

RIGHTS RESPECTING SCHOOLS

STUDENT COUNCILS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

Student Councils and Building Block Two: Student Participation

A fundamental building block of Rights Respecting Schools is student participation. This involves every student having regular opportunities to be an active participant in the school community, and his or her opinions being sought and listened to by decision makers. The formation of democratically elected student councils provides a viable opportunity for this participation to occur. Too often, in many schools, student councils are not empowered to make significant decisions. However in a Rights Respecting School, meaningful and age appropriate opportunities are available to students, as teachers and administrators work closely with student council members to engage them in various types of consultation and decision-making. This resource is meant for teachers, administrators and support staff interested in helping students create student councils that support the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) and the Rights Respecting Schools initiative.

Meaningful Student Participation

is engaging students as partners in educational planning, research, teaching, evaluating, decision-making, advocacy, and more.

SoundOut: Promoting Student Voice in School
<http://www.soundout.org/edreform.html>

Consideration of Children's Age

It is important to understand that the principle of children's participation is premised on the concept of 'evolving capacities' of children and relies on the guidance of adults. Article 5 of the Convention states that direction and guidance, provided by parents or others with responsibility for the child, and must take account of the capacities of the child to exercise rights on his or her own behalf.¹ The box below provides some guidelines on the 'evolving capacities' of children. This information should be taken into account when working with student councils in elementary schools.

- Children between 9 and 14 can meaningfully participate in the decision-making procedure, but their maturity must be carefully assessed on an individual basis. However, care must be taken with younger children and they may require specific assistance to ensure that they can express themselves clearly and freely.
- Children younger than 9 have the right to give their opinion and be heard. They may be able to participate in the decision-making procedure to a certain degree, but caution should be exercised to avoid burdening them by giving them a feeling of becoming decision makers.²

¹ Lansdown, G. (2005).

² United Nations High Commission for Refugees, *UNHCR Guidelines on Formal Determination of the Best Interests of the Child* (May, 2006). Available at: <http://www.unicef.org/violencestudy/pdf/BID%20Guidelines%20-%20provisional%20release%20May%2006.pdf>

SETTING UP A STUDENT COUNCIL

Timeline For Elections

Student councils provide an excellent opportunity for students to experience the democratic process, in which elections are an integral part. By voting for representatives, all students have the opportunity to participate in an important element of their school community. Below is a timeline on how to set-up an election. It includes key points to consider so that the process supports the Convention.



Educate and Endorse

- Students establish a clear understanding of the role of a student council and the responsibilities of each position (see charts on pages 5 and 6) by participating in training sessions.
 - A more diverse group of students will run for council if they know exactly what is involved.
 - Students can make more informed voting decisions about who is best suited for the position.
- Students from previous councils help lead training sessions (if possible).
- The information and training is differentiated for various grades, abilities, learning styles and ESL students.
 - This ensures no child is excluded from understanding the process.
- Key dates and locations are highly publicized throughout this stage.

Nominate and Campaign

- All students who want to run can nominate themselves for any position.
 - Specific grades and age levels should be recommended for each position.
 - Teachers do not nominate students, this ensures involvement is based on genuine interest not good behavior or grades.
- Campaigning supports students' right to freedom of expression (article 13) without being derogatory towards fellow candidates.
- Campaigning is done through various mediums such as speeches, written proposals, question and answer sessions, posters, videos, and audio presentations.
- Support is given to assist the participation of students with disabilities during the campaign (article 23).

Vote

- Students are explicitly shown how to vote.
- All students are afforded the opportunity to vote and each vote is counted equally.
- Voting closely resembles local, provincial or federal models.

Evaluate

- Did a wide range of students get elected? (See box on page 5 on fair treatment and non-discrimination.)
- Did the participants feel like they were given the necessary assistance and guidance throughout the process?
- What prevented students from running for a position in the election?
- Are voters pleased with the results?
- Do voters feel they were able to make informed decisions?

For age appropriate methods of feedback see the Rights Respecting Schools resource on Evaluations.

Source: This has been adapted from *A short toolkit for school council co-coordinators*. Involver.org.uk (2009).

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Fair Treatment and Non-Discrimination

To ensure student councils reflect article 2 of the convention (fair treatment and non-discrimination) consider the following questions at various stages of the process:

- Are students of different ages afforded opportunities to have a voice?
- Are students who do not normally volunteer to participate supported to do so?
- Are accommodations in place for children with disabilities?
- Are students of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds represented?
- Are children of different socio-economic backgrounds involved?
- Are either girls or boys disproportionately represented?

