Create a voice:

A student guide to starting a youth environment group
Introduction

This resource was created to assist students in South Australian schools to start and maintain youth environment groups, particularly in high schools. It has been designed for young people as a “how to” guide to encourage and support them to start their own school environment group and to take action.

Have you ever wished that more people would listen to young people’s opinions? Do you wonder how you can put your own ideas into action? In this resource we’re going to explore the best way that you can set up an environmental interest group in your school or community.

“It’s actually really good fun to meet other people, even though it can be scary at first to be part of a group where you don’t know anyone. You can also get some really good projects happening with others when you share the same values”.- Youth Environment Council alumni
What is youth voice?

The term ‘youth voice’ or ‘student voice’ describes “the many ways in which youth might have the opportunity to actively participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (Mitra 2004).

Youth voice, in its authentic form, allows you, as youth, to identify issues and be the drivers of action to address them.

Youth voice is important because we need young people (as well as everyone else) to be leaders in caring for our planet now as well as becoming environmental leaders and stewards in the future.

What’s so good about youth voice?

Youth voice is important because it allows you to:

- feel like you can make a difference and you are being listened to.
- develop a deeper understanding about how to affect change.
- spur others into action through your passion.

You can also develop a range of new skills through setting up and running a youth voice group, including:

- Better communication
  - media
  - speaking
  - writing
  - listening
  - running meetings
- Leadership
  - motivating others
  - facilitating
  - recruiting/Promoting
  - encouraging
  - people management
  - mentoring younger students
- Better understanding of the environment
- Career pathways
- Project management
  - planning
  - organising
  - reporting
  - budgeting
- Teamwork
- Time management
- Decision-making
- Problem-solving
- Responsibility
- Respect for yourself and others
- Campaigning and advertising
- Networking
- Writing grant applications
- Reflecting and evaluating
- Empowerment and initiative
Examples of youth voice in action

Students from the environmental group at O’Sullivan Beach Primary School met with the City of Onkaparinga Mayor. They showed the Mayor what they had been doing around environment and sustainability and then requested more public bins and dog poo bags along Christies Creek, which was actioned by the Mayor.

Southern Montessori School students approached their Principal and Finance Manager to show energy audit results and pitch the idea of more solar panels for the school roof. This was taken to a Governing Council meeting and was approved, so 75 panels were installed and over the next two terms, the school saved over $6000 in energy costs. This figure is continuing to rise.

Students from Parafield Gardens R-7 School met regularly to progress their Climate Ready Schools project. They then met with the Principal to propose fundraising, purchasing and planting new shade trees around the school. Their suggestions were approved and carried out.

*Parafield Gardens R-7 students present on their Climate Ready project*

Year 2 students at Torrensville Primary School have learnt how to create produce bags out of old net curtains. Parents then began approaching local shops to see if they could provide these as an alternative to single-use plastic bags, with Woolworths agreeing to waive the insurance required to have a stall at the front of their shop. Older students from the Wipe Out Waste group were active in promoting plastic-free alternatives in the school newsletter, and helped to run the stall. The school has also made the bags available to families as a fundraiser.

“It has reminded me that I have a voice and I can change things” - 2019 Youth Environment Council member

“Being part of a youth voice group helped me to develop confidence and the ability to articulate my point of view” - Youth Environment Council alumni
So what do I need to start a group?

Checklist

Below are some factors to consider when starting your own youth environment group at school:

- A mentor; e.g. a teacher, parent (with a current working with children check), principal, groundskeeper etc.
- A supportive teacher who can provide back up for your mentor
- Approval from the school principal
- A clear understanding about what your school’s expectations are
- A group of two or more interested students
- Develop a vision for the group to work towards (once the group knows what their priorities are and what topics and issues are important to them)
- A group structure that is agreed upon by all group members; e.g. formal or informal
- Group rules and guidelines decided on by the whole group (review each year)
- Short-term and long-term goals
- A clear reporting structure
- Research funding opportunities available to the group
- Develop promotional strategies for the group
- Develop recruitment strategies to build and maintain membership
- Once the group is up and running – consider equal representation of people within your group

Definitions and details

Mentor: An interested adult who will support your cause and can commit time to help you achieve your goals. A separate mentor checklist is provided at the end of this section in case you need help to choose somebody.

Vision: This is basically a statement that captures the aims of your group and what you hope to achieve. If you would like some help to develop a vision, you can use the future visioning exercise on the following page. This can be useful in considering your group’s aims and keep in mind what you are working towards.
Future visioning exercise

Equipment:
- poster paper and textas
- white board and whiteboard markers
- relaxation music (optional)

Close your eyes and imagine 10 years into the future. You have lived a full life and you still live in your local area. You have children who also live in the area. Ask yourself the following questions:
- What will your environment be like when your children are growing up?
- What will your children’s school be like?
- What things do you still want to see in your local area in 10 years’ time?
- What plants and animals will be there to show your children?
- How might you be living?
- What will the water quality be like in your local rivers, lakes and oceans?
- What makes people happy? What jobs do people do?
- How do you and your children get from place to place?
- Where does your food come from?

