

Student Networking: Why and How?

What is a Student Network?

A Student Network exists when students from two or more schools (SRCs, Student Councils, JSCs) get together around shared needs and interests. It can be a formal network - meetings or conferences - or an informal network with casual contacts and shared resources, face to face and/or by e-mail. It can be local, regional, statewide or national.

Why is Networking Important?

Here are some ideas suggested by students and others:

Sharing Resources

Students can share information (e.g. about Student Council constitutions, publications, meeting procedures) and physical resources (e.g. 'how to' kits, equipment) - and this will help each student council group operate better.

Supporting Each Other

When students and Student Councils are having problems in one school - in being heard, in getting things organised, in keeping focused, in getting motivated - other students can help with encouragement or advice or visits or ideas or letters or phone calls or e-mails or ...

Learning How

Information can be gained (often best done in face-to-face discussions) from other students about **how** to make decisions, how to take part in school committees, how to organise things and so on.

Efficient Training

A training day shared between representatives from several schools can be an efficient use of scarce resources. For example, several schools can share the cost of hiring a venue or employing a trainer. Training each other is also an economical use of human resources.

Reflecting Together

Students learn about making their Student Councils better by reflecting on and thinking about what they have done. Talking about a Student Council to other students is a useful way of thinking about what's working, what's not, and why. Other students can help this process: 'we are not alone'; 'we found that

too'; 'that's different to what happened to us'; 'because' ...

Learning About What's Possible

Student groups can 'get in a rut' and be limited by what they've done or thought about in the past. In particular, some Student Councils get trapped into thinking that they can only be involved in fund-raising or social events. They might dismiss some other possible actions as 'impossible' because they've never tried them! Or they might never think of them at all! Hearing from other schools can 'shake up' a student group and encourage it to think of new possibilities.

Influencing Policy

Education decisions that affect schools are often made outside the school - they are the bigger issues within which individual schools operate. If students want to have an influence over these policies, they need to be represented at the levels at which they are made - regional, statewide, national etc. And a local network can be a first stepping-stone towards student participation in these big issues.

Partnerships in Decision-Making

At Regional and Statewide level, Education Department committees and officers are often interested to consult with students, to invite students to form advisory groups, or to share in decision-making through student membership of those committees. But who do these students represent? Students need to meet to understand these issues, to talk over their views, to hear and present the diversity of student voices, and to advise their representatives. Otherwise these students will only be able to represent their own ideas.

Information Paths

Network meetings provide efficient and alternative pathways for information to students about education policies and programs. Students and student groups may not always receive this information or realise its significance through individual school sources. Speakers are more likely to be available to talk with inter-school groups, than with each individual Student Council.

20 Steps to set up a Student Network

Here are some suggested steps - one way that a local Student Network can be set up. How you do it will depend on what your local needs are, where you are situated (in rural areas you will probably meet less often and communicate more by e-mail etc), what support you have, how enthusiastic people are and so on.

This is also just an outline and there are many more tasks involved in each step:

1. Propose an idea to your Student Council/SRC: that you hold a local meeting and training day for local SRCs. Get agreement from the Student Council that it will sponsor this. Set up a small organising committee. (Make sure you report back regularly to your Student Council.)
2. Clear the proposal with the school administration and negotiate a suitable date and spaces. Book rooms; if it is to be very big, you might want to book a hall or look for a community venue.
3. Draw up a list of the local schools you want involved. You should include **all** relevant schools. Decide if it will be primary or secondary Student Councils or both. (If both, you might need separate sessions for primary and secondary students.)
4. Send out invitations well in advance - at least one month before the day. You will need to have made some decisions: How many people from each school? Will there be a charge to cover lunch etc? How long? (Remember to allow for travel time.)
5. Work out a program: what do you want to cover on the day? Do you want 'experts' to lead groups? Or students to share experiences and information? (See the box opposite for a sample program.)
6. Who can you get to help you? Contact your local Council, the district or regional Education Department, community groups etc for speakers, workshop leaders and so on.
7. Send out the program with a reminder notice approximately two weeks before the date.
8. Organise the details of the day. You will need to think about: catering (lunch, tea/coffee/juices, biscuits), nametags, information material/booklets, group facilitators, equipment, people to greet and guide visitors, recording outcomes etc.
9. **Enjoy the day.**
10. Make sure there is a large group session to consider any action proposals from workshop groups. (Perhaps these are reported, not voted on, but referred to an on-going group ... see below.)
11. Ask the key questions:

**What will we do with the
outcomes of the day?**

How will we follow these up?

