

Active and informed citizens

This fact sheet describes the key findings in the *Educational Opportunity in Australia 2020* report in relation to how Australian children and young people are developing as active and informed citizens.

The Educational Opportunity report is the first major study to assess performance against the goals in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, a commitment by all Australian governments to build an education system that supports all students to be successful lifelong learners, creative and confident individuals and active and informed citizens. The report looks at which children and young people are developing these attributes at four key educational milestones: school entry, the middle school years, the senior school years and early adulthood.

What is a creative and confident individual?

Through the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, Australian governments committed to supporting all young people, regardless of their background or location, to be active and informed citizens. Informed and active members of their community think and act with integrity and respect for others and the natural environment, understanding and contributing to the common good. They ask questions about and expand their knowledge of our present, future and past, including Indigenous history and people as well as our multicultural, global heritage. They have an understanding of our systems of government, and actively engage in decision-making in a variety of ways. In a globalized world, they also take an interest in, and engage with issues, cultures and people in our immediate region and the world (Education Council, 2019).

Children and young adults' interest and engagement in their communities, society and the economy can have an impact early on, and help to shape the world around them (Schultz & Fraillon, 2012). Having the broadest possible range of views, experiences and backgrounds represented in public life enhances quality and representation in our communities, and in making decisions that impact on all of us. The role of our education systems in supporting children and young people to be active and informed members of the community is ultimately critical to whether we thrive not only as individuals, but as communities, a society and an economy.

Key findings

Proportion of students missing out is the highest of any outcome area in the Alice Springs Declaration. Around one in three young adult Australians are not keeping informed about the world or active in their community. Except for the school entry milestone, the proportion of active and informed citizens is lower at each life stage than the proportion of creative and confident individuals or successful learners.

Gaps relating to socioeconomic status (SES) evident early and grow substantially in adulthood. The gap in the proportion of young people from low and high SES backgrounds reporting being informed and active citizens widens from an 8.5 percentage point gap in the early years to a 20-23.2 percentage point gap in young adulthood.

Children and young people from non-English speaking backgrounds are more likely to report being active and engaged citizens. In early adulthood, 70.2% of young people from a language background other than English (LBOTE) report keeping informed about the world compared to 66.4% of young people from English speaking backgrounds. Additionally, 75.1% of young people from a LBOTE reported remaining active in the community compared to 60.3% of young people from English speaking backgrounds.

Doing well academically in school is also associated with remaining well informed about current affairs and having greater community engagement in adulthood. Young people with strong math skills, for example, are more likely than those with weaker math skills to report staying abreast of current affairs (75.6% compared to 58.3%) and remaining engaged in the community (70.4% compared to 55.4%).

Proportion (%) and estimated of children and young people succeeding and missing out on indicators of active and informed citizenship from school entry to early adulthood

		Successful	Missing out	Comments
Entry to school (Age 0-8)	Developmentally on track in respecting others and prosocial behaviour	85.3% 276,373	14.7% 47,628	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaps in development of prosocial skills and responsibility are substantial for boys (11.9 percentage points behind girls), children in very remote areas (12.7 points behind metropolitan students), and Indigenous students (9.9 points behind non-Indigenous students).
		Successful	Missing out	Comments
Middle school years (Age 9-14)	Keeps informed about current events and aware of global issues	64.4% 188,056	35.6% 103,956	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girls and students with a non-English speaking background more likely to rate key citizenship activities as important. • Students from low SES backgrounds, or with parents with lower educational levels, less likely to be doing well – these gaps persist into senior secondary and adulthood.
	Believes civic engagement activities important to being a good citizen	63.3% 184,844	36.7% 107,168	
		Successful	Missing out	Comments
Senior years of school (Age 15-19)	Keeps informed about current events and aware of global issues	73.8% 234,445	26.2% 83,231	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Particularly strong endorsement from Indigenous students for learning about history (88.4% Indigenous students rate as important/very important, compared with 78.4% non-Indigenous). • Significant difference in 'being informed on global issues' by SES, with low-SES students much less likely (61%) to assess themselves as well-informed, compared with high-SES students (85%). • Girls are much more likely to rate key activities as important components of citizenship, compared with boys (11.2 percentage point difference).
	Believes civic engagement activities important to being a good citizen	65.3% 207,442	34.7% 110,234	
		Successful	Missing out	Comments
Early adulthood (Age 20-24)	Keeps informed about the world	66.8% 254,324	33.2% 126,401	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largest gaps are linked with SES, with young adults from high SES backgrounds (76%) much more likely to be remaining informed than those from low SES backgrounds (56%). • Civic participation (including voluntary work, community activities, involvement in organised activities) much higher among high SES adults (73% engaged compared with 49.8% of low SES).
	Active in the community	61.9% 235,669	38.1% 145,056	

