

## **The Attributes of Effective District Student Leadership Councils**

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Schools and school districts have traditionally offered few entry points for authentic student involvement in educational reform. Traditional student groups, such as school student councils, tend to be “event coordinators” that organize school dances, fundraising and spirit days; they are seldom asked to participate in the reform dialogue between teachers, parents and administrators. Reed (1998) noted that adults seem to view education and schooling as something we do to students, rather than with them. By minimizing student voice, we squander the expertise that students have for the reality of schooling experience, while we simultaneously convey to them the adult ownership of the responsibility for that experience. Some school districts have attempted to address this lack of student voice by founding a district student leadership council (DSLCL). Although there are few school districts that have a DSLCL, these rare organizations offer their school districts a process for supporting an authentic student voice and for involving students in the reform dialogue.

There are many reasons to believe that engaging students in school governance has positive effects for student achievement, but the growing body of literature on educational leadership tends to focus on the role of formal administrators and seldom recognizes a role for student leadership (Wallin, 2003, Mitra, 2004). Very little is known about the district council attributes that might increase the effectiveness of student voice. The purpose of this study was to discover the structural and relational attributes that enhance the effectiveness of district-wide student-led organizations. Structural attributes are the district council features that are directly connected to policies and practice of the school district and the district student council. Examples include a district student council constitution, formal goals, formal roles and responsibilities, and communication systems. Relational attributes are the social connections that arise between the participants, and include the quality of the student-to-student and student-to-adult relationships. The specific questions addressed by the research were:

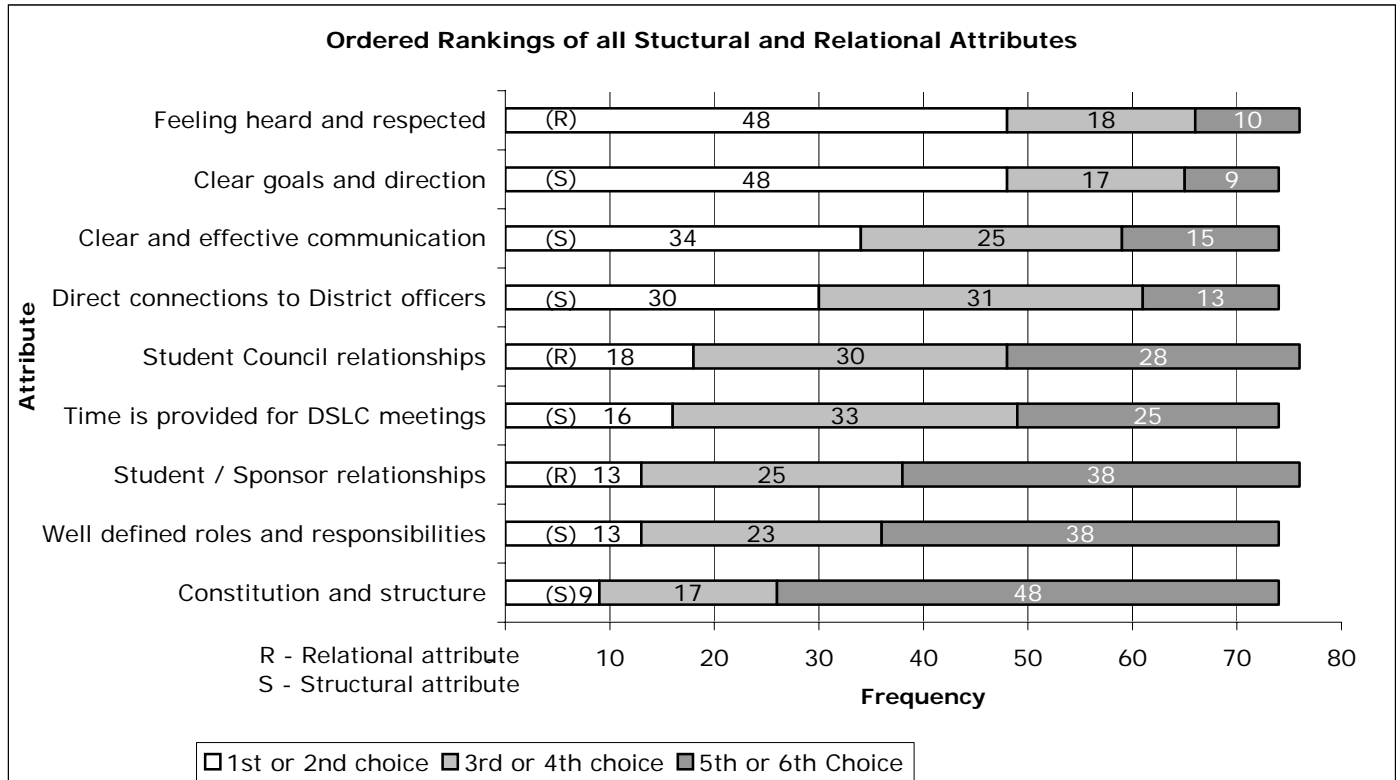
1. What are the most important structural and relational attributes of an effective district student leadership council?
2. What are the potential impediments to launching an effective district student leadership council?