**Do we need to set up some on-going group of students
on the proposals,
to keep these ideas going?**

12. If there is general agreement to this proposal (maybe even propose this formally and ask each school if it will support the

idea), ask each school to then nominate one or two (or more) people to form an 'interim network committee'. Each Student Council might have to take the idea back to its next meeting to formally decide whether to be part of it. This small group meets briefly to set a meeting time. Swap names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses.

13. Set a meeting date for the first network group to meet, perhaps about two weeks away. One school (it'd be good if it were a different one) offers to host, convene and chair the meeting (and send out reminders). Work out a suitable time: perhaps about 4 pm (but this depends on transport).
14. At this meeting talk about **why** you want a local network, and **what** it could do (see ideas on the previous page). How will you work? Who will be involved?
15. Ask each school to formally appoint network liaison persons who will come to meetings or keep in touch.
16. Set a meeting and task schedule for the group. There will be things to follow up from the training day and cluster meeting can also be extended: make a day of it and hold seminars based around common problems and struggles an SRC faces.
17. Identify people who can help you organise - by sending out notices, organising a place to meet, assisting with transport.
18. Start organising another training day - say in 4 to 6 months - to report back on what was decided, what has been done etc.
19. Set up some communication links with the schools e.g. a local Student Council newsletter, to keep all schools in touch with what's happening.
20. Look for other local networks and make contact with them so that you can link up on a wider level and share your experiences. If Student Councils can help each other, so can local Student Networks!

Roger Holdsworth with Chris Varney and Teigan Leonard

Network Day: A Possible Program Outline

- 9.30 **Welcome** and intentions of the day; housekeeping
- 9.40 'Meeting each other' **activity**
- 10.00 **Sharing Information** about what's happening in the Student Councils:
each school presents a brief report
- 10.30 *Break*
- 10.50 Defining the important **issues** (for future meetings): *schools suggest topics and the group decides on the main ones*
- 11.30 **Workshop session 1**: *On topics previously suggested by schools: discussion/decision*

- 12.15 Lunch
- 1.00 **Keynote Speaker:**
"A Challenge to Student Councils"
- 1.30 **Workshop session 2:**
Repeat the topics or new ones e.g. skills
- 2.15 **Action Proposals** from Workshops
(plenary session)
- 2.45 **Thanks and next steps;** evaluation of the day
- 3.0 Close

Student Network Stories

Here are two examples of local student networks that have operated in the past:

Western Region Student Network

Student representatives from many of the secondary schools in Melbourne's western region met regularly for several years. Each meeting was hosted by a different school, with another school acting as secretary for the meeting and then sending out minutes and the invitation for the next meeting - that they hosted. They were supported by workers from the local Education Centre, who assisted with mailings and arranging transport.

Meetings usually went for 1-2 hours, about once a month, after school. Each school reported on what the SRC (or other groups) had been doing, what difficulties had been met and asked for ideas and support. In one case, the Student Network wrote to a School Council at one of the schools, in support of the SRC at that school, until a satisfactory outcome was achieved. At other meetings, students asked Education Department and others to attend to provide information about programs.

The students decided that Network meetings would be entirely student-run, with non-students only allowed to speak at the request of the meeting, and then for a maximum of three minutes.

SOS

Students at secondary schools in Shepparton set up a group called Students of Shepparton (SOS). (There were several other local groups in the Region: like the Student Network of Wodonga - SNOW, and the Student Network of Ovens-King - SNOOK.)

These met at training days, with an executive that organised the days and kept in contact. They had support from Curriculum Consultants at the Regional Office. The group was also asked to represent students on local boards and committees.

Originally in *Connect* 142, August 2003

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.