



Second-level Student Councils in Ireland: A study of enablers, barriers and supports

1. What is the study's background?

This study was commissioned by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Programme. The study was undertaken by Anna Fiona Kehoe and Dr. Jean Whyte of the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin.* The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2005.

2. What is the study's purpose?

The specific objectives of this study were:

- » to examine contemporary thinking on student councils;
- » to describe the operation of student councils in Ireland;
- » to identify enablers and barriers to good practice in the establishment, development and operation of student councils as perceived by school management, teachers, students and other key personnel;
- » to identify ways in which student councils can play a meaningful role in second-level schools;
- » to make recommendations about how student councils can be effectively supported;
- » to make recommendations on the training needs of all stakeholders.

This research was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 took place in May 2004 and aimed to describe barriers, enablers and supports to the development and operation of student councils in Ireland as perceived by key stakeholders. Phase 2 of the study was conducted in January 2005 and profiled 3 student councils as 'models of good practice'.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available on www.dcyia.ie

3. How was the study undertaken?

The methods employed were designed to achieve the above objectives. Firstly, 18 schools were selected for Phase 1 under the criteria of school type and size, and invited to participate. Each of the 4 school types was proportionately represented in the achieved sample, which included:

- » 1 medium-sized Comprehensive school;
- » 1 medium-sized Community school and 1 large Community school;
- » 3 Vocational schools (small, medium and large);
- » 5 Voluntary secondary schools (1 small, 2 medium and 2 large).

Schools both with and without student councils were approached, but only schools that had functioning student councils or were in the process of establishing a council agreed to participate.

Secondly, the student councils profiling 'models of good practice' were selected from a list of 7 schools compiled by the Working Group using 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.

Thirdly, in Phase 1, focus groups were conducted with one group of 2nd year students and one group of Transition Year or 5th year students in

* The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

each of the schools. In addition, student council members were interviewed in pairs or in a group as appropriate. A total of 251 students were consulted using participatory techniques, which derive from Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) strategies.

School Principals, teachers and liaison teachers were consulted through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Members of the schools' Boards of Management were consulted during their meetings or through a survey questionnaire. In total, consultations were conducted with the Principal (and in one case, the Deputy Principal) of each school, with 76 Board of Management members and with 41 teachers, including student council liaison teachers.

The researchers also attended one student council election and 2 student council meetings during the course of the study.

In each of the 3 schools studied in Phase 2, 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 each of the 3 schools' Principals, teachers and liaison teachers.

4. What are the key findings?

4.1 General findings

- » Student councils were ascribed a wide and differing number of roles by different groups within the school. This presented many challenges to student councils.
- » Boards of Management and senior management saw consultation as the main role of the student council and had quite a clear view of what issues they would like to consult students about. Student councils were also viewed as providers of information and as a resource (e.g. for facilitating communication between staff and students, or helping with events).
- » Students, on the other hand, saw the council as having an active role in making the school a better place to be, perhaps by influencing management decisions about policy and rules.
- » Members of the student council saw their main role as one of action – for example, representing students' views, changing practices within the school, dealing with issues, solving problems and helping students.

- » Members of Boards of Management had very little knowledge or awareness of the student council in their school. The same was true of staff in quite a number of schools. Where councils were particularly active, staff were very positive and supportive.
- » Students on the whole did not have a very good opinion of their council and were not particularly supportive of it.
- » Issues related to the internal working of the student council which might impact on its successful operation included the make-up of the council (e.g. its size and whether junior students were represented), resources, commitment of council members, maintaining enthusiasm and continuity, opportunities to develop appropriate skills, pressure on senior students and leadership.
- » The election process was also seen as important.
- » In schools where there was a prefect system, there were some tensions because the roles of prefects *versus* council members were not adequately distinguished.
- » Attitudes of staff and Principals were seen as obstacles in some cases to the student council completing projects.
- » Communication with the Board of Management was considered important.

4.2 Advantages of student councils

- » Having an active student council was seen as contributing to a positive school atmosphere and creating a caring school environment, which is both supportive and inclusive.
- » The student council was considered to be a vehicle for student participation and this was seen in some schools to have a beneficial impact on issues such as discipline, bullying and staff–student relations.
- » Student councils were also seen as providing educational opportunities and an interactive learning environment, where students could learn leadership and communication skills as well as responsibility and accountability.

5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

1. Enablers to establishing a student council

- » Support from senior management.
- » Sufficient time to prepare and inform students and staff.
- » Commitment from the staff member assigned to setting up council.
- » Cooperation from the staff in general.
- » Raising the profile of the new council with the student body to ensure student motivation and enthusiasm.

2. Barriers/challenges to establishing a student council

- » Educating the whole school about what a student council is.
- » Recruiting interested students.
- » Clarifying the role of the council and how it will function on a day-to-day basis with new members.

3. Supports or factors that enabled the development and operation of a student council

- » Regular meetings.
- » Pupil-led agendas.
- » The council having a high profile within the school.
- » The make-up of the council and support from the Principal and liaison teacher.
- » Ongoing training and evaluation.
- » Effective communication systems within and between the staff, Board of Management and student bodies, accessing their views and providing feedback.

