

Promotion of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding

Creating and Developing a school Council

St. Marks Primary School

School Background

St. Mark's Primary School was built just over thirty years ago in Twinbrook estate, an area of socio-economic deprivation, in West Belfast. There are just over 550 boys and girls attending the school, who are helped to learn and develop by a staff of over twenty teachers and classroom assistants.

Overall Learning Intention(s)

To create and develop a child centred and child-led School Council.

Who was involved?

Board of Governors, Principal, teaching staff, classroom assistants, auxiliary and ancillary staff, the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), parents, a local primary school and of course, the children from St. Mark's!

Development of the Project

Preparing for Take Off

As a result of being involved in the SETAQ (Self Evaluation Through Attitudinal Questionnaire), two statements, which St. Mark's did not score as high in comparison to other statements, were, "*Children behave well in my class*", in relation to the pupils' responses and "*Teachers deal effectively with bad behaviour*", in relation to the parents' responses.

In order to address these areas I contacted the SEELB and met with a Board Officer. She suggested setting up a School Council as a way of dealing with both of these issues simultaneously. She put me in touch with a local integrated primary school, which had already set up a School Council. The Link Teacher in that school invited myself and another teacher to her school in order to meet up with the School Council and observe a School Council meeting actually taking place.

After visiting this school I did a bit of research on what exactly a School Council did and what implications setting up a School Council would have on the parents, pupils and the teachers, with regards to time, planning and resources, in the context of St. Mark's Primary School. The books I mainly consulted were, '*The Key Stage 1 School Council Participation Toolkit*' and '*Primary School Councils Toolkit*', I bought these from this web site www.schoolcouncils.org.

I then approached the Senior Management Team and made a short presentation as to why I thought, setting up a School Council would benefit St. Mark's Primary School. I outlined an action plan I completed with regards to the development of this area and asked their permission to submit this plan to the Board. I submitted this plan through "The Dissemination of Good Practice" and asked for £1800.00 in order to pay for the necessary resources and sub cover.

Cruising

There are three classes in each year group in St. Mark's, so I decided to roll this new initiative out very slowly. I only planned to develop the School Council across Year 5, in the first year, then across Years 5 and 6 during the second year, across all of KS2 in the third year and then to introduce it in KS1 in the fourth year.

I sent a letter to the parents outlining the nature and purpose of a School Council and invited them to a meeting in the school where the activities involved in School Council would be described and discussed in more detail. I met up with the teachers and classroom assistants and we agreed on a way we were going to implement this into our day and where and how it was to be recorded on our planners. We agreed that the children should first know, what exactly a School Council was and how it worked. The children also needed to know the positions a School Council required to be filled in order to function properly and the skills associated with each of these positions. When the children arrived at an understanding of all of this it was only then that the teacher could begin to talk about the process of elections.

The first thing a child must do is think about his/her own skills and experience and decide if he/she would be suitable for a particular position. If the child believes he/she would be a good person for that position he/she takes a Nomination Form and asks someone in the class to nominate him/her. This Nomination Form is handed to the teacher and then the child has to write/type a manifesto, where he/she is trying to persuade and convince the rest of the class that he/she has the right skills, attitude and behaviour for that position. These can be displayed for a few days before the actual voting occurs. Each child who has been nominated for a position writes a manifesto and his/her name goes onto the appropriate ballot paper. All the Male Councillors would read out their manifestos and after this everyone votes by simply putting an **X** beside the name of who they think would be the best person for that position. The boy with the most votes then becomes the Male Councillor for the class. This process is repeated for the Female Councillor, the Secretary and the Treasurer.

A week or so before you are going to hold a Class Council meeting, place a number of 'Issue Slips' next to the Agenda Box and tell the class that they can use these Issue Slips to write about anything they want- ways to improve the class or the school, fund raising activities, games after school. No names should be written onto the issue slips. The issues written on the Issue Slips are tallied up the day before the Class Council meeting and this forms the agenda of that meeting- the issue with the highest number of tallies being item 1 on the agenda and so on. The agenda is written onto the Class Council Agenda Sheet.

Before holding the meeting, one of the councillors must agree to chair the meeting. He/She controls the meeting and allows the children to speak one at a time about the items on the agenda. The chairperson must make sure that everyone speaks slowly and clearly so that the Secretary can take down the minutes on the Class Council Minute Sheet.

