

Part 3: Starting Up

In this section, we present some ideas about starting up ... starting a Student Council ... starting more participatory approaches ...

Starting from Scratch

Not had a Student Council before? There's no neat recipe for establishing a Council - so much depends on the size, nature, structure, culture of your school. And the way you set it up depends on what you see it doing, who is interested to be included, and any past history. But here are some general ideas for teachers and students. You should read these in conjunction with the following general article on **Getting the Student Council Going**.

You're going to have to make some decisions ... after talking with others.

Why?

- Why do you think the school should have a Student Council? What could it do?
- Whose idea is it? (What's in it for you/ them?)
- What scope is there for setting up a Student Council? What restrictions?

You'll need to get the reasons worked out in order to convince other people and answer their concerns.

What do students think?

Consult with students across the school. Do they want a Student Council? What's their idea of what a Council might look like or do? You might find that reasons and ideas either add to yours, or challenge them. There might also be a history of Student Councils in the school which affect these views - for example, if there's been a hopeless or inactive Council or one that was ignored, students might be cynical about any attempt to start again. But you'll need an enthusiastic **group** of students if you are to proceed.

What support is there?

Talk with the Principal and other members of the Administration, with (other) teachers, with parents and their committees and with the School Council. How much support and cooperation can the Student Council expect from these groups? What support do you want? It will be much easier to develop the Student Council with their support - very difficult with their opposition or if you ignore them! Don't try to do it alone! What happens when you leave or when you get exhausted? Find support!

A Starting Group

OK - you've identified an enthusiastic group of students, who have some similar ideas of what a Student Council could look like and what it could do. Build on this group and this

enthusiasm - but they'll want to see action soon. They'll also be the group to collect opinions and ideas, make decisions about a structure, and set it in motion ... and eventually they'll have to seek approval, or a mandate, or even election from students generally.

Get Away

You'll need time for these decisions to be made. If possible take a day - away from the school's distractions - to argue, discuss, plan and decide. Have objectives for this day: eg by the end of the day, to have the basics of a constitution drafted or a description of how the Student Council will work; and to have timelines prepared to set up the Council.

Name

What do you all want to call the organisation? Examples in the past have been Student Council, Student Representative Council, Student Forum, Parliament, Student Leadership Council, Student Voice, Junior School Council ... (What's in a name?) These names can represent what you see the group doing or how it is formed or how it is structured. But these names also exist in a context of past structures and a new name might be chosen to represent a new start.

Connections

In thinking about the structure, how do you see the Council linking with:

- classes and grade meetings?
- overall school decision making?
- other student structures (houses, teams, pastoral care)?
- curriculum programs in the school (Civics and Citizenship Education, Youth Development Programs, Student Action Teams)?

Most importantly here, how will decisions of the Student Council be heard within and influence the whole school? Will it have representatives on the School Council and its sub-committees, and on other working bodies in the school?

... and beyond

Discussion within classes

Ask every class in the school to talk about the role of a Student Council in some way. This might involve members of the Starting Group briefing staff at a staff meeting, then visiting all classes to talk and answer questions. It could be part of the school's Civics and Citizenship curriculum: "Why do we have representative groups?", "How do they work?", "Are there other ways?" The aim is to get a broad understanding of the nature and possibility for a Student Council, but - more importantly - to increase the understanding of how everyone, every day, can be part of the decision making in the school. It could also lead to discussion about the qualities of a representative, and why some people could be elected - in order to get away from student elections as 'popularity contests'.

Structure

Decide with the Starting Group on a Student Council structure appropriate to your school. Four possible dimensions to consider are:

- membership: volunteers?; elected (eg two per class)?; multiple roles (many committeees)?; etc
- levels: a single whole-school Student Council?; year level forums and an executive?; inter-level working committees coordinated by an executive?; etc
- size: a small activist group?; a large forum?; many separate smaller groups?; etc
- when: meeting during class time?; at lunchtime?; as a class?; etc

Training

Once the Student Council is in place, you will need to set time aside for training and planning. Several short sessions, or a longer time might be appropriate. Some Councils immediately go away on a 2-3 day camp to get to know each other, to understand their responsibilities, and to plan their objectives and actions. It's valuable for such an activity to be away from the school.

