



NUSS
National Union of
School Students

Student Democracy in Schools

Guide to a Representative School Council

Part 3: Democracy and Inclusion

Now you have a framework for your governance system and elections, the work begins to make your school council more impactful and truly representative. Part 3: Democracy and Inclusion provides a guide to facilitating an efficient, productive student council as well as **democratic best practices** and meaningfully targeting **underrepresented groups**.

Your school council should follow some basic democratic principles:

1

Student reps are named, recognised and actively consulted by the student body.

Make a **display board** with your student reps' names and photos. Create opportunities for them to speak to the wider student body, by leading an **assembly** or holding a regular **surgery** at break time. As well as facilitating better communication, having identifiable reps will generate interest in democratic participation.

2

The council has clear aims/objectives which they strive to meet.

Encourage students to deliver their goals by creating an **agenda** for each meeting to keep discussions on track, including scheduling the next meeting. These could be fixed at the beginning of the year, or as you go. Take detailed notes and **remind** your student council of their aims throughout the year, offering suggested avenues like meeting the caterer, headteacher, or site manager, or emailing their MP/MS/MSP.

3

Staff have respect for student autonomy.

Students should be able to organise activities and **express views freely**, as long as they show responsibility, acting within your setting's policies and the law regarding harassment and discrimination. This includes openly disagreeing with the school when called for. Try to manage communications carefully without silencing student voice.

4

Student reps have a genuine role in decision making.

Using a student council to come up with ideas without a real stake in management is **tokenistic, not democratic**. Student leaders should be driving change at an institutional level and course level. Set up regular meetings with your headteacher or SLT and ensure they **meaningfully consider** all student feedback, implementing **real change** at every possible opportunity.

5

Progress is tracked and communicated effectively to students and staff.

Monitor student participation, action and change, **showcasing** the impact of student voice. This could include regular votes, actions taken, and student reflections, which you could report on during staff briefings, governor meetings, and Ofsted / Estyn / HMIE inspections. Students could form a **communications working group** to make their work visible through assemblies, newsletters, social media or display boards.

Governance & Democracy Best Practice Bingo!

Check how democratic your student council is with this best practice bingo. Some areas of the toolkit are more advanced than others, so you can make ongoing improvements over time.

They fall into 4 main themes: **accountability**, **decision making**, **support**, and **processes**. See if you can get a line, or even a full house!

Accountability	Staff recognise that the student council is autonomous and accountable only to student priorities	Processes are open and transparent , publishing plans and meeting minutes when possible	Council reports back to students using ' you said, we did ' so students can hold them to account
Decision making	Student reps have access to all information needed to make informed decisions	It is clear which student officer or group is responsible for which decisions	Students not in the council are able to feed into council and school decisions
Support	The school/college provides support , advice and mentoring to enable student reps to deliver and develop as leaders	Quality handovers are given every year between each cohort of student council	The student council collaborates with and learns from other student councils, locally and/or through the NUSS
Processes	There is a process for gathering and evaluating student opinion and resolving conflicts or contradictions	There is an appropriate process for complaints and appeals	Official election reports are given to senior staff to ensure that elections are fairly conducted

Widening Participation in Student Democracy & Candidate Nominations

If you're finding that your student council is not representative of your student population, take some time to evaluate why. This could be a lack of representation across demographic (race, gender, household income, age group), type of course or even personality type.

Many student councils are dominated by confident, high-attaining students, leaving out those who are quieter, less confident or from disadvantaged backgrounds. Try to find different avenues for student participation, not just through elections, but through regular classroom votes, surveys and discussions.



Barriers to nomination

Often, the groups underrepresented in leadership positions are racialised students, women, and those from low-income backgrounds.

Ask for staff and student feedback on their barriers to entry. You could even develop an inclusivity audit: just as SOS UK developed the [RACE Report](#) to monitor racial diversity in the environmental sector, you could create an EDI survey to identify which groups are represented in your student leadership, and why.

Barriers suggested by racialised students at colleges and universities included:

- Feelings that they didn't feel good enough against their white peers and that there was a **lack of self-confidence**, among other personal barriers, with one student adding that they often faced barriers in seeking out or seizing opportunities.
- **Current lack of diversity** may create a cycle of exclusion, acting as a barrier for some racialised students to taking leadership positions.
- Underrepresentation of clubs, activities and interests led by racialised students and staff in the institution's **newsletters** and **social media** posts meant students felt their voice wasn't being heard or didn't matter.

Supporting underrepresented students to stand for election

There are lots of things you can do to build self-confidence within underrepresented groups by demonstrating that their voices are valuable and important. Again, ask for input and tailor approaches that work for your setting. These might include:

- **Leadership events** directed at your target groups, e.g. leadership conference - invite inspiring speakers, celebrate success stories, share opportunities, and discuss barriers to entry. Implement learnings from this event.
- Set up or support students to set up **liberation groups/clubs** to engage marginalised students through social activities and campaigns they're already interested in.
- Create an **inclusivity campaign**, e.g. celebrating and understanding the challenges of a different liberation theme each month, through social media, workshops and events.

Of course, when it comes to election season, student nominations should be open to everyone. But offering tailored support to break down barriers for some groups is important to ensure that your student council is truly representative of your student body. This could include:

- Dedicated '**Thinking of Standing**' sessions for underrepresented students to ask questions and get more information, campaigning tips and peer encouragement
- Targeted election **marketing** to specific groups and demographics

Remember, many school students may appear apathetic if they've never experienced an election before, so they may need a lot of proactive encouragement. **With votes at 16 around the corner, it's your responsibility to generate interest and participation in democracy.**

The key part is to embed inclusive principles into the **everyday ethos and actions** of your school/college, in every department. If girls feel like they're weaker than boys because they're not allowed to play the same sports, they may assume they're not cut out for leadership. If some racialised groups receive more exclusions than white students, they may feel a lack of belonging. If young carers often miss morning assemblies, how could you promote the election in other ways, and support them in managing multiple responsibilities? If the school is lacking inclusive representation generally, it isn't realistic to expect elections to be representative unless holistic work is undertaken.

