

How to Make Your School Council Work

Unless your principal is Emperor Hirohito, that is.....

By Malkin Dare

School councils are springing up everywhere these days. In most cases, these councils have been given only *advisory* powers — which means, obviously, that principals can choose not to take their advice. The bottom line in this scenario is that the council is at the mercy of its principal. If you are lucky enough to have Thomas Jefferson for your principal, then the following pointers may be helpful. If, on the other hand, your principal is Emperor Hirohito, then you are wasting your time.

If Emperor Hirohito oversaw the inauguration of your school council, you probably have the misfortune of sitting on a council which is loaded with hot dog mommas and teachers' spouses. My advice to you is to resign. Topics such as standardized testing, academic excellence and teaching methods, will never find their way on to the agenda. You are doomed to endless discussions of the colour of the bunting in the school gym.

If, however, Thomas Jefferson was at the helm, it is possible that your school council is made up of an assortment of open-minded individuals. For the purposes of this article, let's assume that Mr. Jefferson has gone out of his way to encourage high-quality parents to seek election to the school council and he has been scrupulous about observing democratic principles. After giving all the candidates a chance to make their views known, he staged a proper election — advance polls, electoral lists, scrutineers, the lot. You are delighted to have received more votes than anyone else, and this you attribute to your emphasis on basic skills and high academic standards.

If, for some reason, you are not elected chair of your council, may I recommend that you volunteer to become the secretary? Because it's a job which most people avoid, your offer will probably be accepted with open

arms. Next to the chair, the secretary can be the most influential member, *because the secretary writes the minutes*. Nuances, loose ends, indecision — all are grist to your mill as you carve in stone your version of what was decided (as opposed to what the principal thinks should have been decided — after the fact).

Fast forward to the school council's fourth meeting. The sub-committees have just made their reports, and the curriculum committee (of which you are the chair) is recommending some major initiatives. They are:

- A curriculum night each September where parents are briefed by their children's teachers about such things as the year's texts, themes and trips, along with a written handout listing the grade's curriculum objectives;
- A series of public meetings featuring expert speakers on proven teaching methods;
- An essay competition;
- Standardized testing; and
- Report cards which include marks.

Let's assume that your silver tongue is enough to get these recommendations accepted by the school council. What now? Even Thomas Jefferson is going to blanch at the prospect. "Democracy is all very well," he is thinking to himself, "but this is ridiculous."

So that there will be no misunderstandings, you draw up detailed recommendations, including suggested timelines. This report is duly presented to Mr. Jefferson with a request that he respond in writing by a given date. (Perhaps you could work out a mutually-agreeable date with Mr. Jefferson beforehand).

I don't want to shock you, but I would be remiss if I didn't point out that Mr. Jefferson might be tempted to miss his deadline. In fact, I would go so far as

to say that he might prefer never to respond at all.

And so, just to help him stay focused, this would probably be a great time to update the community on your activities. Why not ask the publicity committee to put out a newsletter? Interspersed with the usual announcements, you could sprinkle various bulletins such as the curriculum committee's recommendations and the date when Mr. Jefferson will be responding. You might also include reports on how the school's discretionary and PTA funds are being spent, the school's results on recent testing or in competitions, enrolment over the years, and statistics on pupil and teacher attendance.

Another good idea would be to poll the community on various matters, including their reactions to the curriculum committee's suggestions. You might also want to consider holding a general meeting of the community to get feedback on your activities to date and to seek guidance as to your future direction.

I have the sinking feeling that by now many of my readers have concluded that I am hopelessly pessimistic and cynical about the resistance which school councils are going to encounter. All I can say to my critics is: please, go ahead and try it your way. And if it works, then hey! That's wonderful.

I would expect sweetness and light to work in a tiny minority of schools — say, one percent. In other schools — say 49% — nothing will work. Which leaves roughly 50% of schools where my suggestions may come in handy. Which category does your school belong to?

(Mrs. Dare is the former secretary of a spectacularly unsuccessful curriculum committee.)