Second Level Student Councils in Ireland:
A STUDY OF ENABLERS, BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS

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SET UP A
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Second Level Student Councils in Ireland:
A STUDY OF ENABLERS, BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS

A research report by The Children's Research Centre,
Trinity College, on behalf of the National Children's Office
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Mr. Brian Lenihan, TD, Minister for Children, with students at the launch of the Student Council leaflet, poster and website on 23 March, 2004.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This report presents the findings of a study carried out by the Children's Research Centre on behalf of the Working Group on Student Councils in Second Level Schools, established by the National Children's Office. The study was funded by the National Children's Office.

- The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase of the research aimed to describe barriers, enablers and supports to the development and operation of student councils in Ireland as perceived by key stakeholders. The second phase of the research profiled three 'Good Practice Models of Student Councils'.

- The findings are based on research conducted with 11 schools in phase one and 3 schools in phase two. Focus group interviews and individual interviews were conducted with students, some of whom were members and also non-members of the student council, teachers, Principals and the Boards of Management including parents. There were a total number of 382 participants in the study.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A STUDENT COUNCIL?

- It is clear that student councils were ascribed a wide and differing number of roles by different groups within the school. This presented many challenges to the student councils.

- Boards of Management and senior management ascribed consultation as the main role of the student council. Management had quite a clear view of what issues they would like to consult students about. Apart from consultative capacity, student councils were viewed as providers of information and as a resource. Student councils were considered by school management as a way to facilitate communication between staff and students and as contributors to the smooth running of the school through organising and helping with events. Student councils were also considered to provide educational opportunities to students and establish wider links with the community.

- Students, on the other hand, saw the councils as having an active role in making the school a better place to be in. Junior students tended to list the important things that they think their council should do. Senior students felt that the council should be trying to influence management decisions through policy and rules.

- Student council members saw their main role as one of action – they talked about representing students' views, changing school uniform, changing food in the canteen, fixing things, dealing with issues, solving problems, helping students, organising events, etc. New school councils, in particular, spoke in these terms.

GENERAL FINDINGS

- One of the most important findings emerging from meeting with Boards of Management was that members had very little knowledge or awareness of the student council in their school. Similarly, in quite a number of schools, staff did not seem to be aware of the student council at all. In the schools where the council was particularly active, most teachers said that staff are very positive about the student council and very supportive of it.

- Generally speaking students did not have a very good opinion of their council and were not particularly supportive of it. Council members were aware of this and it concerned them greatly. Students and student council members felt that junior students, in particular, were

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not represented adequately. They felt that communication with the student body must be improved, both in terms of accessing their views and providing feedback. Raising the profile of the student council with students was considered a means by which the relationship with the student body could be improved.

- Establishing a student council is a big project and it needs a lot of time from the teacher who has been assigned the role of setting it up. The main challenges associated with establishing a council were educating the whole school about what a student council is, recruiting interested students, clarifying the role of the council with new members and how it will function on a day-to-day basis. Students in all three schools which were establishing a council assumed that they would run into difficulty with the teaching staff or management.

- Training was considered to be an important factor in preparing the council to function, and it should happen before the ground rules are established so the council is involved in this process.

- A number of issues related to the internal working of the council which impact on how well it operates were raised. These included how the council was made up – the size and whether junior students were represented on the council; resources; commitment of council members; maintaining enthusiasm and continuity; lack of skills amongst council members; the student council not grasping empowerment; pressure on senior students and leadership.

- The election process was also reported as very important. Councils which were mainly elected by students but had some teacher input into the election of council leaders seemed to be the most effective, as the council members were sanctioned by students and staff. There was more commitment from council members if the election process was seen to be fair and involved nominees demonstrating their interest in the council.

- The issue of whether junior students should be represented on the council was often discussed, and a number of schools opted not to include students from 1st and 2nd year in the council, but to have senior cycle students represent them. Junior students in these schools however did not feel that they were represented or their views valued and taken into account.

- In schools where there was a prefect system as well as the student council some tensions were evident. It was not always clear what the distinct role of each group was and how these two groups should relate to each other.

- Many students and student council members perceived that the attitudes of staff, and the Principal in particular, were obstacles to the council completing projects for a number of reasons, including the council having little status within the school and their role being undefined. They had a number of suggestions for improving the relationship with staff and management, for example, by direct communication.

- Communication with the Board of Management was also considered important by many students. The views of members of Boards of Management/Governors to have a student on the Board differed widely. Principals generally had an open mind about having a student on the Board, although there were considerations. Teaching staff had widely differing opinions, especially as teachers are not even represented on the Board of Management in some sectors.

ADVANTAGES OF A STUDENT COUNCIL

- Despite the many challenges associated with the operation of student councils, there were many advantages reported about having a student council in the school. These were mainly related to positive school atmosphere and creating a caring school environment

which is supportive and inclusive. The student council was considered to be a vehicle for student participation. In some schools, this participation was reported to have a beneficial impact on issues such as discipline, bullying and staff-student relations. It was also reported that the student council provided students with educational opportunities and an interactive learning environment. Students could develop communication and leadership skills as well as responsibility and accountability. The student council was also seen as a valuable resource to management, teachers and other students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- The two main factors for the successful operation of a council are:
  - Shared understanding of the role of the council - the council's authority, position and routine must be clear to staff and students alike.
  - Whole school ethos - the student council must have a high profile in the school. There must also be systematic election processes and communication procedures with students, staff, parents and Boards of Management.

- The main supports identified by members of student councils were the Liaison Teacher, support from management, staff and the student body. Student councils need to be a visible group within the school and need to feel they are valued and respected and that they have a fundamental part to play in daily school life. It is essential that the council is seen to achieve something soon after it has been established. Councils must be supported in setting tangible and realistic goals which will improve the school and build confidence in the council.

- Raising the profile of the council is crucial to improving support from students and staff. Management need to allow the student council to raise their profile by allowing them to have a student and staff noticeboard, a suggestion box, a page in the school newsletter, a website, etc.

- Student councils must be representative of the whole student body. If having representatives from each class makes the council too large to manage, an alternative system, such as having an executive committee, or having a junior and senior council should be considered.

- The election process is an important way to raise awareness among staff of the student council. The election process must be seen to be fair and democratic.

- Councils must be supported to create a pupil-led agenda, not tightly prescribed by the Principal, which includes both pupils' immediate concerns and school policy issues.

- The role of the student council must be clearly stated in a Student Council Constitution agreed by school management and students. Procedures related to council structure; elections; meeting formats; communication; the removal of council members from the council must be stated and adhered to.

- Councils need to be given an allocated time to meet on a regular basis. Time needs to be allocated for council members to access student views and to feed back to students on the activities and progress of the council.

- Clear lines of communication are essential to the council being effective. Systematic communication procedures for communication with students, staff, management and other structures in the school must be established.

- The main person involved in establishing a council and the main support to the student council once it has been set up is the Liaison Teacher. The Liaison Teacher imust have structured access to senior management to speed up decision-making. It is important that Liaison Teachers are supported in their role through training and networking.

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- Training is an important support for councils as it will provide members with the skills they need to operate effectively, manage meetings, come to consensus about issues, organise activities, access views and represent views and negotiate with management. It will also provide the council members with the opportunity to bond and build relationships.

- Links between the councils and other structures in the school and community should be forged. For example, the parents' councils could actively support the student council through lobbying on their behalf and helping them to organise events. Student councils should also try to establish contact with student councils in other schools in their locality.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF STUDENT COUNCIL SUPPORT SERVICE

- The establishment of a support service for student councils would be very beneficial. Such a support service could provide information and resources to schools who want to set up a student council and to student councils and Liaison Teachers which are already operating. It could also co-ordinate support provided by existing services and provide whole-school training.

- For councils to operate effectively, they need support from school management. This support takes the shape of regular communication and the provision of resources such as time and space within the school. The Student Council Support Service could also raise the profile of student councils with school management.

- The establishment and co-ordination of regional and national networks of councils would raise the awareness of students and staff of the 'bigger picture' and facilitate contact between councils, providing councils and Liaison Teachers with support and training.

- A Student Council Support Service would also facilitate contact with other organisations internationally.

- Primary schools should also be supported in establishing student councils.

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Emer Ní Chuagáinn, member of the Student Council Working Group, speaking at the launch of the Student Council leaflet, poster and website on 23 March, 2004.

1. OVERVIEW

This report presents the findings of a study carried out by the Children's Research Centre on behalf of the Working Group on Student Councils in Second Level Schools, established by the National Children's Office. The purpose of the Working Group is to encourage the establishment of effective and democratic councils in all second level schools in the country. The definition of a student council agreed by the Working group is:

'A student council is a representative structure for students only, through which they can become involved in the affairs of the school, working in partnership with school management, staff and parents for the benefit of the school and its students.'

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase of the research was conducted in May 2004. It aimed to describe barriers, enablers and supports to the development and operation of student councils in Ireland as perceived by key stakeholders. The second phase of the research was conducted in January 2005. It profiled three 'Good Practice Models of Student Councils'.

The main objectives of the research project were:

1. TO EXAMINE CONTEMPORARY THINKING ON STUDENT COUNCILS;
2. TO DESCRIBE THE OPERATION OF STUDENT COUNCILS IN IRELAND;
3. TO IDENTIFY ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO GOOD PRACTICE IN THE ESTABLISHMENT, DEVELOPMENT AND OPERATION OF STUDENT COUNCILS AS PERCEIVED BY MANAGEMENT, TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND OTHER KEY PERSONNEL;
4. TO IDENTIFY WAYS IN WHICH STUDENT COUNCILS CAN PLAY A MEANINGFUL ROLE IN SECOND LEVEL SCHOOLS;
5. TO MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT HOW STUDENT COUNCILS CAN BE EFFECTIVELY SUPPORTED;
6. TO MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE TRAINING NEEDS OF ALL STAKEHOLDERS.

The findings are based on research conducted with 11 schools in phase one and 3 schools in phase two. Focus group interviews and individual interviews were conducted with students, students who were members and also non-members of the student council, teachers, Principals and the Boards of Management including parents. The study was funded by the National Children's Office.

SCHOOL SELECTION FOR PHASE 1

Schools were identified using data compiled by the Statistics Office in the Department of Education and Science. This data catalogued all second-level schools in the Republic of Ireland by type, size and by gender. Schools were selected by the following criteria: school type and size; location; gender; fee-paying and boarding schools; schools with and without student councils.

School Type and Size

In order to ensure appropriate representation, schools were firstly selected under the criteria of school type and size. A school's approach to developing a student council is likely to be influenced by its history and management. Therefore each of the four school types was proportionately represented. Similarly the issues for schools are likely to differ according to the numbers of students enrolled in the schools. Schools were categorised according to whether they were small (under 250), medium (251 – 600) or large (601+). Schools in the study included:

- 1 medium sized Comprehensive school
- 1 medium sized Community School
- 3 Vocational Schools (small, medium and large) and
- 5 Voluntary Secondary Schools (1 small, 2 medium and 2 large)
- In addition, one other large Community School participated in the research.

Location

Other criteria which were considered to be important in selecting the schools were location. Three schools were rural, five schools were in a town and three of the schools were in an urban setting. Schools from all over the country were included. There were two schools from Ulster and Connaught, three schools from Munster and four schools from Leinster, including one school in Dublin.

Gender

We wanted to ascertain whether there are different issues for single sex and co-educational schools. There were 7 co-educational schools, 2 boys' schools and 2 girls' schools.

Fee-paying Schools and Boarding Schools

Of the 5 voluntary secondary schools, two were fee-paying and one of these was a boarding school.

Student Councils

It was also our aim to access schools with and without student councils. However, only schools with student councils or in the process of establishing a student council agreed to participate in the research. Three of the schools had set up a council within the last school year. Three schools have had a council set up for over 25 years and five of the schools had set up the council since 1997.

Procedure

After schools fitting the criteria of the research were selected, the schools were telephoned and initial information was sought from school secretaries including the name of the person to whom the letters should be sent. Letters were sent to 18 schools explaining the research project and inviting them to participate. Eleven of these schools were willing to participate. The six who declined did so for a number of reasons, including, for example, that the time of year was unsuitable.

SCHOOL SELECTION FOR PHASE 2

The schools profiling 'Models of Good Practice' were selected from a list of seven schools compiled by members of the Working Group and those involved in Student Leadership Training. Three schools were selected as case studies by the following criteria: democratic student representation; systematic election procedures; regularity of meetings; systematic communication procedures between the student council, students and staff; and student council activities and achievements. The schools were sent a draft of the case study of their student council for their approval.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

Research was conducted with 14 schools in total. In each of the 11 schools in phase one of the project, focus groups were conducted with one group of 2nd year students and one group of Transition Year or 5th year students. Student council members were interviewed in pairs or in a group as appropriate. Teachers, Liaison Teachers and Principals were consulted through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Boards of Management were consulted during their meetings. If that was not possible, members were consulted through a survey questionnaire.

In each of the three schools which participated in phase two of the project, one focus group was conducted with student council members and a group of students from mixed year groups. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the Principal, Liaison Teacher and other teachers within the school.

In total, consultations were conducted with the Principal, and in one case, the Deputy Principal, in each school. Consultations were also conducted with 76 Board of Management members and 41 teachers, including student council Liaison Teachers.

The organisation of the focus groups was left to each school. They were asked to select a random sample of students and not solely students they thought would be able to express themselves well. In total, 251 students were consulted (118 boys and 133 girls) in the 14 schools. Of these, 78 were in Junior Cycle, 78 were in Senior Cycle and 95 were members on their student council. The researchers also attended one student council election and two student council meetings.

TABLE 1: Numbers of participants

PARTICIPANTS		Boys	Girls	TOTAL
Students				
	Junior cycle	36	42	78
	Senior cycle	36	42	78
	Council members (mixed years)	46	49	95
Total Number of Students		118	133	251
Principal and Deputy Principals				14
Teachers				41
Board of Management Members				76
Total Number of Participants				382

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The research team spent one day in each school. Focus groups with students lasted for approximately one hour. Focus groups were conducted with teachers where possible, but most teachers preferred to be interviewed individually. Principals were interviewed individually. Boards of Management were consulted during their meetings. At the first meeting with a Board, the chairperson said that they had not had much time to consider the question of student councils and they would like time to consider it. It was agreed that we would develop a short questionnaire which would be posted to them so that Board members could answer it at their leisure. In a number of schools it was not possible to meet with the Board of Management or Board members or the Board had already had the final meeting of the year by the time the research was conducted. In these schools, Principals forwarded the questionnaires to Board members.

METHODOLOGY

The Children's Research Centre strives to make data collection a process that is attractive to, and enjoyable for, children and young people. Focus group discussions with the young people, made use of participatory techniques, many of which derive from Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) strategies.

Participatory strategies view research participants as 'local experts' and are, therefore, flexible. This means that data collection tools can be modified and adapted according to what best suits the group. PLA facilitates the perspective of each individual to be represented within the group perspective. PLA methods are designed to facilitate all members of the focus group to have their say and for it to be recorded. This is a particularly useful method for participants in the group who may be shy or nervous of speaking out. As data is collected on paper, participants can decide to 'take back' an opinion or comment if they wish. This is reassuring, especially for young people who are not used to voicing their opinions and are nervous of the implications of speaking out about an issue. Another advantage to PLA research is that the analysis and feedback of findings is conducted with the group. Not only does this ensure that they group is satisfied that their views have been represented, but also reduces the amount of analysis that the researcher is required to do.

In the present study, these techniques involved making two posters with the group. One poster involved the group ranking in order of importance what they thought student councils should do. The other poster involved the students in outlining the challenges they thought student councils experience and a number of solutions for each challenge.

ACCESS AND CONSENT

When the schools had confirmed their interest in participating and a date had been set, they each were sent an information pack including information about the study for students and teachers, a list of sample questions and personal consent forms for all the students. Some schools requested that parental consent forms would also be included in the pack. It was agreed that either the Principal, or in most cases the student council Liaison Teacher[1], would distribute the information to students and teachers prior to the focus groups and interviews so that they would have time to decide if they wanted to participate or not. Before the focus group began, the project was explained again. Quite some time was spent with the students in particular discussing the project, what was expected of them, how it would be recorded and what would happen with the information. It was made very clear that they had

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[1] The Liaison Teacher is the teacher designated to support and co-ordinate the student council. Schools used different terms for this person – Student Council Coordinator, Liaison Officer and so on. For the purpose of this study the term Liaison Teacher will be used throughout.

a choice to participate or not. If they had not yet signed their consent forms, they did so before the focus group began. It became apparent however that students in some schools had not been informed about the research. In these situations, quite a lot of time was spent ensuring that they were informed. It also became evident in some schools that students were not familiar with giving their opinions or being consulted and it took time for them to warm up during the focus groups and realise that there would be no negative implications for them if they voiced their honest opinion.

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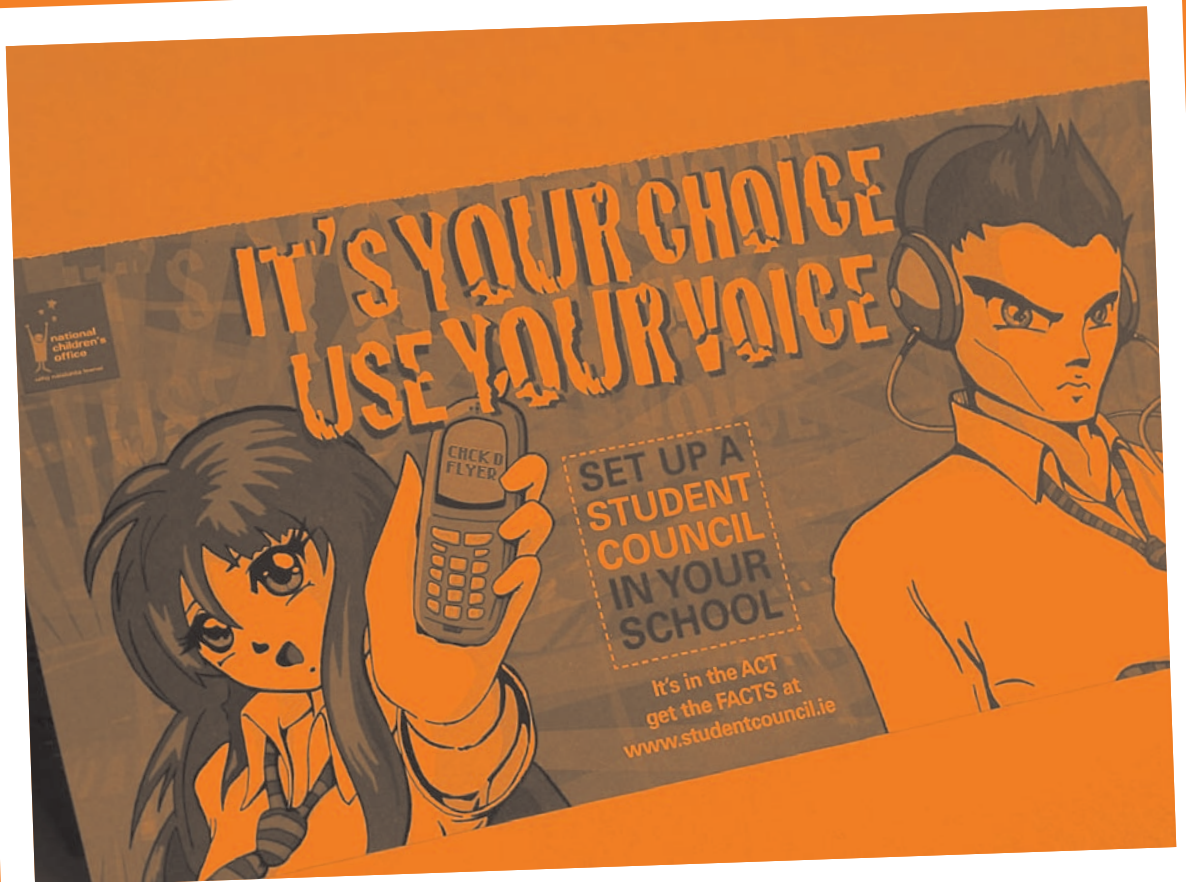
The poster, promoting student councils, designed by the Student Council Working Group.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This project should be set in the context of a heightened awareness of children's rights and needs. The interest in children and young people's position in society has increased over the last number of years, particularly with the publication by the United Nations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. The Convention was signed by Ireland in 1990 and ratified without reservation in 1992. Duerr (2004) argues that the most powerful change wrought by the convention is the way in which children have become visible. Politicians, media, NGOs and broader society feel a clear obligation to include children in their respective public domains.

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S STRATEGY, 2000

Firmly rooted in the UN Convention, the National Children's Strategy (2000:16) has at its core a 'whole child' perspective. The Strategy asserts that 'children are active participants in the world which continues to experience increasing change.' The 'whole child' perspective recognises the extent of children's own capacities, the multiple interlinked dimensions of children's development and the complex mix of informal and formal supports on which children rely. It recognises that children's educational success is not just dependent on schooling, but on many factors - social, cultural, intellectual, environmental, and that home, school and community are interlinked.

The first goal states that 'children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.' Student councils provide a way not only for young people to become actively responsible for their education, but also a way for them to voice their views. Through this research, young people were given an opportunity to voice their opinions on student councils and contribute to best practice of their development and operation.

The second goal of the Strategy states that 'children's lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services'. This research contributes to understanding children's lives and it directly contributes to the third goal, which states that 'children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.' Through this research, young people have been actively involved in voicing their opinion and contributing to the development of educational services.

EDUCATION ACT, 1998

One of the aims of the Education Act, 1998 was 'to ensure that the education system is accountable to students, their parents and the state for the education provided, respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society and is conducted in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff, the community served by the school and the State'. Section 27 (1) states that a school board shall establish and maintain procedures for the purposes of informing students in a school of the activities of the school. This means that the board must give feedback to students. It also implies that the board

is responsible for setting up a system for feedback. These procedures established by the board 'shall facilitate the involvement of the students in the operation of the school, having regard to the age and experience of the students, in association with their parents and teachers (2).

Subsection 3 states 'students of a post-primary school may establish a student council'. Furthermore, 'a board of a post-primary school shall encourage the establishment by students of a student council and shall facilitate and give all reasonable assistance to – a) students who wish to establish a student council and b) student councils when they have been established.' Subsection 4 gives a definition of what a student council should do:

'A student council shall promote the interests of the school and the involvement of students in the affairs of the school, in co-operation with the board, parents and teachers.'

Although subsection 3 states that students may establish a student council and that this should be encouraged and facilitated by the board, subsection 5 goes on to state that 'the rules for the establishment of a student council shall be drawn up by the board, in accordance with such guidelines as may be issued by the Minister from time to time, and such rules may provide for the election of members and the dissolution of a student council.' This takes the impetus for forming and operating a student representative body out of the hands of students and places the student council firmly in the hands of the Board of Management.

WHAT IS A STUDENT COUNCIL?

In 2002, the Department of Education and Science published guidelines to provide practical guidance to school management, teachers and students in the establishment and operation of student councils. It defined a student council as:

'A representative structure through which students in a post-primary school can become involved in the affairs of the school, working in partnership with school management and staff and parents for the benefit of the school and its students (2002:8)'.

It stated that the 'establishment of a council is not an end in itself, but rather offers all concerned an enhanced means of building partnership and effective communications within the school.' The Working Group on Student Councils in Second Level Schools amended this definition slightly by stating that a 'student council is a representative structure for students only'.

Student Councils and Other Student Bodies in Second Level Schools

In Ireland many schools have student systems operating in their schools. Students in these bodies may be called 'prefects', 'captains' or 'councillors'. It is important therefore to distinguish the difference between a student council and a prefect system for example. Prefects are mostly chosen by school authorities for their academic ability and conformity to the philosophy of the alma mater. This system reflects a hierarchical type of management (O'Gorman, 1998). To be a prefect is considered an honour. Student councils, on the other hand, differ primarily in that students elect the members. They aim to represent student issues and are a voice for students within the school.

The Department of Education and Science guidelines (2002:9) state that students do play a valuable support role for school management in many schools but these arrangements

generally have not been developed as representative structures, and the activities involved may not be appropriate to the work of a student council. The guidelines do not require that schools replace established practices that already work well, but they should adapt current practice to meet the requirements of the Act.

Student Council or Student Union?

The difference between a student council and a union has also been discussed. O'Gorman (1998:184) argues that a student council is not a union, which may conjure up images of confrontation, and that it must assist management and support the school mission statement and ethos. Dowling (2003:31) furthermore states that 'it is not a student group to run a unit of the school, a body to gripe about teachers, an organisation to change everything and finally not a power base for student authority.' The Education Act also states that a student council should act in co-operation with the Board of Management, parents and teachers. A student council should not interfere with or detract from the authority of school management or the teaching staff of the school. (Department of Education and Science, 2002: 9).

Student Councils in Other Countries

The OBESSU Country File on School Student Representation (2002) compiles information on student councils in Europe. By and large, the situation in each country is quite different. In many countries, the student councils feed into a bigger organisation of either regional or national student councils or youth organisations. Although some countries have very good systems in place, very few organisations believe their opinions are really listened to, although mechanisms are in place for them to be heard. Often student representation appears to be tokenistic. This seems to be a crucial question - what kinds of structures really facilitate pupil power? Is it partnership? Is it equality of respect? Is it solely about power through numbers? Or is it about having realistic aims and strategic lobbying?

Respondents from a large number of countries reported that effectiveness depends on the school Principals' willingness to listen. Also, quite a number of student councils include staff and parental representatives and quite a few countries have students on school Boards of Management. In the UK, however, there is a law that forbids having students as members of governing bodies of secondary schools as these bodies have a lot of authority.

Student councils have achieved much in other European countries. In Belgium, the VSK (Vlaamse Scholierenkoepel) lobbied successfully to make the math curriculum easier in secondary schools. In Finland, students were involved in developing the matriculation examination. They argue that one of the reasons for their success is that 1/3 of upper secondary school students are members of the organisation - there is political strength in numbers. Also, the conservativeness of the union has also resulted in political esteem. In Liechtenstein, the SOS (Schülerorganisation des Liechtensteinischen Gymnasiums) started an evaluation of the school's quality, the learning atmosphere and the teachers' performance. In some countries, students have also had input into the education system.

In the United States, the National Association of Student Councils (NASC) has been supporting student councils since 1931. It works under the auspices of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). NASC supports state associations of student councils in 50 states and all Canadian provinces, Puerto Rico, Central America and the Caribbean, and organises an annual conference with host schools around the USA. There is no obligation on schools to set up a student council but most high schools and junior high schools have a council. Some elementary schools have one also. Some of the student councils concentrate on student activities such as dances, rallies and assemblies. Others have broader remits and are involved in school policy issues, curriculum and hiring and the evaluation of teachers. One of the main difficulties for student councils, according to NASC, is staff attitudes to the councils.

Student representative councils (SRC) are very common in Australia. Most high schools and some primary schools have SRCs. The New South Wales Department of Education and Training also has a Student Representative Council which represent the views of students in New South Wales government secondary schools. It consists of 22 members, meets once a term and is consulted on student issues by senior officers in the Department, other government organisations, business and community groups. Minutes summaries from these term meetings are distributed to all government secondary school SRCs. A working party of students from the New South Wales SRC also organise an annual conference for participants from the 40 districts in New South Wales.

The Australian student participation newsletter, Connect, includes a supplement for PASTA – the Professional Association of Student Representative Council Teachers/Advisors. PASTA aims to serve, promote and represent S.R.C. teacher advisers at school, region, state and national levels. It also aims to provide the opportunities for teacher advisers to develop their expertise in promoting student leadership, participation and representation.

The Canadian Association of Student Activity Advisors (CASAA), established in 1985, is another such organisation which aims to promote and develop student leadership and activities within Canadian high schools.

The 1st International Student Representative Conference (ISRC) together with the 1st International SRC Adult Advisors Conference, held in Australia in 2000, was originated by one of the PASTA co-founders. A number of organisations including NASC, CASAA, and PASTA supported this conference. Topics of discussion at the conference included 'Celebrating our cultural heritage'; 'Challenges facing young people in the 21st Century'; 'The Environment: conserving our future'; 'The media, political process and you' and 'ISRC: It's structure, function and future' (PASTA, 2001). The 2nd conference was held in Canada in August 2004 hosted by CASAA.

WHY A STUDENT COUNCIL?

There are many reasons put forward about why student councils should be promoted. The main arguments stem firstly from the changing attitudes towards children and young people in society, and the increasing need to encourage and promote youth participation. In conjunction with this, there have been various changes in the approach to education, which in Ireland are reflected in recent policy documents such as Charting our Education Future: White Paper on Education (1995). Another of the main arguments is that student councils can support school effectiveness through assisting in management, encouraging higher achievement and learning, improving staff and student relationships and through promoting inclusiveness and better discipline.

Changes in Societal Attitudes Towards Young People

Student councils promote the increasing awareness of young people's rights and reflect a changing way of thinking about children and young people. In Ireland prior to the 1960s, children were thought of in terms of their functional capacity. The focus was on a respect for authority and accepting the roles assigned to them by their parents (Devine, 1999). This way of thinking about young people has changed gradually over the years and the focus has turned towards respecting children and young people's rights as people and involving them in decision-making and encouraging their full participation in society. O'Gorman (2004:11) argues that by 'the inclusion of student councils in the Education Act, the Department was clearly stating that it wanted students nationally to be informed and consulted on a more formal basis regarding school decision-making. This was now implied as the 'right' of the student.'

Youth Participation, Democracy and Citizenship

With the growing interest in youth rights, there has been considerable concern about the lack of youth interest and involvement in the political sphere. Research by the National Youth

Council of Ireland has shown that in 1999, almost 2/3 of people between 18 and 25 did not vote in the local and European elections. Furthermore, young people in the 12-17 age bracket also seemed to be losing interest in voting. If there was a general election tomorrow and they were allowed to vote, 26% said they would not vote, the main reason being that politics is corrupt and that the political system is not relevant to young people (NYCI, 2000). The implications for democracy in Ireland if this trend continues are disturbing. The National Youth Council of Ireland argues that student councils are a way of harnessing young people's participation. Student councils provide young people with a way of learning about democracy as well as acting as student representatives.

The Council of Europe, too, through its programme 'Education for Democratic Citizenship', argues that student councils realise the need for direct political awareness and learning about democracy through experiencing it. The Declaration and Programme adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 1999 stressed the fundamental role of education in promoting the active participation of all individuals in democratic life at all levels: local, regional and national. One of the key issues identified in Section 3.6 is learning democracy in school and university life, including participation in decision-making and the associated structures of pupils, students and teachers. In 2002, the Committee of Ministers recommended to Member States that some of the educational objectives were to implement educational approaches and teaching methods which aim at learning to live together in a democratic society. They list competencies which this education would provide including 'settle conflicts in a non-violent manner', ' argue in defence of one's viewpoint', 'listen to, understand and interpret other people's arguments'; 'recognise and accept differences'; 'shoulder shared responsibilities' and 'develop a critical approach to information' (Section 2). Acquisition of these competencies could be through active participation of pupils, students, educational staff and parents in democratic management of the learning place, in particular, the educational institution; and through the promotion of the democratic ethos in educational methods and relationships formed in the learning context through promoting learner-centred methods.