Source: based on analysis in Lamb et al, Educational Opportunity in Australia in 2020

What does this mean?

Cohesive and thriving communities, and a healthy representative democracy, require active engagement and leadership from a broad range of people with a variety of backgrounds and experience. The Educational Opportunity report shows around one in three young adult Australians are not keeping informed about the world or active in their community, increasing to around one in two among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged young adults. Low levels of engagement among those from low SES backgrounds are likely to have flow-on effects in terms of how well socioeconomically disadvantaged people are represented in leadership and decision-making at community, state and national levels (Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013). This may limit the extent to which decision-making reflects the needs and interests of disadvantaged Australians. Further effort is required to build upon the strong foundations in early childhood and support more young people to be active and informed citizens in their adult years.

Students can learn as much from the culture of a school as they do in the classroom. Decision-making, negotiation, and the ability to understand rights and responsibilities are critical skills that underpin children and young people's ability to contribute to the world (Noble et. al, 2020). While children make decisions and negotiate on a daily basis, the extent to which they are able to practice these skills, and explore the outcome of these processes, is critical to deep learning about community and governance (Wilkenfeld, 2009). However, these opportunities are often limited for young people within education systems, as well as outside the school gates (Schultz & Fraillon, 2012).

Supporting students to have greater influence over decision-making in educational contexts can impact positively not only on levels of engagement, but also in other areas of learning. Through practical, inquiry-based learning in an environment that promotes student agency, students don't just gain knowledge about the world beyond the school gates, but are able to develop and apply deep learning and experience first-hand the impact of planning, negotiation and decision-making (Lucas & Claxton, 2015). These practices can usefully be applied not only in the context of civics and citizenship education, but across the curriculum, and in school leadership and management. Research shows they can be effective in actually reducing civic engagement gaps relating to socio-economic status (Wilkenfeld, 2009).

What we measured

Milestone 1 – Early years looked at which children were developmentally ready at the point of entry to school, across all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census as well as their skills in the basic literacy and numeracy subdomain. To understand early creativity and confidence the report uses the AEDC to assess development in social competence and emotional maturity. AEDC data on responsibility and respect as well as prosocial and helping behaviour is used to explore early indications of skills needed to be active and informed citizens.

Milestone 2 – Middle school years used a range of data sources to look at Year 7 students' reading and numeracy, Year 8 students' achievement in science; and Year 6 students' proficiency in Information Communication Technology (NAPLAN, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, NAP-ICT). It examined the proportion of 10 to 11 year old students reporting high levels of confidence and displaying various creative behaviours using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). It also looked at civic knowledge, attitudes and skills in Year 6, using data from the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC).

Milestone 3 – Senior school years used the Census to examine what proportion of young people had attained a Year 12 or an equivalent qualification by the age of 19 and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data to look at achievement in reading, maths and science. It also examined proficiency in creative problem-solving, and confidence using data from PISA. Keeping informed about current events and belief in the importance of civic activities was explored using data from NAP-CC.

Milestone 4 – Early adulthood used the Census to look at engagement in full time work, training or study at age 24 and 29 as well as who had gained a post-school qualification. It also examined levels of self-reported creativity and confidence using the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). The LSAY was also used to explore the extent to which young adults report being socially and politically active in their community and remaining informed about the world around them.

References

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More information

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