Student Council Positions

The following chart provides a very brief overview of positions that should be included on a student council. Based on the 'evolving capacities' of children, recommended grades for each position are included, however individual schools should exercise their own judgment in this respect.

Position	Responsibilities	Qualities	Method of Electing
Chairperson (Grade 6)	plans and runs meetings	approachable, good public speaker, cooperative	voted in by peers
Vice Chairperson (Grades 4-6)	assists chairperson	adaptable, reliable	voted in by peers
Secretary (Grade 4-6)	takes minutes	good listener, organized, excellent writing skills	voted in by peers
Treasurer (Grades 4-6)	handles money and financial record keeping	excellent math skills, organized	voted in by peers
Committee Chairperson (Grades 4-6)	recruits committee members	enthusiastic, creative, approachable	voted in by peers
Committee Members	responsible for special (Grades K-6)	enthusiastic projects	volunteer
Class Representatives (Grades K-6)	represents class at meetings and reports minutes to class	willingness to participate	rotates through class list so every student has the opportunity to participate
Staff Advisors	provides students with guidance and training	encouraging, good listener, respectful	voted in by students

STUDENT COUNCIL POLICY

It is important to develop a clear and transparent policy in regards to student council responsibilities. This policy will ensure that student participation is meaningful and that student council members are seen as ambassadors for the Convention and the Rights Respecting School initiative.

Guideline For Policy

- outline of staff and student partnership
- addresses specific ways that staff will support and guide student council
- written in collaboration with students
- uses child friendly language and is made accessible to all students through pictures, audio, and/or video

Source: This has been adapted from *A short toolkit for school council co-coordinators*. Involver.org.uk (2009).

Areas of Student Council Responsibility (Examples)

teacher and staff hiring	school vision and mission	fundraising campaigns
conflict resolution	cafeteria menus	course offerings
parent council activities	building designs	dress codes
field trip locations	codes of conduct	school budget
calendar year planning	bullying prevention	technology to purchase
evaluation policies	student-led activism	playground improvements
textbooks		
head domestic and international human rights initiatives		

Elements of Democratic Student Participation

According to Lansdown (2001)³, the principals of democratic participation include the following:

- Children must understand what the project or process is about, what it is for, and their role within it.
- Power relations and decision-making structures must be transparent.
- Children should be involved from the earliest possible stage of any initiative.
- All children should be treated equally regardless of their age, situation, ethnicity, abilities or other features.
- Ground rules should be established with all children at the beginning of the project or process.
- Participation should be voluntary and children should be allowed to leave at any stage.
- Children are entitled to be respected for their views and experiences.

³ Lansdown, G. *Promoting children's participation in democratic decision making*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (2001). Retrieved from: <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight6.pdf>

STUDENT HANDOUT

1. Educate and Endorse Phase

- I have the right to be educated about what a school council is and what it does, so I can decide if I want to be a part of it.



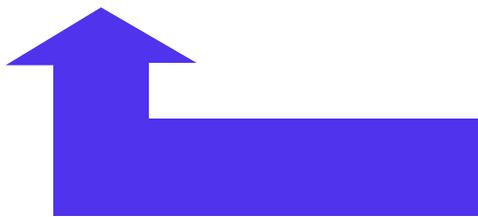
2. Nominate and Campaign

- I can nominate myself for a position that I am interested in.
- I have the right to campaign about why I would do a good job on student council.
- It is my responsibility to be respectful of my peers during the campaign.
- I have the right to receive help from adults during the campaign, if I need it.



4. Evaluate

- I have the right to express my opinion about the election and suggest any changes that I think should be made to the process.



3. Vote

- I know when and where to vote.
- I know how to vote.
- I have the right to vote and have my vote be counted equally to that of my peers'.

Positions

Chairperson	Committee Chairperson
Vice Chairperson	Committee Members
Secretary	Class Representative
Treasurer	Staff Advisors

Examples of Student Council Responsibilities

teacher and staff hiring	codes of conduct
textbooks	school budget
fundraising campaigns	calendar year planning
conflict resolution	bullying prevention
cafeteria menus	technology to purchase
course offerings	evaluation policies
cafeteria menus	field trips
building designs	student-led activism
field trip locations	dress codes
playground improvements	

Qualities of a Good Council Member

friendly
fun
respectful
organized
enthusiastic
positive
problem solver
team player
reliable
good listener