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In the UK, approaches to young people's personal and social learning in education have been under review. The Crick Report (1998) recommended the statutory introduction of citizenship education into schools. It also stressed active learning approaches in citizenship education, strongly endorsing school councils. Interestingly, Crick did not recommend that school councils be made a requirement under Government policy because he did not want to 'overload the bending backs of so many teachers' (Crick, 2000, 81).

From September 2002, citizenship as a school subject has been compulsory in all second level schools in England (The National Curriculum Citizenship Order 2002). The citizenship curriculum does not specifically mention student councils, however the Department of Education and Employment says that student councils are a productive way of teaching the new subject. Dobie and MacBeath (1998) argue that pupil councils provide pupils with an experience of citizenship. The major benefits of having a pupil council were encouraging pupils to take responsibility in the life of the school, improving attitudes to school and providing insights for school staff to help them manage the school more effectively. Clay (2001:9) argues that 'student participation takes many forms, but the single common feature is a structure that gives students the opportunity to take part in decision-making about real issues, enabling them to develop various skills'. He also argues that in schools with effective student councils, a significant number of students talk of having a growing interest in politics and government as a result of their experience of participation in democratic processes.

Davies (1998: 27) advocates caution though in placing too much emphasis on the benefits of student councils preparing young people for political involvement. She argues that 'the philosophy of a school council is as a preparation for political life; but it cannot prepare for all the micro-politics that young people are likely to encounter.' Duerr (2004:9) states that 'teaching and learning about democracy will fail unless it takes place within a democratic

framework and environment'. Dobie and MacBeath (1998: 1) argue that student councils must be accompanied by a deeper school ethos if they are to be effective as a learning arena for democracy and citizenship. They argue that the 'hidden curriculum' of school shapes young people's beliefs and values. Schools are in a sense mini-societies with their own rules, norms and values. Schools model a way of life, and are an arena for experiences which last a lifetime.

Changes in Irish Education

In conjunction with the issue of increasing youth participation we have in Ireland a dramatic change in the approach to education. There is an increasing interest in democratising education and in developing new ways of management based on collaboration and partnership.

In Ireland the White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future* (1995) states that the key considerations which underpin the formulation and evaluation of educational policy and practice are the promotion of quality, equality, pluralism, partnership and accountability. O'Gorman (2004) found that student councils would support these five key considerations.

Currently, Civic, Social and Political Education is offered at Junior Cycle level; this course aims to educate students about citizenship and democracy and the importance of active, participative citizens to the life of the state and all its people. It also aims to encourage and develop the practical skills which enable pupils to engage in active, participatory social interaction and to adopt responsible roles within a democratic society.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is in the process of developing a new Senior Cycle. It envisages that by 2010 senior cycle students will be involved in aspects of school organisation and policy development such as the school behaviour code, the school dress code and health-promotion policies. It envisages that the relationships between students and teachers and students and school management are characterised by trust and engagement. It is also hoped that subjects such as Civic and Political Education will have been introduced at senior cycle (NCCA, 2003).

One of the key considerations outlined in the White Paper on Education has been discussed in the context of student councils is partnership. The Department of Education and Science guidelines (2002: 8) state that a 'student council provides opportunity for students to engage in a structured partnership with teachers, parents and school managers in the operation of their school'. Similarly, Clay (2001:10) argues that 'student councils succeed only if schools have a vision of students as active partners in their own education rather than just recipients of it'. O'Gorman (2003) discusses partnership in the context of the UN Convention on the rights of the child and how young people have a right to partnership. Dowling (2003:42) argues that 'it is the partnership model, in which all parties, the Principal, the staff and the students work collaboratively to build student engagement that leads to increased school effectiveness.'

School Effectiveness

One of the main arguments which seems to be proposed by much of the literature is that pupil involvement facilitates school effectiveness. The Department of Education and Science guidelines (2002:8) argue that students have a valuable contribution to make to the effectiveness of their school and their involvement in the operation of the school is itself a valuable part of the education process. Student councils can create a sense of ownership of the school and its activities among the student population. Dowling (2003:1) states that 'the fundamental purpose of student engagement within the school community is to enable the school to achieve and maintain the highest possible level of effectiveness in meeting the educational needs of its pupils in a culture that is characterised by change.' Monahan (1999) argues that participation, responsibility and accountability can all be given to students with the creation and operation of Student Councils. In Dowling's study (2003), two schools involved the student council in the change in uniform and both Principals stated that this process has alleviated the issues surrounding the proper wearing of the school uniform in both schools.

Higher Academic Achievement and Learning

School councils are accepted as contributing significantly to higher achievement (Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995). Hannam (2001:5) showed that some schools in England which encourage significantly more student participation than others have better GCSE results. He states that contrary to popular belief, more democratic schools do not suffer in exams (due to distraction from them), on the contrary 'it appears that some students who might otherwise give up on school learning develop a renewed sense of purpose in an environment that raises their self esteem through the sharing of trust, responsibility and participation in decision-making'. Smyth's (1999) comparative study of schools in Ireland indicates that students tend to do better academically and are less likely to drop out when they are more integrated into the school.

Monahan (1999:7) argues students are at the heart of the learning endeavour. The student needs to be appropriately involved in all aspects of the learning environment as many areas impinge on effective learning, e.g. curriculum development, code of behaviour, exam policy etc. Titman (1995) found that where students did have a real rather than a tokenistic say in the planning and developing of the school environment, their attitudes towards school and themselves as effective learners significantly improved. Alderson (2000) found that in her sample of 45 secondary schools in England, half had student councils. These divided equally into schools where most students perceived the councils as 'making the school a better place' and those where they did not. Overall student attitudes to school and themselves as learners were most positive in the schools with effective councils and lowest in those with ineffective councils - lower than in schools with no student council at all. Damico and Damico (1993) found that in the USA schools which were more student participative, inter-racial friendships were far more common than in authoritarian schools.

Hannam (1999) discusses the 'aspiration gap', the extent to which the actual practice in schools matches the aims for the student councils. Although many schools would like the student council to be involved in teaching and learning, it is the area where student councils are the least involved. For example, in Dobie and MacBeath's study (1998), over half the schools said that students should have a significant role in this but less than 5% actually said they did so.

Better Discipline

It is also argued that student participation can support better discipline in schools. Jeffs (1995) argues that if schools enabled young people to contribute to the school's management and decision-making procedures many of the administrative and behavioural problems that dominate the lives of many teachers would diminish. Brandes and Ginnis (1990) argue that behaviour is better when schools for example, treat pupils fairly and with respect, strive to build co-operative rather than antagonistic teacher-pupil relationships, give pupils responsibility and rights to active participation and ensure that teachers themselves provide good models of behaviour.

Davies' (1999) research explored the relationship between levels of pupil exclusion and the presence in a school of participatory structures such as school councils. Basically the research was looking at whether giving pupils a voice in the running of the school would help to promote inclusion and reduce the behaviour problems that led to them being 'excluded'. The study identified a number of ways in which school councils could help to reduce exclusions:

- Directly – through peer monitoring of individual children at risk of exclusion, socialising into the norms of behaviour; and peer support or advocacy for individual children, enabling bullying or other problems to be shared.
- Semi-directly – by generating codes of conduct and anti-bullying policies which are seen as owned by the pupils; pupil inspired ideas to minimise behaviours associated with exclusion, particularly with regard to creating an adult, dignified and caring environment.

■ Indirectly - through conveying to pupils and parents that 'children are listened to and are treated with respect' and 'children should 'look out' for each other and be able to express grievances'.

The most interesting thing about these examples is that student councils may be actively involved in monitoring behaviour and providing advocacy for individual children.

Atmosphere and Relationships in the School

Results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000 were used to compile information about student engagement with school. Engagement is used to refer to students' attitudes towards school and their participation in school activities. The term disengaged is used to characterise students who do not feel they belong at school and have withdrawn from school activities in a significant way. At school level students' sense of belonging and their participation tend to go hand in hand and are closely related to school performance, suggesting that schools with high levels of engagement also tend to have high levels of academic performance. However, a considerable portion of students with comparatively high academic performance still report a low sense of belonging. The research showed that in Ireland, 19.4% of students reported a low sense of belonging (in comparison: Sweden 17.7%, Belgium 31.6%) and 17.8% reported low participation (on comparison: Sweden 23.8%, Belgium 14.1%).The research showed 'there are many students who lack a sense of belonging at school and do not participate fully in school activities'. It argues that 'these students would likely benefit from school policies and practices that increased their sense of belonging and participation' (OECD, 2003:34).

The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study, sponsored by the World Health Organisation (WHO), has shown that an individual's health status is at least partially determined by the strength and supportive style of relationships developed in the social context of school. Lack of academic achievement and poor peer acceptance can result in a decrease in positive health outcomes and an increase in risk behaviour (Currie et al., 2004). It is argued that there is a need to prioritise school activities that promote bonding and prevent bullying and hostile attitudes towards peers (2004:50). It is argued that giving 'all young people a greater say in decision-making on learning objectives and methods to achieve them may result in their taking more interest in and greater responsibility for their school work.' (2004: 50).

As Monahan (1999) argues students hugely influence the morale and climate of the school. A student council can contribute to students having a feeling of ownership of the school, which can therefore contribute to a positive school atmosphere. It boosts student morale and contributes to a positive student-teacher relationship. It provides a forum for student views and increases the level of belonging which reduces instances of disaffection among students. It provides opportunities for personal development and it is useful. Clay (2001) shows how student councils can benefit the school as a whole by improving the quality of life for all members. It argues that viewing students as partners helps the school to become a more effective learning organisation. Also Davies (1998) shows how councils are used by the school as a way of mediating problems between students (albeit in the smaller schools).

WHAT MAKES A GOOD STUDENT COUNCIL?

A review of many international case studies of student councils identified factors that both help and hinder effective student councils (Davies, 1998; Dobie and MacBeath, 1998; Hannam, 2001; Obessu, 2002; Taylor and Johnson, 2002). These are summarised and outlined below. Dobie and Macbeath (1998: 1) in their study of student councils in Fife found that there were many different models of student council. 'There is no hard evidence to suggest that one mode is better than another. It is more likely that different models will fit different contexts and that experimentation, networking of good ideas and identification of successful innovation will pay dividends.'

Essential factors for a successful council included:

- A democratic election process;
- Regular meetings;
- Pupil-led agendas;
- Action seen to be taken on pupil suggestions;
- Effective feedback and communication procedures and the involvement of senior management;
- High profile in the school.

There are many factors which enable student councils to operate effectively. Good communication systems within the school are considered to be one of the most important.

- Inclusive structures and lines of communication through class councils, year councils or circle time, so that an individual voice can be heard;
- Regular student consultation is facilitated by the school - each class may have a student council book for notes to and from the council;
- Feedback to students from student council meetings should be immediate;
- Links should exist between the students' council and the teachers, parents and the school board or governors.

One of the other most important factors is that enough time is provided to student councils to operate.

- Frequent meetings and immediate feedback;
- Meetings should be in lesson time and not in free time if they are to have status and credibility;
- Rotation of student council meetings so that the same class is never missed.

Davies found that there seemed to be an obvious connection between the frequency of meetings of the school council and its impact on school life. Also the timing of meetings has been recognised as an important factor (Davies, 1998; Dobie and MacBeath, 1998; Hannam, 2001). Davies (1998:23) states that the timing of meetings has key psychological and practical implications. 'Having meetings after school or at lunchtime puts the school council on the same footing as a club; using lesson time puts it on the same footing as the National Curriculum'. She also states that co-operation of staff is needed about students missing lessons, making up work and so on. Teachers have to see it as an important contribution to learning, and not imply to pupils that they have to 'waste' a lesson.'

In terms of day-to-day operation, the following issues are important:

- Staff representative on council also needs to be in an authoritative position - not a new or young member of staff – and committed;
- Student council members need to have good ideas and the will to act on them;
- A wide-ranging agenda, not tightly prescribed by the head teacher, which includes both pupils' immediate concerns and school policy issues including matters that affect teaching and learning - aspiration gaps must be carefully monitored and discussed;
- There must be support from a majority of the teachers and absolutely essentially the head teacher;
- Pupils and teachers, especially link teachers, need training and support in their democratic roles.

Some factors external to the school environment have also been identified as helping student councils operate effectively:

- Financial support;
- Laws guaranteeing student representation;
- Real support from government, as opposed to tokenistic support;
- Being taken seriously by the public;
- Working together with other organisations towards a goal.

Factors that hinder student councils operating effectively include:

■ Lack of time for students to be committed and active;
■ Dependence on the willingness of the Principal and on the good will of teachers;
■ Not being taken seriously and having to prove oneself responsible to school staff and Board of Management before being taken seriously;
■ Adults looking for action, without giving students power;
■ Parents having stereotypical views.

There are also factors related to student council relationships with the student:

■ An initial adverse pupil experience of the council;
■ Lack of support and motivation from students;
■ Lack of competent members;
■ Maintaining continuity in representatives;

PARTICULAR ISSUES FOR STUDENT COUNCILS IN IRELAND

This section will review research conducted on student councils in Ireland. Although research has collected quantitative data from both teachers, Principals and students, most of the qualitative data has been gathered through teachers. There have been two sets of guidelines published on how student councils can be established, operate effectively and supported (Department of Education and Science, 2002; NYCI; 2001). A number of other authors have also produced guidelines (Monahan, 1999; O'Gorman, 1998).

There have been two surveys of the numbers of student councils in Irish second level schools. The most recent was conducted in 2004 by the Department of Education and Science. Out of 744 second level schools in the country, 561 had a student council (see table). The survey did not collect any data about the structure or format of the council, therefore these figures must be viewed with caution.

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TABLE 2: Numbers of student councils in second level schools in January 2004

TYPE OF SCHOOL		COUNCIL	NO COUNCIL	SUB-TOTAL	TOTAL
Comprehensive		62.5% (10)	37.5% (6)		16
Community		81.1% (60)	18.9% (14)		74
Vocational		70.6% (175)	29.4% (73)		248
Voluntary	Boys	79.3% (88)	20.7% (23)	111	406
	Girls	74.7% (109)	25.3% (37)	146	
	Co-ed	79.8% (119)	20.1% (30)	149	
		561 (75.4%)	183 (24.6%)		744

Statistics: Courtesy of Department of Education and Science

Of 16 comprehensive schools, 10 had student councils and 6 did not have student councils (1 was in the process of establishing a council). Of 74 community schools, 60 had a student council and 14 did not (3 were in the process of establishing a council). Of 248 Vocational schools and colleges, 175 had a student council and 73 did not have a council (16 schools were in the process of setting up a council). Of 406 voluntary secondary schools, 316 had a student council and 90 did not have a council (26 stated they were in the process of establishing one). Of the 316 voluntary secondary schools which had student councils, 88 were all boys' schools, 109 were all girls' schools and 119 were co-educational schools.

Schools in the community sector and co-educational voluntary secondary schools have the highest number of student councils. A larger percentage of boys' voluntary secondary schools have student councils than girls' secondary schools. Comprehensive schools have the lowest percentage of student councils.

A study by the National Youth Council of Ireland (2000) surveyed all the second level schools in Ireland. There was a response rate of only 40% from Principals (300 out of 752 schools). It found that all-girls' schools were more likely to have a student council than all-boys' schools (60% compared to 40%). This is significantly different to the Department of Education and Science survey which indicated that more voluntary secondary boys' schools had student councils than girls'. In 79% of cases, the school Principal was responsible for the establishment of the student council, in only 8% did the students take the initiative. In schools that had student councils, 25% thought they were 'very useful', 44% said that they were 'somewhat useful' and 31% said they were not useful. In schools that did not have a council, 61% of students wanted to set a student council up and 30% said they did not know. 9% said they did not want it.

O'Gorman (2003) conducted research with 91 second level schools in Cork and the views of 5th year students were gathered through 171 questionnaires. Two thirds of these had student councils. The schools most likely to have a student council were large Community and Comprehensive schools. As with the NYCI study, the schools with the longest serving student councils were voluntary secondary girls' schools with a lay Principal.

Sharkey and Guerin (submitted for publication) surveyed the views of 129 female students. They found that first year students perceived the student council to be more beneficial than the fifth year students. When asked if the council was a benefit to the school, 75.6% of first year and 51% of fifth year students answered that it was beneficial, and 65.4% of first year and 53.1% of fifth year students believed that the council did benefit the students. When asked 'is the student council effective?' 57.6% of first year students responded positively compared to 34.6% of fifth year students. Senior students expressed dissatisfaction with the limits of the council's power. They felt that teachers ignored their opinions and suggestions, and decisions were made without taking their views into account. They wanted to be involved in the running of the whole school. First year students wanted the council to organise non-uniform days and special trips, while the 5th years were interested in student participation on the school's Board of Management. Both groups wanted more representatives on the student council and more feedback and involvement from the wider student body.

To date, there has been no survey of the number of student councils in Irish primary schools. McLoughlin (2004) however conducted a case study of the establishment and operation of a student council in a primary school over the course of one year. The structure of the student council in this school was standard – council members were elected by their class, officers were elected within the council and meetings followed an agenda. Issues raised and addressed by this council included policies on food, litter, homework on half days, provision of football goalposts, new football gear for girls and physical classroom environment (hardness of seats and positioning of tables).

Clarity About the Role

The research in Ireland has highlighted a number of particular issues which impact on the successful operation of student councils. O'Neill (1997) emphasises the need for planning, support and commitment for an effective student council. One of the most important issues is that there should be clarity about the role of the student council and realism about what a student council can achieve. Dowling (2003) states that great disparity seemed to exist in his study between how the Principals viewed the role of the student council and what the student council representatives believed their role to be. Similarly, the NYCI study 'Share it with the Rest of the Class' asked Principals and students to outline their top choices of the roles and

activities of a student council. There were considerable differences between the roles assigned by Principals and students. Principals' top choices of the role and activities of a student council were:

1. HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP INTO MATURE, CONFIDENT, INDEPENDENT PEOPLE;

2. ENCOURAGE AN ATMOSPHERE OF CO-OPERATION BETWEEN STUDENTS, STAFF, ADMINISTRATION AND SCHOOL BOARD;

3. ACT AS A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL FROM STUDENTS TO THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION;

4. GIVE STUDENTS AND STAFF THE OPPORTUNITY TO CO-OPERATE ON AREAS OF MUTUAL INTEREST;

5. HELP STUDENTS MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS IN CONNECTION WITH THE RUNNING OF THE SCHOOL;

6. ACT AS A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL BETWEEN ADMIN AND STUDENTS;

7. ACT AS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY;

8. GIVE STUDENTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER;

9. HELP THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRACTICAL ORGANISATION SKILLS AMONG STUDENTS;

10. ENHANCE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE.

For Principals, there was a focus on personal development and good atmosphere. Students' communication to administration was more important than administration communicating to students. A learning experience for democracy was further down the list as was students communicating with each other. In comparison, students' top choices for the role of a student council were:

1. ORGANISE EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES (SPORT, DISCOS, SCHOOL TOURS ETC);

2. ORGANISE FUND-RAISING FOR EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES;

3. RAISE MONEY FOR CHARITY;

4. A WAY FOR SCHOOL STAFF AND STUDENTS TO COMMUNICATE AND WORK TOGETHER;

5. MANAGE SPECIFIC SERVICES FOR STUDENTS;

6. PROVIDE A WAY FOR STUDENTS TO VOICE OPINIONS AND LEARN ABOUT SOCIAL ISSUES;

7. HELPS STUDENTS DEVELOP ORGANISATION SKILLS;

8. MEET/COMMUNICATE WITH THE SCHOOL MANAGEMENT BOARD;

9. ASSIST IN SCHOOL MAINTENANCE;

10. IMPROVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE.

Noticeable comparisons with the Principals' top ten choices are that organising extra-curricular activities and fund-raising for extra-curricular activities were low priority for Principals.

Monahan (1999) surveyed 190 senior students in 7 schools. Four of the schools had councils and three did not. The main functions of the student council according to students was to represent the views of students, to organise events for the students, help first years settle in and take on special projects such as improving locker facilities, involvement in an anti-bullying structure and assisting students with special needs. The most important functions according to students were to represent the views of students, involvement in an anti-bullying structure and assisting students with special needs.

According to Monahan (1999:7) difficulties arise when there is lack of clarity in relation to the three distinct yet linked areas of partnership, responsibility and decision-making. He says that where there is clarity regarding the responsibility and input into decision-making, there is a greater possibility of a positive and productive relationship between partners. Dowling (2003: 43) argues that notions of partnership and collaboration must be accompanied by a clear definition for the context in which they are used. 'Recognising the student as a significant partner in the enterprise of the school requires us to discern with them how their influence and contribution can be respected and integrated into the daily life and direction of the school.'

Browne (1996) identified that there needs to be a clearer role definition for the student council and its members and that adequate preparation and on-going training and development be made available to students. She argued that if school authorities were more aware of the advantages and disadvantages of membership of a student council, they would be more understanding and supportive of the members.

Expectations of What the Student Council Can Do

Walsh (1999) cautions against expecting too much too soon from a council. Duffy and Flynn (1990) found that there were unrealistic and often conflicting expectations of the student councils that lead to frustration and discouragement among the members. They argue that good leadership from among the student body is a real asset to a school. O'Gorman (2003) found that the overall opinion of the working of their own student council was negative. Students were dissatisfied with the way their councils communicated with them. Boys were more negative about their student council than girls. All students gave a negative on 'Management listens to the student council'.

Teachers' Concerns About the Role of the Student Council

Lack of clearly defined roles and expectations for a student council also could contribute to a level of fear among the teachers regarding the breakdown of discipline if there was an increase in the level of student involvement in school matters (Fox, 2000). Teachers in O'Gorman's study also identified transparency and clarity of purpose in the activities of the council as one of the most important factors for the effective operation of a council. Davies (1998) states that 'although it is perhaps impossible to listen to children too much, there is a danger if teachers feel disempowered and bypassed through pupil consultation'. Monahan (1999) gives a number of reasons why there might be opposition to a student council, including previous bad experience of students using the council for 'teacher-bashing' and complaints. It may have raised questions about the traditional understanding of the teacher's role and there may be a perception that students had more influence with the Principal than the teachers. It may have led to a two-tier student body, taken students' energy away from their academic work and unfairly raised expectations of students which led to disillusionment. The NYCI report also lists reasons that there may be reservations about the student council. Individuals may feel threatened by the idea of young people taking an active role in the decision-making process; there may be a fear of the unknown, and a fear of the breakdown of discipline. Duerr (2004:53) found that 'the attitudes of teachers towards pupil participation seem to mirror – at least to a certain degree – their own life experience and socialisation i.e. an authoritarian education system.'

However, it has also been recognised that a student council can play an important role in recognising and supporting the work of teachers (Department of Education and Science, 2002).

Willingness of Principals

In 79% of cases in the NYCI study, the school Principal was responsible for the establishment of the student council compared to only 8% of cases where students took the initiative. Dowling (2003) compared student councils in three schools and argues that the role of the school Principal is of central importance in the establishment and operation of a student council. He argues that the Principal needs to be open and responsive if student engagement is to be effective. 'It is imperative that Principals put in place professional practices that allow parents, teachers and students to have their say in educational change and development in their schools.' (p. 23) He acknowledges that school Principals are often fully engaged with the challenge of implementing the continuous flow of educational reforms cited in recent legislation.

Effective Communication Between Students and School Authorities

The NYCI (2001) argues that communication is the essence of effective student council structures. The main means of communication between the student council and Principal were:

- Attendance at student council meetings by a teacher nominated by the Principal
- Monthly meetings between student council and the Principal
- Direct attendance at student council meetings by the Principal
- Weekly meeting between the student council and Principal
- Written correspondence

The Department (2002) guidelines state that Boards of Management must not only listen but also respond in a meaningful way to the concerns of a student council. In 41% of schools with a student council, a student representative always attends a board meeting and in 17% of cases a student regularly attends (NYCI, 2003).

The Principals involved in the study agreed that while the establishment and operation of a student council brought increased responsibility to students it failed to have an impact on students' own sense of accountability. There are a number of possible reasons for this. A successful student council is dependent on co-operation at all levels within schools. This includes co-operation from the Principal and the school board in the establishment of Councils. There is the suggestion that student councils are not actually given room to exercise responsibility. Dowling (2003: 24) argues that trust must be implicit in the process. 'There must be trust that students, when given responsibility to represent each other, will do so effectively and in the best interests of their fellow students and their school.'

Role of the Liaison Teacher

Dowling's research showed that much of the work of the council came from suggestions put forward by the Principal and mediated through the Liaison Teacher to Student Council representatives. O'Gorman (1998) argues that the Liaison Teacher 'must have respect for the students and know when to advise caution and when to encourage. S/he must be able to steer without taking over, to help the council to develop cohesion, to research ideas, to plan projects and to evaluate performance'. Dowling (2003:30) argues that the Liaison Teacher, or Student Liaison Officer, must ensure a clear line of communication between Council and Staff. However, one of the most common problems for Student Liaison Officers was the lack of time and the pressures of other responsibilities. 'The role of the Student Liaison Officer is often sidelined as a result of low status in formal management hierarchy.' This issue has been identified in many of the case studies internationally (Davies, 1998; OBESSU, 2002). O'Gorman (2003) also found that there appeared to be greater 'hands on' involvement by female co-ordinators. The male teachers expressed the opinion that it 'was up to the students whether the council was successful or not'.

Representation

Another very important area is that of representation. O'Gorman (2004) found that the most important element of a student council identified by teachers was that the council should be truly representative of the whole body. Students in her study were also concerned about the system of representation used on their councils. Dowling (2003) showed that one of the schools in his study had a council with 37 students, and although each class in the school had a student council representative, the executive committee of 12 had 10 members who happened to be in the 'top class.'

A frequent issue which arises is that of senior students having precedence over junior students. The Education Act, 1998, mentions that the school board can take into consideration the age and experience of the students when facilitating their involvement in the operation of the school. Quite a number of schools elect only senior students to the council. Dowling (2003:17) argues that 'justification for not entering into dialogue with children is often made on the assumption that they are incapable or intellectually unable to exercise their rights in a meaningful way.' This assumes that in the absence of entering into dialogue with children, adults will know what is best for them and act in their best interest. It also assumes that children's voice should be listened to if they have something worthwhile or useful to contribute. The notion that ability to represent views effectively is dependent on intellectual capacity or maturity is dashed by the good practicing examples of student councils in primary schools (Davies, 1998). 'Denying some students the right to participate fully on their student council is unfair, and will undermine the credibility of the council in the eyes of many students.' (NYCI, 2001: 24). Dowling (2003) argues that if schools continue to weigh the opinions of seniors over juniors, it will have repercussions in the future. Sharkey and Guerin (submitted for publication) argue that a two-tiered approach to student councils where younger students gain initial experience on the council by dealing with more basic issues, but that they can progress to deal with more serious issues as they move through the school, may be an effective way of managing this issue.

Another question related to representation is whether school staff should be able to veto student nominees in the student council elections. The Department of Education and Science guidelines (2002:15) state that the right of a teacher to veto a nomination should be exercised with caution and only in exceptional cases. Davies (1998: 20) argues that 'the whole procedure of representative democracy is an important learning experience for young people, particularly learning to make choices and living with the implications'. She goes on to argue that 'everyone has to live with the results of an 'unsuitable' person being elected'.

CONCLUSION

One of the critical issues when considering the literature on student councils is the exact role and purpose of a student council. Monahan (1999) importantly points out that although the principle that students should be involved in school decision-making is supported, little is done to actively resource this action. There is more of a leaning towards how a student council can help the school operate effectively rather than how the council can increase the quality of the school experience for students. Although youth participation is advocated, the level to which young people are really involved and represented is questionable. The practical implications of involving young people in decision-making can make true participation difficult. There is a tension between the aspirations of genuine youth participation whilst at the same time concerns about keeping young people in their place. There is still a belief that young people are too young, lack maturity and skills to represent themselves effectively. Students of Deptford Green School pointed out common black spots in the youth consultation process – 'death by consultation', always consulting the same young people, and 'insulting consultation', when adults have no intention of changing a decision (Carnegie Young People Initiative Conference, 2001)

Having reviewed the literature of research on student councils nationally and internationally, the following chapters will review the findings of the research with the schools that participated in this study.

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Rachel Tracey, member of the Student Council Working Group, speaking at the launch of the Student Council leaflet, poster and website on 23 March, 2004.

3. PROFILE OF SCHOOLS AND STUDENT COUNCILS

This section will profile the schools and their student councils that participated in phase 1 of this study[2].

SCHOOL 1 is a medium sized co-educational comprehensive school located in a rural area. The school has three student bodies in the school – the student council, prefects and a mentoring system run by 5th year students for 1st years. The student council was established at the time of the Education Act. It has a Constitution. There are 13 students on the council. Each year group elects one boy and one girl. Students elect council members through a ballot, but teachers vet the nominees. In addition, a representative is elected from the prefects, from the mentors and there is a sports representative. There is a chairperson, a secretary, a treasurer and a public relations officer.

The council meets about twice a month although they have met less often since Christmas. The main activity of the council in 2003-2004 was fundraising for charity and the local community. Previously they had been involved in the whole school planning and they had been consulted about new rules and policies which were being drafted. They started a recycling scheme in the canteen, and they conducted a survey of what foods students would like. They were working towards getting a 'suggestion box'.

The prefects have supervision roles and lunchtime duties. They operate on a more day-to-day level whereas the council deals with problems over a longer time. Prefects also meet with management to discuss student views. It is not quite clear how the council relates to the prefect system.

SCHOOL 2 is a medium sized co-educational community school in a small town. The school has a student council and a prefect system. After the prefect system was introduced, it was decided there should be a student council as well, which was established around 4 years ago. There are 14 members on the student council. Each class from 3rd year onwards elects its own representative. The senior representatives also represent 1st and 2nd years. Interested students nominate themselves and the list of nominees is put up in the staff room. However, very rarely is a nominee not allowed to go forward for election.

Meetings last for about 15 minutes and happen at lunchtime. The student council do a lot of fundraising for charity and assist other teachers with projects. They wanted to get out of this 'mould' and be more effective, so in 2003-2004 they conducted a survey with students from 3rd year upwards on how they could be more effective. They had also been working on trying to stop smoking in the toilets.

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[2] Some of the schools in this study had only five years, which they called 1st to 5th year. However for the purpose of this study, we will use the terms 1st year to 6th year and Transition Year (TY) to denote 4th year students.

The prefects are 6th year students responsible for mentoring 1st years, corridor duty and being involved in the school open night or information night. The prefects do a lot of the tasks that were suggested to the student council, so it is not quite clear what the student council's role is. The Principal felt very strongly that she would use the prefects as a resource as they are more mature and easier to work with than the student council.

SCHOOL 3 is a small co-educational vocational school in a rural area. When the current research was conducted, the school was just in the process of setting up the student council. There is a peer mentoring system in the school run by 6th year students. The school management had previously tried to set up a student council for a number of years but it had never before been successful. They were quite surprised that not many students were interested in being involved with the council. Nine students sit on the council. There is a boy and a girl elected from each year and one extra student who wanted to be involved was elected from 5th year.