Once you have a clear picture of your sustainable future, draw a picture, mind map or write about it. Your vision can be detailed or very simple. After 10 minutes, share your vision with the person next to you. Explain why you chose certain things to be in your vision. Now compare your vision with theirs. What similarities and differences are there?

The next step is to try to create a shared vision. Add elements that all members of the group are comfortable with. For any items that people don’t agree on at first, check in with the rest of the group and do the ‘sustainability test’: If everyone did this would it be sustainable?

Once finished, the group can work together to answer the following questions:
- What could you do to make this vision a reality?
- What things would threaten your vision? How could you avoid this?
- What steps could we take right now to give ourselves a greater chance of achieving our shared vision in the future?
**Group structure:** An agreed set of roles and responsibilities for various members of your group. For example, you may choose to elect a chairperson for the whole year or share on a roster. You might also want to elect a secretary, treasurer etc.

Below is a good tool to decide on group structure. Go through each row and circle the options your group decides on. You can also try something different!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher ideas for projects</th>
<th>Student ideas for projects</th>
<th>Student and teacher ideas for projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers decide what to discuss at meetings</td>
<td>Students decide what to discuss as meetings</td>
<td>Teachers and students decide together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No meeting notes taken</td>
<td>Sometimes meeting notes are taken</td>
<td>Meeting notes are always taken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No meetings</td>
<td>Long meetings</td>
<td>Short meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortnightly meeting</td>
<td>Weekly meeting</td>
<td>Once a term meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher running the meeting</td>
<td>Students running the meeting</td>
<td>Teachers and students running the meeting together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher makes the decisions</td>
<td>Students sometimes vote to make decisions</td>
<td>Students always vote to make decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher tells other people in the school what the group is doing</td>
<td>Students tell other people in the school what the group is doing</td>
<td>No one tells other people in the school what the group is doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share group actions in the school newsletter</td>
<td>Share group actions at assembly</td>
<td>Share group actions in the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve multiple classes in the group’s projects</td>
<td>Involve some other students in projects</td>
<td>Only the group is involved in projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve family members</td>
<td>Involve the community</td>
<td>Involve other organisations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Group rules and guidelines: A clear set of rules that assist members to run the group. This is really important in creating a successfully functioning group! There are a number of resources available on how to go about this, including “How to develop group norms” by Susan M. Heathfield (referenced at the end of this booklet).

Reporting structure: A reporting structure clearly defines who, and how often, the group reports to in their school. For example, do you report to the Principal, your mentor or support teacher, or the Governing Council? How often will you do this? Will it be a written report or a verbal presentation?

Promotional strategy: A promotional strategy is a plan used to advertise and communicate with others about your group. Types of communication can include brochures, newsletter articles, posters, flyers, emails, school assemblies etc.

Recruitment strategies: Like promotional strategies, recruitment strategies are ways in which you plan to promote your group, but with the aim of increasing or maintaining membership. For example, you could offer an incentive to join (e.g. regular group lunches, celebrations) or run a recruitment campaign telling people what they can expect to get out of becoming involved.

Representation: This refers to the make-up or composition of your group. Will your group aim to have representation of genders, and different cultures or background? Do you require a student representative from each year level? If your school has a SRC should you also have a representative from your group on it? Not all of these ideas might work in every case, so agree as a group on what works for you.
Mentor checklist

Job description of a mentor

- Involve young people in the whole decision making process
- Find resources
- Nurture and protect the individuals and the project
- Ensure that each team member has a space to voice their opinions and ideas—everyone’s ideas/voice have equal value
- Ensure there is a safe atmosphere and working environment
- Help young people learn the skills of collaboration through demonstration, such as respect, listening, and constructive feedback
- Provide logistical support and help young people to learn their own logistical skills including:
  - funding
  - writing and submitting grant applications
  - networking
  - administration
- Develop skills of young people—interest, involvement, leadership
- Allow time for guidance and preparation purposes, including individual mentoring when necessary
- Provide opportunities for involvement and challenges
- Foster young people’s passions
- Where possible, incorporate a variety of mentors
- Advocate for students with school governing councils, management teams, staff, community, parents etc.
- Have a clear understanding of what the school expects of me

Person specification for a mentor

- Have a shared understanding of the group’s vision, purpose, short-long term goals and projects, and its structure
- Be committed and passionate
- Be willing and able to work with young people
- Value all people’s input
- Be open minded and willing to challenge your own perspective
- Be flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances
- Recognise that young people and adults are interdependent
- Recognise the barriers to collaboration, trust, risks etc.
What now?