This paper is based upon research completed for a graduating paper by the authors (Brown, Pearse & Wilson, 2005). The research looked at district student leadership councils located in three Lower Mainland school districts: Coquitlam, West Vancouver and North Vancouver during the winter of 2005. Student and adult members of each district council completed questionnaires, and adult sponsors participated in one-hour interviews. The closed form section of the questionnaires asked respondents to rank order a supplied set of attributes of effective district student councils. The open form section of the questionnaire asked them to supply their own set of important attributes.

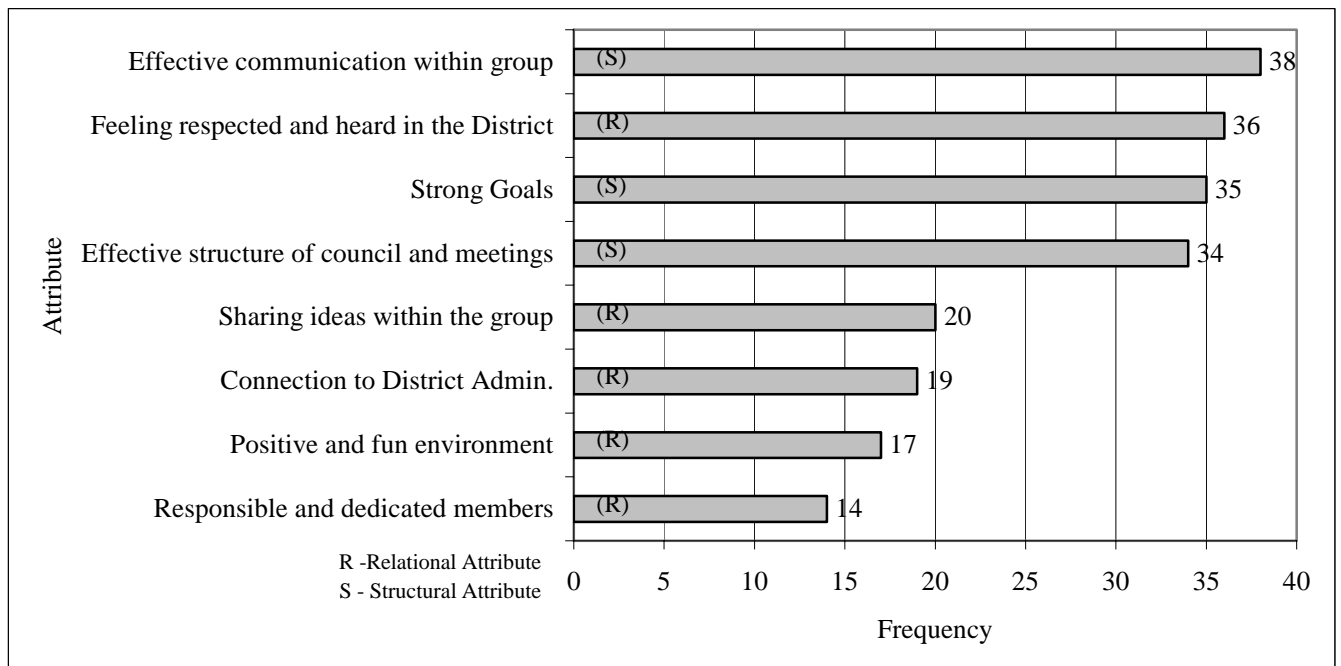
When asked to rank-order a set of supplied attributes of district student councils the respondents reported that feeling heard and respected was the most important attribute, followed closely by clear goals and direction, effective communication, and direct connections to district administrators (Figure 1). When free to provide their own set of attributes, respondents identified communication most frequently, followed by feeling heard and respected, strong council goals, and structured meetings (Figure 2). These findings were substantiated during all of the interviews.

Respondents also reported that instances of district council ineffectiveness were directly related to the lack of one or more of the positive attributes listed above. Using the results from the research, and findings from literature (Mitra, 2004; Reed, 1998; Wallin, 2003; Smith, 2003), the authors generated several conclusions and recommendations.

**Figure 1: Structural and Relational Attributes Importance for DSLC Effectiveness – Closed Form**



**Figure 2: Frequency of Responses Generated by Respondents – Open Form Questionnaire**



## Conclusions

There were three primary conclusions that relate to the structural attributes of council effectiveness. The first is that clear and explicit goals are strongly associated with District Student Leadership Councils' effectiveness. This conclusion is strongly supported by both the qualitative and quantitative data from all three school districts. Forty-eight of 76 respondents (63%) ranked “clear goals and a sense of direction” as either the first or second most important attribute in the closed form portion of the questionnaire (Figure 1), and it was the second most frequent structural attribute provided in the open form section (Figure 2). All interview subjects spoke of the critical need for council goals as a “work plan” or a “map of the year”.

