

POSITION PAPER *STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND STUDENT LEADERSHIP*

PREAMBLE:

This paper refers to:

- the Secondary Principals' Survey – *Tell us what you really think*, Term 1 2010. A summary of the survey findings are listed at **TAB A**.
- *the Middle Years of Schooling Discussion Paper 2008*
- *SRCs, Building Partnerships: Some Challenges*, R Holdsworth
- *the NSW Quality Teaching Framework*.

RATIONALE:

The NSW Secondary Principals' Council encourages all secondary schools to increase student engagement. Principals are encouraged to review student participation and leadership practices in their schools and, where necessary, increase opportunities for students to have a say in educational decision-making processes.

BACKGROUND:

Student engagement and retention is a key priority area of the *Office of Schools Plan 2009-2011* and a nominated strategy is to 'strengthen the implementation of proactive student wellbeing approaches'.

This paper proposes that when schools provide genuine opportunities for students to lead and have a say in educational decision-making processes then student engagement increases.

The Middle Years of Schooling Discussion Paper 2008 states:

'Motivation and engagement are often increased when learning tasks are active, directly related to the concerns of students, connected to contexts beyond the school, provide for depth of study guided by some degree of student direction'.

Roger Holdsworth, editor of *Connect* magazine and Senior Research Associate at the Youth Research Centre, Victoria, in his 2004 paper to student welfare consultants, *SRCs, Building Partnerships: Some Challenges*, quotes Walker and Kelly (2002):

'Student motivation to learn depends on three key student needs:

- to feel in **control** of their learning (significant input to rules and procedures, establish learning goals and tasks, decide how to work);
- to feel **competent** (investigating and responding to issues of survival and quality of life, solving real problems, creating real products); and
- to feel **connected** with others (cooperative and collaborative learning, peer support, community linkages, mutual respect).'

The NSW Quality Teaching Framework highlights the importance of effective student participation and leadership practices. This framework articulates the importance for

students to take active roles in their learning and the importance of a supportive school culture that encourages students to lead and allows them to engage in tasks that are meaningful to them:

- *Problematic knowledge* - 'encourage students to address multiple perspectives and/or solutions'.
- *Substantive communication* - 'students regularly engage in sustained conversations about the concepts and ideas they are encountering'.
- *Engagement* – 'most students, most of the time, are seriously engaged in the activity rather than going through the motions.'
- *Student direction* - 'allow students to exercise some direction over the selection of activities related to their learning and the means and manner by which these activities will be done.'
- *Inclusivity* – 'the participation of all students across the social and cultural backgrounds represented in the school.'
- *Connectedness* – 'apply school knowledge in real-life contexts or problems, and provide opportunities for students to share their work with audiences beyond the classroom and school.'

The significant link between the three documents is that there is agreement that student engagement increases when students have the opportunity to have some control over what they learn and the way in which they learn. A range of wellbeing benefits, such as increased feelings of competency, resilience and connectedness are linked to increasing levels of student engagement.

COMMENT:

The *NSW Secondary Principals' Council* believes that student engagement is increased by school practices that encourage active student-led tasks which are directly related to the concerns of students. The council also recognises the importance for these tasks and the student learning to be connected to contexts beyond the school.

Effective student leadership practices increase student participation levels and contribute to greater levels of student engagement. Student engagement and student wellbeing increase when students feel that they are being heard and are recognised as part of the solution.

The council recognises that there are already formalised school student leadership groups such as student representative councils which allow students to have a say in school life. These may or may not need reviewing. Sometimes, the question is asked:

'What about the other kids, the ones who don't get on the SRC?'

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the findings of the survey (**TAB A**) and the educational research about student engagement, the *NSW Secondary Principals' Council* concludes that student leadership practices are an effective way to increase student participation levels and contribute to greater levels of student engagement.

It is recommended that secondary school principals bring this paper to the attention of their staff and conduct a review of student participation and leadership practices in their school.

Secondary school principals are encouraged to:

1. provide a range of opportunities to involve a broad range of students in first-hand, purposeful student leadership experiences
2. increase opportunities for students to have a say in authentic school educational decision-making processes
3. promote a school culture based on collaborative teaching and learning practices
4. support staff to actively allow students to become partners in key school processes
5. provide skills development for students on ways for students on how to participate in educational decision-making processes
6. provide professional development resources and time, eg, time/period concession to staff who assist student leadership and participation initiatives.

Further implementation:

A support document, to be written by the Student Leadership and Participation Reference Group, is planned for 2011. This document will provide:

- strategies for secondary schools to reviewing current practices in student participation and student leadership
- examples and information about ways for secondary schools to improve their practice.

Secondary Principals' Survey – *Tell us what you really think*, Term 1 2010

Secondary principals were surveyed on a range of issues. Over 150 secondary principals participated in the survey. Questions 27-30 related to student leadership and participation practices in schools.

THE SURVEY FINDINGS:

General:

The majority of respondents stated:

1. The provision of student leadership opportunities increase participation levels and assist students to learn important skills for them to function as citizens in a democratic society
2. Students are happier and participate more effectively when adults listen to their ideas and value their opinions
3. Effective relationships between students and their teachers are the most important factor in raising participation levels
4. Student leaders need formal and informal training and development. This requires teachers to focus more on supporting and directing them in the process, and less on achieving the end product.

Current school practices:

The majority of respondents stated:

1. Schools currently encourage student participation in a broad range of ways which range from student initiatives in which the students share decisions with adults to adult-driven projects in which students are allowed to volunteer for specific roles.
2. High levels of student participation in schools arise when students engage in organised student groups such as Student Representative Councils; environmental, sporting and performing arts groups, extra-curricula activities; student-led projects or special events.

Areas for improvement:

The majority of respondents stated:

1. Although student leadership groups are valued in schools, these groups can sometimes **tend to deal with relatively unimportant issues** in the school.
2. **Students generally don't feel the need to 'participate now'** as educational outcomes in schools are usually 'deferred for the future' - useful in a job or 'when you leave school'.
3. **Students are generally are not consulted about important issues** to do with process or planning to improve the quality of school life.
4. The main barriers to effective student participation in schools are
 - **lack of time and resources**
 - **student apathy**
 - **staff resistance** to allowing students into authentic decision-making processes.