SCHOOL 4 is a medium sized co-educational vocational school in a small town. The school has a relatively large catchment area from the rural locality. There is a student council and a prefect system in this school. The student council was initiated by a teacher five years ago. For the first two years there was great enthusiasm; however this has declined over the last few years. There are 11 members on the student council. There is a chairperson, two vice-chairpersons and a secretary. Anybody interested in joining the council can get an election form, on which they write down their name. Before they can be nominated, they must have the form signed by three teachers and their year head. Not every class is represented. There are 3 from 1st year, four from 2nd, 1 from 3rd, two from 5th and one 6th year student.

They meet during lunchtimes, four times a year. They were not very active during 2003-2004 although they were involved in developing the mobile phone policy and representatives attended the launch of 'Student Councils' website. They felt that other students think the student council is boring and that all the members are 'all brains'. The prefects are 6th years who look after the first year students and assist management. Students described the prefects as being like 'student police.'

SCHOOL 5 is a large co-educational vocational school in a large town. The student council was established five years ago. It did not come about through the Education Act but through the school development planning process. The idea came through a survey of teachers. There are 34 students on the council elected by each class. The council has a steering committee of 12 including a chairperson, a vice-chair, a secretary, a representative on the Board of Management and a public relations officer. There are also sub-committees. The steering committee is elected from within the council – one boy and one girl from each year group (10 students), one transition year student and one Leaving Certificate Applied student.

The student council and the steering committee meet on a weekly basis. The student council has been involved in bringing in changes in uniform and changes in the school canteen, and improving school facilities. They were also involved in initiating a breakfast club for students who arrive in school early. They have organised various school events and have been involved in drawing up the school's policy on Substance Abuse, Alcohol and Smoking.

SCHOOL 6 is a small, co-educational fee-paying voluntary secondary school located on the outskirts of a town. The student council was established by a student the previous September. There is a prefect system made up by 6th year students who take the roll in the morning, and organise sports events. There are 12 students on the council. One boy and one girl are elected from each class by the students. There is a chairperson, a secretary, an assistant secretary and a public relations officer.

Meetings tend to happen on an ad hoc basis, when someone wants to raise an issue. One of their first tasks was to produce a survey for students to fill in informing the council what students would like them to do. They were trying to get permission for girls to wear trousers and new facilities.

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SCHOOL 7 is a medium, fee-paying voluntary secondary boarding school for boys. The student council was established in the school in the early 1970s at the behest of the students who wished for a wider student representation than the 3 school captains could provide. The council is made up of 13 students from 4th year upwards voted for by students only. The student council is led by the Head Boy and two other Captains from 6th year who are elected by students from 3rd year up. Two representatives are elected by 4th and 5th years. Although there are no juniors on the council, 1st, 2nd and 3rd years elect two 6th years to represent them.

As it is a boarding school, the students get to know each other very quickly and so matters can be discussed as they arise. The council meets formally once or twice a term and the meeting is usually two hours long. Members of senior management sit in on these meetings. The council mainly deals with student issues like bullying, and representatives get allowances or privileges for students in their year. It also has a role in monitoring students' behaviour.

SCHOOL 8 is a medium, voluntary secondary school for boys in an urban area. The student council has been established for over 25 years. There is also a buddy system. There are 19 boys on the student council. Each class up to 5th year elects their own representative. The council is led by four school captains who are selected by interview in 6th year.

The council is involved in making sure the 1st year students integrate well and in fundraising for charity. In 2003-2004 they conducted a survey on the catering services in school. In the past they have been involved in getting better facilities for students.

SCHOOL 9 is a large, voluntary secondary school for girls in an urban area. The school has a student council and a prefect system. The prefect system was established first and then the council was established in January 2004. At this time, the teacher responsible for setting up the council produced packs for the staff explaining the student council and the idea of the student council was discussed in a staff meeting. There are 27 girls on the council. Each class elects their own representative and vice representative.

The council meets every two weeks. They have not yet been able to realise most of their ideas as they have only been established for 6 months, but they did organise a 'no uniform day'. The prefect system is made up of students from 5th and 6th year and their main job is to keep an eye on things at lunch time and collect rubbish.

SCHOOL 10 is a large voluntary secondary school for girls in an urban area. The student council has been established over 25 years. There are 38 students on the council comprising of one representative from each class. In addition, the executive committee is made up of 12 girls from 6th year who are elected by 4th, 5th and 6th year students. Head Girl and Vice Head Girl are elected from these 12 by 5th and 6th year students and teachers. The council meets once a month and the executive committee once a week. The activities of the council change every year. They were planning to organise a disco for 1st years and to make new international students feel more welcome in the school.

SCHOOL 11 is a large co-educational community school in a town. The student council has been established since 1998 and was set up by an interested teacher. There are 30 students on the council. There are representatives from each class and out of this group, seven officers are elected and interviewed, one of which becomes the President.

TABLE 3: School Profile

SCHOOL	TYPE OF SCHOOL	SINGLE /CO-ED	SCHOOL SIZE*	LOCATION**	STUDENT BODIES IN SCHOOL
1	Comprehensive	Co-ed	Medium	Rural	Student council, prefect system and mentor system
2	Community School	Co-ed	Medium	Town	Student council and prefect system
3	Community College	Co-ed	Small	Rural	Student council and peer mentoring system
4	Community College	Co-ed	Medium	Rural	Student council and prefect system
5	Community College	Co-ed	Large	Town	Student council
6	Fee-paying Secondary	Co-ed	Small	Town	Student council and prefect system
7	Fee-paying Boarding Secondary	Boys	Medium	Town	Student council and captains
8	Voluntary Secondary	Boys	Medium	Urban	Student council, captains, and buddy system
9	Voluntary Secondary	Girls	Large	Urban	Student council and prefect system
10	Voluntary Secondary	Girls	Large	Urban	Student council
11***	Community School	Co-ed	Large	Town	Student council

* School size: small (0-250); medium (251-600), large (601+)

** There are two schools each in Ulster, Munster and Connaught and four schools from Leinster including one from Dublin. This is not made explicit in the table as it will make the schools identifiable.

*** Extra school

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TABLE 4: Student Council Profile

	WHEN?	WHO SET IT UP?	NO.	HOW OFTEN DO THEY MEET?	HOW ARE STUDENTS REPRESENTED?	ELECTION OR SELECTION
1	Since 1998	Management	13	Twice a month but can call meetings	Each year group elects a boy and girl. In addition there is a prefect, a mentor and a sports rep.	Elected by students but nominees vetted by teachers.
2	Since 1998	Management	14	Irregularly	Each class in 3rd, 5th and 6th year elects a rep.	Voted by students but teachers can influence inappropriate choices.
3	New	Management	9	Not yet established	A boy and a girl from 1st, 2nd and 3rd year and 3 from 5th year.	Student only election.
4	Since 1998	Management	11	4 times a year but a meeting can be called.	There are 3 from 1st year, four from 2nd, 1 from 3rd, two from 5th and one 6th year.	Nominees must have their form signed by three teachers and their head teachers.
5	Since 1998	Management	34	Council and Steering Committee meet on a weekly basis	One rep from each class.	Elected by students but nominees vetted by teachers. Teachers are involved in electing the representative on the Board of Management.
6	2004	Initiated by a student	12	At least twice a term, but meetings can be called.	One boy and one girl from each class.	Student only election.
7	Over 25 years	Proposed by students	13	Once or twice a term.	The Head Boy and 2 House Captains are voted by 4th, 5th and 6th years. There are two representatives from 4th and 5th year. 1st, 2nd and 3rd years elect two 6th years to represent them.	Student only election.
8	Over 25 years	Teacher	19	Irregularly	3 from each year up to 5th and 4 school captains from 6th year.	Elected by students except for captains who are selected by interview.
9	2004	Management	38	Every two weeks	Each class elects their own rep and vice rep.	Student only election.
10	Over 25 years	Teacher	27	Executive meets every week and the whole council once a month	Each class elects a rep. 12 girls from 6th year are elected by 4th, 5th and 6th year students.	Election by students. Head Girl and Vice Head Girl are elected by students and teachers.
11	Since 1998	Teacher	30	Once a week for 45 minutes	Representatives from each year group.	Election and officers are selected by interview.

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Students attending the launch of the Student Council leaflet, poster and website on 23 March, 2004.

4. THE ROLE OF A STUDENT COUNCIL

One of the first questions we asked participants in the study was 'what is the role of a student council?' We also asked participants 'what do you think a student council should do?' The following chapter reviews the answers to these questions from all the groups of participants: Boards of Management and Governors; school Principals and senior management; teachers; student council members and students in 2nd and 5th year.

Although each group ascribed different roles to the council, the views of Board of Management members, Principals and senior management and teachers were broadly similar. Their responses have been presented below.

VIEWS OF BOARD OF MANAGEMENT, SENIOR MANAGEMENT AND TEACHERS

One of the most important findings emerging from meeting with Boards of Management was that members had very little knowledge or awareness of the student council in their school. This was reflected in focus groups with Boards of Management and also survey responses. One parent said that she had never heard of a student council and wondered what it was. In fact, it was not surprising given that in most schools student issues were never on the agenda for Board of Management meetings. The one exception was the school with a student representative on the Board. Similarly, in quite a number of schools, staff did not seem to be aware of the student council at all. Informal conversations with many teachers in staff rooms revealed that many did not realise there even was a student council in their school. One Liaison Teacher stated:

> 'They [teachers] know it exists, I think they would agree with the value of it. But it really doesn't, in the day-to-day teaching life, it doesn't impact on them and I don't think they'd give any serious discussion. I mean we've never had a serious discussion at staff level about it.'

A Consultative Body

All the participants discussed how a student council should have a consultative role. Board of Management members saw this as the main role for a student council. Students should be consulted prior to implementation of new school policies e.g. uniform, drugs, bullying, games, sports, and activities. This would be useful in terms of collaboration and all-inclusive orientation.

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Principals and senior management valued students' opinions because it helped them manage things on the ground. One Principal referred to the student council as a 'school management team'. Another talked about how the student council gives her another perspective:

'I mean we have one perspective on running the school, the students have a different perspective, and it enables us to see their perspective much better because they get together to discuss issues and then they come to us with the issues, then we have a more overall view or impression of their perspective… whereas you can talk to individual students and you wouldn't necessarily, they wouldn't be representative of the whole student body.'

Gaining students' views is important especially so that management can stay in tune with students:

'It makes it more user friendly to the students… to take their ideas, young people's ideas, they are important, they are our bread and butter at the end of the day and as we advance in years… and as everybody advances in years at least you're keeping in tune with students'.

Principals were more specific about the kinds of issues that they would value student opinions on, for example, attendance policy, uniform and why students were not participating in extra-curricular activities. Many of the Principals also valued students' views on academic issues such as homework policy, timetabling, subject choices and the curriculum. Another issue on which the student council could be consulted was in relation to how students should be dealt with:

'Obviously most of the focus of the student council is on the conditions and life for them, but and even in relation to management, mostly we're trying to focus on how management is treating certain problems and treating certain students. For example, a boy who steals – the student council might take a line that he shouldn't be kept in school because he's a danger to other students. In that sense, they would take a stance on management… as it relates to the boys, as distinct from how it relates to the selection of subjects'.

This consultation would aid the smooth running of the school, especially if students feel they are involved and have a role in decision-making. A number of Principals discussed how formal involvement in policy development will encourage students' compliance with policy:

'I think it gives a …formality to have them involved in procedures, that we have them agreed to it, so that we can always say well… so then hopefully they will see the logic and rationale that we have for the rules, and that may be more clear to bring that to their members.'

Another Principal confirmed this:

'They're a back up to us in decisions we make, now as management of course we have the overall say in decision, but we will always run everything by the student council because even if at the end of the day the student council think differently from us, the perception among the student body is at least we consider their views'.

One teacher also talked about how students are more likely to follow procedures they were involved with:

'If they're involved in drawing things up, I think they see that it's their school too, and that they're owners, we're all owners of this building, of this situation we are all in... if they're involved in something, they're more likely to accept it'.

While some parents on the Board of Management were supportive of the student council having this role and excited about the potential of involving young people

'This is where we are trying to help the young, we're not making the decisions, we have the young people making the decisions for us... rather than the old fashioned idea that this is what we're putting into place and you work around it, we ask them what they want to put into place and we work around it.'

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Others were concerned that the student council would take over if given too much authority:

'Well I don't think they should give them too much authority, especially about school work, homework, uniform, rules and regulations within the school grounds ... if they had a problem with any of those ... that they could go to their reps. But I wouldn't like to see them taking over.'

There was a fear that if they 'took over' rules and regulations would be abandoned:

'Me, personally, I like to see rules and regulations adhered to, because I think it speaks for the school at the end of the day, it's an advertisement for the school...'

The view that the student council should not 'get out of their box' was also expressed by a number of teachers. There was also a fear that the student council would be disruptive and there would be a fear that they would be given too much power. One teacher argued that this was due to a fear of organisation:

'Well at first, I think there was certainly, isn't there always fear of organisation, when people start to get organised, whether it be a political organisation or a group of students, there is fear of that. There was definitely fear and suspicion that in many ways, here we were as a staff facilitating... almost organising a mass rabble, here we were facilitating this mobilisation of student strength...'

Fears about particular individuals being on the council were also expressed, especially 'if you've a couple of characters that are just anti-everything...'

Providers of Information

The student council should not only be a consultative body, it should also provide management with information. The student council should alert management to student concerns of which they might not be aware and also provide management with ideas and solutions to problems that students have, for example, peer pressure. A Deputy Principal in a school which was just establishing a student council hoped the council would alert management to issues like bullying:

'I think as members of the student council, particularly younger students will look up to them. I'm hopeful they will earn respect. The advantage then over us is that they're out there at break time and they see what's happening and going on.... they would be looking out for the problems that they believe themselves happen in the school and they will be the first to bring it to the fore.'

Some members of senior management also felt that the student council should inform management about disciplinary issues, such as bullying or drug taking. One teacher recognised that this can be a difficult task for students:

'I would like to see a policy of openness and transparency ... We would expect them to act like maturing adults, or else our expectations of them might be too much... they're caught between a rock and a hard place.'

A Resource

The student council was described as being one of the working bodies in the school and was compared to the parents' association. It was pointed out that 'we don't think of all the brilliant ideas, students can have the best ideas'. A student council should work in tandem with the management:

'They sometimes forget that they work very much in tandem with the management of the school in order for instance, to carry out the ethos of the school... in order to alert the school authorities if something negative is happening in the school, for achieving certain things for students, acquiring facilities, benefits and privileges.'

The student council can also be involved in organising events:

'They also have a role in our calendar for the school year, they organise events for the other students, they would come to us - coordination; if they wanted to raise issues like half-days, or timetabling.'

However, some teachers expressed concern that the council would not be utilised properly. One member of senior management expressed concern that the 'the council would just be interpreted as being messenger boys'. Another teacher also stated that teachers had to be careful that they did not just use the council to do things for them.

A Communication Channel

The student council was described as a vital channel of communication in the school. The student council should not only provide management with information about opinions of the student body, but should also feedback information to the student body from management. One Principal described how the student council provides a link between management, teachers and non-teaching staff with students:

'I think it has a very important role. I think it's a forum for communication, or a channel of communication, between the students and the staff in the school, and I think it gives the students an opportunity to also meet together to discuss issues that are related, that are directly relevant to them.'

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Teachers in two schools gave an example of how important the student council was in facilitating communication between staff and students. In both schools, the student council had helped alleviate tension during the teacher strikes. One teacher described what happened:

'A few years ago when there was industrial action, management liaised with the student council and things were worked out. The students were going to walk out on one occasion when the teachers were on a go-slow, the liaising helped to keep things nice and calm, and we all co-operated with each other, there was a two way interaction, they played their part, and have done in the four years since the student council was established.'

A Forum in Which Student Concerns Could Be Aired and Addressed

Many teachers felt it was really important that student views are represented and that they have a formal vehicle for their voice:

'I think it's really important that they have a forum to speak and to talk... we're working in an institution, and that they do have some outlet is really helpful.'

Board of Management members also saw the role of the student council as a forum for student concerns to be addressed. The student council can air student difficulties which otherwise might not come to light on behalf of individuals or as a collective:

'As well a hope would be that it would raise issues with us... the students themselves are what it's about and what they raise is of importance to them and it might be something that we don't pick up, so I hope that it would be a platform for them to bring out into the open whatever it is that they are concerned about and then we'll be in a position to do what we can'.

One teacher pointed out those students who are complaining can be directed to the student council:

'You'll always have complaints from first years, so now when complaints come in, in any class you can say 'now, you have your student council rep, put it in writing to your student council rep, they would be more effective than I would be.'

Another teacher pointed out that it also bedevils the complainer:

'I'm delighted that the student council exists now because it works with those who want to be involved and it also takes the floor from under those that don't. It takes the wind out of the sails of the complainant by giving a proper channel and they are taken seriously.'

One Board of Management member also stated that it is important for student grievances to be properly addressed and that a student council may be an appropriate forum for this. He said that some students feel they are getting a bad deal and this in turn can make life for management very difficult. There must be a proper procedure to have their complaints listened to and acted on. Individual students never have the opportunity to air their views or grievances. In his experience, there are situations where teachers do not treat students fairly and there must be a forum where students can raise this issue.

However, Principals and teachers did not think the student council was an appropriate forum for student complaints. In one school, the parents' council raise issues about staff. In another school, the Principal said students are more likely to go through an individual member of staff. A number of teachers worried that it might become a 'kind of a thing against teachers'. Another concern that was often voiced by teachers was that the student council would be a complaints forum:

'I don't think the students council is about somewhere where they can complain about things or negative things, it should be positive things, it's all what they want to change... like there are a lot of good things, but they don't see that, they think that they're there to change.'

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Peer Support

Bullying and social isolation is another area identified by teachers as an area in which the student council can support students:

> 'A lot of the time problems that juniors might be having are solved by the student council, not necessarily by us, we would be a last resort'

One parent felt that the main role for the student council would be as a peer support group. She thought that it might be a good idea for students to have a peer to talk to, but it would have to be confidential and 'they wouldn't go back saying it to everyone else'.
One member of management also discussed how the student council plays an important role in supporting students:

> 'There's a hidden role... the fact that they're in existence and that the boys will come to them, and maybe more specifically that the year reps are the carers for that year... So they kind of look out for them and care for them and get privileges for them. They look out for any bullying or anything like that. So that's going on all the time even though the student council mightn't meet for weeks on end.'

An Educational Opportunity

The potential for the student council as a learning tool was raised by Board of Management members, senior management and teachers. One teacher talked about how students can learn to think critically through involvement with the student council.

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> 'I think that's very important for them to voice and perhaps to be critical thinkers, 'cause sometimes I feel in education we don't allow for critical thinking... many teachers perceive it as being cheeky or 'challenging my authority' if the child is critical, so it's not a thing that teachers are comfortable with critical thinking but it's a very necessary skill to have'.

One teacher discussed how the student council provides an interactive learning environment:

> 'Education is changing as we sit here, it is changing rapidly, and I suppose the more the students are involved, it's such an interactive world outside school, everything from the internet is so interactive... and then the school, the physical building, is such a different culture to them... this is another way, that somehow they could feel more interactive in their learning... when you think we're using blackboards to educate'.

One Principal discussed the wider remit of the student council in education:

> 'I suppose the other part in relation to the student council... is part of the pastoral approach. The whole fundraising, is to create awareness of the disadvantaged out there, and those of us who are maybe that little bit more advantaged, we need to take that on board and that's why we do a fair amount of fundraising for Trocaire, Concern, Alzheimer's society.'

Also, students' involvement in the student council is good for development of personal skills. It potentially provides an opportunity for students to develop interpersonal and leadership skills, and it teaches them responsibility:

'The students are representing themselves, their own opinion; it gives them confidence more than anything else'.

Teachers discussed how 'it's an experiment in democracy' and how students need to learn how to represent themselves:

'I still think if it was run properly, it's a very good idea because students, in this world, when they get out of this school, you know they need to be represented.'

One Board of Management member felt that students are often unprepared for life after school as they are still treated like children at second level. The student council has a role in preparing students for university and life after school by giving students adult roles and responsibilities.

Improving School Atmosphere

One Principal felt very strongly that empowerment of students in schools is very important in terms of creating a positive school atmosphere, and she felt strongly that students should have a sense of ownership of their school. A Board of Management representative also mentioned this:

'It has a great potential to empower, you know ... I think it's desperately important there is one and that they meet and are facilitated to meet and are taken... as seriously as any other meeting body in our school, I think.'

Another Principal suggested that if students feel involved, it will benefit the school spirit:

'I would love if they could bring back the school spirit we used to have... here we don't have a major problem discipline wise or anything like that, but just the attitudes have changed and they seem to think that we set all the rules, you know so I'd like them to be involved in that sort of thing, seeing that they're for their good, and just general communication.'

Teachers talked about how facilitating student involvement in school issues will benefit the school atmosphere in general. One teacher stated that 'you'll have a better school, happier students'.

'It's good for the school atmosphere; it's a good way of building rapport with students and allows students approach teachers on certain issues including bullying.'

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Also, the student council could renew the sense of community in the school:

> 'A hope that I would have is that they could see the school as a community, that they wouldn't just see it as teachers versus students.'

This sense of community would encourage the students to feel proud of their school. In this way, there would be less graffiti and littering. An example was given where a group of students wanted to renovate the toilets. They were given the money to buy paint and they came in on a weekend to paint the toilets. A teacher remarked that 'you daren't graffiti the toilets that your classmates painted.'

Establishing Links with the Wider Community

In some schools, particularly Community and Comprehensive schools, the student council was envisaged as having a role in establishing links with the wider community. As one Liaison Teacher put it:

> 'A student's life doesn't stop after 4 o'clock'.

Councils have been involved in fundraising for the local community and charities. Another council was asked by the county council to do a survey of primary and secondary schools in the locality.

STUDENT COUNCIL AND STUDENT VIEWS

Students in junior and senior cycle and student council members were asked what they thought their role was and what they thought a student council should do. Although they raised similar issues to management, teachers and Board of Management members, their priorities differed considerably. Therefore these have been presented separately.

Listening to Students

Firstly, student council members argued that students should feel that they are involved in the school and that they are listened to:

> 'It lets students know that someone's gonna listen to them'

One council in particular talked about how younger students are not listened to by the management and teaching staff:

> 'It's important to listen to the younger students, because when you're a senior you get some respect from the teachers, because you're getting older and you're able to handle yourself a bit more, whereas juniors don't really get the chance to say what they think, or what they think should go on in the school, so the student council is really a chance for everybody to get their views represented.'

The awareness of student council members that younger students in the school need to be listened to was confirmed by the fact that almost all the junior cycle students identified listening as the most important council role. Council members were seen as having the duty to listen to the views, opinions and ideas of all students.

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'I think they should listen to our ideas! Since they don't.'

'They should be people who you should be able to talk to if you have a problem.'

Representing Students' Views

Student councils argued that they should 'provide a voice for the students' and that they should represent students' views by bringing them forward to management and teachers in a diplomatic way. Members talked about how they had a role in 'getting management and teachers to listen to students'.

'Like we take ideas from the students, students come up to us if they have a problem and they wanted it sorted out, that we'd talk about it and bring it up.'

In fact one council stated that it was set up:

'... Because some students would feel that they couldn't go straight to the teachers, but that they could go to the student council.'

While second year students saw the main student council role as being that of listening to the views, opinion and ideas of students, senior students emphasised the role of representation more. While there was a feeling that student councils should 'listen to the students', it was also felt that a student council should:

'Bring students' ideas forward to the teachers.'

'Represent(ing) students in important matters.'

Instead of simply listening to students, senior students felt that a student council should 'voice the students opinions', and 'express the students concerns'. Although junior students emphasised listening, some argued that it should then lead to representation. It was felt that the student council should:

'Stick up for the student body and represent the student body if there is a problem.'

'A student council should listen to the STUDENTS' ideas and bring them across rather than what the teachers think is right for us.'

Contribution to Developing Policy

Student council members talked about how they should contribute a lot to the development of school policies. In a number of schools, councils had already contributed to policies, the development of new school rules and so on. However, they also felt that they should be kept informed about any decisions that are made in the school:

'Take everyone's ideas and put them forward. It's something between the students and Principal to, like, join it altogether.'

Student council members talked about working parallel with the management. They felt the student council should have more involvement with the school and its ideas for changes and that the student council should have a say in the running of the school. Senior students repeatedly expressed the view that a student council should be a means for students to influence school policy:

> 'Student council should get involved in some rule decision-making.'

Clearly more focused on getting a say in policy change than junior students, many senior students emphasised that student councils should:

> 'Make certain rules more fair.'
>
> 'Be part of making new school rules to see if it suits student and teacher'.
>
> 'Get a say in changes made by the Board of Governors.'

This is possibly due to the fact that the older students understood that the school rules could be an effective way to tackle the day-to-day issues in their school. While the younger students tended to list the issues they wished to see the student council dealing with, senior students realised the way the student council could go about tackling these issues, i.e. via the rules.

The potential role a student council could have in representing students' views when it came to devising school policy was not mentioned frequently by junior students, however it was present. One student suggested that a student council should, 'fix some school rules'. Other students mentioned that a council should work towards having 'not as much exams', and to have a 'no more homework day'. However these suggestions were given low priority tasks for a student council by junior students.

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Providing Feedback to the Student Body

Student council members talked about how they saw their role as providing feedback from management to the student body. This was described as an important role by senior cycle students, after representing students' views and influencing policy. 'Informing the whole school about what a council is and what it does' was seen as very important. It was felt that councils should:

> 'Notify all students on what's been decided – student council should be more organised.'

Clearly there was a feeling that students who are not on the student council are excluded from its activities.

> 'Involve students who aren't on the council in what is to be done and consider general student opinion.'
>
> 'It should give each student even if not part of the council more information about what's happening.'

Furthermore, many students emphasised that they would like student councils to be approachable:

> 'The council should not be seen to be unapproachable to students, they should feel comfortable talking to them.'

Peer Support

Providing support for students with problems – personal, social or teacher/student relationships – were cited as aims the student councils had. A member of one council which had been successful in achieving improvements in basic facilities or conditions stated that:

'We need to move beyond the TLC 'toilet, litter and chips' and deal with the real problems'.

Student council members stated that they should 'help students with problems'; 'help students with their concerns or worries, for example, being bullied'. Some members also stated a council should 'make sure everyone gets along'. Students in two of the student councils which had just been established talked about taking a more active stance in this regard.

'If students have problems we should be able to fix them'.

'Solving students' issues/problems'.

Supporting first year students or students from other countries were also cited as aims by some student councils.

Bullying

Many of the student councils felt they had an important role to play in dealing with bullying.

'(Since the student council has been set up) people have been asking a lot for what they want in the school, what they feel is missing, but what's really been neglected in the middle of all this has been the social issues, such as bullying.... I feel social issues really need to be dealt with.'

The importance that student councils attributed to dealing with student problems such as bullying was evident because it was an important concern raised by both senior and junior students. Junior students felt that student councils should act upon issues around bullying. Student councils were seen to have a duty to, 'help in any way possible, especially if bullying's involved'. It was felt that the student council might understand the phenomenon better than teachers:

'If they are being bullied the student council might know what the bully is like.'

Bullying was also something that senior students felt should be dealt with by student councils. It was felt that councils should, 'tackle bullying (especially racism)' and 'make aware to teachers any incident of bullying that is made known to the council'.

School Social Issues

In some of the co-educational schools, student council members talked about how there is differential treatment of boys and girls. In one school, members talked about how teachers are harder on the boys, particularly in relation to punishing students for not having homework done. They also talked about how boys have more access to sports facilities and training than the girls. The student council in this school felt they had a role in challenging the status quo. Some senior students also felt that that student councils should, 'ensure that boys and girls are treated equally', and 'promote equal opportunities for both boys and girls'.

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Some junior students felt that the student council should strive to make the school a place where 'people will be seen as equals (with each other)'. Part of this was the concern of the second year students that younger students in the school were not having their say:

> **'All the people on the council should have a say not the older ones only.'**

The well-being of younger students was also an issue which senior students emphasised as being quite important to them, and something with which student councils should be dealing. One student suggested that there ought to be:

> **'More participation from younger year groups to create less intimidation between junior and senior cycles.'**

Another social issue was raised by student council members in the boarding school. The student council members talked about how they feel their remit is broader than school issues, as the students spend out of school hours together also. For example, they talked about how if a boy gets into trouble after school, it is raised as an issue in school with the teachers the next day. They felt that this was unfair and that in normal circumstances, what you do out of school is separate from what you do in school. They felt they had a role to play in advocacy for fellow students in this position:

> **'A major problem is if something happens in a dorm, and a staff member finds out, the next day, the student could be sitting down in class, and that teacher will come in and half way through the class he'd say something about what happened to him? How did he find out? Why did he find out? Why does he need to know? Why is he saying this in front of all the students? Something that person did outside of school hours should not be brought back to the teachers...This wouldn't be just one teacher either, it'd be common among all the teachers, and it'd get worse and worse as it goes on...and it could be small things ...but it all builds into something that is probably gonna have a terrible effect on the student's life in school...these things should be brought up at student council level.'**

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Improving Student Teacher Relationships

Many of the student councils debated whether student problems with teachers are the constituency of the student council or not. One council member argued that if a student is having a problem with a teacher that they would be more likely to talk to a student about it than risk bringing it up with a teacher.

Although councils understood that there was a limit on their role in addressing student/teacher relationship issues, they all felt that they could improve the general relationship with teachers and that this was an important part of supporting their peers:

> **'I suppose the reason we're here is to really find a way to meet the teachers half-way.'**

Members of newly established councils again talked about this in more active terms. They talked about 'getting teachers to be nice to students'; 'helping students to talk to teachers' and 'getting teachers to trust students'.

Senior students placed a stronger emphasis on the responsibility of a student council to improve student/teacher relations than junior students did. It was clear that students felt that student councils should work for 'teachers and pupils having better relationships'.

> 'Student council should be a link between the students and teachers.'
>
> 'Encourage communication between students and teachers.'

Improving School Conditions for Students

Councils felt that they should play a role in improving day-to-day conditions for students. Three issues arose as having high priority for junior and senior cycle students and the student councils, and were for many of the councils continuing campaigns. A number of councils had already succeeded in these projects.

One of the most discussed areas that they felt the need to be involved with change was in the school uniform, mainly in making the school uniform more comfortable to wear and making trousers available for girls. In one of the girls' schools, the student council wanted to campaign for a lighter school uniform for the summer months.

The variety of food available in the canteen or school shop were also voiced as an important issue by councils. Some councils had already been involved in changing the food available in the canteen, others had produced surveys for the students. In most situations, the students wanted healthier food. The availability of water was also an important issue. Councils discussed wanting to organise renting a water font, or drinks machine.

Councils discussed the importance of having clean toilets with soap, decent toilet paper, and hand drying facilities:

> 'Toilets and hygiene are never really taken seriously, we keep coming back to it, the staff have a good toilet, but the students' one is really in a bad state'.

Another area that the councils discussed was related to time-tabling; for example, the length of lunchtimes and breaks in between classes. This was not related to getting out of class, but arose simply because they did not have enough time to eat their lunch or go back to their lockers to change their books for the next class. In one school, the students talked about how often they did not get out of class in enough time to catch the bus home.

