

Student Voice Initiative

Participation and Consultation in Schools

Proposed Structure

CPS specialises in creating the conditions for constructive dialogue in any context. It has been our experience as practitioners, parents and in our time as students ourselves, that student council initiatives have too often proved unable to stimulate such a dialogue. In keeping with the culture of innovation and excellence that schools so often want to demonstrate, we have designed a structure which empowers students to communicate the issues which concern them as a starting point for a discussion, rather than a list of demands which are not able to be met.

Needs, then strategies

Our programme will train student facilitators to 'translate' such demands, identifying instead the underlying **unmet need** which is being expressed. A dialogue can then be initiated between staff and students, at the end of which a **strategy** to meet this need in the future can be identified. This process encourages students to engage with the wide variety of ways in which their needs might be met, rather than fixating on one particular strategy.

"Circles"

In order to give all students the opportunity to contribute to the student voice, we propose to implement a structure of 'circles', illustrated below:

Level 1 – Theme/Issue Circles

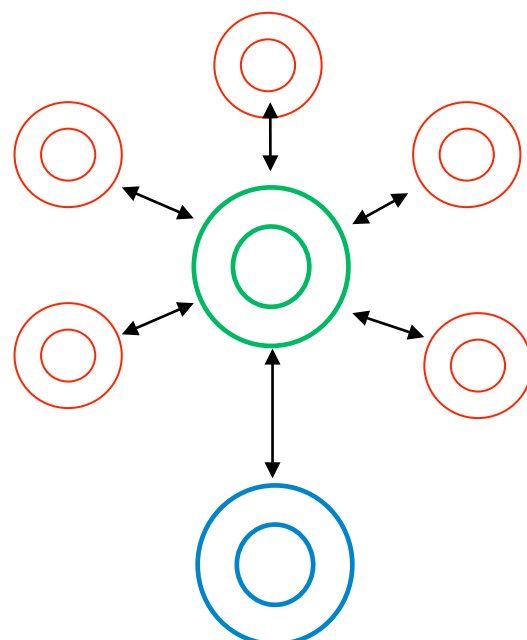
These are **open invitation** meetings, facilitated by trained students, to discuss a specific theme or issue – e.g. sports, seating in the playground. These circles can be initiated by any student, as long as a trained facilitator is available to run the circle, which will be held during break or lunchtimes. Unmet needs will be identified, and 2 representatives nominated to participate at the next level.

Level 2 – 'Hub' meetings

Held at regular intervals (e.g. half-termly), these meetings will be attended by all Level 1 representatives. The meeting will be facilitated by two trained students, supported by 2 staff members. Facilitators and staff will take statements from each Level 1 circle, then initiate a dialogue to agree on a proposal for action to be taken forward on each issue. In many cases this proposal will be able to be actioned by participants in the 'Hub'. Where a proposal requires the attention of other staff members, at least one student and one staff member from the 'Hub' will be given responsibility for taking this forward to a Level 3 meeting.

Level 3 – Presentation of Proposals

These meetings may take a variety of forms, from one-off meetings with specific staff members, to an agenda item at a regular staff forum. Feedback from these meetings will then be delivered at the next 'Hub' meeting.



Training

Specific training for student facilitators and staff supervisors is vital to the success of the structure outlined above.

- *Needs-based theory*
- *Non-violent communication*
- *Facilitation*
- *Conflict Resolution*

During the first day's training, the group will be introduced to facilitation and conflict resolution using needs-based theory and NVC. NVC, developed by Dr Marshall Rosenberg, is a needs-based communications system which empowers practitioners to connect with the underlying motivations and intentions of others through dialogue. Having been shown the basic principles, the group will have the opportunity to practice using these techniques, increasing confidence and developing valuable communication skills.

- *The 'circles' structure*

Over a further day's training, the group will be taken through every aspect of the 'circles' structure described above. Specific and rigorous processes govern the way in which proposals are put forward, considered and approved at each stage. Working through both fictitious and 'live' examples, the group will learn the strengths of the process and what the role of facilitator entails.

Ongoing training and supervision

While this initial training course will enable the group to begin working as facilitators, further support will be needed to ensure continued quality of delivery. As well as honing skills and introducing more advanced techniques through additional training, supervision sessions are crucial to allow the facilitators a constructive, supportive forum to discuss the frustrations and stress of their role.

In the absence of both these training and supervision elements, it is likely that the quality of delivery from the facilitators will suffer, resulting in a devaluing of the student participation system as a whole.

Outcomes and Benefits

The proposed structure for student voice –

- Allows any student to participate – if they have commitment

Participation is not limited to facilitators or elected representatives. The system will be driven by any student prepared to commit their time and effort to a particular issue.

- Manages expectations

The expertise of the facilitator, supported by the rigorous structure of the process, will allow students to feel their concerns have been heard, without imposing unrealistic demands. The process of developing proposals and presenting them for discussion will be clear to all participants. In the event that a proposal is not accepted, the feedback process will ensure that reasons are clearly communicated, and any disappointment acknowledged and discussed.

- Allows for a clearly defined remit

The implementation of this initiative will require the senior team to define exactly which areas of school life will be open for discussion. Any student wishing to raise an issue will be guided by the student facilitators as to whether their concern falls within this remit.

- Will produce visible results

By refining and directing students' concerns this process ensures that the school will be more likely to be able to accept proposals which emerge. As this continues, students will become more adept at recognising productive areas of discussion, putting forward more realistic and achievable proposals.

- Develops and encourages valuable communication skills and qualities

Not merely the trained facilitators but any student taking part in this process will be learning and improving a range of skills and qualities such as self discipline, taking responsibility, getting outcomes using reasoned dialogue, negotiation, dealing with rejection and reassessment. This set of skills will support the individual's educational development as well as their ability and willingness to contribute positively to the school community.