Once you have formed a group, found a mentor and established some group rules, it’s time to look at your vision, goals and start planning your projects. On the following pages, we have provided some tools that might be useful in your planning. You can print these and fill them in if you like.

Growing a project tree and framework

Many student groups have used the ‘growing a project’ tree on the following page. Each part of the tree represents a different step in creating a successful project. The project tree starts with the roots- group work which holds a project together, then a clear vision so that all actions work towards this. Actions are the leaves, from those projects new opportunities often arise (the fruit) and all projects need community support (sun) to thrive. Often students draw their own project tree and fill in the specific information for their project, as in this example.
growing a project
1. Roots = group work
   • How can the group work effectively together?
   • How can this be improved?

2. Trunk = project vision
   • Why are you doing the project?
   • What will it look like?

3. Branches = identify and plan
   3.1 Identify
      • Benefits
      • Resources/expenses
      • Challenges
      • Who will be affected?
   3.2 Planning
      • When, where and how will your project happen?

4. Leaves = action and evaluation
   4.1 Action: JUST DO IT!
      • Don’t forget to have fun and celebrate when you are finished!
   4.2 Evaluation: critically analyse your project
      • How have you been successful in achieving your vision?
      • What would you do differently next time?
      • Has your vision changed? How and why?
      • Is this the way you want to continue, do you want to do more?

5. Fruit = evolution
   Monitor, maintain and grow your project!
   • How will it continue?
   • Who will continue it in the future?

6. Sun = community support
   • Who could provide feedback on your project tree? E.g. Staff, classes, experts, NRM Ed.
   • Who should you keep informed of your project progress? E.g. teachers, parents, general public.
   • Who can help you do your project? E.g. Parents, classes, community groups.
   • Who should you invite to the celebration? E.g. special guests, mayor, local public figures
   • How will you celebrate your suggestions and achievements?
Environmental Action Plan template

You can use this template to identify as a group:
- where is the school now?
- where do we want to get to?

We have provided an example of what this might look like in the first row.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do we want to do? (Goal)</th>
<th>How? (Steps) *include costing if applicable</th>
<th>When? (Timeline)</th>
<th>Who?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.g. Our goal is to get more of the local community on board with reducing litter</td>
<td>Approach local Friends group to find out what they already to do reduce litter in local parks</td>
<td>By End Term 1</td>
<td>Year 5 reps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Run a community clean up day and BBQ (cost $100 to cater for 20 people)</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Whole group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Talk to Council about increasing recycling bins (find out cost and brainstorm funding options)</td>
<td>ASAP</td>
<td>President and Mentor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FAQs: What if our group encounters problems?

Below are some frequently asked questions and some solutions to help guide you through any challenges your group might have. Remember, your mentor and other members of the school community may also be able to help!

**What if my group is too small?**

Sometimes you may have a smaller group than you envisage, but that isn’t always a problem. Ask: *Are there enough members to achieve our group goals and vision in a reasonable timeframe?* If yes, then don’t worry about having a particular number of members. As Margaret Atwood once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

If there genuinely aren’t enough members though, you will need to find some! First refer to your recruitment strategy, if you have one. Otherwise try:

- Running an event or information session about your group. Offering food or drinks is always a good way to get people to come along.
- Advertising your group via assemblies, school newsletters or bulletins.
- Create a ‘brand’ or identify for your group to promote membership and make yourselves visible around the school e.g. t-shirts, nametags, badges, caps etc.
- Promote to older or younger students and try to attract members from more year levels. Which classes aren’t represented? Talk to them first.

**What if it’s too big?**

- You could introduce an application process with set questions for those who want to get into the group. These could be assessed by your mentor or set leaders from the group.
- The group could also be split into sub-groups, with their own meetings and projects (e.g. waste and recycling, school garden, energy use etc.)
- You could create a waiting list. Once the group has enough members, any new students wanting to join are placed on a list and they can be approached to join if anyone else leaves the group for any reason.
- The group could run on a roster system, with new students taking over each term or year.
How do we get funding for the group’s activities?

- Ask your principal for an annual budget.
- Ask for donations of materials and services you need for free from others (this is called in-kind support).
- Write a letter to local groups such as Rotary or Lions Clubs for a financial donation to pay for your project or initiative.
- There are often grants available to help with environmental and other initiatives within schools. Try researching grants through your local council, community groups or state or federal government, using the search term ‘environmental grants’. Some examples include NRM Education grants and school Landcare grants.
- You could start up a can and bottle recycling program and use the proceeds to fund projects for your school or local community.
- Consider doing some fundraising. Run an event, set up a chocolate drive or organise a stall.
- You can also contact your local NRM Education officer for help. Details are on our website.