The second most important responsibility of the student council, after listening to students, was seen by junior students to be acting on problems brought to their attention by students. One of their main tasks was seen to be to, 'act on problems in the school such as food etc', and 'campaign to get everything students want'. The student council should 'make the school more of a happy place to be in', and 'make people happier'.

> 'Student councils are important because if anybody has a complaint about anything they can tell a member of the student council and they will do their best to change it.'

Improving School Facilities

Junior and senior cycle students as well as student councils felt that councils had a role to play in improving school facilities. It does not suffice for them simply to express a desire for change, but they want to be active in this change. They used words such as 'change', 'fix' and 'improve.' Facilities that needed improving included:

- Lockers
- Benches or seating areas for break times
- Sports facilities
- Better school equipment for example, AV equipment, tape recorders etc.
- School decor e.g. brighter walls
- Fixing the heating system
- Making the school handicap accessible

Councils discussed either lobbying for the school to make the changes or else fundraising so that they could organise the change. Again they felt their role was not just raising these issues with management, but seeing them implemented.

Just like second year students, the senior students had a strong sense of the duty of student councils to, 'think of realistic ways to improve the school', 'improve the school life for students – enjoyable', and 'to improve the conditions in the school to benefit students'.

Some senior students, and every second year group wanted the student council to improve their sports facilities. Some students did not like the particular sports available to them at their particular school. One student suggested that the student council ought to:

> **'Bring more different sports to the school such as horse riding because a lot of people don't like the sports in the school.'**

However other types of facilities were also mentioned as something that was or should be part of the work of the student council:

> **'The student council should help the students in class like getting blinds so we can see the board.'**

One student even suggested that the student council should be dealing with factors which were external to the school, such as the problem of having to take a very expensive bus ride from the town to get anywhere:

> **'The cost of the buses e.g. to go to [   ] we have to pay €4 to go.'**

Improving the Learning Environment

Councils talked about how they would like to see an improvement in the choice of subjects available. Another council said it had been involved in commenting on the fairness of in-school tests, or homework. Two of the aims of one 'Student Council Booklet' was 'to help students with day-to-day learning etc' and 'to achieve a good school environment suitable for all staff and pupils to work to their maximum.' Senior students felt that a student council should be somehow involved in easing the hardship caused by exams, both personally by the council, and through teachers:

> **'Offer help/advice to students e.g. with exam stress'**
>
> **'Talk to teachers to take it easy on us in exams'**

Furthermore, a few second years felt that help with academic work should fall within the remit of the student council, that student councils should 'help students with their studies'.

Improving the School Atmosphere and Building Community Spirit

'The student council is supposed to be working to make the school a good place and so are the teachers...'

Many councils stated they had a role in improving the school atmosphere and making school more pleasant and fun and 'make the school as good as it can get.' Besides doing this through making students feel involved and their opinions valued, the councils felt that through organising events they would encourage a good school spirit. One council had organised events for each year group, such as quizzes, parties and Céilís. They also produced a year book which they present to 6th year students at their Graduation Mass in May. The fact that many of these fundraisers should be whole school events was identified as important by some student council members. In one school, the council had organised a 'no-uniform day' and in another, a 'Teachers' Karaoke'.

Both senior and junior cycle students felt that student councils should organise more events like talent shows, barbeques, no uniform days and trips were frequently mentioned. Students clearly felt that they were not getting a say in what was being organised, and that student councils could assist them in getting that say.

'Let students have a say in what activities are chosen in school!!!'

'More social events to enable students to get to know each other more.'

Raising Students' Awareness of 'Bigger' Issues

Some councils discussed how they would like to raise students' awareness of social issues like poverty, the environment and health, especially issues that effect students nowadays, like peer pressure. Another bigger issue was that of students' rights. One council also talked about how they would like to encourage other schools to set up student councils. Another set of council members talked about their involvement with the Union of Secondary Students.

Do Something They Would be Remembered For

'I always thought if we could do something big to change the school...'

All the councils stated that they wanted to do more than just fundraising, although they were content to do a certain amount. One student council felt that they had been left with all the fundraising. A member of another student council felt frustrated that the main role the management assigned them was fundraising:

'We're told it's all about fundraising, but it should be about more than that.'

Senior and junior students also identified fundraising as something that a student council should be doing for both the school and external entities.

'I think they should check how run down the school is and raise funds to paint the walls.'

'Fundraising not for the school.'

However interestingly, senior students wanted to see 'less fundraising and more things for students.'

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DISCUSSION POINTS

Two questions were raised in various meetings with Board of Management, senior management and teachers. These questions seem to be at the core of the different roles ascribed to the student council by the various groups of participants.

Student Council or Student Union?

A number of Principals discussed how there needs to be clarification on the difference, if any, between a student council and a students' union. One Principal questioned:

'The difference between a student council and a students' union, I'm not sure if it's been defined by anybody. I would feel that the students and ourselves quite possibly at school level should tease out the difference...'

She said that although different schools will assign their own understanding to this issue, it should be teased out a bit more at national level. Last year the Union of Secondary Students (USS) was encouraging the student council to join. She argued that if student councils are understood as being students' unions, 'I could see actions being taken by a union that may not be appropriate actions for the student council.'

Another Principal said that in her experience, many people are not comfortable with the idea of a student council because there is a fear that students will 'get out of their box' and 'become unionised, like a trade union'. Some schools do not take it seriously and it requires a 'leap of faith'.

Partnership

A number of Principals discussed the student council in terms of partnership. One Deputy Principal said that under the 1998 Education Act, they are part of the cog and the wheel and that she can see how students' opinions will be accessed more and more over the coming years:

'They are one of the key partners... I think [partnership idea] is excellent... they are our bread and butter our students are, and I think it's very important, they keep us on our toes... because you can get staid and you can get very much focused in what you believe yourself.'

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Another Principal thought that it needs a lot more discussion:

'At national level or generally speaking, I think we have to examine or be aware of what partnership actually means, because I know this has been brought in at national level with a view to it fitting in nicely to the whole partnership approach. And while I feel the partnership approach has great merits, it's not the be all and end all and I don't think there should be unreal expectations, and I could imagine it happening in some places where student council may think or feel that they have more power than they actually have and thus end up being disillusioned or disappointed, and I feel the same for example with the National Parents Council. I'm not quite sure that their role in the education system has been fully thought through, because I think there is a distinction and there should be a distinction between professionals in the field and the others, and there's a danger going down the partnership line that the boundaries become blurred. People are not sure what they're supposed to be doing and I can see that same issue with the student council.'

CONCLUSION

Boards of Management and senior management ascribed consultation as the main role of the student council. Management had quite a clear view of what issues they would like to consult students about. Apart from consultative capacity student councils were viewed as providers of information and as a resource. They can facilitate communication between staff and students and can contribute to the smooth running of the school through organising and helping with events. Student councils also provide educational opportunities to students and establish links with the wider community.

Some members of Boards of Management and teaching staff voiced concerns about student councils stepping 'out of their box' and thought that there should be a limit to their role. Students on the other hand see the councils as having an active role in making the school a better place to be in. They should make students feel listened to and should not only represent student views but should act on the issues that they raise, whether it is improving the school conditions and facilities, providing support to peers or raising bigger issues within the school such as bullying, or teacher/student relationships.

Junior students tended to list the important things that they think their council should do. Unlike the junior students, the senior students did not have clear priorities as to what were the most important things student councils should be doing. Generally, they felt that the council should be trying to influence management decisions through policy and rules.

One of the roles that student councils see themselves as having is one of action – they talk about representing students' views, changing school uniform, changing food in the canteen, fixing things, dealing with issues, solving problems, helping students, organising events, etc. New school councils in particular speak in these terms.

This is in stark contrast to Board of Management members, Principals and senior management and teachers who refer to the student council as a consultative group and a resource. It is clear that student councils are ascribed to wide and differing number of roles by different groups within the school. This tension is evident for many student councils as has been pointed out by the national and international literature. This puts the student council in a very difficult position. The following chapters will outline how the student councils we spoke to deal with some of these challenges.

The launch of the Student Council leaflet, poster and website on 23 March, 2004.

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From left to right: Oisín O'Reilly, Blainead Casserly, Katie Lawless and Stewart Daly, members of the Student Council Working Group.

5. ESTABLISHING A COUNCIL

This section will review some of the issues which were identified in relation to establishing a council. Three schools had recently established their student council. Some of the challenges they experienced and also factors which helped them will be reflected here.

TIME

One Liaison Teacher said that establishing a student council is a big project and it needs a lot of time from the teacher who has been assigned the role of setting it up. The time and resources needed to establish a council must not be underestimated. Members of teaching staff and some of the senior students in another school devised an idea of what a student council should involve. They researched different publications on student councils and information from the Union of Secondary Students. They also spoke to other schools. In the third school the council was initiated by a student who wrote the Student Council booklet. This took time. And other events can intervene:

> 'We've been trying to set up a student council many times. Every time we try to do it we hit a wall – term ends, or something happens.'

INFORMING THE SCHOOL

The main difficulty identified by one school was educating the whole school about what a student council is and 'to sort of try and instil sufficient enthusiasm in them in order to get them interested in having an election at all.' The Liaison Teacher in this school produced a pack for teachers with information on the student council and presented the pack at a staff meeting. Each class tutor then educated their class about the student council using this pack.

LACK OF ENTHUSIASM FROM THE STUDENT BODY

The main challenge for one of the schools was actually recruiting interested students. It took quite a number of weeks for the student council to be formed:

> 'What I couldn't get over is, when we actually put it out to the kids... no one was interested, very few.'

The Deputy Principal went from class to class telling students about the student council and encouraging their involvement. He stated that normally he would say 'ah, look it, give it a shot'. However this time he was emphatic that the students would have to be interested. From previous experience he knows that 'it's essential that it's

from the ground up, that anything where you have someone from the outside saying, now do this, you're destroying the whole initiative.' Eventually he asked the peer mentoring group, who were trained by the health board, to invite students to nominate themselves for the council. He thought that at least the students felt that it was students who put it together. Students who eventually expressed interest had been involved in other youth initiatives. The new student council members though did not feel that way. They felt that it had been imposed on them and they were pushed into doing it:

'Many of the people on the student council will be there just because they're the ones who always get involved. The same people are involved with everything... you'll be pushed into taking part'.

The Liaison Teacher surmised that the reason students did not want to get involved in the council was because they did not want to appear presumptuous among their peers. Another possibility was that the students probably suspected it was some other way of teachers 'getting them to do something for us, rather than something for them.' She also felt that they were not interested because the idea was not 'real' for them. She told them she was amazed that no one had been interested because she imagined that the pressure to start a council would have come from the students:

'And I said you know some schools don't want them where management aren't happy about it and teachers, you're very lucky that teachers are behind it here and the Principal wants it. Then suddenly they started seeing it...'

NOT KNOWING WHAT THEY SHOULD DO

The importance of student councils having clearly defined roles was also recognised by teaching staff and management in the schools. One Principal felt that it was not only important that their role was clearly ascribed but that the council members themselves were involved in this process:

'One of the very important things is... that they would define their role very clearly, that they would know exactly what is the purpose of the student council and that would be laid down very clearly, and that they would do that themselves but with help ... and following on from that then they would draw up their guidelines, a mode of behaviour, guidelines for good meetings'.

However even where efforts were made, the outcome was sometimes unsatisfactory. Council members in one school stated that one of the difficulties they encountered was that they did not really know what to do, despite having a Student Council Booklet. They were not sure what to do on a day-to-day basis. Neither did they know the channels through which issues they raise have to pass. It was recognised that this might be overcome by training for council members.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HOW MANAGEMENT AND STAFF WILL REACT

Students in all three councils assumed that they would run into difficulty with the teaching staff or management:

'Teachers might feel that student council is getting too powerful so they'll stop it'.

'Some teachers won't get involved because they may feel that we're challenging their views and authority'.

'Some teachers are very supportive, but there are some who are very reluctant to interact with the students, they don't see it as correct.'

Members in another newly established council felt that student opinions had not been taken into account before and suspected that this would not change, despite having a new council:

'When they're (teachers) making big decisions that might affect us they won't ask us for our opinion'.

The assumption that management or staff will hold the council back from doing things presented problems for one of the councils. They had drawn up a survey for the student body on what they would like to see the council doing.

The Principal however had it taken up.

'We had surveys done and he took them off us and then I think he burnt them... cause he wasn't here that day... but there was nothing bad in it, what do you want changed, what do you want done.'

When I asked why they didn't ask him whether they could administer the council they said 'because he would've contradicted everything on it'. In this case, the council did not ask permission to circulate the survey because they assumed the Principal would not permit them to circulate it. The Principal said that he would have permitted them but took it up because they did not clear it with him first.

STAFF RESPONSE TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE COUNCIL

In one school where the council is just being established, one teacher felt that the staff is rather wary about the student council:

'I would say the staff are very wary... there would be a lot of fears there. The Principal is very much behind it and wants it to happen as well, so that's a positive, if we're going to make it happen. But I think it will take time for teachers to get used to the idea, to be comfortable with it'.

However, in another school which had just set up their council, the staff opinion was quite different:

'There were no dissenting voices at all when it came to setting up the student council and everybody was extremely cooperative when it came to going through the motions to get the election together...'

One Deputy Principal pointed out that it is important for management to put across the message to the staff that the council is not going to be a threat. There are quite a number of changes taking place in terms of policy at the moment which can be quite unsettling. He mentioned that the parents' council took two years to get established and although it is doing great work, it took some time to get used to:

> 'Because when you set up a group like that, you lose control of a certain aspect of control and control is something that schools, they feel more and more is being taken away'.

DIFFICULTIES THE STUDENT COUNCILS EXPECT TO HAVE

Student council members felt that other students would not co-operate with them and also that people would expect 'things we can't offer'. They also envisaged that students will disagree with their choices. They felt that if the students do not see anything happening, or if things are moving too slow, they will stop supporting the council:

> 'I think the students will start to object to the running of the council if they see that we aren't tackling important issues such as bullying'.

Practical problems they envisaged were problems with organising activities, raising money for events and initiatives. They were worried about missing their lunch and where they would meet. They also envisaged difficulty with finding realistic solutions to problems.

Student council members also identified a number of issues within the council. They were worried that a member might take complete control, and for this reason they thought a teacher should supervise meetings. They did not think staff would really listen to them and that student council members would lose interest. They felt that student council members will be 'too afraid of talking to everyone' and they just will not take part. Another issue was that 6th year students will be too busy. Also the fact that student council members themselves do not know each other was identified as an issue.

CONCLUSION

The main issues related to establishing a council are the time needed to prepare and inform both students and staff. The main responsibility with setting up a council lies with the Liaison Teacher. Educating the whole school about the council is of utmost importance. In the school where the staff were fully informed about the establishment of the council, the election process and initial activities of the council have been positively received. This increases the interest from the student body in joining the council and alleviates fears that the staff may have about the purpose of the council. However, even in schools where it has openly been discussed, students may be reluctant to get involved as the concept of student involvement is not real to them and they do not perceive that their participation will be truly valued.

Some factors, although pertinent to the establishment of a council, such as students' assumptions about how staff will respond to them and the importance of training, are ongoing issues which will impact on the continuing operation of the council.

Stewart Daly, member of the Student Council Working Group.

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Fionn Daly, member of the Student Council Working Group.

6. THE COUNCIL

This chapter will deal with specific issues related to the council. It will review how the council is made-up, internal issues to the council, and the role of the Liaison Teacher.

MAKE-UP OF THE COUNCIL

Who makes up the council and how it is made up are significant factors for the successful operation of a council. It can impact on the commitment of members, communication, how the council is viewed by staff and students, and how it is organised. Although the main issue is how the council is elected, some factors affect how the election process is decided in each school, the size of the council, and whether all years should be represented on the council and the presence of other student council systems in the school.

Size of the Council

The size of the council was raised as an issue for a lot of councils, especially for large schools. In smaller schools, it is possible to have a representative from each class on the council yet have a small, manageable council. In larger schools however the decision had to be made about how many representatives there should be. Large councils provide wider representation of the student body, but they face more challenges in terms of organisation and communication. Most of the councils with over 30 students had an Executive or Steering Committee. Only one large council did not.

In some schools actually getting enough students interested in joining the council was an issue. In one of these schools, although the plan was to have a boy and girl from each class, two girls from one class were very interested so rather than eliminating one of them, they took the two. Afterwards it was queried whether this was fair in terms of representation.

Should Junior Students Be on the Council?

The issue of whether junior students should be represented on the council was often discussed. Two schools did not have students from junior cycle on their council. In one school, a Community school, a number of reasons were given for this. When the council started they had 1st and 2nd years but the numbers in the council were too big to manage. Also, 1st and 2nd year students did not have enough experience of the school or the kinds of issues that were raised. They were 'a little bit immature in their attitude'.

'It's very hard for them to do anyway, so that would be of a very strong character to be able to stand up in front of their colleagues, in 1st year, their classmates, you know asking them for information'.

The Principal also stated that there is an honesty of relationship with older students. Now the senior students go back to the 1st and 2nd years to find out their views. The Liaison Teacher thought that it definitely works better this way. They also know the school better. However, members of the council did not think so:

'We're meant to be the link with 1st and 2nd years, but it doesn't work... I think we need to have more contact with 1st and 2nd years...even thinking back ourselves, 1st and 2nd years know very little about the student council'.

In the second school, a voluntary secondary school, staff were not sure whether the younger students would be mature enough to make a good decision when voting for their own representatives. Similarly, senior students go back to access the views of the junior students. Members on the council also thought that younger students would not be mature enough to act as representatives.

'With 1st and 2nd year there'd be no secrecy with them like, they'd go back (after the meeting) and they'd be blabbing on about this or that like'.

'Sixth years know the ropes better – they've been through it, and 1st, 2nd years have respect for sixth years - I can't see them giving respect to anyone in their own year - they definitely wouldn't be mature enough'.

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Second year students however generally did not think that they were adequately represented by the councils. They suggested that to have a more inclusive student council:

'They should have a vote in all years for junior and senior councils'.

'They should have junior students on the council'.

'Make two student council groups, 1 for younger students, 1 for older'.

Student Councils and Other Student Bodies in the School

Five of the schools had a student council and a prefect system. The main difference between prefects and student councils is that prefects are selected by management and are responsible for assisting management, such as supervising and monitoring other students' behaviour. In one school, prefects mentor 1st year students. Prefects' duties are usually on a day-to-day basis whereas a student council is involved in long term projects.

In schools where there is a prefect system as well as the student council some tensions were evident. It was not always clear what the distinct role of each group was and how these two groups should relate to each other. In three schools, the student council felt that they were given less respect and authority with management than the prefects.

In one school, it was felt that the student council were given the left over jobs to do, a 'sweeper up group'. One Principal stated that she values the prefects over the council because they are more mature and easier to work with whereas the student council do not know why they are there. There is a level of prestige in being a prefect. They put themselves forward and are selected through an interview. Usually, they are responsible students who have the personal skills to be a resource to management. They deal with the 'real' issues. She consulted with the prefects when developing the Substance Abuse policy for example.

Three of the voluntary secondary schools had adapted their prefect system to make it into a council by making it into a representative system where students are elected from each class as opposed to final year students being selected by teachers. In two cases, teachers are still involved in selecting the leaders of the council.

In most cases the prefect system had been established before the council and the prefects conducted some of the duties already that would be appropriate for a council. This was cited as one of the reasons why there was a lack of clarity between the roles of the council and the prefects. A significant factor is that prefects have more authority with staff because they are selected by staff.

There is a distinction between prefect systems and a peer support or mentoring system. These systems have been established for the specific task of looking after first year students. Many of the student councils felt they had a role in peer support, but did not see the established peer support system as infringing on their domain.

ELECTION OR SELECTION?

The timing of the election or selection process in each school differed. In four schools the election occurred at the beginning of the school year in September or, at the latest, October. This implies that 1st year students can be involved especially if there is a whole school election. The representatives on the student council can also play a part in educating 1st years what the council is about. In four schools the election occurred in May. This means that the council can get going immediately in September. Training, plans and orientation can begin in May and the new council can meet with the outgoing council. Also, 6th years can be involved in voting the new council and in one school, the outgoing leader is involved in interviewing and selecting the incoming leader.

Although the election process in each school differed, there were three common ways of electing the council – by student only elections, elections where the teachers could vet the nominees and elections which involved teachers in selecting the leaders. The choice of election process seems to be dependent on what the role of the council is considered to be by the school. If the council's role is to assist management, then it is more appropriate for them to be selected by management. If the council's role is as a representative body, as a democratic structure, then it should be elected by students only.

Student Only Elections

In four schools (three voluntary secondary and one community college) the student council was elected by the students alone. Three of these schools had newly formed councils and they reasoned that it should be a democratic process. As one Liaison Teacher put it:

'not just a messy student council… one that's democratically elected by the students and that they feel is their council, that has some kind of genuine power.'

One Principal argued:

'You can advise and give direction, but in the end, students make their own decisions, it is a democracy. That's the way it is, the other alternative is that you interfere with the democratic system and that brings the whole thing into disrepute'.

He went on to say that students rarely make the wrong decision when electing the leader or Head Boy. The Principal of another school stated:

'I feel that certainly they should elect and they select their own representatives and that's obviously who they think would represent them best, and if it works out well, all the better'.

The decision in this school that teachers should not be involved in the election process was in fact taken in a staff meeting. The Liaison Teacher described what happened:

'We decided, we did talk about it, we had a staff meeting about it... we decided that, yeah that it was a democratic process and we had to abide by the position the girls themselves have made ... each teacher got a pack, it was explained what needed to be done. I think people felt that they should make decisions themselves'.

They decided to make it a whole school effort. Students were allowed to canvass, they were allowed to put up their posters and then they had to have a manifesto and a little speech. Asked whether there is a danger in a student only election that the people that go for the student council are doing it only for the perks, one teacher replied 'well sure isn't that political life?' The Liaison Teacher went onto say that some teachers were concerned by the students who were elected:

'... having said that though, after when the election results came out on a couple of occasions, I know that a few teachers would have felt a little bit, a couple of the characters that were put on the council were a bit dodgy. That wasn't discussed formally, but there were chats about it in the staff room, but again it was decided to leave them there and see'.

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In two of the schools with student only elections, it was not yet clear whether this form of election was beneficial for the operation of the council as the councils were so new, and in fact, a student in one of the schools was doubtful about the sincerity of the process:

'There's not enough talking about things that are happening...there's a lot of banging on the back...people just get re-elected; there's nothing said to students'.

Teachers Involved in Selecting Council Leaders

In three schools (two voluntary secondary and one community school), teachers were involved in electing the leaders of the council. In two of these schools, the teachers elected leaders from the group which had already been elected by the students. The reason given by one Liaison Teacher was that these students are representing the school. She added that the students do not seem to resent it. In this school, each class votes for their representative, and senior students elect 12 girls from 6th year to the Executive. From this group of 12, senior students and teachers elect the Head and Vice-Head.

In the second school, every year a group of representatives is elected by proportional representation from each year group. From these representatives a group of Officers is then chosen for special positions in the council. These Officers are selected by an interview and one of them becomes the President of the council. The outgoing President is on the interview panel too. The Liaison Teacher described it as a 'fail safe' way of ensuring a good President and a deterrent to those who may not be committed. The student body also votes for the

President. In the four years it has been running, the person with the most votes has also been the person selected by the interview. Student council members thought this was a fair way of selecting the President:

> 'But if you get all the votes and you are not suitable to be president, you're just popular, then that's no use because the reason they have to interview you, is to see if you are a worthy candidate to be president.'

In the third school, the council is elected by the student body and the four School Captains are selected by interview with three teachers including the Liaison Teacher. In practice however, the election process of student council members is left up to the Year Head – 'some elect, some have an election process, some have a selection process'. The Principal favours student only elections:

> 'The only thing is, our experience has been, that sometimes the election process is, sometimes you can get individuals elected that wouldn't have the best interests of the class or the school at heart... my own view, the ideal would be that they would elect their own representatives... and to counter balance that at the end we have the lads at senior level... they're selected'.

From the schools' point of view it was stated that the selection of leaders or the executive ensures that at least school staff approves of the leader of the council. One teacher said that in her opinion, if teachers alone were to elect leaders of the student council, it would be likely that they would elect 'role models', whereas it is important that a student council should be representative of the student body, even if some of the students elected do not go down well with the teachers.

Teachers Involved in the Selection of Nominees

In four schools (two community colleges, one comprehensive and one community school) teachers' opinions are taken into account in vetoing students at the nomination stage. One school Principal said that this was a 'duty of care' responsibility. Also, the school had to consider who was representing it. There is responsibility attached to the student council and it was important that students should take their role seriously.

In this school, the student council was selected through an open house election. Students from every year nominated themselves. Teachers vetted the nominees and those who were passed by the teachers had to canvass to get on the council. They presented themselves at assembly. Voting took place over two days, the first day juniors voted and the second day seniors voted. The votes were tallied by the Leaving Certificate Applied class. The Liaison Teacher stated that there was a 99% turnout and the 1% represented those who were sick, so it seems that students were quite interested and motivated. The Liaison Teacher talked about how the election experience provided students with 'a sense of real life'. It was a good learning experience for all students. One of the student council members thought it was a fair process:

> 'I personally didn't think I'd get voted on, 'cos the ones I was up against, they were louder than me and they knew people really well, compared to me, I thought... but I was really shocked when they said my name... I thought it was really fair the way they did it, 'cos I didn't personally expect to be on it, and when I got on it, I was really happy and stuff, 'cos I thought other people would have picked other people, but...'

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In another school, when the Liaison Teacher has a list of nominees she puts them up in the staff room and if any teacher has misgivings about a student, she would take that into consideration. She did state that it has happened only very occasionally.

In the third school, teachers have more of a direct input. Nominees have to get their forms signed by three teachers and their head teacher. The Liaison Teacher stated that he printed out about 50 to 60 forms this year but only got back 6 or 7. The student council were of the opinion that this results in students being elected by grades not by choice. They also stated that students are not informed and nomination forms do not go to every class. One student council member thought it would be better to have class elections with a student representing each class on the student council.

In the fourth school, technically speaking, teachers are not supposed to influence the election process. The Constitution states that a 'secret ballot will apply and each tutor will oversee the election. Ballot papers will be made available to all tutors before the election'. Student council members stated that it's different in each class, and it's dependent on each teacher. 'Some teachers just get you to put up your hand, some get you to stand up in front of the class and give a speech'. New guidelines have been recently brought in about the election. If a student wants to go for student council, 'you have to nominate yourself and give a reason why you want to do it'. The student continued 'but I can't see it being enforced; it's up to the teachers to do it properly'. One member of senior management in this school stated that it is important for the class to have a strong tutor base. The tutor needs to sell it to the class: 'It really needs seriously to be sold to the class, not just another exercise at 9 o'clock in the morning when you meet your tutor class and say right this needs to be done. It needs to be sold to the student body to tell them why, it's there for them, that they will gain from it'. Asked how it would be sold to the class, she said:

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'I would say the... tutor needs to be informed by the student council co-ordinator that this is serious that it's not just a paper exercise. And at the end of the day... it is very important that the students nominate and elect their representative, but the tutor should reserve that right always to be able to pick number 2 or number 3 down the line, whatever... that's very easy, you can do that without people even knowing'.

Should Teachers Be Involved in the Election Process?
Below we have summarised the arguments for and against teacher involvement in the election process.
For teacher involvement:
- Students take the election more seriously.
- Teachers take the election more seriously.
- Lends to council members authority with management and staff.
- 'Duty of care' – students who represent the student body and the school must be responsible and trustworthy.

Against teacher involvement:
- More democratic if students elect their own representatives.
- Students need to take responsibility for their own decisions.
- Some teachers will be unfairly biased.
- Elected students should be given a chance – members can always be removed from the council if they are not suitable.
- More commitment from students.

Election or Popularity Contest

Both students and teachers expressed concern over the election process being a popularity contest. One teacher felt that 'when students hear 'vote', they think 'pick someone'. A Liaison Teacher said that every year students elect new members as opposed to students who they think will represent them. They seem to think 'well you've had your chance', as opposed to 'you're doing a good job'. Teachers also felt that some students are not represented on the student council, for example, those with learning difficulties and those who are shy or quiet.

Students felt that canvassing for the student council was difficult, especially if you are a shy person:

'People would be uncomfortable canvassing in their own class, people would be shy, and it would be the popular people who would end up getting it'.

This resulted in either popular people, but not necessarily committed people getting on, or the same people, who do everything, getting on to the council:

'It's the same people who get involved with everything, who get pushed into doing it'.

Another reason students may nominate themselves for the council is so they can put it on their CV although they may not necessarily be committed.

INTERNAL ISSUES TO THE COUNCIL

After the council has been set up, a number of factors affecting the operation of the council were identified. These included resources, commitment of council members, maintaining enthusiasm and continuity, lack of skills amongst council members, the student council not grasping empowerment, pressure on senior students and leadership.

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Resources: Time, Space and Money

Lack of time and money were all seen as major obstacles to the effective running of a student council by junior and senior students. Interestingly it was the schools with medium and old councils that emphasised these problems

'Designated facilities for the student council – none!'

as opposed to the schools where the student councils had just recently been established. The students from schools with older councils particularly felt that time was a problem for the functioning of the council.

Time

The most significant factor in how well the council operated was whether or not they met regularly. Councils that met regularly were much clearer about their plans, their role and their limits. These councils had a set time and space to meet on a regular basis.

Finding time to meet is an important factor. Council members talked about how difficult it is to organise everyone to be there at the same time, although mostly it was the Liaison Teachers who organised meetings. All councils met during lunch or sometimes after school. However, what can be achieved over the space of lunchtime is limited as one Liaison Teacher pointed out:

'What are you going to achieve in 40 minutes with hungry kids'.

Previously they had been able to get off 10 minutes before class and arrive back to class 10 minutes late, however this was stopped by management. If meetings push into classtime, Liaison Teachers have to make sure that the students, especially those in exam classes, do not continually miss the same class which takes a bit of organising.

Space

Not having a designated meeting space was also an issue for some councils. Council members talked about how it would be easier if they had a focal point. However, it was pointed out though that if the student council had their own meeting room it could further the notion of elitism of the student council among the student body.

What About Money?

A number of councils talked about needing money, mainly so they could establish themselves. However, members of the student body perceived money to be quite a substantial obstacle. They often argued that councils did not have enough money. One group of second year students remarked that:

'The student council has no money to do anything'.

Commitment of Council Members

The main internal issue for the councils is the commitment of members. Some members do not attend meetings, or are not interested in sharing responsibility or do not take issues seriously, making suggestions like 'leaving school early'.

'You can't work around one person, you have to share the responsibilities, we try and share out jobs, but some people kinda sit back, you kinda have to give them a job, they don't want to take it – you want everyone to have the chance to be a part of it, and they're not actually co-operating with you, so you have to give them a job'.

Reasons for lack of commitment suggested included:
- The election procedures 'If voting was done fairly and interested people were voted on it would run more smoothly'.
- Lack of definition of roles and clear plans.

