

The importance of student councils in schools and colleges

A Ayaz Kader

A few months ago, students from various public universities voted in new student bodies after a long hiatus. A body to act as a voice for the students, it also teaches students democratic values, such as accountability and leadership skills. However, apart from universities, the majority of schools and colleges in this country lack a body where students can make their voices heard.

Many might ask, what's the point behind introducing democratic processes to children at such an early age? Most democracies have their voting age set at around 18. Therefore, it is important that students be exposed to democratic processes and institutions well before that age in order to ensure awareness and civic responsibility.

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One of the most fundamental misunderstandings of democracy is that you just vote, and the person who wins the majority is automatically the sovereign. This perspective ignores the nuanced structure of democracy, which ensures separation and limitation of powers, respect of basic fundamental rights, rule of law and accountability. Therefore, it's imperative to ensure students are familiarised with these concepts practically rather than theoretically at an early age.

Besides that, due to the nature and structure of most schools, it's difficult for a student to have their concerns and ideas heard, especially by the administration. A student council serves to bridge this gap. This is important because teachers generally address the macro issues, so they do not have the time to address the micro student issues. Hence, students may feel alienated from their teachers.

When students actively negotiate with their institution's administration for their demands, it can teach them how to engage in dialogues on the basis of mutual respect. A democratic society must be preceded by the recognition of the fact that differences of opinion might exist, and they're natural, and it's the responsibility of all stakeholders to solve the conflicts considerately and reach compromises in a respectful manner.

Student councils serve exactly that purpose in this case.

When asked how the council at her school benefitted the student body, Anaya Zoya Chowdhury, a head girl at Glenrich International School, argues, "The council ensures students have a voice in school decisions. By structuring duties, maintaining daily checklists, and holding monthly meetings with the principal, we help bridge communication between students and teachers." She thinks that small steps like these encourage participation, make students feel heard, and lay the foundation for student-led initiatives that benefit everyone.





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Subrata Sutradhar, a teacher at South Breeze School, explaining why his school ratified an election, states, “The school wanted to let the council show responsibility and honesty, and also create a communication bridge between the administration and the students. We also want them to prioritise student interests and represent them in front of the school administration.” By getting students accustomed to the proceedings of democracy, schools, in turn, instil values of a responsible citizen.

Councils can also fill the gap in holding activities. The council can plan and arrange whatever is required for events, suited to the needs of the students participating. Kathleen Dhar, the former president of Holy Cross College, said the council in her school “executed most of the big tasks, like planning for rag day and other events.”

Similarly, Anaya Chowdhury believes that student councils are best positioned to promote more student-led initiatives and clubs. She explains, “These opportunities allow students to explore interests, develop leadership, collaborate with peers, and face their fears—as I did by joining Model United Nations (MUN) this year.”

How it might play out

Once the school administration decides to greenlight an election, campaigning will soon start. In this stage, students who are standing up for the election will learn the necessary skills in advocacy and debate when campaigning for their candidacy.

Students who will vote will have questions and therefore raise their queries to the candidates who are planning to represent them. Therefore, they will develop the skills necessary to make a clear judgment and single out the most qualified candidate.

Schools with newspaper clubs will benefit the most, as students of the club can contribute directly to the election process by reporting on all the election-related news and therefore help students cast an informed vote.

Once voting day arrives, students can be familiarised with how votes are carried out and counted. After the voting is over, volunteers can act as observers in the counting process to ensure the election is both free and fair.

After the results are declared and the council is established, the members will benefit the most from the skills they acquire over time. They have to regularly sit with others and discuss their agenda and take action. Besides, they will also have to listen to their voters, the students, to understand their demands and work on them, thereby honing their leadership skills. If their voters perceive that they’re not doing their job properly, they will have to face criticism and accountability.



Illustration: Azra Humayra

Ishraq Azmaeen, the president-elect of the South Breeze School Student Council, explains what prompted him to stand in the elections: “I decided to stand for presidency because I believed every student had the right to be heard. Oftentimes, teachers are dismissive of students who require assistance outside of academics and are unfair to students who aren’t the brightest in terms of studies.” He has now pledged to host events and start clubs so that his school can focus on extracurriculars as well as academics.

One of the main jobs of council members will be using their creativity and problem-solving skills for the welfare of students. This sentiment is shared by Subrata Sutradhar, who says, “We wanted to give our students a platform so they could express ideas, develop leadership skills, engage in the democratic process of decision-making and also make use of their creativity.”

Anaya Chowdhury explained that being the head girl has strengthened her public speaking and confidence. She exemplifies this by stating, “Organising prefect duties, setting routines, and planning initiatives like the SAT Prep Club and the Math Club have taught me leadership, time management, and teamwork.”

What to look out for

Although an election might sound very festive, arranging one might not be so straightforward. Zaim, who organised the South Breeze School student council election, states, “The process of arranging a student council election is always a very difficult endeavour. Yet, we managed to have a free and fair election.” It’s very important to watch out for the proper execution of the election, or the future legitimacy of the council may be questioned due to a lack of interest or trust.

Besides, in many schools, councils may not be fully effective in promoting student interest due to limited agency. The councils may be subject to undue administrative control, hampering their independence and efficacy. Kathleen Dhar states, “I wouldn’t say the student council did much to benefit the students in my institution because mostly the student council followed orders from the administration.”

Thus, it is important for a student council system in a school to have the proper checks and balances that normally exist in different branches of power in a democracy. Or else the council risks turning into an ineffective medium which exists solely on paper but has no presence in practicality in improving student welfare.



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