay student teachers full salary for their placements.

7) Free university, including free teacher training.

8) We support the establishment and promotion of an Australian Teachers' Day, on a date relevant to the history of Australian education such as a general strike, to recognise and celebrate our teachers and education staff, as well as draw attention to the issues facing the teaching profession and our schools.

9) State education ministers should be former government school teachers.

Tertiary education

We insist that school students have a legitimate interest and the strongest stake in the future of tertiary education.

1) Free university.

It can be done and it has been done. Coupled with an equitable university entrance system and appropriate support, we can level the playing field for students with less privileged backgrounds.

2) Reform university entrance.

Abolish ATAR and competitive entrance schemes. Tertiary education providers should be expanded so all students have complete freedom to choose to study whatever they want as long as they have demonstrated sufficient prerequisites with flexible alternative pathways available.

3) School students deserve a voice in tertiary education policy, more than that given to professors, businesses, and university students.

Since those of us in primary and secondary school will be the next generation of students to leave school and possibly enter university or TAFE, tertiary education policy will obviously impact us the most.

NOTHING
about us
without us!