Suggested ways of maintaining and increasing commitment included:
- An election system whereby a student must nominate himself or herself, justify why they would make a suitable candidate, and outline what they hope to achieve in front of their class. This would hopefully ensure that students see the position as a responsibility and fair representation for all.
- Delegating duties so that members can be encouraged to contribute and feel they are involved.
- Monitoring attendance at meetings – A number of councils had Attendance Officers, although in some, the Liaison Teacher took this role. In one school with a newly established council, the Liaison Teacher is hoping that the fact that she's staying on top of attendance will filter down and that the students will be more diligent as a result and take responsibility for their attendance and put pressure on each other. All the councils did have a proviso that a member can be voted off or removed if they were not pulling their weight.

Maintaining Enthusiasm and Continuity

Another challenge for the councils was in completing projects, seeing ideas through and ensuring continuity from year to year. It is important that councils keep focused on their role of representing students and their problems and come up with realistic plans:

'We spent a lot of time at the start of the year organising a concert, so we could start the year positively...a type of morale booster...but we ended up realising we'd lose money on it, and we wanted to make money on it...so it was a lesson learnt, we realised we were losing our focus'.

One Liaison Teacher talked about how important it was to start off with small projects. She felt this was vital for building up the confidence of the council members and also for building the relationship with staff and students:

'So we felt, start small. There are issues certainly in my head in the future about litter initiatives and recycling... but we felt start small, little things first and then let them get geared up and let them gell as a group'.

It is also beneficial if some of these smaller projects are whole school projects, which are enjoyed by everyone, such as a whole school event. However, most of the councils did not just want to have small projects, but felt it was very important to move onto longer-term projects which make a real difference.

In a number of schools, students were very enthusiastic when they were first trying to establish the council and the elections were taking place. In one school, however, the momentum of the council was lost after a period of time. Student council members said that their enthusiasm waned when they could not get anything done. They gave two reasons why this was the case. Firstly, it was because they have not been able to see any project through:

'I don't know, nothing we've tried to get done has been put forward, so if we were allowed to do something. Everybody thinks we haven't done anything, but we're not allowed to do anything'.

Losing their enthusiasm and momentum was a real problem according to one teacher. This led to the second reason why the council may lose momentum as identified by the council members. When other students see nothing happening, they lose interest, which discourages the council even more. As one of the teachers said:

'It lost momentum very quickly after September... I would actually see the classes being very anti-it if they do come round, they'll say that's a waste of time because nothing was made of it last year. I think they'll be very hard pressed to get it going again'.

She felt that there would have to be a lot more work before it starts again in the coming year. The student body would have to be told exactly what it is about and what they can expect from it. Student council members were a little subdued about their experience on the council. In fact one member described it as 'a waste of time'. For this reason it is also important that both the council and the student body see tangible results, as a Liaison Teacher pointed out:

'I think it's absolutely vital that they see results quickly, and they need to feel they're making a difference. They are so eager when they're in their meetings at first, they really do want to do things and show they're responsible, but if they're not allowed that bit of freedom, well they very, very quickly become disillusioned and then disinterested and then stop showing up'.

Maintaining momentum from year to year was also cited as a challenge for the councils. This was very frustrating for some council members when they realised that some projects will simply not be completed in one year:

'...we have to look to our future like... 'cos not everything's gonna be done in a year like, people can't be expected to do everything in a year like, there is gonna be problems like, so you just have to leave it for next years group'.

Some of the suggested options were to make sure particular representatives stay on the council for a number of consecutive years. It was also argued that maybe the Chairperson or Leader of the council should not be final year students:

'We've said that the vice-chairperson one year should be the chairperson the next year, so they'll know what to do; because we all came in new this year and we spent a fair few months trying to work out what to do. But because next year, both myself and the vice-chairperson will both be gone, it'll be difficult to do that next year anyway'.

An alternative system suggested was one where 2nd year and transition year students would be voted in for two consecutive years.

Lack of Skills Amongst Council Members

One Liaison Teacher explained that another factor in how much the council achieves is related to their skills. When a school's code of conduct was being renewed, the student council did not really have much to say when given the document. The teacher felt it was because it was rather onerous and the students found it difficult to think things through and the suggestions they made were impractical.

The skills of council members have a bearing on what the council achieves according to one Liaison Teacher. Indeed, council members said that often they do not know how to present their ideas to management and staff. Senior cycle students mentioned that there was a lack of confidence on the part of the student council members and that this was affecting their representation of the students:

'A lot of opinions don't get discussed because of difficulty i.e. taking the easy way out... Should take on all opinions not just easy ones'.

It was stated that the student council were 'scared of making big changes,' and that they 'don't like to do things Principals and teachers don't want'. The lack of confidence was seen as being due to a power imbalance between teacher and student:

'The students have nothing to pressure the school with. But the school does, such as no videos or privileges'.

Some of the other difficulties which council members raised were finding it hard to listen to each other and working in a group:

> 'We try to…we were told that everybody should be listened to, we try, but it's very hard, 'cos everyone's got their own opinion and what have you'.

Junior students did not trust that there would be enough agreement amongst various parties for a student council to properly function. This impacted on how they came to a consensus and made decisions about what they were going to do. Senior cycle and junior cycle students also recognised the fact that it is difficult for the various parties to agree, and that this is an issue for student councils. It was understood that 'the student council must find it hard to please everyone'.

Student Council not Grasping Empowerment

Some members of staff talked about how sometimes the council members do not grasp their role. Some teachers expressed a desire for the council to 'get teeth':

> 'I'd like to see them just a little bit more dynamic, to have that little bit of a say…I'm sure down the school there's a perception, 'oh the student council they're not on our side', or they're non existent or running'.

One point of view therefore wanted the students to be more assertive but others attributed lack of action to a kind of passivity almost, due to the general school climate. They have set assumptions about student-teacher relations and how they will be dealt with. One Liaison Teacher attributed the lack of action to 'carry over from the classroom and they want to be spoonfed'. In this particular school, students interested in joining the council needed to have signatures from three teachers before they could be put forward as nominees. Not only does this automatically reduce the number of students willing to join the council, it gives the message to students that the role of their council is to serve the staff and school management, as opposed to being a representative group for the student body. This issue has been raised in the literature, as Dobie and MacBeath (1998) argue that student councils must be supported in the deeper school ethos and commitment to youth participation and learning for democratic citizenship.

Pressure on Senior Students

Although only two schools did not include junior members on the council, the three councils which had been well established had an executive made up of senior students. In another school, the President of the council was always a 6th year student. In most of the other schools the Chairperson was also a sixth year. The benefit of senior students being allocated responsibility on the council is that they are more mature, more confident and better at communicating with management than younger students. However, many teachers were concerned that the council eats into their time considering the fact that they are preparing for the Leaving Certificate.

Students in senior cycle also felt that senior students on the council had too much work to do already, without also taking on the responsibility of being a member of a student council. It was thought that there would be 'pressure on the student council affecting study and other areas'. It was suggested by students that exams created a huge problems as regards finding time for a student council to meet.

Also, there is a limit on the time that they can give to the council. As studies are becoming more and more time consuming and stressful, a number of people queried whether the leader

of the council should be a final year student (whether elected or selected). Final year students are being consumed by their school work. In one school, the Liaison Teacher wondered whether it would be better for students from 5th year to be on the council, although this would raise a number of questions, for example, should Presidents be able to take a 2nd term if they wished?

Leadership

Most of the councils had a number of officers including a Chairperson and a Vice-Chairperson. However four councils had designated leaders, all of whom were elected with or by teaching staff. In these schools the quality of the leadership is a very important factor in how the council operates:

'It depends ultimately on the Head Boy, it's crucial that he's a strong character then everything will follow suit, a weak character is not good'.

Characteristics of a student council leader were outlined by staff in a number of the schools. A leader needs to be a strong character, be a good public speaker, have a sense of humour, be a team player and involved in school life. The leader is the first link between management, staff and students and so needs to be able to argue a good case. Leaders also need to be able to balance their role on the council and their school work. The leader needs to be good at delegating and having faith in the members of the student council and also needs to be able to manage internal conflict and cannot take criticism personally. One teacher commented on positive experiences with good leaders:

'They just really can sit around with you and talk and chew the fat with you on issues, which is very positive, and I really do think that they take into account that yeah, we're running a very big building here and there's a lot of basic rules and regulations, and they take that on board'.

STUDENT COUNCIL LIAISON TEACHER

A good Liaison Teacher has been identified as a very important factor in the success of the council. Below we will look at the student council members' views of their Liaison Teacher, the views of the Liaison Teachers and the challenges they face.

Student Council Members' Views of the Liaison Teacher

Generally the council members were very positive about their Liaison Teacher. It was someone they trusted, could speak out their views in front of, and felt supported by:

'Yeah 'cos she sometimes sees what we don't see so well (a management outlook) you kind of have to have her there, officially, because you're kinda working with the teachers and the students'.

'We have [Liaison Teacher], who set it up, and she's brilliant, and she acts as mediator... she explains things to us fully, and tells us of upcoming events... [she] holds it together... she talks like an equal to us in the meetings'.

Some students mentioned that often it was their Liaison Teacher who managed to get things followed through:

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'If we didn't have [Liaison Teacher] we probably wouldn't get half the stuff we've got if he hadn't been going to the Principal about stuff, nothing would happen, it's only because he's there bringing it to the Principal's attention'.

Student council members in one school acknowledged that the Liaison Teacher is in a difficult situation, because there may be negative repercussions for them when acting on behalf of the council. One council felt that their Liaison Teacher exerts too much influence and that everything has to go through the Liaison Teacher. They felt that they would like to have an independent person to liaise with the school management on their behalf.

In cases where the student council did not feel fully comfortable with their Liaison Teacher and were not sure what they could discuss in their presence, they argued that they should be allowed to meet on their own:

'Teacher involvement is good at some level, but we need to meet on our own first, so we can discuss what we want to do'.

In two schools, the Principal acted as the Liaison Officer. Although this was beneficial in that it provided a direct communication channel, members felt that they never have a chance to gather their thoughts and prepare themselves properly.

Role of Liaison Teacher

The Liaison Teachers described some of their responsibilities:

- They have to be present at meetings to guide students, help the council to think things through and make them aware of the repercussions of certain decisions. They also have to provide students with information, help them to keep focused and to work within their limits and boundaries. They also provide practical support e.g. photocopying, organising meetings etc.

- They ensure equality exists within the council and that all council members feel they have a chance to speak and that no one member takes over or is favoured. The Liaison Teacher can be a mediator when problems break out between members.

- The Liaison Teacher also has to train council members e.g. how to run meetings; how to prepare a meeting with the Principal and also on how to lobby issues such as speaking with teachers about suggestions etc.

- The Liaison Teacher has an important role in making sure students' ideas go forward and that they have a voice. They act as the liaison between the students and staff about student related issues and the link between the council and management. As one Liaison Teacher described it:

'... so it's kind of, in some instances appeasing students and working with management, actually seeing net results at the end of the day because they want to see that their voice is listened to, and things being done.'

Another Liaison Teacher felt her role had another important aspect:

'For me the most important thing is still trying to create something that has clout within the school and also that has respect and that students in the future will aspire to. I do not want it to be just a shobby by-the-way that people don't respect'.

Most of the Liaison Teachers enjoyed their role:

'I think it's very positive for me in the school, it gives me a link with students. They kind of think I'm very democratic because I'm connected with the student council…'

Challenges for Liaison Teachers

Although a fulfilling role, Liaison Teachers experienced a number of challenges. Firstly, the role takes a lot of time. One Liaison Teacher argued that in the future she would ask for more support from staff:

'I have found again that, I think for next year I've learned that I will try and start to look for more support from the staff in terms of designating… I'm there to help the student council definitely but other teachers will have to take over, and I know they'll be more than happy too… I think that I'll have to delegate and look for more support in that way and I'll have to make that more clear in staff meetings in the future.'

Secondly, some Liaison Teachers noted that there is tension for Liaison Teacher in deciding where their priority lies – with staff group or student council. It is important for staff members to know that there is a staff member on the council guiding it.

'…to see that it doesn't become a nitpicking and a let's get at the teachers type… it's important to have a staff member there to see that the agenda is appropriate'.

However, sometimes it can be difficult to define the role with the staff group:

'I suppose initially I was wary of you know, being seen by staff as too student friendly, at the same time… there's a line… making sure that you weren't kind of on one side or the other, that you're sort of linking between the two. That's the kind of idea, because most people I suppose are very happy that students have a voice but possibly some people aren't'.

One Liaison Teacher felt that her role may be misunderstood:

'In a way I find myself being approached about kids and discipline, in a way am becoming the one who warns kids that if they don't mind their behaviour they'll be off the council… I have to be careful about that too that I don't become like 'the discipline woman.'

Another Liaison Teacher pointed out that it can be difficult to know where the brief begins and ends. The role as Liaison Teacher requires a lot of skills:

'It does require certain skills of diplomacy and being able to manage both students and staff as well. It takes a lot of time… They need to know where their brief begins and ends'.

'[As a liaison] you're dealing with the Principal… then I'm going back to the staff as well and putting things to them, you have to be so delicate, you know, and then you go back to the students, so you are actually dealing with everybody and you have to be careful enough.'

A further issue for Liaison Teachers is that they have to learn not to take responsibility for the council's actions or council members' actions:

'I suppose liaising is the key word, whatever that means, but it's not the most straightforward job, and to be honest, when I started doing it there's so little information about what you're supposed to do… to actually know where my role stops and management takes over, on one side, and where my role stops and the students take over, on the other side, is actually very difficult to know where that is, and then in terms of staff, it's even more difficult'.

Some Liaison Teachers wondered how far they can go in representing students' issues to management:

'… so it's difficult to know exactly what you're supposed to do, and even if I bring an issue to management and management don't respond to it, do I go back and push management to respond to it…I suppose at the end of the day, they're management of the school and fundamentally they're the boss … '

Another Liaison Teacher felt that she would like to be given a little more authority in her role, 'maybe a little more scope in what I could do. It would be helpful if she could make decisions rather than having to bring everything to management.

Most Liaison Teachers said that in the beginning they were very active as the council was being established, but with time they begin to stand back. They also said that they try to sit back and let the council do the work. They only intervene if appropriate. The majority said that they arrive 10-15 minutes into the meeting so that students have a bit of time to organise themselves. One Liaison Teacher pointed out that she has to make herself sit back as the student council would let her run it if she let them. Another confirmed this:

'I find myself at the moment interjecting an awful lot and that's no good either because it takes responsibility away from them and people start looking to me then. I think I'm either in there or I'm not, I would prefer not to have to be involved at all, I would much prefer to sit back.'

However another Liaison Teacher found that he has gone from standing back to becoming more active. When it began, he expected the council members to come up with ideas. He had compared it to a 3rd level union and how active they are. When they had no ideas he presented ideas to them and was met with blank faces. He does not think it is his job to give homework like a teacher in class:

'It's not what I should be doing, I should be suggesting, not over-suggesting and expecting them to come back with feedback… you don't want to be too authoritarian about it either, you want them to be relaxed about it.'

The role of Liaison Teacher should not be an indefinite position:

'I also think by virtue of the same argument, a Liaison Teacher can't do their role indefinitely, there should be a time when you can be it, and then a time when you're not it anymore, because it requires huge resources of energy and innovation and enthusiasm, and you become stale... because new blood can bring new ideas.'

A number of Liaison Teachers argued that they would like some training to support their role. This would be very useful especially as Liaison Teachers have to train council members.

'If there was something for us, where we could air and share our grievances and our views or just get ideas.'

CONCLUSION

There are a number of issues related to the internal working of the council which impact on how well it operates. These included how the council was made up – the size; whether junior students were represented on the council; resources; commitment of council members; maintaining enthusiasm and continuity; lack of skills amongst council members; the student council not grasping empowerment; pressure on senior students and leadership. The Liaison Teacher was identified as one of the main supports to the council. This was mostly seen as a fulfilling if challenging role.

The election process is also very important. Councils which were mainly elected by students but had some teacher input into the election of council leaders seemed to be the most effective, as the council members were sanctioned by students and staff. There is also more commitment from council members if the election process is seen to be fair and it involves nominees demonstrating their interest in the council.

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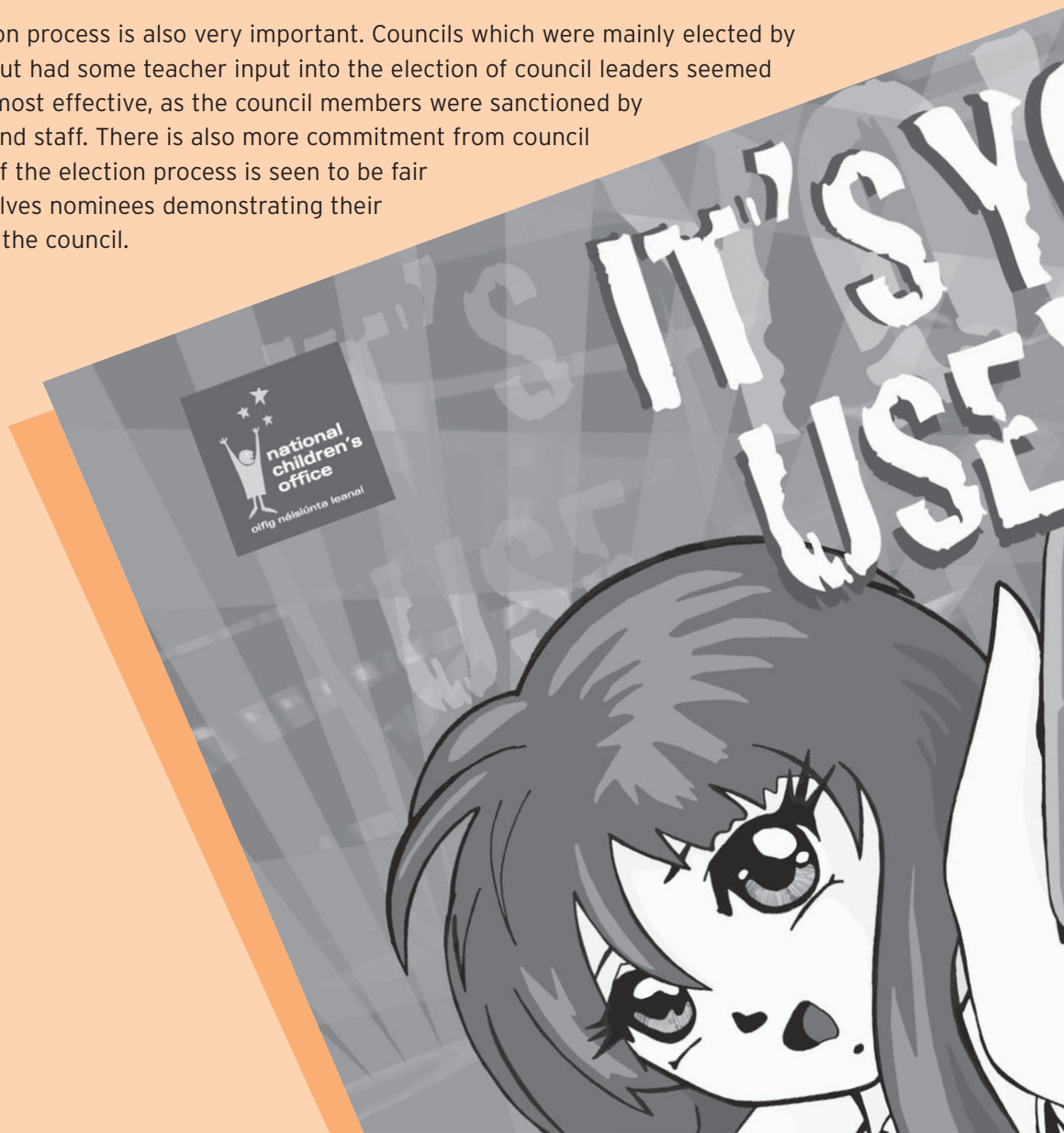
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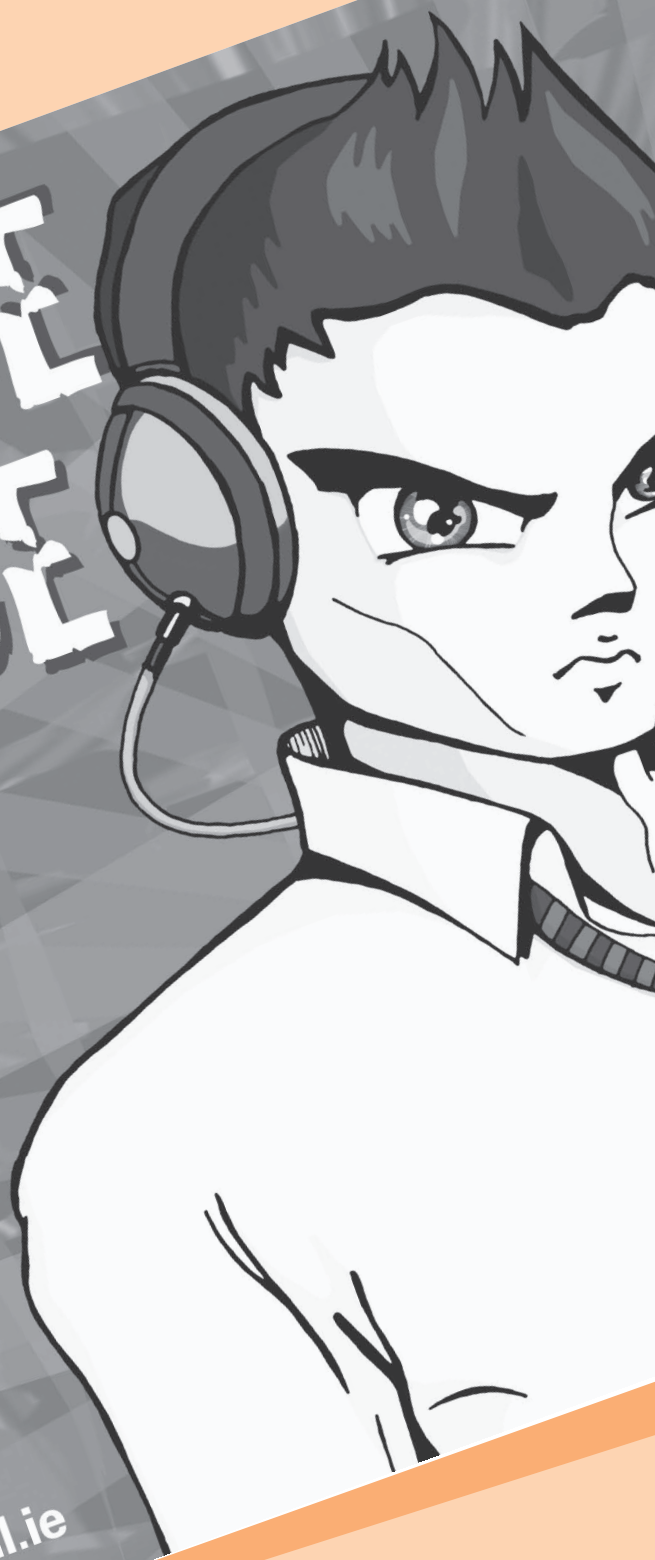
From left to right: Fionn Daly, Grace Fitzpatrick, Hazel Nolan, Oisín O'Reilly, Blainead Casserly, Katie Lawless and Stewart Daly, members of the Student Council Working Group.

7. COMMUNICATION

This chapter will present an overview of the issues identified in relation to how the council relates and communicates with the student body, the management and staff and the Board of Management.

RELATIONSHIP WITH STUDENT BODY

One of the main concerns for student council members is how they relate to the student body. They were very concerned about how the students viewed them and that they did not understand their issues. They perceived that students do not give them much support. This had a very significant impact on their self-esteem.

Students' Views About the Council

Some students felt positive about their councils:

> 'It's had a really positive impact on the school, girls are getting more involved now.'

> 'It's a good idea if done properly; if you could get your views onto the council.'

Generally speaking however, members of the student body who participated in the study did not think very much of their councils. They acknowledged that they (the students) were not very supportive. They argued that they did not know anything about the councils, that they were excluded from the activities of their council and that the councils do not access their views. Second year students in particular were far less informed about the activities of the council and lacked trust in it. There was also a perception amongst some students that the councils were more loyal to the staff than to the students, particularly when students see the council carrying out agendas set by management or completing tasks for teachers. It was emphasised that a student council...

> '...should listen to the students more than they listen to the teachers'.

Students who were not on their school's student council felt that they were completely excluded from its activities. It was clearly felt by students in these schools that they were being excluded from the workings of the student council and that no one was trying to access their views:

> 'Don't try and find out what the students in the school want'.

This was supported by the finding that students, according to themselves, never hear anything about what the council is doing or get feedback on their ideas from

management. In one school, the student council had done a student survey of what improvements students felt could be made in the canteen, but it was never heard of again:

'We're not hearing about the results of the survey – it's just as if the student council goes into a room and you don't.'

Student council members also felt that sometimes the students do not take the council seriously, even if it has been successful. They think it is tokenistic, or a 'photo-op'. Indeed one senior student argued that the council is 'just there so the school can have one'. Some students also perceived the council as elitist and that it is just a way of getting out of class. This was exacerbated by how the student body understood the council was made up. The role of teachers in the selection process was seen as a problem by senior students in some schools:

'Only people who stand out and who work would get a position on the student council...people seen as messers wouldn't have a chance.'

It was a common feeling that there was a 'falsity' about the student council, i.e. that it was all for show and not intended for anything meaningful:

'I think the student council is false – they organise loads of stuff that the teachers would have done.'

'The student council is all for show, so that they can say it's like a democracy, but it's not... because at the end of the day, only the staff have a say.'

Student council members were aware of how the students viewed them. These difficulties in relating to the student body were related to three areas – accessing students' views, actually bringing their views forward and providing feedback about the outcome.

Accessing Student Views

Student council members recognised that they do not access student views sufficiently. In a number of councils, there were no formalised procedures for accessing students' views:

It's not planned really – someone comes around, says there's gonna be a meeting at lunchtime, so we should get the other students to shout out their ideas and then write them down'.

Councils expressed particular difficulty with accessing the views of junior cycle students:

'I do think that the junior voice could be heard more... the seniors have a lot of weight... '

Senior students too felt that their views were not accessed enough and recognised that junior views in particular are not represented. Indeed junior students clearly did not feel trust for their student councils. Some said that they did not trust the representatives enough to approach their student council with various problems. They felt that members on the student councils do not get to know the students that they represent, which is causing a barrier to trust. Many issues around this were mentioned by second year students:

> 'They don't know us so it would be a bit hard to talk to us.'
>
> 'Embarrassed to talk to strange students.'

Junior students also pointed out that they were not convinced that council members would maintain confidentiality if students raised an issue with them. It was reported that because they are not teachers, they are not seen to be as trustworthy regarding confidentiality. Interpersonal difficulties were also mentioned as part of the lack of trust:

> 'A person in the student council might not want to help a person that needs it. They might not get along.'

Students do not tend to approach council members, so making it easy for students to voice their opinions to council members is important. Students have to be able to express their views without teacher presence; however the only time all students are together is when they are in class. Suggestions included providing students with a facility to email the council and an anonymous suggestion box:

> 'There was the idea of the suggestion box ... we wanted people if they had any queries or worries or problems, to put their suggestions in the box, and we'd sort through them...and even if there were any that weren't relevant, we'd look at them...'

Providing Feedback on What They Do

Even if council members do access their views, some 2nd years felt the council are selective in the issues they bring forward:

> 'They just use their own ideas and not the ideas of other students.'
>
> 'Not doing their job properly e.g. if someone has a problem and the student council thinks it's not that important.'

Some students felt that their student councils were not concerned enough with what students wanted. It was also felt that student councils were not putting in enough effort, and that:

> 'If teachers say 'no', they don't ask again.'

Council members however talked about how students make unrealistic requests:

> 'I don't know, you know really, changes like, a lot of people said a new canteen, you're trying to come up with ideas that really work, like'.

Also students find it difficult to accept that changes cannot happen immediately and blame the council for decisions the council did not take:

> 'It's kinda hard to tell other students that we can't really change the school...we haven't the actual power to get things that are way too overboard done...it's up to us to tell them, we can't do that'.

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The council members argued that the main reason the students did not feel represented is that they are not aware of the work the council does:

'But we haven't really done anything to show the students that we are there…'

One of the councils talked about how important it is to carry out activities which are tangible:

'Students don't see the tangible results that we are achieving, changing some of the rules in the school, as we build up relationships and build up trust with management… We have to have tangible results so students can see what we're doing, so we'd need to retain the likes of the concerts in that respect.'

One Liaison Teacher pointed out that the council should not get too bogged down with students not knowing or appreciating what the student council is doing. Councils should not be trying to justify themselves – 'the satisfaction is in the doing'. Indeed one council member stated that representatives had to 'get over being stereotyped by students as a bunch of academic overachievers handpicked by teachers'.

Raising the Profile of the Council

Council members thought that these issues related to accessing the students views, and providing feedback on their activities could be addressed through raising the profile of the council:

'We need to make the students realise that it took four years for us to get the likes of the decking and the air-conditioning'.

'It's important that other students find out what the student council is about, not interested so much that they might want to join it, but that they would go to so-and-so with an idea and they can tell the Principal and something might be done'.

Some of the suggestions for raising the profile of the council included wearing badges, alerting students to the changes the student council have achieved through a noticeboard, a page in the school newsletter and through having a website. Students suggested that the minutes of meetings should be released and available to other students.

Another important mechanism for raising the profile of the student council was that the representatives have more one on one contact with the students. This would also provide students with opportunity to ask questions and comment. Suggestions included that the representatives should report on the council's activities in class meetings. Other suggestions from junior students included having a, 'certain time when you can go and tell your ideas'. One helpful suggestion provided by a fifth year student was that student councils should…

'…have a separate time for council reps to talk to the class (a scheduled time every week) so it won't cut in on regular classes and everyone will find out what is going on.'

RELATIONSHIPS WITH MANAGEMENT AND TEACHERS

The next challenge for the student councils after accessing student views and deciding what they will do is bringing ideas forward to management. In the schools where the council was particularly active, most teachers said that staff is very positive about the student council and

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very supportive of it. In schools that had a council established for a long time, teachers did not seem to question it:

> 'The reception is that it's very valuable, worthwhile group of people to have in the college because let's face it, the school runs when the students and staff are working together in partnership and there has to be someone to represent the students at that level as well.'

They said that it depended on the actual council from year to year and also on the leadership. Another teacher stated that it is seen 'not so much a threat, but maybe a thorn in their side'.

In most schools however, the teaching staff did not have very much involvement or interest in the council. As one teacher put it:

> 'One teacher looks after it, and we just let it happen… that's probably a negative aspect to it'.

Students and student council members, on the other hand, perceived teachers' attitudes to the council as an obstacle:

> 'At the end of the day, you don't get as much done as you think you will, because the teachers have the power and it's up to them really, they have the final say. Sometimes they say to you, 'we've given you your student council, you have that'… but it's not… we don't get to do all that much'.

Many councils attribute the Principal as the main reason they do not achieve the things they want and had many examples of this.

