

# Learning for Life and Work

Establishing a School Council

Case Study

Little Flower School

Little Flower is an all ability maintained secondary school for girls aged 11 - 18. It is located off the Somerton Road in North Belfast and has an enrolment of approximately 660 students and is staffed by 47 teachers.

As part of its school development plan, Little Flower sought to establish a student council primarily as a means of encouraging the students to play a more active role in the running of the school. The approach of the school's management was one of recognising the need for such a working partnership between students and staff by acknowledging that there was a need to ensure that the pupil voice was heard.

The senior management saw the advantages of encouraging greater partnership between the pupils and their teachers as they felt that giving students a greater say would develop a keener sense of responsibility amongst all students. At the core of the decision to establish a school council was the early recognition by the Principal that establishing such a body was very much a school improvement issue. Furthermore, there was a strong commitment to encouraging greater partnership between students and teachers and a firm belief that the ethos of the school could be effectively 'lived out' through developing the young people as decision makers and as active members of a thriving school community, who possess the skills and the appropriate mechanisms for influencing the many decisions that are taken on their behalf by adults.

The timing of when to establish the student council was significant. The school had entered in the Local and Global Citizenship pilot in partnership with the ELBs and CCEA and were exploring ways of promoting greater pupil involvement. Moreover, the school also had been enrolled in the Health Promoting Schools Initiative, which like the citizenship programme was supportive of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which articulates the right for young people to have a say in decisions that affect them.

Added to these circumstances was the fact that the Principal was newly appointed and supported the initiative with time and energy and communicated this effectively to her staff. Likewise, the teachers also recognised the value of a council and were committed and supportive of the venture. It might be important to note that some preparatory work had already begun in their school through various exercises at staff In-Set and other initiatives that helped the school to establish its readiness.

The timing, therefore, was right for Little Flower.

The Principal of Little Flower took the initial step of establishing a school council by working closely with two carefully chosen teachers who attended a three day course on school councils. One was a senior teacher, who was able to liaise closely with the senior management of the school and able to advise and co-lead the initiative in the school. The other teacher was a teacher of English, who had attended the BELB local and global citizenship training and was very familiar with the issues surrounding pupil participation and was strongly supportive of the initiative. Both teachers were effective communicators and possessed an infectious enthusiasm for what they were doing. The school had in effect created liaison teachers who could act as support for the students and who could reliably inform the staff about what was happening.

These members of staff attended some initial training on school councils. This three day course was facilitated by the Belfast Education and Library Board and was based on high-quality materials and guidance developed by School Councils U.K. ([www.schoolcouncils.org/](http://www.schoolcouncils.org/)). The training was offered to five schools, two primaries and three post-primary of which Little Flower was one. There was a range too of the types of schools who sought to introduce such an initiative, from grammar to secondary and a range of single sex and co-educational institutions were also represented. This reflected the increasing interest there was in this area of pupil participation.

The first two days of the course were spent working with the teachers familiarising them with the ethos, principles and out-workings of school councils. It helped teachers reflect on where their schools were at with regard to being prepared to undertake such a significant whole-school initiative.

The third day of the training was aimed at the students who arrived with their teachers. In essence, the teachers took their students through a series of activities designed to develop their understanding of school councils so that the students themselves could return to school as not only as informed advocates of the initiative, but equipped with the necessary resources and skills to disseminate these to others. The value of this type of training was to initiate a self-sustaining approach, which would put direct responsibility for leading the initiative with the school and in particular with the students themselves.

The training focused on many of the essential preparatory issues that this type of initiative needs to address: its *raison d'être*, its potential benefits, the potential pitfalls, bringing on board the

support of staff and the wider school community, negotiating a constitution or operating principles, establishing the parameters on the appropriateness of issues for debate, ways of electing a council, the need for the council to be autonomous in its debates and ensuring there is a workable mechanism for conducting regular meetings. Beyond this, the training helped the students to explore some of the more mechanical issues like how to conduct a meeting, the roles and responsibilities of post holders and examining the qualities of an effective councillor. While the training touched on many of these areas, it is important to note that there was an onus on the schools to develop the training needs for their students back at school by customising further support in order to ensure the students' knowledge, skills and confidence were developed.

As part of the training, the teachers were invited to construct an action plan to help them prioritise and identify time frames for future progress. Each school had a different way of going forward and Little Flower's response was entirely appropriate to their specific needs and to the readiness of the staff and students. In short, there is no single right or wrong way to proceed.

On returning to school, the teachers worked closely with the students and used their action plan as a basis for development. Little Flower established a structure that they felt was right for the needs of their school and in doing this they took the decision to select the first council rather than elect, in order to get the initiative off to the best start possible. The school decided that after the first year they would hold whole school elections to form all subsequent councils. Two representatives from each year group were selected and these pupils had the task of initiating and sustaining the initiative. A total of fourteen students have since been elected by their peers and these girls now serve on the current council.

The council and the teachers initially drafted and agreed a constitution, which in hind-sight has proved very useful. Acting as a written summary of intent and as an encapsulation of the principles and out-workings of the body, the constitution has proved a valuable reference point to focus all concerned, if and when things may begin to go off course. The school have ensured that the constitution is not deeply entrenched and is therefore subject to periodic review to ensure that it acts as a solid working document that can support the best intentions of the council's remit.

Having agreed a constitution, the teachers and students next worked on arranging publicity and information about launching the initiative and on other essential operational matters like

arranging tutor time or all classes to discuss issues, arranging additional training for councillors in running effective meetings etc. They came up with various ideas about how to ensure that the council was effectively communicated to all members of the school community.