Network

Search out other Student Councils eg in your region. What are they doing? How can they help you? Perhaps even think about organising some joint activities and shared training.

Roger Holdsworth

(with thanks to Erica McCalman and Charles Kingston)

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OFF TO A GOOD START!

Getting Your Student Council Going

deally ... you've made all the arrangements at the end of last year, elected / selected the members of the Student Council, already had the first meeting to set objectives for the year, selected office bearers etc. You're probably well under way. But, just in case ...

Here's a brief checklist of some of the steps you'll need to take to get going fast! After all, the longer it takes for the Student Council to get going, the more decisions that have already been made - without formal student input.

It's assumed here that you've had a Student Council before (there's another short article here for those starting for the first time), and need to kick it off ... into action! ... for a new year. Each school will be different, so adapt and develop and extend this list (and tell us what happens!).

Many of the following steps should or will likely happen sort of all at once - certainly within a few weeks. Think of them holistically. Don't just wait until one step is finished before starting on the next. Plan and look ahead to all the steps. Do them when it's convenient and necessary for those involved - including yourselves.

The outgoing executive meets with the support teacher to steer the process.

This is a **student** council, so it's important that students are driving it along. But it's realistic that every student council needs supportive committed adults working to support them. Start here: call a meeting to set down a timeline for getting the Student Council going.

Staff briefing meeting.

If staff are to support the process of appointing a new Student Council, and of its operation, they need to know what is happening and what is expected of them. Staff and/or students should address a staff meeting or prepare a hand-out.

An Activity to Use These Steps

Print out these pages larger, then cut out the individual cards. As a group, decide which ones are relevant to you and which ones are less relevant or not relevant at all.

Then sort the relevant cards into a time-line. Which steps come before other steps? Work out who will do what. Make an action poster to remind you all.

Principal/ Administration briefing meeting.

Similarly, keep the Principal and other key Administration members up-to-date with plans.

Set up opportunities for students to give reasons for their selection.

Students should want to be on a Student Council for some reasons. There should be opportunities for them to publicly state these reasons - in talks, in writing, on posters, in conversations. Be careful that these opportunities do not exclude some students - those with lower literacy levels, those who are less confident in public speaking etc. The 'best' students (in traditional terms) may **not** be the best representatives.

Class discussion.

Where possible: encourage, support, resource discussions in every class about the Student Council. These discussions should cover: why we have a Student Council, what it could do, what structure it has, what we expect from representatives, what the characteristics of a good representative are and so on.

Decide on and publicise how people get to be on the Student Council.

Students might volunteer, or be nominated and selected, or be elected from home groups, class groups or in other ways.

Call publicly for nominees/volunteers.

This launches the process of forming the Student Council. Everyone needs to know what is happening and have a chance to be involved. The form of this invitation depends on the structure and process you've adopted - people might nominate or volunteer themselves, or they may require others to nominate them.

Decide on and publicise the Student Council structure (*it might be different this year from the past; it might adapt to school changes*).

Everyone needs to be clear about how students join the Council, what they are joining (and what its powers and responsibilities are), different levels and areas within the Council, such as:

- [] a year level or sub-school forum;
- [] a whole-school Student Council (coordinating / executive);
- [] Student Council Working Groups, sub-committees, action teams etc;
- [] other appropriate structures.

Provide chances for new students to the school (eg years 7 or 8).

These students may not know each other, or know who might be a good representative. Introductory school processes should assist them to meet each other, and aid the selection process. Perhaps an 'interim' representative is appointed for a few months.

Hold the election or interviews or

From each group as decided, appoint representatives and deputies. Having all teachers involved in assisting this process can also get them involved in understanding and supporting the Student Council.

Carry business over from last year.

Look at any business still unfinished from last year's Student Council work. You should also have a statement from last year about finances that the Student Council was left with - so you know where you can start. Bring this information to the first meeting.

Advertise the first meetings.

These meetings need to be advertised widely. Personal congratulations and invitations to all representatives makes them feel special and also lets them know when and where meetings are held. Send all representatives information on the structure, powers, operations and responsibilities of the Student Council - and of individual members. Give them the constitution.