How do we gain the support of our whole school?

- You can talk to your mentor about this, or identify other key teachers who can promote your group at staff meetings and in their classes.
- Another approach is to write up a summary of your group’s vision, goals and planned actions to give to key people within the school (e.g. Principal, Governing Council, Year level leaders).
- Try to arrange a meeting with your Principal or time to present at a Governing Council meeting, and ask for support to spread the word about your group and promote your ideas.
- Run a celebration event when your group reaches a particular goal, and invite others to attend so they can see what your group does!

How do we link our group with the wider community?

- Promotion is always key. The group could develop posters to put at key locations within the community (e.g. sports clubs, libraries, shopping centres) or write an article for the local newspaper.
- If your group has worked on projects that benefit the whole community, promote these. E.g. you may put in a new bush garden and open it up to the whole community to enjoy.
- Consider contacting your local Member of Parliament (MP), state or federal elected member, or council for support and place articles in local media. Not only does this promote your group, it also highlights the school and gives it recognition.
- Contact your local environment group or NRM Education officer and ask them how you could become more involved with their organisation. Are there any partnerships that can be formed? Can you help them with any of their projects or vice versa?

What if lots of members stop coming along or leave the group?
- Consider a mixture of long- and short-term projects. Some students will be happy to participate in short-term projects with less commitment while others may wish to work on something more substantial that carries over into the following year(s).
- Ask for feedback from members who leave. Think about people’s reasons for being part of the group and try to build on these.
- Keep going back to your recruitment strategies and ask everyone to feed in new ideas. Maybe you could even make this a standing item for all group meetings.
- You could also look at more fun activities that would encourage members to stay. For example, organise planting events, visit another school for inspiration, or have a shared lunch or celebratory event.

What if the group is getting dominated by certain members?
- It’s useful to have a clear set of agreed group norms or guidelines. These can be read out at the beginning of meetings and referred to if any members appear to be dominating.
- The person chairing the meeting is largely responsible for ensuring everyone gets a say. Your mentor should be able to help with this.
- You might like to structure meetings so there is time for a ‘round robin’ on certain issues, where everyone has a turn to state their opinion.
- You could try giving each member three sticks, with each representing an opportunity to speak. If you run out, you can only speak when asked.
- Your mentor could talk to the person ‘dominating’ and suggest some strategies for holding back from the conversation. It takes time to learn the skill of balancing input and observation.
Case studies

Golden Grove High School

How is student voice active in the school?
- There is a student green team called the Environmental Management Unit (EMU), which meets once a fortnight and drives sustainability initiatives within the school (such as mobile phone recycling).
- The EMU also runs sessions with the entire school regarding sustainable practises, and play a key role in providing valuable student perspective on environmental issues and events within the community.
- Inter-generational equity is captured in the school’s vision to ensure student opinion is valued.
- The Environmental Action Team (EAT) is made up of staff, but invites student members to be a part of their meetings and feed in their ideas.

What outcomes have been seen so far?
- Increased student engagement in sustainable practises.
- More students attending EMU meetings.
- Increase in student’s engagement and confidence as a result of the Green Team program, which provides students who might otherwise be disengaged with an opportunity to make a real difference with hands-on work.

Students and teachers from GGHS green team receive an award
Glenunga International High School

How is student voice active in the school?

- Several student-led environment clubs (e.g. world wildlife club, vegan club) with recognised structures and processes are supported through a formal student club structure at the school.
- The Glenunga Environment Team is made up of the students’ Environment Club Captain, a member of Executive leadership, ex-students and ancillary staff.
- The Environment Team’s vision has been co-developed by staff and students and approved by Executive leadership within the school.
- An active SEMP (Site Environment Management Plan) guides the work of the Environment Team.

What outcomes have been seen so far?

- New recycling system and introduction of 10c ‘hoop’ recycling bins, which has been overseen by the Environment Team.
- The students involved note that the learning for them has included flexibility; thinking outside the box; developing diverse ways to communicate with the whole school; networking; researching contractors, the best deal and process; and learning how to work within a hierarchical school structure for decision making.
- Since the last audit in March 2015 the school has achieved a 40% volume reduction in materials to landfill.
For more information on these groups, and others from around the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges region, you can visit our case studies webpage and filter by topic ‘Youth Voice’. There are lots of great written and video examples here of what others have done to inspire you.


References


“Using my voice has taught me that even small action can make changes.”
-Youth Environment Council member
This resource has been adapted from “Create a Voice: My Voice, Your Voice, Youth Voice” – a student guide developed in 2010 by the NRM Education Program of the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board in consultation with the NRM Education Program of the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Natural Resources Management Board and the Youth Environment Council of South Australia.