> '…just the fact that the Principal, we've gone to her numerous times, she's the only one who's holding us back…nothing can be done without her approval…'

Senior and junior cycle students also felt that management and teachers were serious obstacles to the running of the student council of their school:

> 'Board of Governors don't think the student council is capable of making decisions.'
>
> 'Teachers and management don't take seriously and don't seem to listen to the 'voice of the students.'

Some students attributed it simply to the generation gap. Others attributed it to the fact that the teachers do not see results from the council:

> '[Teachers] seem to back us most of the time, they let us talk about it in the class…but they wouldn't really be that for it…maybe they think we don't really do much in the school, but that's not our fault either'.

In contrast, student council members who felt they were respected by teachers said that they worked with teachers very well:

> 'They have a respect for you when you're on the student council; they help us and we help them it's mutually beneficial'.

> 'We will help if we have the time to do it, but they respect that we have heavy workloads and expectations placed on us'.

Student council members felt that teachers have to meet them half way though:

> 'It is up to us to be known for our ideas...things change with the times...they need to respect that we have ideas...we all have new ideas and if they can't accept that, then there's no point in us being here...'

> 'We can respect old traditions, but we can also create our own new traditions'.

In terms of making sure their ideas are brought forward to staff, some student councils and Liaison Teachers suggested that a council representative would give a report to staff at staff meetings outlining the councils ideas, proposals and what was discussed at their meetings.

Pupil Voice or Pupil Power?

Senior students related these problems with staff to a lack of power available to the council:

> 'The student councils are not taken seriously – it does not seem like they have any real power.'

This was mentioned as problematic by all schools in the current study, and was clearly perceived as the most serious issue for a student council by senior students:

> 'The staff basically rule the roost, they have the say at the end of the day.'

Second years also identified that student councils had very little power:

> 'They don't have enough power!'

> 'They don't have enough say in what goes on.'

Some senior students reported innovative endeavours by their student councils, but a lack of impetus on the part of teachers preventing any positive change from happening. Senior students seemed to feel that a student council needed more power to be able to tackle these issues effectively:

> 'It should be given some level of power so that it can be taken seriously.'

> 'To be granted a bit more authority by staff members.'

Junior students identified that this issue was mostly related to better communication between staff and students:

'Students should fight for their views.'

'Get more teachers involved.'

'Sit teachers down and let them know what the student council are doing.'

'Should have more meetings with the Board of Management and the Principal.'

Senior students had more focused ideas on how to tackle this problem:

'Board of Governors and Student Council should hold their meetings together.'

'We need a representative on the Board of Governors.'

'Student Council should work with a group of elected teachers and make a final decision where everyone's opinion matters.'

What Does Power Mean?

Council members in a number of schools also talked about not having enough power. When asked to define what they mean by power the council members stated that power means trust, respect and resources such as time, space, money. They understood that it was not given automatically:

'You shouldn't have power unless you've earned it, and I think we have.'

Whereas some councils which had been established since 1998 felt they had some power, students in the three schools that had long established student councils were resigned to the fact that there is only so much they can do. Student council members in both the boys' schools were downbeat.

Q. 'What would help the student council?'

A. 'Nothing – They (staff) dismiss us – everyone knows we don't have a say really, it's just for show – in meetings, they'd propose X, Y and Z, and if we had any queries about it – it wouldn't register, they always carry through everything they say, and when we have our own ideas, they take them away, and when we say will you get back to us on when you'll consider putting them in place, and they say, but you never hear from them...'

Students in the all girls' school were much more positive than students in the boys' schools and felt that if they used diplomacy that they would achieve a certain amount of authority. They talked about 'using our limited power responsibly and maybe gaining a little more in the process':

'The more they see us doing without power, the more power they will be willing to give us...or at least respect us more'.

True Democracy or Training for Democracy?

One Liaison Teacher talked about how students would like to think of it as true democracy, whereas management is more likely to see it as a place for training for democracy. As one member of senior management pointed out:

> 'Like schools, when it comes down to it, schools are places where learning takes place, and that's where I think a student council is fantastic, because it initiates the whole process by doing it... but I'm not big into this sort of politicising things because I think it's not just a great place, schools, because their structures, the way they're designed, they won't take to politics, they're not democracies, they don't work like that you know. It would be great if it did but...'

Perhaps the best way to think of the student council is as 'a blend of democracy and common sense'.

Whose Council Is It?

Student council members wondered whose council it was and for whose purpose? Lack of clarity about the role of the council led to a number of issues.

Student council members in a number of schools believed that the staff felt the council was in place to serve them. It was not a students' council. The agenda of councils in these schools was set by management, or else they were frequently asked to complete tasks for different teachers. For one council, training was very useful and motivating, however, when they returned they were given an agenda by the school management. This dampened their spirits. They had no chance to promote awareness of students' issues or to represent students. This has led the council to feeling that they are not appreciated and are taken for granted. They felt they were just being used. The Liaison Teacher in this school stated that this also contributes to a lack of commitment among some members. Another Liaison Teacher had very strong opinions about the council being asked to do inappropriate tasks:

> 'Well as far as I'm concerned that's not the way it works. You start off tiny, small, get them to work as a cohesive group, get them to have some sort of pride in their position and then get them to work on the larger things... I don't want them to be like they're there to do work, like nasty stuff, like rubbish and graffiti. It has to be good, positive things too.'

Council members in these schools perceived that they do not have the freedom to turn down tasks given to them by management and staff. They wondered if they would be punished if they said 'no'? Some council members also felt insecure in their position as representatives because they might be removed from the council, and so were reluctant to be assertive or make their voice heard. There were no specific rules laid down as to what constitutes grounds for removal from the council. They have to play it by ear:

> 'Also if you break guidelines, you get a warning, and if you get three warnings, if you do this or that, you lose your captaincy: you don't know what makes up these guidelines, you are never told what is acceptable and what is not... it feels like they just make it up to suit themselves.'

Although quite often students may have unrealistic expectations, management constantly refusing every idea they have is a real problem. In one school, the Liaison Teacher thought that this was the main reason the council has collapsed. A lot of things were refused at the early stages, and now they are disillusioned. Some councils expressed frustration at this train of events:

> '**The student council members should take a stand and tell teachers this is not what we are for!**'

Another Liaison Teacher also felt that sometimes things that the council has managed to achieve, for example, a new facility for students, is held over the heads of council members. If something goes wrong, they are threatened that the facility will be removed. In a similar way, some council members felt that vendettas against particular students would be continued into the council, which they thought was unfair.

One council member suggested that clarifying the role of the council would be very beneficial:

> '**If there was a clear layout from top to bottom, where everyone knows what is happening, where there's trust like ….if all of that was coming right down to first year, everyone knew what was happening, and there was a distinct line of knowing what was going on clearly…**'

Communication with Management

Councils communicated with management in different ways including delivering the minutes of the meeting to the Principal via the Liaison Teacher; writing up a report and putting it under the Principal's door. In one school the Liaison Teacher brings the initial ideas forward to the Principal but then it is up to the council to bring the issue further. In another school, the problem was that when the Principal wants to consult them, he schedules meetings out of nowhere and they have no time to formulate their thoughts:

> '**We could have loads of ideas in our head, and we could ask the Principal for a meeting, say this evening, but he could just out of nowhere say call us out and say 'we're having a meeting now', but we wouldn't have our ideas thought up, and that would be his idea of a meeting.**'

It is not just a challenge to bring ideas forward to management but to staff also.

> '**Ideas get to the staff council, and don't go to the Board of Management… or else, ideas get to the Board of Management, and nothing happens… it's really about ideas not being followed up**'.

Even when the council has successfully brought an idea forward, they reported not getting any feedback on their idea. This was very frustrating:

> '**There's a real need for feedback even if the Principal disagrees, we could go back to the drawing board and change something but we don't hear anything back at all.**'

Council members argued that they should be given a definite response when they suggest or request something. Also, when something has been refused, the reason why must be clearly explained to the students directly, not through the Liaison Teacher. Communication needs to be two way. The main outcome of poor communication with management is that the council members end up feeling like they are not valued and listened to, which knocks their self-esteem:

"We just need someone who will actually listen to us, instead of saying 'I'm too busy...'"

'People dismiss what you say straight away... then you just don't bother...'

Why Does Management Not Get Back To Them?

Students had a number of ideas about why management do not feed back to them. In a number of schools, the perception of council members was that management do not value the student council:

'We're (the student population) a lower class, we feel degraded'.

'I'd like to see it ranked up there with the prefects...if we were given as much respect as them.'

Some councils argued that the management only listen to the senior members of the student council. They also felt that management and staff do not trust the ability of the council to make the right decision:

'No trust or not much respect there either. Like we'd come in here and it'd be like teacher and students, instead of equal people around the table.'

Sometimes management and staff think they understand the issues the council raise, but they do not:

'You listen to them half way through the meeting, 'we're older, we're adults, we've gone though this', but we're the students, we know exactly what's going on.'

Some councils also feel that the management do not take the council seriously and that it is really just tokenistic:

'...they're only calling a meeting for the co-operation of the students, so we can go back and say that we had a meeting about it. They make a decision themselves on really big issues and they come back to us and they ask our opinions – but I think they've already made their opinions before they talk to us. I don't think that's right, at the end of the day they have the power.'

Principals also acknowledged that they did not get back to the councils. One Principal attributed this to the fact that it's part of the larger communication issues in a school:

'When you talk to the members of the council, they'll probably say 'we don't have as much say as we should have...' there's probably truth in that too...As a staff we don't consult each other sufficiently enough, the same goes for the students.'

Finding the time to feedback to councils was also an issue:

'Time is another thing isn't it really, because to find the time for them to go through these things and to discuss them'.

Another Principal discussed the difficulties of involving students in influencing policy:

'Now the trouble there is that the wording of the policy sometimes is legally binding and difficult for them to read and I'd say the juniors are going to be, mainstream will be able to understand, but I think that might be difficult in some areas. I mean, you have to include them really.'

Also some Principals found that there was disparity among the council and they could not come to a consensus on issues. One Liaison Teacher suggested that sometimes the management do take on board the council's suggestions, but it is not immediately apparent:

'...like, things were happening, but it was seen as nothing was happening, or things weren't happening very quickly in the system... and then I would see with where we come up with ideas and put them to management, and then a year later someone else would run with the idea, that kind of thing, someone else would take over the job.'

Better Communication Strategies

Councils suggested a lot of ways to improve communication with the Principal. Firstly, they acknowledged that it is not enough to present an idea once, they need to be assertive:

'We need to keep on at the Principal more; he keeps on forgetting about things.'

They also acknowledged that they have to present ideas to the Principal in an appropriate way. Some councils also felt that they should communicate directly with the Principal 'because you could tell his reaction straight away'. Another council felt that their ideas were being filtered as it was brought to management and teachers through their Liaison:

'We need to go to the meetings to see what they're thinking and what we're thinking... whatever they're thinking is being incorporated into what we're thinking and it's not our pure kind of idea, it's just altered into what they want it to be...so if we sat down with them and said 'this is what we're thinking', and they sat down with us and said 'this is what we're thinking', well, then we're getting it properly face to face...there's no middle man, you know'.

Direct communication with the management could be facilitated through the Principal or Deputy Principal attending meetings also. A number of Liaison Teachers also suggested this, not only because it would provide direct communication, but it would mean the student council actually feel that they are being listened to. Management will also get a sense of what's happening and the feeling of the group.

COMMUNICATION WITH BOARD OF MANAGEMENT

A number of councils felt that they needed direct communication with the Board of Management. Council members wondered what the Board of Management did:

'We don't understand why they're [Board of Management] there – they are the people who run the school, but how can they run it if they don't know what type of students are in the school – they are never here, you never see them...'

'It's a bit ridiculous, because they're making all the decisions for the school, but you should be able to help make decisions. We are the ones in the school, we are the ones who it is affecting'.

A number of models were put forward for student issues to be addressed at Board of Management level.

1. **AGENDA FOR THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT MEETINGS SHOULD BE DISCUSSED WITH THE STUDENT COUNCIL.**

2. **PERIODIC REPORTS SHOULD BE BROUGHT BEFORE MANAGEMENT TO BE CONSIDERED.**
   This would involve the student council documenting the issues they would like to be addressed to be circulated at the Board of Management meeting.

3. **BOARD MEMBERS ATTENDING STUDENT COUNCIL MEETINGS.**
   This would involve a Board member attending student council meetings to discuss with them the issues they would like to be addressed. In one school, student council members get the opportunity to meet members of the Board, however it is not very successful as the Board members rarely visit the school.

4. **STUDENTS BEING REPRESENTED BY THE PRINCIPAL OR A TEACHER.**
   In many of the schools, students' issues and concerns are raised to the Board of Management by the school Principal. However, one Board member suggested that an independent person should represent the students. He anticipated problems with the Principal or a teacher acting as a student representative.

'If students want to put an idea forward it needs to be listened to and they need to be sure that the person representing their views does not have a conflict of interest. It shouldn't be a teacher or the school Principal. It should be an independent member.'

5. **A STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE ON THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT.**
   A student representative sitting on the Board was considered by many councils to be the best way of ensuring student issues were raised and brought forward:

'We don't even know if the Board of Management are even hearing our ideas, because there's no one present at the meetings to see if they've even brought it up. I think it would make a big difference if someone could represent a student in the meeting'

This particular possibility will be given more detailed attention below.

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE ON THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT

The views of members of Boards of Management/Governors to having a student on the Board differed widely. Principals generally had an open mind about having a student on the Board, although there were considerations. Teaching staff had widely differing opinions, especially as teachers are not even represented on the Board of Management in some sectors. These views will be outlined in the following sections.

Selection of the Student

In all schools, it was important that the student representative would be approved by both staff and students. In one school, it was felt that prefects, who are selected through an application and interview process, would be more favourable representatives, as they would be approved by teachers and have skills to address a Board. In another school, the 6th years on the council are selected through an interview process, and for this reason the Principal would have no difficulty in having one of them act as a representative:

'The students go for interview, prepare a CV and so on and that's how they're selected. These lads, I'd have no problem... with one of them being on the Board of Management. Their views of course, I mean basically what is the school about, about them.'

If the student representative is elected by the student body, then the student body must be fully informed about what the role involves:

'I really think if the student council is to work properly they'd want to be given a good deal of time to be... spoken to about the responsibilities of being on these council committees... so that students realise this is an important thing and not something to be trifled with.'

Term of Office

One Principal pointed out that the term of office on the Board of Management is 3 years, and wondered how this would be managed:

'I've seen it operate at 3rd level where the students are represented on the governing authority, and they remain silent throughout most of the meeting except for a particular interest to them, but they only are there for one year, because their term of office in the Students' Union is gone, and then there's a turn over annually for them. Would it be the same at second level?'

Confidentiality

In one meeting with a Board of Management, it was discussed how issues of confidentiality would put pressure on the students. Senior students, in particular, 6th years are under enough pressure. They did state that there is a role for student council members to provide feedback and address the Board of Management on pertinent issues, but they need training.

Responsibilities

The issue of a student sitting on a Board of Management is not just about whether they can keep confidentiality. Board members need to have a certain amount of skills and experience

to participate fully in the meetings. This Principal thinks that the issue needs a lot more teasing out. After all, in a voluntary secondary school, the Board of Management has a corporate identity:

'… so I think it needs a lot more teasing out, I think it's difficult enough for the uninitiated to be on a Board, I think for people who have been working from one particular perspective, be it teachers or parents, have to broaden their perspective very significantly to operate as part of a corporate entity and I think students would have difficulty in doing that. Some of them would be excellent, but they just are so young, they haven't the experience. It's nothing against them as people, but they haven't lived the experience sufficiently widely to be able to look at the broad perspective, that is sometimes, or a lot of the time necessary to be a corporate entity.'

A number of teachers had themselves been representatives on the Board of Management. One teacher from a voluntary secondary school described it as an onerous task which requires a lot of thinking and reflecting. There is quite a lot of responsibility and there may be ramifications for what happens in school. Another teacher stated that most of the time they talk about finance, raising money, organising voluntary contribution:

'A lot of that might be inappropriate for students, and then disciplinary things that would come up, I'm not sure a jury of their peers, I don't think it would be the right place for them at all… I think it would just be a bit cynical really, you might put them on and say, oh we have students on the board but I don't think they'd be functional.'

Other teachers were concerned that such responsibility may have personal costs for the student:

'… but this would also put a high demand on the students having to be involved in all this stuff. I know they'd be trying to push an issue and be at the core of it, but I don't know if it's necessarily pressure to put on a student. I know it's something to aim for, those kind of meetings is all part of growing up. I think that trying to be an adult before your time, I don't mean that as an insult – just trying to do things at that level, I think it's a bit of a big jump. I'd certainly think that their opinions would be considered still – they would have a voice still, but I don't think they have to have the presence.'

Trusting the Student Representative

A number of teachers and parents sitting on Board of Managements said that it was very important to trust students and a student representative. One teacher said that there was nothing to fear about having a student sit on the Board:

'What are they afraid of, it's not a them and us scenario'.

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Another teacher representative said that it's something that must be tried:

'I wouldn't, not now, maybe yes, maybe in the future, I feel it's something that would need to be tried... it's an awkward one, because there are some very sensitive things on the Board obviously that could even be said in passing... having said that... you've got to trust the student... but you have to trust the people on the Board as well.'

A number of Board members talked about how young people's skills and maturity can be underestimated. One teacher representative stated:

'A child aged 18 years has a great head on their shoulders, a great tuned-in mind, very active... '

Another teacher representative on a Board of Management stated:

'Boards of Management will find, I think, that their fears are over-rated... it's fear of the unknown, and dare I say it, it's underestimating the children in our school that they can't come up with one senior student... who has the right qualities, and God help them if they don't, they'd want to start upgrading their standards if they can't get a student who is discreet and confidential out of the entirety of the population. People may not want to hear that but it's certainly the truth, you know they have low opinion of kids like that... there's bound to be good choices out there.'

He continued by saying that fear of the unknown is not a good enough reason not to have a student representative on a Board:

'Fear is no reason in my view, not to be delighted to have a student on, because time and again... it gives fair representation and then you can't complain... It also adds proper weight to the student council because the student council isn't just an isolated body, it's linked one hopes through the student to the Board of Management and they have ...a really important, genuinely strong channel to have their views articulated....There's nothing to fear about the truth... about students, or their ideas, or their hopes, or their aspirations and the only way they'll articulate that is on the student council and the Board of Management.'

One parent talked about how important it is to listen to young people, especially as their views were not heard for a long time:

'I always believe myself... that it's very important that students have their say and that they're listened to. Too long like, it was the other way around... I believe that when we're having a parents meeting or Board of Management meeting it would be valuable to have some students from the student council sitting in on these meetings.'

When the issue of confidentiality was raised with this parent, he said:

'[Yes, they'd be] concerned that there'd be a breach… but I don't know, maybe that is the old school again, like that we can't trust them. Maybe I'm a bit naive in that instance, but I think myself that if you have a student sitting on there, the more they love sitting on it. I believe they'd hold confidences… it's my belief like all aspects of life that they should have an input, like after all it is them we're talking about. Ok, you might see someone else that thinks of the controversial end of it like, that maybe the student sitting here is going to bring in a load of stuff and upset the whole thing… I don't think that would happen. I'd love to know how it works in other schools.'

Proviso for Students to Sit Out Certain Parts of the Meeting

An option that was quite often suggested was that the student representative should leave the meeting when certain issues are to be discussed. As one Principal stated, 'they shouldn't be there for any discussion around staff, either the employment of staff or a difficulty that a staff member might have, or anything like that.' However, she continues:

'I think it would be quite daunting in some ways, I think… on some issues it would be great to have them there, I think on other issues, quite honestly, it would be neither necessary nor good to have them there, and would it be very contentious then to have them in and out?'

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Other areas where a student representative might be asked to leave the meeting would be when discussing other students. One Principal gave an example of a student who had been expelled. He expressed reservations about another student being involved in that discussion and knowing personal details about other students. A teacher who sits on the board said on a student issue, the student perspective would be very important. However, he also stated that:

'There may be some items that are very… sensitive, of a teaching nature, or a parental nature, and really they cannot be in on some of those issues. But there are many issues they could be in on'.

In one school, there is a student representative on the Board of Management. This student is a full member of the board and gets the agenda in the post. In terms of confidentiality, it was decided that the student would be asked to leave the room if necessary, just as a teacher may be asked for certain issues. School staff are aware of this proviso. A teacher who sits on the board said that despite this proviso, the student has never been asked to leave during the previous two years:

'We've never asked him… I never remember him having to stand outside the room… and I don't remember there being one awkward moment in it… The dealings of a Board of Management at the end of the day aren't perhaps as mysterious and as deep as people might think. You're dealing with more banal issues of looking for grants for this that and the other and permission for maternity leaves and all the rest, the use of the school'.

Lip Service to Representation

A number of teachers queried whether a student representative would actually have any say on the Board of Management. This question of whether a student would actually have an equal position on the Board was raised by a number of teachers:

'I think it would purely be a political thing... I would think it would be done for the sake of what people would think... I think it would be hard for a student to have a powerful presence on a board like that... I don't see how it would really work.'

Teachers in a voluntary secondary school discussed the fact that students are not employees and this puts them into a different position:

Teacher 1: 'they are in a different role and they're not adults either, and definitely, I want them to represent themselves and have a voice, but I don't think that necessarily grants them parity either.'

Teacher 2: 'but also, we've been trained, we're adults, we've got experience, we've been trained, we're being paid, we've done various courses during our lifetimes and I think that has to be recognised, and I think to put a student of 16 on a par with somebody who has years of experience behind them, in my opinion...they're not employees'.

Some teachers felt that the student voice would be better represented in other ways, for example, student representatives could address a staff meeting. A student council member in a school where there is a representative on the Board of Management also felt that representation at staff meetings is more important:

'Board of Management does not deal with day to day rules, it's the running of the school; so things which really concern the student council, seem to be dealt with at the level of staff meetings'.

Another teacher argued that:

'I'd say it's more important that they would have more contact with management as in Principal and Vice-Principal and the staff in the school, in a more informal way. I don't think they'd have any place myself on a Board of Management'.

Another possibility is that a committee of students and teachers could address the Board:

'...maybe if you had a committee that would advise the Board, which would be made up of teachers and students then, maybe that would be more in line, that they would be told about the issues that wouldn't be too sensitive...'

STRUCTURE OF THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT/GOVERNORS

The Department of Education and Science has stated that it is not aware of any legal impediment to an under 18 year old becoming a member of a Board of Management.

Section 14 of the Education Act 1998 places a duty on the patron of a recognised school, for the purposes of ensuring that such a school is managed in a spirit of partnership, to appoint, where practicable, a Board of Management. The composition of a Board of Management must be agreed between the patrons of schools, national associations of parents, recognised school management organisations, recognised trade unions and staff associations representing teachers and the Minister for Education and Science.

A Board of Management has statutory duties under the Education Act 1998, the Education Welfare Act 2000 and the Equal Status Act 2000. Each Board, with the exception of those in the VEC sector, is a body corporate with the power to sue and be sued in its corporate name. The structure of the Board of Management in each sector is summarised below.

Comprehensive

In the Comprehensive sector the composition of each board is set out in that school's Deeds of Trust. There are 16 Comprehensive schools in Ireland. In ten of these schools, the Board of Management is made up of three people: 1 bishop's nominee; 1 minister's nominee and 1 VEC nominee. The other six schools have a five person board, but in no instance are teachers or parents formally admitted to the Board. Negotiations regarding the structures of the Boards of Management in comprehensive schools are ongoing.

Community Schools

In the Community sector the composition of each board is set out in that school's Deeds of Trust. The Board structure of community schools is 3 members nominated by the religious authorities, 3 members nominated by the local VEC, 2 parents and 2 teachers. Under the current terms of the Deed of Trust for a community school, it is not possible for a student to be nominated to the Board of Management. However, it is possible for a trustee to nominate a student to the Board but this is highly unlikely.

Vocational Schools

Up until April 2005, there were a number of different Board structures of VEC schools and colleges. At the time of writing, Board structures were being standardised to the following format. For vocational schools, the Board will comprise of 3 or 4 members nominated by the local VEC, 2 parents and 2 members of teaching staff and additional members to reflect partnership e.g. a local primary school representative, member of a local or community organisation. There will be a maximum of 12 members on the Board. For community colleges, the Board will comprise of 3 or 4 members of the local VEC committee, 3 nominees of the bishop/trustee/patron, one other religious nominee, 2 parents, 2 members of teaching staff and another Board nominee e.g. a primary school representative, member of a local or community organisation. Again the maximum number of members on the Board will be 12. Boards of Management are answerable to the VEC, so legal responsibility of board members does not arise as all final financial and staff decisions are taken at VEC level. Some community colleges do currently have a student on the Board of Management (see case study).

Voluntary Secondary schools

In the case of voluntary secondary schools the composition of a Board is governed by the Articles of Management. Student membership of a voluntary secondary school's Board of Management would require an amendment of the Articles of Management for Catholic Secondary Schools as agreed between the ASTI and the AMCSS. This would have to be negotiated and agreed with all the parties involved. The formula for voluntary secondary schools was agreed after 12 years of negotiation in 1985 (20 years ago). The agreed structure for Catholic secondary schools allows for representation of parents (2), teachers (2) and

nominees of the trustees (4). Since students under the age of 18 cannot be held legally responsible because they are minors, it would appear that students cannot become members of a Board of Management.

Case Study

One of the schools had a student representative who sat on the Board of Management. The following case study will provide some insight into his experiences.

The College elected the first Student Representative to its Board of Management in 2000. This representative was elected for a 2-year term. He was first elected to the council and then elected by the Principal and teachers to the Board of Management. He raises student issues to the Board of Management. He stated that when he was first approached to run for election for this position he firmly believed that it was beyond his remit and that the entire experience would be daunting:

'I thought the Board of Management to be a group of distinguished adults made up of VEC members, the parents association and teachers and that their initial response to me would be one of curiosity and hostility. However the groundbreaking work of my predecessors ensured that this was not the case.'

His predecessors each sat on the council for one year, whereas he was elected for two years:

'While I have faced many unique and diverse challenges over the past two years, I have never neglected my duty as the representative of the Student Body. I see my task primarily as raising student issues to the school's governing body.'

In a presentation to the Working Group on Student Councils in Second Level Schools, he highlighted a number of issues in relation to his role, which he felt would be invaluable to any other student wishing to take up this position.

"Firstly I adamantly believe that every successful student council should have a student representative on the Board of Management. It is only then that students will be regarded as partners in the educational process. This ensures transparency and allows for open communication and co-operation between all the partners in the educational process.

Secondly, the selection of both the chairperson of the council and the representative on the Board of Management is not one that should be taken lightly by any student. It is a time-consuming, responsible and as I have already mentioned, a daunting job. The student must be motivated, enthusiastic, trustworthy (the content of the meetings is highly confidential), and be available to attend meetings outside of school time.

Thirdly, from my own perspective a representative of the student body to sit on the Board of Management was initially greeted with scepticism and I believe many interpret it solely as a public relations stunt. This may be the case in other schools but it is not the case at our college. Improving the student body is the goal of everyone concerned with this innovation. I have always been welcomed at Board of Management meetings and I am afforded adequate time to raise the issues and concerns that have been brought up at council meetings. Even more importantly, I believe the views of the Student Body are listened to and considered and this encourages me."

One of the teacher representatives on the Board of Management said that that the opinions of the members to a student coming on were positive. Although there may have been a bit of uncertainty, members on the Board were comfortable with the student chosen.

'Because remember a Board of Management is made up of diverse people who may not know one other anyway. There may be two parents' reps who might be as unsure about their role on a Board of Management as would perhaps the two teachers and the students might feel the same.'

The Deputy Principal in this school was very positive about having a student representative on the Board of Management. She stated 'it's an absolutely super idea, it's an excellent idea... I would say we're learning more'. She said that the representative needs to be briefed prior to the meeting so that they can take an active part in the meeting. She said that she would also value a student who is not afraid to bite the bullet and speak their mind. In this way, she said that she foresees the student representative being used more by the Board of Management in the future.

CONCLUSION

Communication is the essence for establishing a good relationship between the student council and the students and staff. Generally speaking students did not have a very good opinion of their council and were not particularly supportive of it. Council members were aware of this and it concerned them greatly. Students and student council members felt that junior students, in particular, were not represented adequately. They felt that communication with the student body must be improved, both in terms of accessing their views and providing feedback. Raising the profile of the student council with students would also improve the relationship with the student body.

Many students and student council members perceived that the attitudes of staff, and the Principal in particular, were obstacles to the council completing projects for a number of reasons including the council having little status within the school and their role being undefined. They had a number of suggestions for improving the relationship with staff and management, for example, by direct communication.

Communication with the Board of Management was also considered important by many students. The views of members of Boards of Management/Governors to having a student on the Board differed widely. Principals generally had an open mind about having a student on the Board, although there were considerations. Teaching staff had widely differing opinions, especially as teachers are not even represented on the Board of Management in some sectors.

IT'S YOUR CHOICE
USE YOUR VOICE

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Students attending the launch of the Student Council leaflet, poster and website on 23 March, 2004.

8. GOOD PRACTICE MODELS OF STUDENT COUNCILS

This chapter will profile the three student councils that participated in phase two of this study. These schools were selected because they provided diverse models of good practice.

SCHOOL 1 – GIRLS' SECONDARY SCHOOL

School A is a medium sized voluntary secondary girls' school located in an urban area. The school is designated disadvantaged, however all socio-economic groups are well represented within the school and there is a high Leaving Certificate completion rate. There are approximately 450 students with 37 teachers. The school offers a Transition Year Programme, the established Leaving Certificate Programme, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme.

The student council is the only student body within the school. The student council was established about 20 years ago by an interested teacher after she had read an article about student councils. The school already had a council prior to that although it was not very well recognised. The student council members are known as prefects, and all wear 'prefect' badges. In this school, the council is considered part and parcel of the school. The Principal described the council as a participative decision making body. Any decisions that are being made are automatically referred to the council. The students' participation brings life to the school.

Make-up of the Council
The council is made up of 36 members including the Head Girl. Each class has a prefect and a vice prefect to represent them. To ensure that the junior cycle students are properly represented, each junior cycle class has a prefect from senior cycle who provides support to the class prefects and the class. This support system is overseen by the Liaison Officer.

To make the council more workable, there is a Senior Executive Council made up of the senior prefects and the Head Girl. Reservations were expressed about the fact that the Council Executive is simply made up of senior cycle students. The council are considering whether the Council Executive should be elected from within the council.

The Head Girl chairs the council and also acts as Communications Officer. Other officers on the council include a Secretary, Public Relations Officer, a Treasurer, an Attendance Officer and a Liaison Officer, all of whom are elected from within the Senior Executive Council at their first meeting each new school year.

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Election

Election of Council Members
Council members are elected in September. Two students from each class are elected by their class through a secret ballot. The vote is facilitated by the class tutor. Each year the Liaison Teacher puts up a notice in the staff room with suggestions about how the class tutors should facilitate the election. The class tutors are recommended to prepare students for voting over a period of sessions, beginning with discussion of what kind of characteristics a prefect should have. The students have to nominate and second students. Normally there are five or six nominees from each class. At this stage the nominees are told in detail about what is expected of them as a prefect and they must decide if they would be willing to commit. The students then vote in a secret ballot. The votes are counted by the class teacher; however the students are given the option of requesting that another teacher assists with the counting of the votes. The student who gets the most votes becomes prefect and the second becomes vice-prefect.

