



NUSS
National Union of
School Students

Student Democracy in Schools

Guide to a Representative School Council

Part 1: Design

Setting up a Student Council

You may already have a student council set up, or you may be starting from scratch. School councils are currently a [statutory requirement in Wales](#), and around 95% of schools already have one in place. Either way, 'Part 1: Design' should help you to consider the **most effective** way for your school/college to bring student voice into its day-to-day running.

The aim is to create an efficient channel for communication with students with **real influence** on the school/college and its decision-making processes, rather than a tokenistic sounding board. You could also **combine** more than one system to maximise the impact of student voice across various areas.

Whichever is chosen, students should have genuine autonomy, staff support, and a **regular meeting with the Headteacher/Principal** to ensure direct collaboration with those in power.

Why have student representatives?

The people making decisions in schools and colleges are usually senior staff, who can only bring one perspective. Student representation widens this perspective, specifically including the educational experience you offer, resulting in more sustainable and solution-focused decisions.

The process also gives an insight into problems and issues that are affecting students, so you are able to fix them before they become bigger problems.

How to get started

Who?

Which classes/cohorts will you elect reps from?

How many?

Represent as many groups as possible, while ensuring you have time to meet with all reps productively and elections can be conducted democratically.

How often?

Tailor to your school calendar.

- Meet at least every half term to set out upcoming priorities
- Be available for ad-hoc support
- Smaller project/working groups

Meetings

Decide on your own structure.

- Set questions for each meeting
- No agenda at all
- Space for both staff questions and student-led feedback

Roles

Ask students about their interests and favourite subjects.
You could assign chair, secretary, treasurer roles or just identify an area for each member to focus on.

Training

Elected reps should understand what to expect from meetings and receive meeting dates as far in advance as possible.

It's really important to have elections for all your reps (even if there is only one candidate). This is all about accountability and making sure students know who is representing them, as well as showing that the institution is taking it seriously. It will often be the first time a student has been asked to vote for anyone so it's really paramount that the process is run democratically.

Remember, the role of staff is to guide and support student representatives, not to lead. Setting up efficient systems early in the year will benefit pupils, create more meaningful change, and reduce your to-do list in the long term.

Levelling up your Student Democracy

Once you're confident in your student rep system, you can choose to formalise the group to have more stake in the management of your school or college.

When deciding which system to create, you should consider things like the size, type and structure of your school/college, and how these impact your communication channels and decision-making processes, but also the skills and leadership opportunities that each would provide to your students.

There are 3 main ways to level up a student voice group:

Youth Advisory Board

A Youth Advisory Board may have a similar framework to a traditional school council, but with more responsibility for accountability, development and strategy, perhaps including formal committee roles like Chair, Secretary and Treasurer.

Officers with Portfolios

Taking inspiration from the university students' union model, some schools may choose to advertise specific portfolio roles to focus on specific areas of work. These could be roles like Activities Officer and Sustainability Officer, or could represent liberation groups e.g. Women's Officer, BAME Officer, LGBT+ Officer.

Student Governors

Students elected to your governing body to represent the views of the school/college's primary stakeholders – the learners. Their presence ensures that learner voices are heard in decision-making processes at the highest level. They usually serve for 1 year and have equal voting rights to other governors, except in some discussions e.g. senior staff pay and employment matters.

Youth Advisory Board

Many charities, businesses and even government departments have set up Youth Advisory Boards to offer a different perspective on strategic decisions, keep management accountable and oversee ongoing development. Senior staff will often present plans to the advisory board for comments, suggestions or approval.

How could this apply to schools/colleges?



Accountability

Ensuring the school/college is meeting the needs of students, managing the institution fairly and showing full transparency

Strategy



Contributing to wider strategy to promote high-quality education, wellbeing, and sustainability in the school/college's wider plans

Development



Advocating for student priorities in the school or college's future plans and making suggestions for development areas

Finance



Once trust is established, overseeing budgetary decisions to ensure they align with the school's values and priorities

Formalised school councils like a Youth Advisory Board could also use an annual schedule or objectives tracker to maximise the efficiency of your collaborative efforts.

Goal	Who is responsible?	Due date	Status
Run elections	Ms Smith	April	On track
Student survey	Mr Ali	October	Not started

Officers with Portfolios

Having dedicated officers with different portfolios (themes) can make sure the school council is as representative of different student views as possible. Officers have their own area of work within the council – making change in your school, MAT or at a national level.

The type of officer positions and the number of officer positions you have will vary based on your school's needs. Some example officer positions are below:

- President
- Education Officer
- Activities Officer (sports and clubs)
- Wellbeing Officer
- Sustainability Officer
- Qualification type officers
 - KS3, KS4, FE
 - A Levels/Highers, T Levels/V Levels, Apprenticeships
- Liberation Officer (representing students with protected characteristics)
 - BAME Officer, Women's Officer, LGBT+ Officer
- Any other role that represents a group of students or a project focus at your school.