Celebrate at the first meeting.

Have lunch together. Welcome, congratulate, thank, challenge all members.

Hold the first meetings.

Important tasks to include are:

check the structure:

does everyone understand it? is everyone happy to continue with it?

set the meeting time-table:

when? where? how will reminders happen? is this OK with everyone?

set the objectives for the year:

what does the Student Council want to achieve? This might take more time to discuss, so ...

Appoint students to important positions.

You will need to think about chairing meetings, keeping records of what happens, writing letters, looking after funds, publicising, liaising with various people (including the Principal), networking with other schools ...

Appoint students to school positions.

Students may need to be appointed to the School Council, sub-committees, working groups etc within the school. If these positions don't currently exist, ask for student representation.

Organise a Planning/Training Day.

The Student Council will need time to meet each other, get training for their tasks, and plan what they want to do, and how they will do it. Such a day might include reviewing the Council structure (sub-groups etc), appointing an executive, brainstorming possibilities, drawing up plans, setting timelines, allocating responsibilities ... This could be one day, or a three-day camp. Try to have it away from the school to avoid distractions.

Appoint bank account signatories.

These may need to be changed over from last year, so that current students from the Council control its funds.

Review and Reflect.

Build time into meetings to check how the larger things (structures, processes etc) are going.

Get a space.

The Student Council needs a home - a small room, or at least a filing cabinet. Get a notice-board set aside for the Student Council. Get a mail box in the front office.

Have a 'hand over' event.

Last year's Student Council congratulates the incoming Student Councils and tells them what they learnt - how they **should** have done things.

Roger Holdsworth

(with thanks also to Charles Kingston)

Originally from *Connect 127*,
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KICKING OFF THE YEAR WITH A PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENT COUNCIL

Many of the issues discussed in the other articles in this section also apply to Primary Schools - so read and adapt those suggestions to your situation. But there are some particular issues that need to be considered in establishing or re-starting a primary school Student Council (or Junior School Council).

• Teacher responsibility

While students will be very enthusiastic about forming a Student Council, and may have considerable knowledge about what to do and how it can be done, primary school Student Councils generally need more support from staff and other adults than is the case in secondary schools. The support teacher, however, needs even more sensitivity about when and how to 'step back' and let students run the Council, make mistakes, solve problems, and own solutions.

• Who has time and responsibility?

Because of the relationship between teachers and grades, and because of the large classroom-based teaching commitment, it is particularly important to think about who has time to support and 'drive' the Student Council. As well as needing someone with the appropriate personal characteristics and commitment to student participation, the location of the teacher within the school is critical. How will any time release be managed? Several schools have located such support with a Deputy Principal, or have arranged that two or three teachers share the role.

• Involve last year's Council

Students who have 'done it' are a valuable resource to advise new Student Council members. You can set up formal 'buddying' arrangements both within the Council and to involve ex-members in a new role.

• Staff briefings

Because the role of the grade teacher is so critical in supporting representatives and in making sure that the Student Council approach connects with other curriculum initiatives, make sure that staff are fully briefed at a staff meeting. Set aside time there, or at a curriculum day, to discuss the whole school's approach to 'representation',

'decision making', 'democracy' and so on. These issues are very naturally part of discussions about the school's Civics and Citizenship curriculum program - see below.

• Class meetings

The basis of the Student Council is in the classroom - and it should connect with ways of teaching in each grade. Do teachers hold classroom meetings to discuss the work of the grade? Are important decisions made here? How can such meetings link with that grade's representation on a Student Council? It might be valuable to provide reading material to teachers, or to hold a professional development activity around these approaches - the Parliamentary Education Office in Canberra has booklets and videos discussing various examples and ideas here.

The Civics and Citizenship curriculum in the classroom in primary schools could (and should, and perhaps even must) cover rules and the need for them, how decisions are made in small groups (families etc), how decisions are made in larger groups (representatives) - and these issues can be linked to the role of the Student Council both in the school, and in its community.

Within this, grades can discuss the characteristics and requirements of a good representative, as well as processes for reporting back and to enable participation by all in decisions.