Election and Selection of Head Girl
The Head Girl is elected by the staff and students from 2nd year upwards. All students who put themselves forward for Head Girl must canvass for votes and also submit an application for the post to the Principal. All are interviewed by the Liaison Teacher and the Principal usually the day before the election. They are rated on the basis of the interview. This rating is added to their rating attained in the election. The student with the highest rating becomes Head Girl. For the last number of years, the student selected through the interview process and the student with the most votes has been the same. It seems that the student body is becoming more experienced at voting for a suitable candidate.

Originally only senior students voted for Head Girl, but the 1st and 2nd year students began to lobby for a vote. The council debated it and decided that 2nd year students, but not 1st year students should be given a vote. Every year the 1st year students lobby to be allowed vote, and every year it is brought before the council which decide that they are not in the school long enough to vote.

Procedures of the Council
The council does not have a written Constitution, partly because it is felt that a Constitution would tie the council to a set remit and it is preferable to play it by ear from year to year. However, over the years specific procedures have been decided on by the council including the format of meetings, the election procedure and how a prefect would lose her badge. Council members must have some safeguards and security of tenure so a prefect could lose her badge for three reasons – if she resigns; if she does not attend meetings; or if she is put 'on report' which means that she is not a good role model.

Meetings
The full council meets once a month after school for approximately one hour and the Senior Executive Council has an extra meeting in between the full council meetings. The council is chaired by the Head Girl. The meetings are formal – there is an agreed agenda, the attendance and minutes are taken. Members who wish to raise an issue at the meeting ask for it to be on the agenda. They can also raise it at the Any Other Business (AOB) time of the meeting. The meeting runs quickly and smoothly, covering many issues within 45 minutes. (See appendix A for an example of minutes of a meeting.)

Funding
The student council receives the commission given on each item sold from the vending machine. It can amount to a few hundred each year. The council aims to use it for the benefit of the pupils generally e.g. prizes in competitions, new towels for the bathrooms, donations to charity.

Liaison Teacher

The teacher who established the council still acts as the Liaison Teacher. She stepped down from the position for a period but unfortunately the council fell apart, so she took up the role again. Although it is not optimal for the one teacher to act as Liaison for so long, it does provide continuity to the council and has allowed trust to be built up with the council.

Communication with Students

'Whatever we want we can bring to the Council, and if it can work then they'll do their best.' (Student)

There is a systematic communication procedure in place for communicating with students and management. Each prefect is given a folder and notebook at the beginning of the year so that they can make notes in the meetings and jot down ideas. Before council meetings prefects ask their class mates when the class is together, usually during religion class, if there are any issues they would like to raise through the council. In the same way, prefects report back to their class on the issues that were discussed at the meeting. The teachers are usually very accommodating and allow some time for this feedback.

'And generally the teacher would leave the classroom if there were any problems, so that they (prefects) could talk to students, so they don't feel, oh we can't do that.' (Council member)

All prefects and vice-prefects wear a badge so students can approach their class prefect at anytime if they would like to raise an issue. The students feel comfortable talking to the prefects as they are 'usually approachable'. The girls said that this trust is possible because they vote for their prefects – 'it's very formal, they vote, and they choose everyone who's representing.' The council felt that students recognise the council and do put forward their views:

'And students, loads of times, will come up and – will you bring that to the Council, will you bring that to the Council? It's good, they know it's there.'

The system of Liaison Officers from senior cycle linking with the junior classes is considered a particularly good way of ensuring that the junior voice is heard.

'Especially the liaison between the juniors and the seniors. If one of them had a problem in the class they could come and talk to us. We'll help them.' (Council member)

Communication with Management and Staff

After each council meeting, the Head Girl writes a report about the main issues raised at the meeting. A copy is given to the Principal, another is put up in the staff room and another on the council noticeboard. The Head Girl usually gives the report to the Principal by hand and goes through it with her.

On some occasions, student council members will address the staff meeting. Teachers may not turn up at council meetings unless they are invited for a particular meeting. If they wish to address the council, they arrange a time to come during the council meeting. Students on

the council feel that management is very supportive of the council and will when possible try to facilitate them.

What Has the Council Achieved Over the Years?
The council has achieved many things over the years. Some of these included:
- Changes to the uniform – the introduction of trousers, a campaign which took five years, and permission to wear black tights instead of grey tights with the school skirt;
- Setting up a system for students to photocopy;
- Organising the use of computers at lunch time and extended use of the library;

The council has also been instrumental in:
- The shortening of the school lunch time and thus shortening of the school day;
- The setting up of supervised study after school;

In addition, every year the council organises:
- Fundraising events – the council fundraised in aid of the Tsunami Crisis and raised over €9000;
- Person of the Year Award.

This year, 6th years and 5th years requested and received the use of courtyards for lunch time as they would normally have to stay in their classroom. The council provided bins and benches for the students to sit on. Transition year students are currently in the process of lobbying for a courtyard. The area the 4th years requested is normally used by the teachers as a smoking area. This issue is being discussed at the moment.

This year the council has also continued work on making the toilets more pleasant.
- Students requested that the towels in the toilets would be changed everyday and wanted an electric hand drier. However, when council researched this they discovered that electric hand driers are very expensive and unhygienic.
- Students also requested that there was a constant supply of toilet paper. To this effect, the council have ordered larger toilet rolls (which cannot be stuffed down the toilet) and have asked the caretaker to check the toilets everyday.
- Students requested and were granted mirrors in the toilets. They also requested that there would be soap in the toilets. However, this issue has not yet been resolved (liquid soap runs out too quickly and a bar of soap runs out or goes missing).

Advantages of Having a Council

Supports and smoothes day to day running of the school
The student council helps to keep the day to day running of the school smooth and can help make the school a more pleasant place to be for students.

> 'It can help sort out problems that someone might encounter every day coming to school. Even just being able to buy a drink downstairs (...) It helps the students.'

Representing the school
The Principal described how the student council represent the school. For example, when the Lord Mayor came to visit the school, he was welcomed by the Head Girl and the council members.

Learning experience for both students and staff
Having a student council provides many opportunities for learning for students and staff. They learn that they must compromise and that there is a process through which decisions

must be made. The election process gives the students experience of voting. They learn how to vote and that they can spoil their vote by ticking the box for two candidates, or by writing a comment on their ballot paper. As the Liaison Teacher put it:

'It's a fantastic introduction to democracy for them.'

Members of the student body also learn responsibility. For example, if a student requests something, they are urged by their prefect to do some more research on it before it's brought before the council. Similarly, one issue that constantly arises is the state of the cloakrooms. The council brings this back to the students because it is their responsibility to keep the cloakrooms and toilets tidy.

The council members have learned how to lobby. The students must fully prepare their arguments – they have their market research done, how many people wanted it, how it could be done, when it could be done etc. They must have all the answers ready. Council members talked about what they have learned from being on the council.

'It teaches negotiation... that if there's a problem you can solve it in some way.'

'Compromising ... not everything but there are things where you can meet half way.'

Provides opportunities to unite the student body
The council also provides opportunities for students to get to know each other. If they did not have a Council "students might not meet people form other classes, but in the Council we actually meet together." Having a council makes students feel that they are supported and have 'somebody behind them.'

'As a group of students you can make a change if you want to.'

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Whether it works or not, it's the process that is important
Although having an effective student council is time consuming, everyone learns from the process of consultation, negotiations and from the trials and errors. An example of how the process is important is the history of acquiring two vending machines for the students - one provides drinks, and the other chocolate bars. The process involved the council doing their market research on the price of vending machines, where they would get them, where they would put them in the school etc. This was one of the occasions where members of the council addressed a staff meeting with their request. They presented their arguments and provided the staff with handouts. They made suggestions about where it could be plugged in, what happens if 400 girls want to get a drink or bar of chocolate at the one time, etc. The Liaison Teacher described how there was absolute silence amongst the staff when the three council members left the staff room. Then somebody said 'we have to give them a chance, they've worked so hard at it.' So the vending machine came in on trial and members of the council would take it in turn to keep order at the vending machines during the break times. It worked out very well at first; however, the chocolate machine has now been sent back because the level of litter in the school increased and also students were eating chocolate all the time. It began to cause disruption. There has not been any negative reaction from the student body to it being returned.

'Only last week some of the students were telling me that they felt much happier now that the chocolate machine was gone, they're now eating fruit again... they'd never have come to that realisation if they hadn't been given a chance of the experience of it.' (Teacher)

SCHOOL 2 – BOYS' SECONDARY SCHOOL

School B is a large sized voluntary secondary boys' school located in a small town which has grown significantly over the last decade. There is a large rural catchment area. There are 770 students and 53 teachers and a School Counsellor. The school offers a Transition Year Programme. The Principal talked about how there is a strong spirit of mutual co-operation and positive relationships within the school. There is generally an open and transparent approach in the day to day running of the school.

There are three student bodies working within the school – the student council, a prefect system and Meitheal. The prefect system comprises of twenty 6th year students who are selected through an application and interview process. The prefects take responsibility for the lockers, the shop, they also produce a newsletter every two weeks. Meitheal is a buddy system for 1st year students provided by 6th year students. The Principal described the different roles of the student bodies in the school:

> **'The prefects do, Meitheal look after, and the student council represent.'**

The student council as it now stands was established in 2001 by the school. The Liaison Teacher was sent by the school to a training programme, and she set up the council on her return. The school had had a student body similar to the council prior to that although it was not representative and was mainly involved in organising events like school discos. The council are appreciated by the management of the school and they are taken out for Christmas dinner as an acknowledgement of their voluntary commitment.

Make-up of the Council

The council is made up of 13 members. Two student representatives are elected from each year group from 2nd to 6th year. Two Meitheal representatives stand for the 1st year students. There is also a Prefect representative. Officers on the council include a Chairperson, Secretary, a Public Relations Officer and a Delegation Officer (liaises with the Principal) all of whom are elected from within the council after they have had their training weekend. As the elections are held in May, there are no first years on the council. Consideration had been given to electing first year representatives in October however it was felt that this would delay the training of the council. Also, as the representatives are elected from the year group, first year students would not know each other very well.

Election

The council members are elected in May. Two students from 2nd to 6th year are elected by secret ballot within their year group (150 students). Before the election, council members speak at the year group assembly and explain to the students about the council and encourage them to think about joining. Students who are interested then fill out a nomination form. They have to be proposed by two of their year group and have the form signed by their form teacher. They must also write on the form what ideas they have for the council. Those who have not been on the council before are interviewed by 2 or 3 outgoing council members. The interview includes questions about why they want to join the council, what they would bring to the council and whether they are prepared to commit. The Liaison Teacher is not on the interview panel but moves in and out between the interview rooms. After the interview, the election takes place. One of the teachers interviewed felt that the students mostly seem to make wise choices and elect students who they know will represent them. Representatives must sign a contract once they have been elected (see appendix B).

Procedures of the Council

The council has a written Constitution, which took almost one year to establish and agree (see appendix C). After it had been agreed by the council, it was brought before the Board of

Management who ratified it officially. It has since been reviewed and two changes have been made by succeeding councils. The Constitution has eight sections discussing structure; election procedures; the role of prefect/meitheal representatives and the Liaison Teacher; meetings; exclusions; code of conduct; removal of student council members.

Meetings
The council meets weekly at lunch time for half an hour. There must be 7 people present to have a meeting and 9 to have a vote. The meetings are formal – there is an agreed agenda, the attendance and minutes are taken. Decisions are taken on a majority vote. The Liaison Teacher feels it is important that the council meet weekly even if it is simply to maintain contact with each other.

Funding
The prefects give them a proportion of the profits which are acquired from the vending machines. The parents' council also give them €500 which pays for the training. Fundraising for the council is difficult because there are already so many fundraising events in aid of charity.

Liaison Teacher
In this school, the position of Liaison Teacher is not a post of responsibility. This is because the current Liaison Teacher (whom the Principal believes is the best person for the job) would not be able to apply for a post of responsibility, as she is not senior enough.) In order to acknowledge the work and voluntary time that the Liaison Teacher gives to the council, management gives her one extra class period free a week. This year the Liaison Teacher asked for support from two other teachers. This means that she has other teachers to bounce ideas off and also to stand in if she is absent.

Communication with Students
Students can make their views and opinions known to the council in a number of ways. There is a suggestion box underneath the student council noticeboard. Students can also approach council members. The council members wear badges so the students know who they are. The council pointed out that they get a lot of student views simply through word of mouth. Feedback about what decisions are made in council meetings is given to students through the council newsletter which is pinned on the noticeboard.

The procedure for suggestions is that it is brought to the council and they take a vote on whether the idea should be pursued or not. One suggestion that they did not proceed with was a request that those cycling to school would be able to cycle up the drive way instead of dismounting. Some students drive mopeds and they are allowed drive them up the school driveway because they cannot push them, but the cyclists must dismount and push their bicycles. The council decided not to pursue it, because they understood that cyclists were obliged to dismount for safety reasons.

The members were of the opinion that students do notice the council whenever something 'big happens', for example, when the council organised for the purchase of a new school fleece and bought a stereo.

'Most students do recognise that you are making a difference for them. With the bullying policy, people didn't come up and say thanks or anything. But the likes of the discount card, when they do find out about it, obviously they are going to thank us, like. For the fleece and stereo they thanked us, but they forgot a week later! It's just part of school life, like.'

They do want to raise the profile of the council with the student body and would like students to speak up more often.

In order to raise their profile, they plan to put photographs of the council on the council noticeboard. They also intend to put the meeting agenda onto the website for students to view. They would also like to speak more often at assemblies.

Communication with Management

On some occasions, the Principal will attend a student council meeting, mainly so that he can fill them in on what's happening in the school, for example, the building plans etc. If they want to raise an issue with him after a meeting, they make an appointment to see him. The council also introduce themselves once a year to the Board of Management, the parents' council and the staff.

What Has the Council Achieved Over the Years?

Each year they work on one big project and a number of smaller issues. Last year the big project was setting up an anti-bullying committee with teachers. The Principal found that having students around the table was 'an excellent experience'. This year, the big project is acquiring a discount card for students to get discounts in local shops. At the time of writing, the council had already sent letters to all the local shops and businesses and they had received a response from five or six.

They have approached the Principal with a request to change the policy on camera phones. Currently if a student is caught with a camera phone it is confiscated for 20 days. The council think that this is too harsh as most mobile phones now are camera phones so they have approached the Principal with the suggested changes and it will be brought before the staff meeting then.

The boys also wanted top up machines (for mobiles) and change machines (for the vending machines) but it was decided that the machines would be vandalised. Instead the council has organised that students can get change through the school book shop, the school shop and the office.

Some of the other achievements of the council included:
- Introducing a school fleece with the school crest on it. Originally they had wanted to get a school tracksuit but it was too expensive, so they opted for the fleece instead. There was actually a lot of demand for it. They made no profit on this project as they charged the cost price for the fleeces.
- Buying a stereo system for break times.
- Organising water for the vending machines and there will be a water font in the new building.
- Organising many successful fundraising events.

Advantages of Having a Council

Professionalism

The Principal felt that the student council lends to the professionalism within the school. The meetings are properly run and the chairmen and secretary are 'as good as you'd find anywhere.'

> 'I think the student council at the moment is very professional and it's run on a professional basis, and anything that's done on that level will add to the quality of professionalism around the school and that adds to the quality of academic performance... it adds to the tone... doing the work and getting on in life and looking forward to going to college.' (Principal)

The council's involvement in policy making also contributes to developing good practice in the school. For example, the council involvement in setting up the anti-bullying committee and consultation on substance abuse policy was very helpful. As one council member put it:

> 'Yeah, management might have an idea like, but if they didn't consult us, they could go wrong. We could have a better outlook on it than them.'

Although the council has been consulted to a certain extent regarding school policies, the Principal stated that he would like to see student consultation becoming standard practice, 'even if this means taking risks and making mistakes along the way.'

Giving students a voice

There was a general perception in the school that having a council gives the students a sense of worth. As one student put it, the aim of the council is:

> 'To give students a voice, rather than have the teachers make a decision for us that's not going to effect them, so they don't know what we want.'

The presence of a student council in the school certainly adds to a positive atmosphere. The Principal talked about how it is encouraging to work with students who are very positive about the school and 'stand up for it in a nice, pleasant way'. A council improves relationships between students and staff and between students themselves.

> 'We let people know what's going on, 'cos if there was nobody there doing that, half the people in the school wouldn't have a clue what's going on. You hear people going around complaining about stuff that's wrong, but unless you have someone to go forward...'

Particularly in this school, where overcrowding is a problem, it's essential that there's a co-operative spirit in the school. The Principal felt that 'you can't run a school on a controlling basis anymore, you couldn't control 770 fellas.'

Particular benefits for students on the council

Council members talked about their experience of being on the council and what they have learned from it. The council members talked about how they felt that they were appreciated by management and were listened to.

> 'You get more involved and you realise how things work.'
>
> 'You realise things takes time and that. It's good to know all the issues and what's going on.'

The Principal felt that it was particularly beneficial for some students who otherwise may not participate in school:

'I think it's great for some people who might never find their way through, they won't be academic in a very strong way ... some extraordinarily good people come through the council and it was their only way of being good in school and doing things in the student council.' (Principal)

SCHOOL 3 – COMMUNITY SCHOOL

School 3 is a large, co-educational community school located in a small town. There are approximately 960 students and 63 teachers. The school offers a Transition Year Programme, the established Leaving Certificate Programme, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme.

There are two student representative bodies within the school – a class representative system and the student council. Each class elects two representatives, who are called 'class reps'. These representatives are responsible for practical day-to-day issues, for example they call the roll, collect money from students when necessary, deal with issues students may raise and liaise with the class tutor and Year Head.

The student council was established, in its current format, in 2001. The Principal described how important it is that students feel ownership of the school and that the student council is a tangible expression of this ownership. The council is valued and taken seriously. As an acknowledgement of their efforts and importance, the council is given quite a lot of autonomy within the school – they have their own student council office and bank account. The council has its own letter head and email address.

Make-up of the Council

Currently there are 24 students on the student council, 12 from junior cycle and 12 from senior cycle. Council members remain on the council for as long as they wish. If a council member resigns, or leaves the school, then the position is advertised and filled through an interview process. This means that there are always experienced members on the council which provides continuity for the council from year to year. New council members are also trained in by experienced members. This structure was agreed by the council when it was formally established.

There are many officers on the council including a Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Secretary, Vice-Secretary, Treasurer, Public Relations Officer, Anti-Bullying Officer and an Office Manager. In addition there are a number of 'Special Officers' who are elected within the council to take responsibility for ongoing issues the council deals with, for example, there is an Anti-Bullying Officer, a Vending Machine Officer, a Mentoring Co-ordinator and a Battle of the Bands Co-Ordinator. (See appendix D for the Student Council Management Layout and job descriptions).

The structure of the council changed around three years ago. There had been a junior and senior council. They would take responsibility for issues raised by junior cycle and senior cycle students respectively. The junior and senior council would convene once a week. However, it was argued that the council was too big using this format. Now there is only one council with a maximum of 24 members. The council members described this as being more efficient and manageable.

Selection of Council Members

This student council is unusual to the other case studies, because members of the council are selected by an application and interview process. When a position on the council becomes available, the post is advertised. They must fill in an application form which is signed by their tutor. They are then interviewed. Interviews are carried out by four members of the council (two junior, two senior, two boys, two girls) under the supervision of the Liaison Teacher. The Liaison Teacher does not ask any question, but is present to ensure transparency. This is a vigorous process which students take very seriously.

Any student can apply to join the council regardless of what year they are in or their gender, although consideration is given to making sure each year is represented. The council considers it more important that prospective members are willing and committed. At the time of the research, one position on the council had become available and fourteen students had applied for the post. This gives an indication of how many students aspire to sit on the council.

Procedures of the Council

The council has compiled all its policies and procedures in a Student Council Handbook. This handbook contains all the information needed for the successful running of the council. It includes the Constitution, management layout, job specifications and procedures related to selection, removal, vacancy filling and grievances. Each September the council goes away for a training weekend during which they develop an Action Plan for the year and elect the officers.

Meetings

The council meets every Tuesday for 50 minutes. The school does not open until 10 o'clock on Tuesday morning, so council members meet in their own time. The meeting is formal – attendance is taken, there is an agreed agenda and minutes are taken. The Liaison Teacher is not necessarily present for all of the meeting.

Funding

The council gets funding from the Parent's Association, the Battle of the Bands and from the vending machines. They have their own bank account under the council's name. The main expenditure is the Battle of the Bands, contribution to the training weekend, and office stationery. The council also gave a donation to the school in aid of a new canteen.

Liaison Teacher

The Liaison Teacher has just taken on the role since September. Although much of the work establishing the council had been done by his predecessor, he described how complex the role is and how it takes a lot of getting used to. However, as most of the council members had been on the council previously, it made the change of Liaison Teachers less disruptive.

Communication with Students

Students communicate with the council mainly informally through word of mouth. The council also has office hours when students can drop by and has also conducted surveys to access student views when necessary, for example, when the uniform was being changed. Students can also communicate with the council through their class reps and the council mentoring system ensures 1st year students get to know some council members and are given the opportunity to meet with them. The council also circulate their own monthly newsletter which provides an update of their activities.

Students who were not on the council stated that although it is easy to approach a council member with a suggestion, they would like to hear more about what the council were planning and would like to get more feedback about the council's activities.

The council members themselves were very aware of this issue and were planning to raise their profile. They were planning to get a new 'suggestion box' as the previous one had been

damaged. They were also planning to visit each class to tell them about the council, make more announcements about council activities on the intercom, get a section on the school newsletter and make better use of the school website.

Communication with Management and Staff

Sometimes the Principal will attend a council meeting. If the council would like to raise an issue with her, they make an appointment to see her. The agenda and minutes of the meeting are also given to the Principal. Student council members felt that school management is very supportive of the council.

Staff members stated that although they do not necessarily have any contact with the council on a daily basis, the council was a visible group within the school. One teacher described the council as being an integral part of the school and played an important role in terms of welcoming dignitaries and visitors. Another discussed how he was planning to involve the council in developing the new Health and Safety policy.

Once a year the council makes a presentation to the Parents' Association, the staff meeting and the Board of Management to inform them about the council and what they are planning to do. The Parents' Association reported to the school that they had been very impressed with the presentation they were given by the council. The Principal also includes a section on the student council in her report to the Board of Management.

What Has the Council Achieved Over the Years?

Senior cycle students reported that the council had improved significantly over the years. One council member who has sat on the council for a number of years recalled, for example, how disorganised the meetings were when the council was beginning. She said that over the years, they have learnt to make meetings short, efficient, and to make decisions. They are proud of having a properly worded Constitution and Student Council Handbook.

The Principal too stated that they had grown from strength to strength:

'I think in the last couple of years in particular, their perception of themselves as a group with autonomy with power, that has changed and they have become more confident, so now, they have no problems calling the main office to make an appointment with the principal to discuss such and such an issue... in that sense, they've grown from strength to strength.'

The council has a number of ongoing projects.

- They organise the Battle of the Bands every year and this seems to be a very popular event. This involves a lot of organisation.
- Another ongoing project is mentoring of first year students. Two council members are designated to each of the first year classes. They meet with the class once a month and talk to them about various issues, like drugs, or bullying. The council has developed a syllabus which they complete with each class. Mentoring requires members of the council to give up quite a lot of time. This involves the council coming in for a day before the term begins in September to organise and plan the mentoring. They also have to decide themselves which classes they will give up to go to speak to their mentoring group – they have to organise their own time, seek permission from their teachers and make sure they do not constantly miss the same class.

They have also been involved in:

- Introducing vending machines;
- Improving toilet facilities;

- Tackling graffiti;
- Developing school policies for example, discipline, bullying and substance abuse;
- Accessing students views via a survey about changing the school uniform;
- Fundraising for school facilities, for example, the school canteen.

At the time of the research, the council were working on two issues. Firstly, they wanted to organise benches for students to sit on during break time. They decided to make an appointment to see the Principal about this after the meeting. Secondly, students had approached the council about the fact that the toilets were only open at break times. This was to minimise the level of litter and vandalism in the toilets. The council made a decision to put up posters around the school asking students to keep the toilets clean. They were also going to raise this issue with senior management.

Advantages of Having a Council

Rewarding for council members
Council members talked about how being on the council was a rewarding experience, as well as being 'good craic.'

'It's great like after working so hard on something and it's just been successful.'

Members also talked about how being on the council is a good learning experience.

'We learn a lot of people skills anyway... it teaches you how to talk things out especially.'

The Principal also discussed how sitting on the student council has many benefits for individual students. In terms of their academic results, she feels that many student council members perform better because it helps them realise their potential, not only as individuals but in the classroom as well.

'They have greater responsibility, their sense of responsibility for self, it's that whole business of making them aware of their potential. That is a role of the student council. Being on the student council makes them aware of their potential.'

Improving school environment
Students talked about how the council has been involved in improving the school facilities and making the school a more pleasant environment. There are vending machines, benches for students to sit on, the uniform has changed and the toilets are more pleasant. As well as being involved in developing the anti-bullying policy, the council will also be involved in developing and implementing the Health and Safety policies. The Liaison Teacher described how:

'the council themselves are very observant, they know what's going on, litter problems, graffiti problems, toilets and they address these issues.'

Another way that the council has been integral to improving the school environment is that they improve the quality of communication in general within the school. The council provides a voice for the students and gives students a chance to have their say. Through the council, senior management and staff can be kept informed about the views and needs of the student body.

Improving staff/student relationships
The Principal described how the council has improved staff/student relations, especially with council members.

'One of the greatest benefits for me as Principal of having such an active student council is the shift in relationship between staff and students. The staff treat the student council more as equals, there's a mutual respect there that may not always be evident in their other meetings with students. Because the students are meeting them head on, it's very much 'these are issues we're trying to work together.'

The positive relationships between staff and student council members does permeate through to the student body in general.

'Students enjoy having that kind of easy relationship with staff and they aspire to that.'

The Liaison Teacher also described how some members of staff make good use of the council by asking for their help with carrying out different projects.

SUMMARY

The three student councils profiled here are considerably different, however they share a number of features which contribute to their successful operation.

- Each council is valued by senior management – council members stated they felt supported by the school management and could raise issues with management at any time. It is also notable that each Principal meets with council members on a regular basis.
- All the councils have received training which they found an invaluable experience.
- Each council had a student led agenda.
- Each council had agreed and adhered to procedures for election of members; removal of members; meeting format. Each council also had an agreed system of communication with school management and students.
- Election, and in one case, selection of council members was predominantly student based.
- Each council had their own funds which they raised through vending machines, organising events and donations received from Parents' Associations.
- Each council gives a presentation to the staff, the Parents' Association and the school Board of Management.

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TABLE 5: Profiles of Model Student Councils

SCHOOL	WHEN ESTABLISHED?	WHO SET IT UP?	NO.	HOW DO STUDENTS GET ONTO THE COUNCIL?	HOW IS THE COUNCIL STRUCTURED?	HOW OFTEN DOES THE COUNCIL MEET?
1	Approx 20 years	Interested teacher	36	Student only election in September. Each class elects a prefect and vice prefect. Head Girl is elected by students from 2nd year upwards and staff and selected by interview.	The council is chaired by the Head girl. To make it more manageable, there is a Senior Executive Council made up of senior cycle students.	The full council meets monthly for 45 minutes after school. In addition, the Senior Executive Council meets every fortnight.
2	2001	Management	13	Student only election in May. Nominees are interviewed by outgoing council members. Each year group from 2nd to 6th year elects two students. Two Meitheal representatives stand for first years. There is also a Prefect Representative.	Officers on the council include a Chairperson, Secretary, a Public Relations Officer and a Delegation Pfficer (liaises with the Principal).	The council meets weekly for 30 minutes at lunchtime.
3	2001	Management	24	Council members are selected by an application and interview process which is co-ordinated and conducted by existing council members.	Other than the standard officers, there are also officers assigned to ongoing issues including an Anti-Bullying Officer and a Mentoring Co-Ordinator.	The council meets weekly for 50 minutes before school starts.

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Oisín O'Reilly, member of the Student Council Working Group.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will outline the main conclusions and support and training recommendations for the successful establishment and operation of student councils. These conclusions and recommendations are based on the findings from phase 1 of the research study which was conducted with 11 schools nationwide. The research aimed to identify enablers and barriers to good practice in the establishment, development and operation of student councils as perceived by management, teachers, students and other key personnel.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM PHASE 1

The findings from this research show that the issues in the establishment, development and operation of student councils in these schools are very similar to the issues raised in other national and UK studies. Some of the findings specific to Ireland are summarised below.

Long Established vs. Newly Established Councils

Three of the schools in the voluntary sector (including one fee-paying school) had had a student representative system in operation for over 25 years, although this had changed over the years. All the other schools had established a council since 1998, with three schools having established the council in the recent past. Schools which have had a representative system for a long time have had the opportunity to try out various different approaches and also identified periods of highs and lows in their councils' effectiveness. Participants in these schools were more relaxed in their discussions of the council and took it for granted as a feature of their school, however, in some circumstances they were not able to recognise the need for it to change to become a truly effective student representative body. Schools which had set up their councils recently were still struggling with adjusting to the structure as part of the school. It is evident that it takes the student council a significant number of years to become firmly established as a working structure within a school.

Other Student Participative Structures

Five of the schools also had a prefect system. In some cases it was not always clear what the distinct role of each group was and how these two groups should relate to each other.

Gender

Seven of the schools were co-educational and four were single sex schools. The perceptions of students and council members of their student council in both the girls' schools were quite positive, whereas students and council members in both the boys' schools were rather negative about the effectiveness of their councils. The small sample of single sex schools in this study does not allow us to draw conclusions, but clearly, more research on a gender specific basis would be beneficial.

Perceived Effectiveness

As perceptions of the effectiveness of the council differed significantly amongst student council members, students, teachers and management, it is difficult to assess which schools had effective councils. If we consider only the councils' perspectives, excluding the school in which the council had just begun, the councils in the two voluntary secondary girls' schools and one community school, considered themselves to be effective. Three of the councils, in one community school, one community college and one boys' secondary school, seemed to be totally disillusioned with their experience of the council. The other four councils, in one comprehensive school, one community college, one co-educational secondary school and one boys' secondary school, had both positive and negative experiences of their councils, but importantly felt that there was potential to improve it and that it was a positive venture (see table 6). It is clear that we cannot draw conclusions about whether student councils are more or less effective in any particular school sector. The effectiveness on the council is dependent on a number of factors.

TABLE 6: Council Members' Perceptions of the Council's Effectiveness

SCHOOLS (excluding the VEC school in which the council had just begun)	PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EFFECTIVENESS
2 Voluntary Secondary Girls' Schools 1 Community School	Effective
1 Comprehensive 1 VEC Community College 1 Co-Educational Secondary School 1 Boys' Secondary School	Somewhat effective
1 Community School 1 VEC Community College 1 Boys' Secondary School	Ineffective

Enablers and Barriers

Factors which enabled the establishment of a student council included:

1. SUPPORT FROM SENIOR MANAGEMENT;
2. SUFFICIENT TIME TO PREPARE AND INFORM STUDENTS AND STAFF;
3. COMMITMENT FROM THE STAFF MEMBER ASSIGNED TO SETTING IT UP;
4. CO-OPERATION FROM THE GENERAL STAFF;
5. RAISING THE PROFILE OF THE NEW COUNCIL WITH THE STUDENT BODY TO ENSURE STUDENT MOTIVATION AND ENTHUSIASM.

