

Education Week Article

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Student Council Project Aims to Encourage Civic Activism

By Bess Keller

Student power is getting a boost from the National Association of Student Councils. The venerable group is in effect ushering prom-planners Brad and Susie to the wings, while attempting to put a broader group of student leaders at center stage. For instance, the association can envision a school's students collectively tackling bullying, gung-ho Elena organizing a tutoring group, and student council president Rajiv booking a salsa band for Cinco de Mayo. The NASC, administered by the Reston, Va.-based National Association of Secondary School Principals, decided its 75th anniversary last year was a good time to reconsider its work. One result is a new project for helping student governments lift up young peoples' voices in school and community affairs.

"One of the original purposes of student councils was to serve as a lab for practicing democracy," said Rocco Marano, who directs the student-council group as well as the NASSP's student-activities division. "Maybe we need to get back to that."

Using a \$325,000 grant from the Washington-based Corporation for National and Community Service and money not yet in hand, Mr. Marano and his collaborators hope in the next few years to have trained educators and students from 41 states in launching projects that encourage students to improve their schools.

Community Service

Under the NASC initiative, meetings throughout a school for choosing a problem typically progress to planning and follow-through by smaller groups of leaders. One school ran a pregnancy-prevention campaign; another got a microwave oven for the school cafeteria, Mr. Marano said.

With the anticipated new funding, plans call for some 780 schools with at least 41,000 students to participate.

The student-council group is also encouraging its members to devise a schedule of activities that recognizes the diversity of the student body and to integrate voluntary community service into the life of the school.

The organization's latest standards for "councils of excellence" look to see that a council carried out at least one service project in the year that promoted participation by the whole school, for instance, and for evidence of meetings with the principal or another administrator.

Principal Nelson H. Beaudoin of Kennebunk High School in Kennebunk, Maine, said that after almost 15 years of organizing schools around student voice and participation, he can hardly imagine another way to work.

A Model in Maine

The principal has acted as an informal adviser to Mr. Marano, with Kennebunk High a kind of model of what can be accomplished.

“Most people go into education to help kids develop, become somebody, and yet there is something in us that wants to keep kids incapable because it increases our importance,” said Mr. Beaudoin, who has written two books on student engagement. “But there’s a wealth of things that open up for kids, teachers, educators, when you start from a fundamental place where kids have value and have ability.”

At his 890-student school, he said, students are adding a Kennebunk High School Senate to the existing student council, which has meetings open to all and where anyone who has regularly participated has a vote. The senate will consist of 12 students, eight teachers, and four parents who will be charged with advancing the school.

Mr. Beaudoin expects that much of the progress will be made through building consensus among the parties.

“We’re trying to give our kids experience in citizenship that we hope will have lifelong meaning to them,” he said.

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