• Structural issues

The smaller size of many primary schools has implications for the size and structure of Student Councils. Many of these Councils are smaller, working bodies, where students can feel empowered to cooperate and work as a group, rather than have to deal with the organisational issues of 'class sized' bodies.

But there are other critical questions that emerge here:

• For how long should students be appointed?

Some schools believe that there should be a regular 'turn-over' of representatives (eg once a term), to give more students experience in these roles; others feel that continuity and an understanding at a greater depth require whole-year appointments.

• What levels?

Some schools specify Student Council membership for senior (eg grade 5 and 6) students, with some 'representing' younger grades; others define membership from across the whole school.

• When to meet?

The issues are similar to those in secondary schools - there are dilemmas both with meeting during class-time (often more of an issue for teachers), or at lunch-time (more of an issue for students).

• Appointment

Once decisions have been made about structures and membership, students can be invited to apply or be nominated. Some schools do this very formally, insisting on formal nominations and then having speeches and elections; others invite students to self-nominate and then talk more casually with their grades; others set up staff-student interview panels. In all cases, students should be considering why they want to be on the Council, and what they want to achieve.

• Training and Networking

Opportunities to share information with other Student Councils are invaluable. If you can, build the same training opportunities into your new Student Council as those outlined in the other articles, but also contact other nearby primary schools (and secondary schools) to see if they would be interested in sharing approaches, training and advice.

For more detail on many of these issues, see the booklet written by teachers from the Gresswell Cluster in Melbourne's northern suburbs: **Democracy Starts Here: JSCs at Work** - available through Connect.

Roger Holdsworth

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**Find out how your Student Council is doing
from the people who count**

Student Council Survey

This is a survey intended for Student Council representatives to find out from other students and staff about what they should be doing.

Guidance

- This survey can be done in any of three ways:
 1. Face-to-face questioning during breaks and lunchtimes. Researchers will need clipboards!
 2. Handed out to students to fill in and put in ballot boxes (like an election).
 3. Given out in classes to be completed during lessons (possibly Social Education or Citizenship).
- It can be done by students **and** staff – you may like to compare their answers.
- Make sure students know that it is **anonymous** so you will not need to record their name. However it is useful to know which year group they are in so that answers for different years can be compared.
- To get a good idea of people's opinions you should try and get at least 10% of the students in the school to complete the survey. These should be spread equally across year groups.
- The following introduction can be printed or spoken: *We would be very grateful if you could answer a few questions for our Student Council Survey. Your answers will help us to find out how our Student Council is doing and how we can improve. The survey should take around 5 minutes and your name will not be written down.*
- Space has been left for **comments** after each section. People might have other suggestions or opinions, which may be useful.
- When all the surveys have been completed, you will need to choose a small group of Student Council members to analyse the results.
- Use the Analysis Table to find the totals. If you have carried out face-to-face research, then each researcher could add up their totals on a separate table.

- For parts 1 and 2, you will have 3 totals for each question. These can be converted into **percentages** to give better results (maths experts required!).
- For parts 3 and 4 the answers can be arranged by **rank** with the one with the highest score as number 1.

What to do with the results?

The results from the survey should first of all be **published** around the school. You could put them up on a noticeboard or send copies to classes for display. You could make a special edition **newsletter** or **TV news report** – don't forget to quote some of the **comments**. Teachers, School Council members and local council officials may be interested in the results.

More importantly, the results give you a much clearer view of how the Student Council is doing, and where it should be going. Discuss the results in a meeting – maybe go into smaller groups to talk about each section and share your views. You must work out how these results will influence the work of the council.

Now you know what students want done, you can start **making a real difference**.

Tips for success

Why not encourage people to complete the survey by entering them into a **prize draw**? Each person completing the survey would receive a raffle ticket and you could try and get a prize donated from a local business.

This survey is adapted, with permission, from one designed and circulated by **School Councils UK** in Britain. Further details can be found at: <http://www.schoolcouncils.org>
Note: in England, Student Councils are referred to as 'School Councils'.

