

## **'Teach the teacher': spaces for dialogue about learning and teaching**

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Designed by students, [Teach the Teacher](#) is a student-led professional learning program in which both teachers and students share views and plan school change. It is a practical approach to engaging a school community in discussions about education and life at school, around topics defined and led by students. It provides a space for dialogue between students, teachers and principals where they can explore issues, share ideas and plan change in a constructive and judgment free environment.

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\* Edison Ponari was a member of the 2011 VicSRC Student Executive that developed the Teacher the Teacher program. Emma Myers was the VicSRC's Teach the Teacher Project Officer 2014-2016. The VicSRC is the peak body representing school aged students in Victoria. We strive for a world where all learners have access to education that is student-led, student-driven and student-focussed. We exist to empower all student voices to be valued in every aspect of education. The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria, and funded through the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET). The VicSRC provides resources, events, teacher professional development, and support to principals, teachers and students.

Even within student-centered learning approaches, there remain few opportunities for students and teachers to engage in deep conversations about education. When these occasions do occur, e.g. as teachers seek student opinions and feedback, the conversations are generally led and defined by teachers around issues that they identify as important.

The Teach the Teacher program seeks to redress that balance by providing a space within schools in which students can lead conversations with their teachers around learning and teaching, on topics and questions that students identify as important. These conversations are:

- collective - involving groups of students and teachers rather than simply conversations between individuals;
- formal - occurring within a recognised professional development space;
- constructive - aimed at building shared understanding and partnerships, and
- change-oriented - seeking practical outcomes in changed classroom and school practices.

The importance of curriculum negotiation between learner and teacher has been recognised for many decades – the work of Garth Boomer and others in the 1970s and 1980s established Australia as a leader in this field. Teach the Teacher extends this approach from individual classrooms to larger school contexts, valuing student voices, and enabling students and teachers to form partnerships to transform school cultures. It re-visions student and teacher roles as partners in learning, re-creating structures and occasions for discussing and planning around issues that students see as essential to their learning.

Victorian students developed the Teach the Teacher program through their peak body, the [Victorian Student Representative Council \(VicSRC\)](#). At its annual [Congress](#) in 2011, students discussed how they could contribute to school improvement, focusing on student-teacher relations and learning styles. These were areas of importance to students, and in which they recognised they had particular knowledge, views and information to offer. They decided to establish a program in this area. The [VicSRC Executive](#) developed the program over the following 12 months. Two Year 11 students negotiated trials of the program at their schools and wrote a detailed kit describing their initiatives.

### **How does it work?**

Teach the Teacher supports students (through their SRC or a specifically set-up group) to identify issues about learning and teaching environments that are important to them. Supported by teachers, and with training from the VicSRC, they collect student questions and views through conversations, focus groups and/or surveys, and decide on their priority for discussions. They then organise and present a professional learning session for staff around the identified issue(s) in a safe and reflective space. This involves presentation of information, discussions of student, teacher and principal perspectives, and the development of some possible 'solutions' to these issues that students and

teachers can take together – and then later report back to further staff/ student meetings.

The original student-written kit of materials is still available from the VicSRC, but it has now been restructured and is offered as an [online](#) course. Schools can simply register for the course and use the material themselves (and many have) or the VicSRC can provide support and training for organising and running the program. This is funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

The program is adapted to the needs of each school, allowing schools to

- choose specific or general topics;
- work with the whole school or just a small section;
- a one-off event, or as part of a continuing program.

### **How is it being used?**

Every four years state schools undergo an Independent Review Panel that reviews the school's strengths and weaknesses and formulates a four-year strategic plan. In one school, students wrote and presented a report to the school's independent review panel based on findings from their conversations with and surveys of peers. Following discussions at a staff professional development session, students established several [Student Action Teams](#) to develop action plans for student and staff collaboration. These will operate across the school's four-year strategic plan, and the cycle will then be repeated. The teacher who initiated the school's participation in the program stated it was about finding "opportunities for our students to *do* something meaningful and *lead* something in our school, rather than just talk about doing things. Teach the Teacher gives our students the framework for genuine student-led initiatives at our school."

At another school, students submitted a proposal for more LGBTI education across all year levels. They are currently working with the Head of the Health/PE Faculty to draft new LGBTI curriculum resources to present at the faculty meeting. The teacher reported: "Teach the Teacher is an opportunity to enhance school values, and is great for teaching, learning, communication, trust and respect".

In several schools, students are using the annual *Attitudes to school* survey data to guide their own discussions, and then lead staff-student explorations to understand responses and explore ways to improve student experiences.

### **What has been the impact on students?**

One year 12 student stated: "It gives me a chance to work with my teachers on key issues within the school community, to strengthen student-teacher relationships and create positive change. Teach the Teacher has been an eye-opener for me as it has allowed me to see, understand and appreciate the art of teaching and learning". For Student Councils, Teach the Teacher has provided structured opportunities to move beyond a focus on fundraising, social gatherings or facilities, to represent student voices on learning and teaching.

The VicSRC has commissioned an independent evaluation of Teach the Teacher that is currently being carried out. It is already pointing to positive outcomes for teachers and students. Teachers are gaining a greater understanding of the views of students, and becoming more aware of how classroom approaches and whole school policies are implemented and to what degree they are effective, and exploring deeper meanings of student data. Students are gaining greater understanding of reasons for teaching approaches and greater commitment to learning. Together, students and teachers are creating new ways of learning together, trying them out as collaborators, and reporting back on outcomes to both student groups and to staff meetings.

### **Are all teachers embracing it?**

There has been some resistance in a few schools. For teachers who are antagonistic to ideas about student voice and collaborative learning, Teach the Teacher is not changing attitudes – these staff members are avoiding attending student-led professional development sessions. For them, the very title – Teach the Teacher – is a reason to reject such approaches. Schools have offered the program under alternative titles such as Creating Conversations, or Talk to/with Teachers.

However the program is adamant in recognising that teachers continue to be learners – about their own practices and about their effectiveness. Teachers already recognise the value of the feedback they provide students; here they seek and welcome feedback from their students, alongside that from colleagues. Teach the Teacher creates the environment in which students and teachers can learn together, as they plan collaborative school improvement.

More information at [www.teachtheteacher.org.au](http://www.teachtheteacher.org.au)