4. Barriers/challenges to the development and operation of a student council

- » Lack of time.
- » Lack of feedback and action from management on the council's suggestions.
- » Lack of support from students and staff.

6. What are the recommendations?

The following recommendations aim to complement the recommendations and guidelines for the successful operation of student councils nationally and internationally. The first set of recommendations target schools and the second set target external services.

1. Recommendations for schools

Role of the student 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 status, elections, meeting formats, communication and the removal of council members from the council must be stated and adhered to.

Make-up of the student council

- » Student councils must be representative of the whole student body. If junior students are not represented, they will not support the council.
- » If having representatives from each class makes the council too large to manage, an alternative system should be considered, such as having an executive committee or having a junior and senior council.

Election process

- » The election process is an important way of raising awareness of the student council among staff and students since it provides an opportunity for the council's role to be discussed throughout the school.
- » The election process must be seen to be fair and democratic. Students will not be empowered if, from the very beginning, decisions are taken by staff.
- » Staff will support the student council and take it seriously if they feel that they have a say in what it is about.

Maintaining continuity

- » Councils should consider whether representatives of some year groups should be members for 2 consecutive years.
- » Time and commitment are essential elements for a successful council.
- » Responsibilities of members of student councils should be shared and not lumped on the shoulders of final year students.

Activities of the student council

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

- » The student council should be seen to achieve something soon after it has been established. Councils must be supported in setting tangible and realistic goals that will improve the school and build confidence in the council.
- » Links between the student council and other structures in the school and community should be forged, for example, with parents' councils.

Supports for liaison teachers

- » The main person involved in establishing a student council – and its main support once it has been set up – is the liaison teacher. This role should be clarified and he or she should have a genuine interest in youth participation and a commitment to the council. 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.
- » Liaison teachers should have reduced class contact time.
- » A dedicated support pack and a training module should be developed for liaison teachers.
- » A forum for liaison teachers, in which to meet and exchange experiences and ideas, would be very useful.

Allocation of time

- » Council members need to be given and allocated time to meet on a regular basis. This should preferably be timetabled rather than being, for example, during lunch time.
- » Time needs to be allocated for council members to access student views and to provide feedback to students on the activities and progress of the council.
- » 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. For example, a designated space or room where the council can meet regularly is helpful.
- » Resources/funding should be available to the council for training, organising events, purchasing materials.

Establishing effective communication systems

Communication with students

- » Systematic procedures for accessing students' views and providing feedback to them must be established, e.g. having an allocated time for representatives to gather students' views, having a council stand or table, a suggestion box.

- » The council should survey the views of students and be allowed to follow through on some of their ideas.
- » Arrangements for feedback to students about the work of the council should be incorporated into the school structures.

Communication with staff

- » Direct contact between council and staff should be arranged, e.g. council members presenting their activities to staff at a staff meeting.
- » A procedure for direct communication between council and management should be established.
- » The council should be connected to other structures within the school, e.g. the prefect system, sports clubs, parents' council and Board of Management. Links with Comhairle na nÓg, youth groups and local primary schools should also be established.

Raising the profile of the council in the school

- » This is vital in order to ensure the support of students. It could be done by means of a dedicated notice-board, a suggestion box, a website or a page in the school newsletter.
- » Raising the council's profile will also help gain support from staff, who need to be informed about the council's role so that they do not have false expectations, unnecessary fears or ask council members to carry out inappropriate tasks. Staff also need to be briefed on the role of the council's liaison teacher.

Training for student councils

- » Training is an essential support for members of student councils in order to help them acquire the skills they need to, for example, operate effectively, manage meetings, come to a consensus about issues, organise activities, access views and negotiate with management.
- » A dedicated training session at the beginning of the school year by independent facilitators is recommended. Staff and students should be given a copy of the training agenda and should be able to contribute ideas.
- » Ongoing training once a term is advisable, as is a mid-year evaluation.
- » Suggestions for training content may be found in the full report of this research (available at: www.dcy.ie).

2. Recommendations for Department of Education and Skills

The establishment of a student council support service

- » Such a support service could provide information and resources to schools that want to set up a student council, as well as supporting existing councils and liaison teachers. It could also coordinate supports offered by existing agencies.

In addition, a support service could:

- » Encourage and even carry out research relevant to the establishment and development of student councils.
- » Develop and provide training for schools in relation to the establishment and support of student councils.
- » Raise student participation as an issue with school managements.
- » Set up networks of student councils at regional and national levels.
- » Establish international connections for student councils.
- » Explore the possibilities of establishing student councils at primary level.

7. What are the benefits of the study?

The benefit of this study arises from its analysis of the issues that need to be considered in the context of establishing and maintaining student councils, where a student council is seen as 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 study also provides good practice models of student councils based on practice in 3 schools, which should be helpful both to schools that already have a student council and to those contemplating setting up a council.



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Check out www.dcy.ie for full report of study