The main challenges associated with establishing a council were:

1. EDUCATING THE WHOLE SCHOOL ABOUT WHAT A STUDENT COUNCIL IS;
2. RECRUITING INTERESTED STUDENTS;
3. CLARIFYING THE ROLE OF THE COUNCIL AND HOW IT WILL FUNCTION ON A DAY-TO-DAY BASIS WITH NEW MEMBERS.

Factors which enabled the development and operation of the council included:

1. REGULAR MEETINGS;
2. PUPIL-LED AGENDAS;
3. THE COUNCIL HAVING A HIGH PROFILE WITHIN THE SCHOOL;
4. THE MAKE-UP OF THE COUNCIL; SUPPORT FROM THE PRINCIPAL AND THE LIAISON TEACHER;

5. ON-GOING TRAINING AND EVALUATION AND;

6. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS BOTH WITH THE STUDENT, BOTH IN TERMS OF ACCESSING THEIR VIEWS AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK, AND WITH THE STAFF GROUP AND BOARD OF MANAGEMENT.

The main challenges associated with the development and operation of the council were:

1. LACK OF TIME;

2. LACK OF FEEDBACK AND ACTION FROM MANAGEMENT ON THE COUNCILS' SUGGESTIONS AND;

3. LACK OF SUPPORT FROM STUDENTS AND STAFF.

Advantages of a Council

Despite the many challenges associated with the operation of student councils, there were many advantages reported about having a student council in the school. These were mainly related to positive school atmosphere and creating a caring school environment which is supportive and inclusive. The student council is a vehicle for student participation. In some schools, this participation was reported to have a beneficial impact on issues such as discipline, bullying and staff-student relations. It was also reported that the student council provided students with educational opportunities and an interactive learning environment. Students can develop communication and leadership skills as well as responsibility and accountability. The student council was also seen as a valuable resource to management, teachers and other students.

ESSENTIAL FACTORS FOR A STUDENT COUNCIL

The two main factors for the successful operation of a council are:

Shared Understanding of the Role of the Council

The essential factor in the successful operation of a student council is that the role of the council is explicitly defined and that all groups within the school have a shared understanding of why the council is there and what it is expected to achieve. Is it a body to help run the school, do things for management, or is it a forum for students to represent themselves?

In schools where the role of the student council was not clearly defined, it leads to frustration amongst the student council, the Liaison Teacher and management. The student council can lose enthusiasm and fizzle out, or else become confrontational. Either way, this results in management, staff and the student body losing faith in the student council. Consequentially, management clamp down on the freedom and authority given to the student council and students lose interest in the council.

A member of senior management in one of the schools recognised the importance of clearly defining the role for the council. He stated that in the past the student councils have worked best when the role is clarified: their authority, position, routine and procedures such as systematic and clear election processes. The importance of the role of the student council should be explained not only to the student body, but also to staff. He compared the importance of an induction programme for the student council to an induction to a job. He argued that lots of people leave their jobs because they have no feeling of satisfaction, because they do not know what they should be doing.

The Department of Education and Science guidelines for setting up a student council encourage schools to draw up a Constitution for their student council. A number of student councils had a Constitution however these documents were rarely discussed or referenced and so their value should be queried. Many council members reported that they had very little input into the development of their Constitution and so did not feel any ownership of it or attach any importance to it. Also, the Constitutions did not give guidance on the day-to-day level functioning of the council, for example, what communication procedures are in place for student council liaising with staff and students.

Importantly, the role of the council must be decided through discussion between all the groups within the school. Each school is different and has different systems in place. As schools, staff and students are continuously changing, this clarification of role cannot be a once off process. It must happen each year with a new council to allow each council to work out for themselves where their input would be useful, recognise their limitations and decide what their main focus is and what issues they do not want to be involved with. This must also be done after the council has had training so they are in a position to discuss the role of the council in a meaningful way.

Whole School Ethos

For there to be a shared understanding of the council, it must be a whole school issue. In a number of schools it became apparent that the success of the student council had to do with the fact that it was part of the whole school ethos. Two teachers discussed the general attitude to student participation in their school:

> Teacher 1: 'the relationship here in the school for the most part it seems the students are always involved here, the student council... Like you wouldn't see it in other schools...but here we've always had great co-operation.'
>
> Teacher 2: 'it's real go for it isn't it? Good luck, go for it, we don't really bat an eyelid anymore do we?'

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In one school, the student council came about not through the Education Act, but through the school development planning process. The idea for a student council came through a survey of teachers.

In another school, the good relationship between staff and students was mentioned in the 'Whole School Evaluation'. Staff were considered to be very open to the students and that students in the classrooms were very comfortable, free to ask questions and interaction was encouraged. One teacher says that the student council helps develop that kind of atmosphere and ambiance in the classrooms.

> 'I'm very proud that we've had it here for so long... and I think it's very much part of the ethos of the school.'

One Board of Management member said that she certainly believes that students can run a successful council but with much support. They need supervision, direction and also boundaries. She argued that it has to be a school decision for it to work. A student council has to be part of the school and a school decision. There needs to be adequate support, training and a good staff liaison to support the students. Students have lots of ideas but need skills to enact them. Ultimately the student council must be valued by staff and management for time to be made for them. Also, as a Liaison Teacher pointed out, school management and staff need to be open to the idea of a council for it to be successful:

> 'You really need to have a very good relationship with management if you're to have a successful student council, and that's not the easiest thing to do in any school... you need to have a very open Principal, a management team that's going to be open to new innovations and take them on, but who is also going to see the bigger picture as well about taking something on...'

RECOMMENDATIONS

These support and training recommendations are aimed to complement other recommendations and guidelines for the successful operation of student councils nationally (Dept of Education and Science, 2002, NYCI, 2001; O'Gorman, 2003; Monahan, 1999) and internationally (Baginsky and Hannam, 1999; Clay, D., Gold, J. and Hannam, D., 2001; Devon Youth Council, 1994; Taylor with Johnson, 2002).

The main supports identified by members of student councils were the Liaison Teacher, support from management, staff and the student body. Student councils need to be a visible group within the school and need to feel they are valued and respected and that they have a fundamental part to play in daily school life.

The recommendations have been grouped into two sections, firstly, recommendations targeted at schools and what they can do to improve their councils, and secondly, recommendations targeted at external services.

Recommendations for Schools

Role of the council

■ The role of the student council must be clearly stated in a Student Council Constitution agreed by school management and students. Procedures related to council structure, elections, meeting formats, communication and the removal of council members from the council must be stated and adhered to.

Make-up of the Council
Representation

■ Student councils must be representative of the whole student body. Students and student council members felt that junior students, in particular, were not represented adequately and this significantly decreased their support for the council.
■ If having representatives from each class makes the council too large to manage, an alternative system, such as having an executive committee, or having a junior and senior council should be considered.

Election process

■ The election process is an important way to raise awareness among staff of the student council. Election time provides an opportunity for the council's role to be discussed and debated in the whole school.
■ The election process must be seen to be fair and democratic. Students will not be 'empowered' if from the very beginning decisions are being made by staff.
■ Staff will support the council and take it seriously if they feel they have a say in what it is about. Including staff members in the final stages of the election process, or in electing leaders to the council, will lend authority to council members amongst the staff group.

Maintaining continuity

■ With regard to maintaining continuity of the council's projects and actions from year to year, councils should consider whether representatives from some year groups should be voted in for two consecutive years.

Time and commitment

■ It is important that responsibilities of members on the councils are shared and not lumped on the shoulders of final year students. As time and commitment from council members is of utmost importance to the successful operation of the council, consideration should be given to whether the leader of the council should be a final year student, and/or the council executive should be in their final year.

Activities of the Council

■ Councils must be supported to create a pupil-led agenda, not tightly prescribed by the Principal, which includes both pupils' immediate concerns and school policy issues.

- It is essential that the council is seen to achieve something soon after it has been established. Councils must be supported in setting tangible and realistic goals which will improve the school and build confidence in the council.
- Links between the councils and other structures in the school and community should be forged. For example, the parents' councils could actively support the student council through lobbying on their behalf and helping them to organise events.

Supports for Liaison Teachers
- The main person involved in establishing a council and the main support to the student council once it has been set up is the Liaison Teacher. The Liaison Teacher should be someone who has an interest in youth participation and has a genuine commitment to the student council.
- As the Liaison Teacher is a very important support to councils, this position should be considered within the school schedule of Posts of Responsibility.
- The Liaison Teacher must have structured access to Senior Management to speed up decision making.
- Schools should consider giving Liaison Teachers reduced class contact time to acknowledge the amount of voluntary time they give to the council.
- Although Liaison Teachers said that the guidelines available were useful, some said that they would like to have a dedicated support pack which would include information on how to run an election, different models of student councils and examples of good practice.
- Training should be available for Liaison Teachers.
- Liaison Teachers also stated that a forum for Liaison Teachers to meet and exchange ideas and experiences would be very useful, especially as theirs is such an isolated position.
- One of the main issues for Liaison Teachers is that their role and remit was not clearly defined. Although this is something which is negotiated as the council develops, it is important that their role is discussed with senior management. Also, if the student council is seen as a whole school issue, other teachers will be more likely to be willing to chip in and reduce the work load of the Liaison Teacher.

Allocation of Time
- One of the main challenges for councils in all the schools was having enough time to be effective. Councils need to be given an allocated time to meet on a regular basis. Although all the councils in this study met during lunch time, other case studies of councils show that meetings held in curriculum time lends to the status of the council and puts it firmly in the domain of education as opposed to a 'students' club'.
- Time needs to be allocated for council members to access student views and to feed back to students on the activities and progress of the council. This could be done when the class meets together, for example, in the morning or just after lunch.
- Time is also needed for certain events such as elections, whole-school activities organised by the council, and meetings with senior management.

Allocation of Resources
- Resources are important to aid the council in its work. A designated space or room where the council can meet is helpful.
- Funding should be available to the council for training, organising events, materials e.g. if they wanted to carry out a survey. Funding would also provide student council members with a reward at the end of the school year. Most of the schools in this study provided funding themselves, however external funding would be most helpful.

Establishing Effective Communication Systems
It must be acknowledged that establishing a student council within a school is effectively establishing another structure within an organisation. Clear lines of communication are essential to the council being effective.

Communication with students
- Systematic procedures for accessing student views and providing feedback to students must be established. Suggestions for accessing views included having an allocated time for

representatives to gather student views e.g. during tutor groups; having a council stand or table; a suggestion box; council email address.

- The council should survey the views of the students and be allowed to follow through on some of their ideas.
- Suggestions for the council to provide feedback to the students included making the minutes of the meetings available on the council noticeboard, representatives giving updates at class meetings and announcements made at assembly.

Communication with staff

- Communication between the student council and the staff is normally dependent on the Liaison Teacher. Direct contact between the council and staff should be increased. Suggestions including council members presenting their activities to staff at a staff meeting; having a meeting time between council members and staff perhaps once a term; establishing a 'teacher/student council' would also be a progressive way for communication between students and staff to be improved.

Communication with management

- A procedure for the council's direct communication with management should be established. This would provide a way for a council to raise issues with management but also for management to feedback to the council. Suggestions included the Principal attending some of the council meetings; council members giving the Principal minutes of every council meeting; having a set meeting time between the council and the Principal once a term.

Communication with other structures within the school

- The council should be connected to other structures within the school, like the prefect system, sports clubs and other student bodies, as well as structures which are not involved with the school on a daily basis such as the Parents' Council and Board of Management. Links should also be made with feeder primary schools, Comhairle na nÓg (organised by City and County Development Boards) and local youth groups.

Raising the Profile of the Council in the School
For students to support the council, they must see it in action. Students must know who their council representative is and what's more must feel their representative was fairly chosen and is able to do the job. They must have faith in their council and trust that they are being represented. Students need to see that it is taken seriously by management and teachers.

- Raising the profile of the council is crucial to improving support from students. Management need to allow the student council to raise their profile by allowing them to have a noticeboard, a suggestion box, a page in the school newsletter, a website, etc.

Councils need to have support from the general staff body, and therefore need their respect and recognition. This would be achieved mainly through raising the council's profile with the staff group.

- Staff needs to be informed about the council's role so that they do not have false expectations, unnecessary fears, or ask council members to do inappropriate tasks. This could be done through briefing staff on the council's role, and having a council notice board in the staff room and including the council's activities on the agenda in staff meetings.
- Staff also need to be briefed on the role and remit of the Liaison Teacher.

Training for Student Councils
- Training is an important support for councils as it will provide members with the skills they need to operate effectively, manage meetings, come to consensus about issues, organise activities, access views and represent views and negotiate with management. It will also provide the council members with the opportunity to bond and build relationships.
- When the council has been formed, an initial introductory session with the Liaison Teacher, Principal, and outgoing council executive to outline the role of the council – the role should be open for discussion with the new council as it is important that they feel they have ownership of the roles and responsibilities.
- A dedicated training session at the beginning of the school year is very important, even if some of the council members are on a second term. Training will allow the council members to get to

know each other and focus on what they want to achieve. Independent training facilitators are preferable as they provide an external viewpoint. Such facilitators should have a background in education and experience working in schools.

- Ongoing training once a term is also advisable when councils are starting to lull or run into problems. A mid-year evaluation of the council should be part of this process.
- Staff and students should be provided with an outline of the training agenda, so that the purpose of the training is clear to all.

As one council member stated, training should teach you 'how to get your ideas across, get them listened to and to get them worked on, to be assertive, you've got to believe in yourself and believe in the people you are talking to'.

Suggested training should be in:

- How to organise and run a meeting; the different roles of council members i.e. the Chair, Secretary, Treasurer; how to be inclusive, how to write minutes, draw up a Constitution, protocol, abstaining etc.
- Communication skills – how to structure and lobby for proposals to change; how to negotiate role; how to access views of peers and feedback to peers; how to access views of shy students, students with disabilities; how to deal with difficult students etc.
- Leadership skills building self-esteem, assertiveness and self-confidence.
- Inter and intrapersonal skills – listening skills, teamwork skills, peer support skills, skills in anti-bullying and peer mentoring.
- Training in critical thinking, logic and problem solving.
- Training on other issues would also be useful, for example, about the educational system, how to find funding, etc.

Establishing Contact with Other Student Councils in the Locality

A number of participants said to the researchers that they had really been looking forward to participating in the project because it would raise the profile of the council in the school (both with teachers and students) and would also give the councils an awareness of the 'bigger' picture. This indicates the isolation experienced by schools. Councils which had established contact with student councils in other schools found it very supportive and beneficial.

- Student councils should establish contact with student councils in other schools in their locality. This would raise the awareness of students and staff of the 'bigger picture' and provide support systems for student councils and Liaison Teachers.

Recommendations for the establishment of Student Council Support Service led by the Department of Education and Science

Student Council Support Service

Schools need to be supportive if they are to have successful student councils. Goal 3 of the National Children's Strategy states that 'children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.' Section 4 of Recommendation Rec (2002) 12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on education for democratic citizenship in 2002 was to encourage the development of methodological and educational resource and advice centres open to all actors involved in education for democratic citizenship.

- The establishment of a support service for student councils would be very beneficial. Such a support service could provide information and resources to schools who want to set up a student council and to student councils and Liaison Teachers already operating. It could also co-ordinate support provided by existing services.

A support service could also co-ordinate the following:

Further Research

- A follow-up to the 2004 Department of Education and Science survey of the numbers of student councils, accessing more indepth data of the structures and format of the councils.
- Qualitative research on particular issues for single-sex and co-educational schools.

Training for Schools

- Such a service would provide training to student councils. Guidelines for schools are useful; however as each school is different, school specific training would be very helpful.
- Facilitators, like Transition Year facilitators, should be trained by the Student Council Support Service to provide whole-school training and support to schools, support Liaison Teachers, Principals and also to brief staff on student councils. Such facilitators should have an educational background and experience working in schools.
- In-service should be provided for the whole school – management, teachers, other staff and students.
- A database of trained facilitators should be compiled and made available to schools – Many of the schools had sought external training for student council members and Liaison Teachers. All the schools reported that they had difficulty trying to find a trained facilitator.

Raising Student Participation as an Issue with School Management

A Student Council Support Service should make a priority of raising student participation as an issue with school management. For councils to operate effectively, they need support from school management. Support from management lends integrity to the council. This support takes the shape of regular communication and the provision of resources such as time and space within the school.

- For this reason, student councils need to be identified as an issue of importance with school management. Some Principals may see student councils as something that has been imposed on them which requires more time in an already packed schedule. The benefits and broader vision of student participation should be promoted. A forum should be provided for Principals and Deputy Principals to discuss and debate the broader issues of student participation and students as partners in education. What is their view of student involvement? Do they see it as beneficial? What role do they see for a student council?
- Focused research on Principals' perspectives would be beneficial.

Regional and National Networks of Student Councils

Councils who were involved with the Union of Secondary Students found it quite useful however, many argued that the role of the Union of Secondary Students is different to the specific role of student councils in schools. For this reason, a forum specific to student councils would be more beneficial.

- The establishment and co-ordination of regional and national networks of councils by the Student Council Support Service would facilitate contact between councils, providing councils and Liaison Teachers with support and training.

Establishing International Connections

- A Student Council Support Service would also facilitate contact with other organisations internationally such as School Councils UK, OBESSU (Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions), NASC (National Association of Student Councils) in the USA, CASAA (Canadian Association of Student Activity Advisors) and PASTA (the Professional Association of Student Representative Council Teachers/Advisors) in Australia.

Student Councils in Primary Level

- There are many international examples of effective student councils at primary level. Students who have experience of a student council at primary level are also more likely to confidently participate in and operate a student council in second level. Consideration should be given to supporting the establishment of student councils in primary schools.

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Grace Fitzpatrick, member of the Student Council Working Group.

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Students attending the launch of the Student Council leaflet, poster and website on 23 March, 2004.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:
STUDENT COUNCIL MEETING REPORT – SCHOOL A

- At this meeting the Student Council welcomed two visitors from the Children's Research Centre. They were using our Student Council as part of their research.
- Each officer gave her report. The Treasurer informed us that there is now 137 Euro in the Student Council account.
- Thank you letters were received from the charities that we collected for at Christmas and read at this meeting. The Student Council also discussed the success of the Tsunami appeal collection.
- The Student Council was informed that students would be able to use the computers on Tuesday between 1:05 and 1:35 in the computer room.
- We decided that, after much research it would not be possible to have soup during lunchtime. However the facilities are there for those who do Supervised Study.
- The 1st year P.E class was also discussed. The fact that the P.E hall is being shared with another class is causing concern. The 1st year students themselves decided that they would follow up on this for the next meeting.
- Finally, the Student Council discussed the idea of a rota system in every classroom so that students will be responsible for cleaning up the classroom after lunch. This will be followed up on for the next meeting.
- The next Senior Executive meeting will take place on 31st January and the next full Student Council meeting on the 28th February.

Signed: Head Girl _____

APPENDIX B:
STUDENT COUNCIL CONTRACT – SCHOOL B

I _____ am willing to undertake the following duties:

To attend weekly Student Council Meetings.

To inform students in my Year Group of the issues raised or dealt with by the Student Council.

To represent my Year Group responsibly and to fulfil any position I may be elected to do on the Council to the best of my capability.

I will be supportive to the other prefects throughout the year. I acknowledge that I am accountable to the other Student Council members and to the Liaison Teacher.

I will abide by the school rules.

Signed: Student _____

Liaison Teacher: _____

Date: _____

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APPENDIX C: STUDENT COUNCIL CONSTITUTION – SCHOOL B

Structure
The Student Council of School B consists of:

- 2 elected representatives of each Year Group from 2nd – 6th Yr.
- 1 representative of Prefects.
- 2 Meitheal members to represent 1st Yr.
- A representative of staff (Liaison Teacher).

Election Procedures

- The process begins with the nomination procedure. All interested pupils must fill in a nomination form, being proposed by 2 of their year group.
- Form Teacher signs the form.
- An interview will be held with the Liaison Teacher and 2 outgoing Student Council members at the end of May.
- List of candidates is displayed.
- Election is by secret ballot; pupils put 1st and 2nd preference besides candidates' names.
- The votes are counted and kept by a staff member.
- If a Council member leaves or is dismissed, the candidate with the next highest number of votes will replace him.

Prefect/Meitheal Representative

- Meitheal and Prefect representatives are decided within their own age groups.
- As Prefects begin their term of office in April, the incoming Prefect representative may attend Student Council meetings for the remainder of the school year, and have a voice but not a vote.
- The outgoing Prefect representative maintains his vote.

Liaison Teacher

- Attends weekly meetings.
- Acts as link between staff and Student Council.
- Has a voice but not a vote.
- Is a source of information.
- Liaison Teacher can select substitute teacher for replacement.

Meetings

- All Council members are expected to attend all meetings.
- Meetings take place at lunchtime one day a week.
- There must be 7 people present to have a meeting, 9 to have a vote.
- Student Council members vote to choose a Chairman, Vice-chairman and Secretary.
- An agenda is set in advance and adhered to.
- Attendance record is kept and minutes are taken.
- All Council members get an equal say, and are expected to contribute to each meeting.
- All contributions to the meeting must be through the Chairman.
- Decisions are taken on a majority vote.
- All problems discussed at meetings must be treated with discretion, respect and confidentiality.
- A teacher must be present for a formal meeting to take place.

Exclusions

- Any uncomplimentary mention of staff, management or pupil by name or implication.
- Individual grievances between pupil and teacher.
- Discos, Battle of the Bands etc.
- Ongoing disciplinary matters involving a student or group of students.

Code of Conduct

- Attend weekly meetings.
- To be actively involved in Student Council activities.
- To set a good example to others.
- To represent the Year Group.
- To stand as a group and support decisions made by the Student Council.
- To maintain good relations with staff members.
- Upon election, Council members sign a contract, in which they agree to attend weekly meetings, represent their Year Group, support their fellow Council members and abide by the school rules.

Removal of Student Council Members

Reasons for removal

- Non attendance at 3 meetings without a valid reason (Automatic removal, no appeal)
- Regular non-involvement in Student Council activities.
- Breach of Council Code of Conduct.
- If a pupil leaves the school.
- If a pupil is suspended from school, the Liaison Teacher issues a warning.
- A second suspension results in removal from Student Council.

Removal Procedures

- In order for procedures to be started, the Liaison Teacher must receive 3 complaints from individual Council members.
- The Liaison Teacher issues a warning.
- If there are further breaches, the Council member is asked to resign.
- The Council member has a right to appeal in front of the Student Council.
- The decision to remove the Council member is voted on.
- The result is decided by a majority vote, and is final.

APPENDIX D: STUDENT COUNCIL MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE AND SELECTED JOB SPECIFICATIONS – SCHOOL C
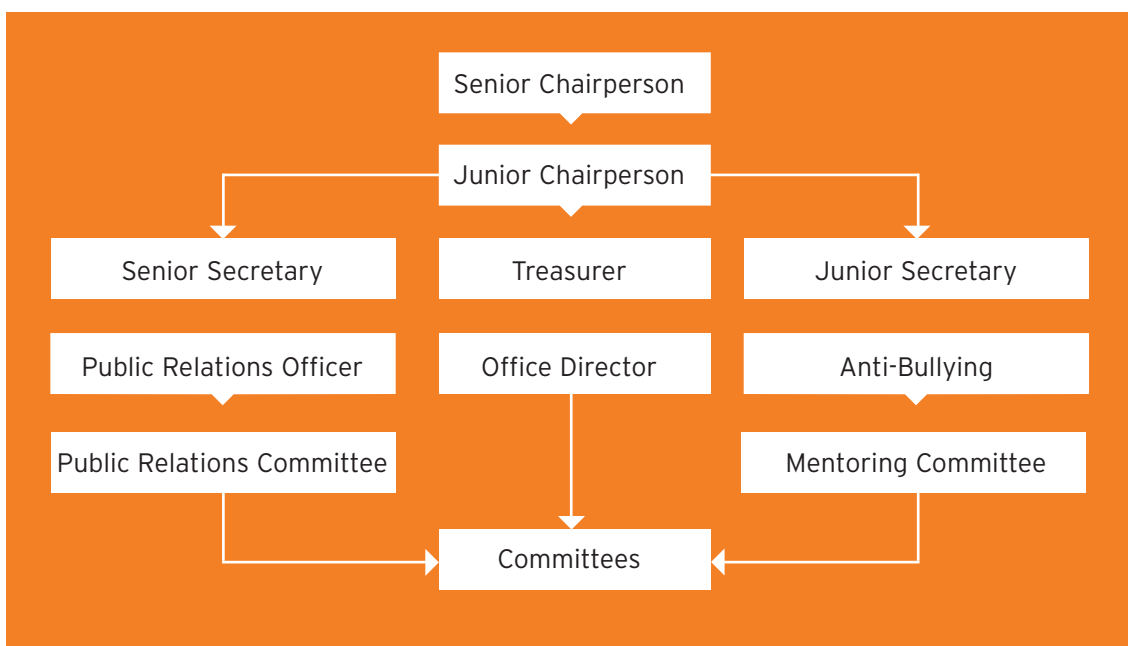
The Senior Chairperson

The Senior Chairperson is responsible for presiding over the meetings of the Student Council. Therefore the Senior Chairperson must be on time. The Senior Chairperson is the designated representative of the Student Council at meetings with the school management as such the Senior Chairperson must be aware of all that is going on in the Student Council.

During the meetings the Senior Chairperson must:

1. MAKE SURE A SECRETARY IS TAKING MINUTES.

2. KEEP A WATCH ON THE TIME TO MAKE SURE THAT ALL ITEMS ON THE AGENDA ARE DISCUSSED. SOMETIMES THE SENIOR CHAIRPERSON WILL NEED TO CLOSE THE DISCUSSION IN ORDER TO REACH A DECISION (THE SENIOR CHAIRPERSON CAN USE THE AGENDA TO GUIDE THEM THROUGH THE MEETING).

3. MAKE SURE THAT EVERYONE IS INVOLVED IN THE DISCUSSION AND THAT A FEW INDIVIDUALS ARE NOT DOMINATING THE DISCUSSIONS (REFER TO MEETINGS PROCEDURES).

4. AS THE MEETING COMES TO AN END, THE SENIOR CHAIRPERSON SHOULD ASK IF ANY COUNCIL MEMBER WOULD LIKE TO RAISE ANY OTHER BUSINESS (A.O.B.). THESE SHOULD BE VERY SMALL ITEMS AND SHOULD BE DEALT WITH QUICKLY. ANY ITEM THAT NEEDS A LOT OF DISCUSSION SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE AGENDA FOR THE NEXT MEETING.

5. AFTER THE MEETING THE SENIOR CHAIRPERSON MUST MAKE SURE THE SENIOR SECRETARY KNOWS WHAT TO INCLUDE IN THE MINUTES. BEFORE THE NEXT MEETING THE SENIOR CHAIRPERSON MUST MEET WITH THE SENIOR SECRETARY TO ARRANGE THE AGENDA FOR THE UPCOMING MEETING.

The Senior Secretary

The Senior Secretary prepares the agenda for each meeting with the Senior Chairperson. The Senior Secretary then circulates the agenda for the upcoming meeting to all the members of the Student Council in advance where possible. Any other business (AOB) should always be included as this allows any member of the Student Council to raise an issue that is not on the agenda.

During the meeting the Senior Secretary must:

1. WRITE DOWN THE NAMES OF THE STUDENT COUNCIL MEMBERS ATTENDING, NOTING ABSENCES.

2. WRITE DOWN ALL SUGGESTIONS MADE, WHO THE SUGGESTIONS ARE FORWARDED BY, ACTION THAT IS DECIDED AND WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ACTION TO BE TAKEN. THESE ARE CALLED THE MINUTES.

After the meeting the Senior Secretary must:

1. CHECK THE MINUTES WITH THE SENIOR CHAIRPERSON.

2. DISCUSS THE AGENDA FOR THE NEXT MEETING WITH THE SENIOR CHAIRPERSON.

3. CIRCULATE THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING AND THE AGENDA OF THE UPCOMING MEETING TO ALL STUDENT COUNCIL MEMBERS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

The Public Relations Officer

The P.R.O is responsible for promoting good communications between the Student Council and the student body, staff, parents, Board of Management and their wider community.

A P.R committee will be formed, including the P.R.O.

The P.R.O and the P.R committee are responsible for:

1. KEEPING THE STUDENT BODY INFORMED OF THE STUDENT COUNCIL'S ACTIVITIES AND PLANS.

2. ADVERTISING I.E. THE LOCAL NEWSPAPER.

3. ANY ANNOUNCEMENTS CONCERNING THE STUDENT COUNCIL.

4. THE STUDENT COUNCIL WEBSITE.

5. KEEPING THE NOTICES ON THE STUDENT COUNCIL NOTICE BOARD UP TO DATE.

6. PROVIDING UPDATES TO THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT, PARENTS/TEACHERS ASSOCIATION AND THE PRINCIPAL ON THE STUDENT COUNCIL'S ACTIVITIES AND PLANS.

7. PROVIDING AN END OF YEAR REPORT TO THE BOARD OF MANAGEMENT.

Treasurer

The Treasurer is responsible for managing the funds of the Student Council. Therefore they should keep a complete account of all income and expenditure of the Student Council, advice and recommendations can then be given to the Student Council regarding their funds.

The Treasurer should provide the Student Council with a complete financial report at the end of the school year.

Finances should not be kept in the Student Council Office.

The Office Director

The role of Office Director is a practical role and as such the Office Director is entitled to form a committee. The Office Director is responsible for:

1. KEEPING THE COMPUTER IN THE STUDENT COUNCIL OFFICE WORKING.

2. KEEPING THE STUDENT COUNCIL OFFICE STOCKED WITH STATIONERY.

3. KEEPING THE STUDENT COUNCIL OFFICE CLEAN AND TIDY.

4. KEEPING A CHECKLIST OF ALL ITEMS IN THE STUDENT COUNCIL OFFICE TO MAKE SURE THAT ALL ITEMS ARE WHERE THEY SHOULD BE.

5. THE COMBINATION TO THE LOCK ON THE DOOR OF THE STUDENT COUNCIL OFFICE.

6. THE DECORATION AND FURNISHINGS OF THE STUDENT COUNCIL OFFICE.

IT'S YOUR CHOICE USE YOUR VOICE

SET UP A STUDENT COUNCIL IN YOUR SCHOOL

national children's office
oifig náisiúnta leanaí

National Children's Office
1st Floor, St. Martin's House, Waterloo Road, Dublin 4.

Tel: +353 1 242 0000   **Fax:** +353 1 6641929
Email: nco@health.gov.ie   **Web:** www.nco.ie
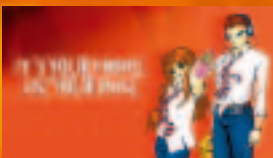
Student Council Working Group
Web: www.studentcouncil.ie