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Student Council Survey

Researcher's Initials _____ Year Group of Student _____ Survey number _____

Part 1: What do you know about the Student Council? (Circle answers)

1. Did you know that there is a Student Council at this school?	No		Yes
2. Do you know what the Student Council is for?	No	Sort of	Yes
3. Do you know the names of your class/form representatives?	No	Sort of	Yes
4. Do you know how you could make a suggestion to the Student Council? No	Sort of		Yes

Comments _____

Part 2: How effective is our Student Council?

5. Do you feel well informed about what the Student Council is doing?	No	Sort of	Yes
6. Do you think the Student Council listens to other students?	No	Sort of	Yes
7. Do you think the Student Council is helping to make the school better?	No	Sort of	Yes

Comments _____

Part 3: What should our Student Council be doing?

The following are things that our Student Council *could* be doing. Please give each one a mark of between 1 and 5 depending on how important you think they are: 1 = not important, 5 = very important

a) Improve communication between students and teachers	1	2	3	4	5
b) Improve facilities outside school for young people (eg transport, leisure)	1	2	3	4	5
c) Improve school discipline and behaviour	1	2	3	4	5
d) Improve school facilities eg playground	1	2	3	4	5
e) Improve choice and value of school food	1	2	3	4	5
f) Improve teaching and lessons	1	2	3	4	5
g) Manage services for students (eg canteen)	1	2	3	4	5
h) Organise extra-curricular activities (sport, discos, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
i) Raise awareness of social issues (eg racism, drugs, environment)	1	2	3	4	5
j) Raise money for charities	1	2	3	4	5
k) Raise money for school equipment	1	2	3	4	5

Comments _____

Part 4: How can the Student Council improve?

We want students to find out about what the Student Council is doing. Please give each of the following ideas a mark of between 1 and 5: 1 = very bad idea to 5 = very good idea

a) Weekly class meetings for all students to discuss issues	1	2	3	4	5
b) Announcements in assembly about the Student Council	1	2	3	4	5
c) Student Council newsletter	1	2	3	4	5
d) Student Council Website and email updates	1	2	3	4	5
e) Noticeboard with news about the Student Council	1	2	3	4	5

Comments _____

Part 5: Any other comments?

Is there anything you would like to say about the Student Council or the school in general? Your comments will be anonymous.

Thank you very much for your time!

Student Council Survey: Analysis Table

Part 1: What do you know about the Student Council?	Total answers for each question		
	No	Sort Of	Yes
Did you know that there is a Student Council at this school?			
Do you know what the Student Council is for?			
Do you know the names of your class/form representatives?			
Do you know how you could make a suggestion to the Student Council?			

Convert totals to percentages

Part 2: How effective is our Student Council?	Total answers for each question		
	No	Sort Of	Yes
Do you feel well informed about what the Student Council is doing?			
Do you think the Student Council listens to other students ?			
Do you think the Student Council is helping to make the school better?			

Convert totals to percentages

Part 3: What should our Student Council be doing?	Total Score	Ranking
a) Improve communication between students and teachers		
b) Improve facilities outside school for young people (eg transport, leisure)		
c) Improve school discipline and behaviour		
d) Improve school facilities eg playground		
e) Improve choice and value of school food		
f) Improve teaching and lessons		
g) Manage services for students (eg canteen)		
h) Organise extra-curricular activities (sport, discos, etc.)		
i) Raise awareness of social issues (eg racism, drugs, environment)		
j) Raise money for charities		
k) Raise money for school equipment		

Part 4: How can the Student Council improve?	Total Score	Ranking
a) Weekly class meetings for all students to discuss issues		
b) Announcements in assembly about the Student Council		
c) Student Council newsletter		
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e) Noticeboard with news about the Student Council		

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Doing the Student Participation Two-Step

Do we share a clear idea about what we mean when we talk of 'student participation'? Without that clarity, limited and (at times) counter-productive practices can masquerade under an empty slogan of 'extending participation'. By identifying at least some of these limitations, it is may be possible to suggest ways in which limited practice may be improved.