In this respect, one of the first tasks the council did was to introduce the idea to the staff by leading part of an In-Service Day. Using some of the activities that they had completed as part of the training, the students expressed their hopes and expectations of what a council could bring to improving the quality of life for all at the school. During this, the link teachers sat quietly in the background and let the students lead the In-Service.

The staff worked for the morning in groups setting out their views and concerns while the students put forward their opinions. The day was received very well by the teachers and both staff and students were able to discuss many issues and were able to build trust and support for the venture. A closer examination of this day is contained on the DVD *Establishing a School Council*, which can be accessed on the Learning Northern Ireland website.

Taking the message to the rest of the school was the next major undertaking. The area of communicating the establishment of the council was developed through many very familiar routes in the school. Notice boards were used to publicise the council and highlight issues to the wider school population, assemblies were used for this purpose and time given as part of the pastoral programme to allow all members of the school community to get involved and to refer issues up to the council. Furthermore a special suggestion box was created to allow all members of the school community to put forward ideas or to contact the council about any concerns. This initiative gave all members of the school community additional access to the council over and above their pastoral provision. Communication was enhanced recently through the use of flyers and news-sheets that the council produce to inform and publicise events, campaigns and activities.

The area of communication was thought to be important to the council's overall effectiveness. Little Flower felt a need to build from the bottom up by encouraging all classes to feed into the overall structure of the council. This was achieved by providing the time in from class for students to raise class issues, which in turn could be taken via a class representative, class tutor or other to the council. Moreover this space also allowed time for a return of information from a

representative of the council, thereby allowing the students a chance to reflect on the response, the reasoning for decisions made or time to celebrate success.

Feedback was a very important part of the school council process for the Little Flower council. This was achieved by members of the council providing feedback and information to a range of audiences. School assemblies are regularly used for council members to report on many of the issues that the council is engaged in. They have imparted various information to the teaching staff, Board of Governors, parents and to the student body. This was achieved through using regular meetings as well as assemblies and other scheduled gatherings to provide feedback and impart information. Finally feedback can also take place on a one to one basis with a member of the council meeting with a particular member of the school community regarding their ideas, suggestions or concerns.

Two months after addressing the staff, the Little Flower Council attended a meeting of the Board of Governors to introduce themselves, to highlight their expectations and to request the support and assistance of the Governing body. This proved another highly effective step in the process of establishing the council and the meeting was received very positively by all. In this meeting was the recognition that the students had a real voice in the school and they were welcomed and encouraged by the Board of Governors to play a full part.

By now the council was meeting on a regular basis and had a healthy range of issues to debate and action. One such issue was the request for lockers from the student body. The council debated the way forward for this issue and investigated the logistics of this by researching opinion of students and staff through questionnaire, measuring, photographing and lobbying! They took their findings to the Principal, who after consideration saw the benefits of their proposals. Consequently, the Principal has invited the student council to become involved in the planning process for a major capital spend that will see the building of a new school in the near future. Students will be asked to give their ideas and views about what features they would like to see in the new build.

On the other hand, there were other issues that did not end in success for the council. An issue regarding transport resulted in the request to meet representatives from a local bus company in an attempt to influence how they manage their school service. The council duly met the representatives, but failed to persuade them of their views.

The suggestion box that was placed in the school produced some very interesting issues that were taken up by the council, including the locker one. Another such issue regarded a television programme that highlighted a family who had three teenage girls who all became pregnant. This issue clearly touched some of the students who brought it to the attention of the school council. The council brought this to the management's attention and they recognised the concerns of the young people by committing to review the school's own policies on sex education.

In the midst of all this, the school was inspected and the Inspectors sat in at one of the school council meetings. The Inspectorate commented on "...the positive impact of the Student Council in promoting actively the pupils' independence, organisational skills and initiative".

As the school year progressed, further ideas were raised that helped the council target future actions; there was a desire by the students for change not only within but outside school too and requests for engagement with environmental initiatives as well as ideas about working with the local community. One such idea, that is the basis of on-going debate, was to find new ways to strengthen greater links between the students and the local community.

The new school year heralded a fresh election to this year's council and the school saw the need to create some new roles for the outgoing councillors, some of whom did not get re-elected, but who had made a significant contribution in the early stages. These roles were created as much to ensure the sustainability of the council by providing continuity, training and guidance to the new council. As it now stands, the current council comprises 14 students who were directly elected by their peers and who meet a minimum of once a month, but who would meet more frequently on an ad-hoc basis to deal with issues that require more time. The school attempts, as far as possible, to provide as much flexibility as possible regarding the frequency of meetings.

One of the biggest achievements the link teachers reported was that the establishment of the council has significantly impacted on the attitudes of the students, in that they are now more likely to follow an issue through the mechanism of school council, rather than feel apathetic and moan about it. Furthermore, the link teachers report that the range of issues that the council is beginning to engage with is most gratifying. The teachers feel that very appropriate suggestions about things like teaching and learning as well as linking with other schools in the community have been aired and are being given serious consideration by the management of the school.

One of the most gratifying outcomes of the experiences of Little Flower concerned improvements in attitudes and behaviour. One of the link teachers commented on the positive reaction of staff as well as students to the initiative. She stated that teachers are generally very positive and supportive and they use the council as a way to air staff concerns to the student body. The link teacher also believed that the students acknowledged that not all the issues they raise will be resolved to their satisfaction, however the girls accepted that these would all be taken seriously and given careful consideration by the school authorities.

At the end of the first year of the council's establishment, the school identified a number of successes. There was a feeling that there was a greater sense of confidence in the way that issues were being raised and in the way they were brought to the attention of the Principal and the board of Governors. The link teachers felt that the venture was very valuable and that the outcomes were well worth the efforts and that the school council was now in a strong position to sustain itself and go from strength to strength due to the commitment and hard work of the students.