Items which can be solved as a class are dealt with at that level, some items such as school dinners or bullying might need to be brought to the School Council in order to be dealt with properly. These type of issues are written onto the

School Council Agenda Sheet and passed onto the link teacher, who then tallies these items up from all the classes and this then becomes the agenda for the School Council meeting. This is written onto the School Council Agenda Sheet and forwarded to the Class Councils. A Councillor is needed to chair the School Council Meeting, all of the Secretaries record the minutes on the School Council Minute Sheet and the Councillors use these minutes when they are reporting back to their class with regards to the actions which were agreed to at the School Council meeting.

It is having this structure and following the same procedure each time, which leads to the School Council becoming stronger and stronger each time a new Council is elected. This happens each term, and the number of Class/School Council meetings required really depends on the issues that the Council are dealing with. Class Council Elections and meetings usually occur at the beginning of each term and the School Council meetings are determined what comes out of the Class Council meetings.

The Principal needs to fully support the development of a School Council. He/she must allow time at Staff meetings for the link teacher to update the rest of the staff, devote assemblies and notice boards to School Council issues, place School Council training and objectives on the School Development Plan and allow some of the budget to be spent on badges, prizes and books. This will raise the profile of the Council, make it more credible and add to its success and effectiveness.

Turbulence encountered

The fact that I planned the roll out of the School Council over a number of years, really helped it to become embedded in the life of St. Mark's Primary School. I also believe that because it was developed at this steady rate, problems, which arose, were relatively minor and as a result quite manageable.

At the beginning it was necessary to have individual meetings with parents after the group meeting as two sets of parents from the school were concerned about the issues which may be discussed at Council meetings and they also thought that their children's time at school could be best spent doing something else. When these parents were shown the subjects a Council usually discussed and the types of activities a Council was mainly involved in, their fears alleviated somewhat. When the cross curricular aspects of a School Council was described to them, they became more convinced of its value and agreed to let their children, participate in their Class Councils. After meeting up with these parents later that year, both sets had very positive views with regards to St. Mark's School Council and how it was contributing to the overall development of their children.

A few teachers were somewhat sceptical of the children's ability to hold meetings, write minutes and behave properly at meetings. These teachers were simply invited along to Class and School Council meetings in order to see the children in their roles and invited to talk with the children after the meeting. All the teachers who witnessed a Class/School Council meeting were amazed at much the children could do when given the chance and left with a more positive and less sceptical view towards the School Council.

Due to circumstances within the school, I was unable to hold Class Council Meetings at lunchtime- these usually occurred between 1:00 and 1:25. The meetings were to be held after school between 3:00 and 3:40. This had a very negative effect on the School Council as many of the children simply voted with their feet, went home and did not come to the meetings. It was necessary to change the time of the meetings back to 1:00- 1:25 at lunchtime.

Safe Landing

A School Council helps the child's voice to be heard in his/her school and this relates directly to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child '*Each child has the right to express the views that he/she has and for his her views to be listened to in anything that affects him/her.*' Through the School Council the school has won certificates in this area from, The Impetus Project, The Northern Ireland Cancer Fund for Children and Amnesty International. Children became involved with The Northern Ireland's Commission for Children and Young People and even sat on a steering group, which help draw up set of guidelines for the development a School Council. Children have spoken at conferences about their experiences and feelings about St. Mark's School Council and The Children's Commissioner and The Human Right's Commissioner have both visited St. Mark's, on separate occasions, in order to meet up with the School Council and discuss with the children, the work that they were undertaking at that time.

The introduction of The Revised Northern Ireland Primary Curriculum provides the perfect context for the development of a School Council. As long as a strong foundation is laid at the outset, a School Council will evolve and develop positively and effectively, with respect to the context the school it is in.

Advice to others

Have fun. Take your time. Have fun. Be very flexible. Have fun. Remember that the children own the Council and the teacher is the facilitator. Always ensure that the children have decided on the agenda of any meeting and that the agenda has not been created or imposed by anyone/thing outside of the Council. Mistakes will happen, so what, we'll learn from them. Try to have other teachers working alongside the link teacher. Do it your way. You know what is best for your children and your school. One last thing, have fun!