Scope

Is student participation equated solely with the SRC or JSC? The very idea of student participation can be limited in scope. It is, unfortunately, still common to find both students and teachers who simply think that some form of student body is 'what student participation is all about'. This can be accompanied by a token participation of students in 'safe issues' and, particularly, the exclusion of student participation from what is central to the school - the learning and teaching that occurs there.

Even relatively forward-looking approaches to Civics and Citizenship Education have talked as if 'representative democracy' defines the total scope of what being an 'active citizen' is, rather than acknowledging that having and exercising a valuable role within communities is at the core of our citizenship. So, school-based approaches have stressed the need to build on existing examples of 'student democracy' and 'leadership', to the exclusion of curriculum initiatives. Learning about active citizenship in schools will **include** support for active student voice and participation through Student Councils and within various areas of school governance, but it must also include fundamental changes to the ways in which we structure the teaching and learning in classrooms - particularly towards rethinking how we share purpose and demonstrate authentic outcomes.

Exclusion

Secondly, student participation approaches originally and correctly stressed ways to **include** students; it attempted to provide pathways to success for those previously excluded. These basic ideas about student participation are constantly under threat from practices that target advantages to those already successful (eg choosing only the 'best students' to be tutors; setting up SRC elections that reward the already articulate and 'in the know'). For some schools, caught in situations where every action is thought of as 'selling' the image of the school, educational outcomes have become secondary to those of public relations; for others, the forms and activities of participation hide a commitment to the selection of the few for continued success.

A continued attention to selective ideas of 'leadership' or 'participation' will finally be self-defeating. Where governance or curriculum activities have **excluded** the broad range of students and have by-passed their interests, concerns and abilities, these students have grown increasingly cynical and angry at what they see as another form of coercion and deflection. Such initiatives fail.

Student-Centred Learning

Thirdly, ideas of student participation can be limited by being seen as merely 'student-centred education', 'active learning' or 'creative teaching'. It is thought that, by having a 'hands-on' curriculum, in which students are 'doing things', or conducting simulation activities, that they are active participants.

Student participation involves more than that. Active learning may be only the first step of the dance - and when we talk about student participation we actually mean doing the two-step.

The Dance

Step 1: Moving from passive instruction to active engagement

Inquiry-based learning approaches are characterised by an active role for young people in investigation and presentation. This is the **first step** in which we move from presentation of information by the teacher, and relatively passive responses from students. It is characterised by teachers asking: 'how can I organise for the students to do it instead of me doing it?'

For example, in a lesson about the nature and range of local mental health services, a teacher-centred approach would involve providing students with a list of the appropriate organisations; classroom activities might then be focused on answering worksheet questions about this information. **The first step towards participation** would be to change this approach by organising for students to carry out the local investigation. They might, as a group or in small teams, compile the list of services (asking and answering questions about

where to find information) and perhaps interview a range of these services to write descriptive paragraphs about what they do. This information would then be disseminated within the class and discussed.

The teacher role has moved from presenter of information to one of organiser of learning. The student role has moved from recipient of facts to active searcher for information and meaning.

But this is just the first step.

Step 2: Moving from activity to real learning of value

When we talk meaningfully of developing student participation, we really need to be thinking of approaches that go beyond this. These approaches also involve creating **real and recognised roles of community value** for the students and for their learning. Each example of active learning can be 'pushed' a step further to create engagement with meaningful outcomes.

To pursue the curriculum example above, we could start by asking questions about the collection of information about the services: 'why do we want to find this out?' and 'what are we going to do with the information?' What might then emerge from class discussion are several possible outcomes: the students could publish the information they have discovered in a school newspaper, in a community forum or newspaper, or through a small booklet or pamphlet which is distributed in the area.

Students are now learning for a direct purpose. They are adding something of community value to their learning, and are being seen as valuable community members, doing valuable things. These are all direct indicators of enhanced mental health.

The challenges for teachers in doing the student participation two-step, are to be:

- **inventive:** we must always be seeking ways for real and valuable outcomes (authentic assessment) of learning - and that might mean recognising and seizing local opportunities as they arise; and
- **bold:** willing to leave 'safe' or meticulously pre-planned territory and embark on exciting uncertainty - a dance of learning **with** the students.

Roger Holdsworth

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