Identifying the roles needed in your officer team



Start with a blank piece of paper. You are designing officer roles that will cover all the types of work that students want from their student council, as well as enough diversity to attract a wide variety of student leaders.



Speak to your students to gather views on what they want their student council to do. Ask them specifically what roles would attract them to run in an election.



Once you have a good number of suggestions write them all down and look for gaps.

- Do the roles you have allow for good levels of diversity?
- Do they cover the work of the student council?
- Will the group of officers be representative of as many students as possible?
- Is the number of roles proportionate to the size of your school/college?



Once you have a list of officer roles, you can start setting up your elections process.

Once your first officer team has been elected, continue to regularly evaluate these roles as part of your quality assurance process, including the views of current officers and the student body.

Evaluate whether roles with clearly defined remits are more effective for your school council than generalised reps that cover the whole school.

Student Governors

Appointing 1-2 members of your student council as members of your governing body is a great way to incorporate student leadership at all levels of your school/college. Having a position at the highest level of school management means that students can ensure their suggestions and work are heard and considered more **directly** and **effectively**, reducing the levels of bureaucracy between your student leaders and decision-makers.

The Code of Good Governance for Colleges in Wales advises the elected appointment of student governors to all Welsh colleges. **Most colleges in Wales have at least 2 student governors** as part of a student voice system.

Responsibilities of student governors could include:

- **Representing the student body** by gathering their concerns, needs and aspirations, actively listening and communicating these to the board.
- Meaningfully participating in **board meetings and decision-making**, including the school's strategic plan, financial matters and policies.
- Ensuring **accountability and transparency**, including engaging students with governors.
- Maintaining **confidentiality and ethical standards**, with integrity and professionalism.

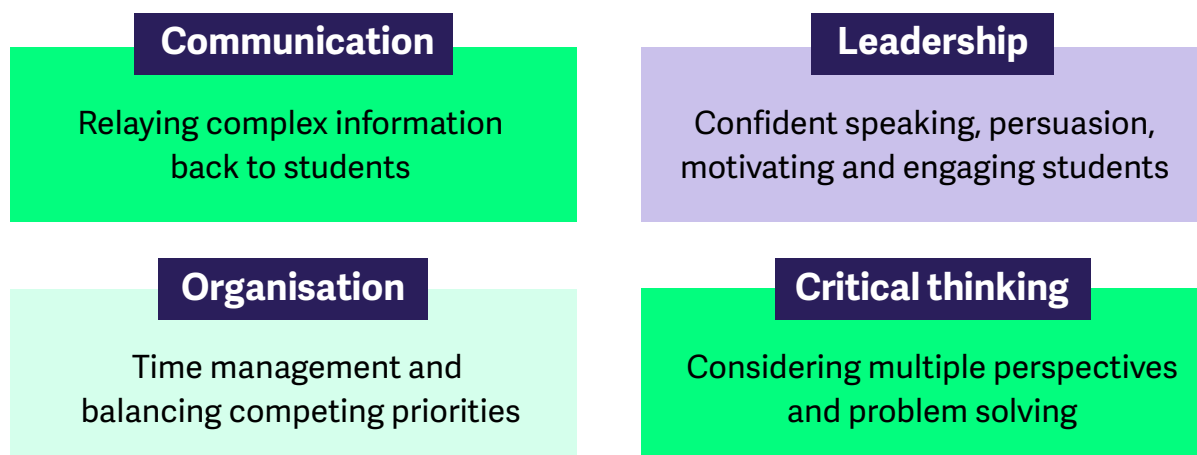
While student governors often serve a shorter, 1-year term than other governors and may be asked to leave the room for extra-sensitive discussions like senior staff pay and employment matters, their voting rights are usually equal in all other areas.

Challenges and supporting student governors to succeed

Student governors face several key **challenges**, including skills gaps, balancing academic and governance responsibilities, navigating power dynamics, and representing diverse student interests. To be effective in their roles, they need support through **training, mentorship, and resources**.

Student governors need to know **how a board of governors operates**, the norms, expectations and terminology of a committee, e.g. 'AOB', 'chair' and 'minutes'. They will need to comprehend and be able to interpret the school's **strategic plan, financial reports and policies**, and understand their **legal and ethical responsibilities**.

They will also require help building professional skills:



Additional support could include:

- Discussing power dynamics with other governors to consider how a board meeting might be overwhelming for a student governor.
- Mentoring & peer support to help students navigate complex issues.
- Wellbeing support - providing a single point of contact, mental health & stress management resources and encouraging work-life balance.
- Networking opportunities - engaging with student governors/ reps from other schools.