The second conclusion that relates to structural attributes is that structured and scheduled council meetings, with clear agendas, enhance the effectiveness of the District Student Leadership Council. Council members, and their adult sponsors, valued the structure provided by published agendas, minutes of meetings, and the guarantee of an opportunity to speak. The category of “structured and scheduled meetings” was the fourth most frequent attribute recorded in the open form portion of the questionnaire, and a frequent theme in interviews. Responses included multiple references for the need for a “clear agenda and sticking to it”, and “organized effective meetings.”

The third conclusion regarding structural attributes is that District Student Leadership Council members associate effective communication with council effectiveness. DSLC members placed a high value on access to communication structures that allowed information to move between adults and students between meetings. For instance, communication was the second highest rated structural attribute in the closed form portion of the questionnaire, with forty-five percent (45%) of respondents rating it first or second. Efficient and effective communication was the most frequently listed attribute in the open form section, with sixty-three percent (63%) of respondents naming the attribute as important. All interview subjects spoke of the necessity for access to effective communication systems and referred to communication problems as an issue that hindered unsuccessful projects, noting that: “communication and dissemination of information is always a problem with the DSLC.”

The findings in the present study, and the literature, strongly support a conclusion that for the council to be effective, District Student Leadership Council members need to feel heard and respected within the school district. This attribute scored highest among the relational attributes identified in the present study, was the second most frequent response in the open form data, and a recurring theme throughout the literature on student leadership (Reed, 1998; Mitra, 2004; Wallin, 2003; Smith, 2003). Sixty-three percent (63%) of respondents ranked the need to feel heard and respected as the most important relational attribute affecting council effectiveness. A related attribute, “the ability to talk directly to decision makers,” was third among the structural attributes in the closed form section of the questionnaire. Thirty-six of 60 respondents (60%) that completed the open form portion of the questionnaire included the need for being respected and heard among their responses. Students need to feel that adults are respectful and interested in the opinions of district council members.

## Recommendations

Regarding the importance of District Student Leadership Council goals, school districts should consider requiring the council to submit their goals at the beginning of each school year, along with a summary of the resources required to achieve these goals. Council members could present to the board of trustees in September of each year, introduce themselves as the new executive, and outline

their list of objectives for the year. The inherent demands of this process would help to ensure that goals were formalized and validated.

Given the importance of structured meetings, District Student Leadership Councils should schedule all monthly meetings, publish agendas and publish meeting minutes. If district council meetings are scheduled well in advance, and with clear agendas that delineate the objectives for the meeting, it is likely that students will respond positively to the structure this provides. When district council members have prior knowledge of the purposes for the meeting they also have the opportunity to consider the issues and to formulate responses. Minutes from prior meetings provide a review of the issues addressed at the prior meeting and provide some continuity between consecutive meetings.

Regarding the importance of communication for District Student Leadership Council effectiveness, districts should provide communication tools and support DSLC websites. These communication tools could include email service and support, access to phones and fax machines, voice mail, notice boards, school announcements, meeting rooms, photocopying and interschool mail service. The district should provide the technical and other supports to allow the development and maintenance a DSLC website. This important link to all students, teachers, parents and administrators could provide the capability for communication between the district council and the general school population.

The remaining recommendations pertain to the need for DSLC members need to feel heard and respected within the school district. To address this need, trustees should bring issues to the District Student Leadership Council for their input, and permit DSLC presentations to the board. This two-way communication between the DSLC and the district leaders would demonstrate to the students that their voice is important and heard. Since these connections with trustees are likely to be sporadic, district administrators should attend District Student Leadership Council meetings on a regular basis, and be involved in the communication processes used by the district council. Having a district administrator attend DSLC meetings sends a consistent and predictable confirmation to students that adult decision makers are respectful of student council deliberations and opinions. This recommendation also addresses the conclusion regarding the need for effective communication. The council members need to feel both that there is effective communication between themselves and district administration, and that those administrators value what is being communicated. A consistent presence of district administrators addresses both of these issues.

Since the student members of the District Student Leadership Council also need to feel heard, respected and known in the school and general community, school districts should recognize and publicize those instances when district councils were able to have impact on district decisions. Public recognition of council effectiveness would be an authentic confirmation that the members are heard, respected and effective at promoting the interests of their peers. This public acknowledgement of district council effectiveness would also help to impede a backlash from disenchanted students, a potential that was observed by Smith (2003).

District student leadership councils offer school districts an opportunity for building and profiting from an effective and authentic student voice. Capitalizing on this opportunity will require effort to ensure that the district student council has structures in place that foster clear goals, well-organized meetings, effective communication between members and adults, and that relationships develop such that student directors feel heard and respected. There are clear benefits that arise from student involvement in school improvement, and these simple steps will help to ensure that school district are able to profit from student initiative and expertise.

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