

## **Inspiring students for ownership in education**

### **Jonathan Scott**

To succeed, students need to do more than pay attention in class. They need to flourish. We cannot be satisfied with any less. Although ‘engagement’ has recently become an educational buzz-word, creating engagement is not enough. We need to inspire a sense of ownership. If students do not feel they own their education – that they can open the horizons of their own futures – student engagement, as envisioned by the educational community, cannot exist.

Education is currently presented to students as a complete service package. Students receive (or have forced upon them) a package they had no say in constructing. The curriculum is made at the Ministry, the teacher is made at the teachers’ college, the classroom rules are made in the principal’s office, and the lesson plan is made in the teachers’ lounge. There is no place in this formula for inspiring students to create their own education. Even the classroom is made by someone else, built by an anonymous construction worker and cleaned by the janitorial staff. Students receive a complete package and are seen as the product – a product shaped by a system they have no say in constructing.

“We need to make changes and shift the paradigm from education for students to one of education belonging to students,” wrote former Ontario Student Trustees’ Association (OSTA) president Andrew Pawluch. This paradigm shift can occur in three ways: by including students in school decision-making processes, by ensuring that students have the opportunity to express their opinions about the way schools are run, and by creating school communities that are symbiotic.

## **Practising Democracy**

We’ve all encountered it in some way, whether through personal experience, as a TV show plot, or in a novel. It’s the stereotypical authoritarian principal, the type of school leader who creates a climate that seems to say, “School is not the place to have an opinion. Students’ opinions don’t matter.” While on rare occasions students can use the suppression of their opinions as a catalyst for action, a comparative international study of civics education undertaken more than 30 years ago showed that, on average, “more knowledgeable, less authoritarian, and more interested students came from schools where they were encouraged to have free discussion and express their opinions.” Yet, as Judith Torney-Purta points out, decades later, “Much so-called democracy in school has remained superficial with little impact on student life. Some argue that the current implicit curriculum may contribute more to alienation than to a sense of competence in participatory decision making”.

This reality is in stark contrast to the recognition that real-life, contextual lessons in civics, in decision-making, and in leadership are more valuable – and more realistic – than textbook questions. Relying on social studies or civics courses to present information about democracy is inadequate because democracy is more than an historical fact or a political concept; it is a reality, a way of living. In other words, for a conceptualization of civics to be real for students, they need to experience a school community that is a reflection of civil society’s ideals – or, as Carole Hahn writes, we need schools where students “experience democratic dialogue and open inquiry”.

Perhaps the best way to create this experiential form of civic education is to create student ownership in education.

Traditional students’ councils are one venue in which students can be empowered to contribute to and gain ownership of their schools. In Britain, School Councils UK seeks to help create democracy in education by forging strong student leadership teams. If they are seriously interested in empowering students, Canadian ministries should explore creating a similar programme. The Ontario Ministry’s Speak Up program for funding student council projects is a welcome move in this direction.

To promote genuine student ownership, student government organs need to be truly representative, elected by the student body, and charged with acting not merely as the providers of dances and hat days, but as the forum for the student voice to be communicated to the principal and superintendents on matters of social and educational substance.

Such communication and dialogue are keys to effective participatory democracy, but to be truly effective they need to take place in a receptive environment in which principals make a habit of consulting with student councils, and student councils make a habit of consulting with students; it is imperative that these consultations reach the entire student body.

This consultation should be fostered from the board itself, with the superintendent supporting a culture of open communication, making it clear that she wants to know what her pupils are thinking and feeling about their schools. To be successful, such a culture needs to be supported by a consultative framework that promotes free dialogue between students and adults in each school board.

The scope for consulting students – letting them into the conversations on key decisions – is broad. Student committees can be struck to advise guidance offices on what courses should be

offered; student athletic committees can help to run sports tournaments; students can help set school policies. They can, in short, be empowered to help run their schools. What is important, ultimately, is to involve them in the decisions made at school and at the school board, including those that affect them most, like choosing school leaders.

The think tank People for Education has suggested that the community has a role to play in hiring a principal. If this is carried to its logical conclusion, community involvement should include students. If students are to be accountable to their principal for scholastic effort and behaviour, it is only logical to assume that they have the right to a principal who is accountable to their best interests – a ‘servant leader’, who makes decisions that serve the needs of his or her students. The same symbiotic culture of accountability should exist between students and superintendents and between students and teachers; each person in a school system is accountable to each other person, in a true circle of community. Because schools have not traditionally operated in this way, the relationships that make up this circle need to be formally established.

### **Listening to All Students**

This culture of mutual accountability is easier to prescribe than to accomplish, particularly at the student-consultation level. Too often, student councils have become hierarchal in a way that disconnects the engaged (or ‘elite’) student council member from the disengaged (or ‘regular’) student. This disconnect is, of course, not isolated to student government; indeed, it is the challenge of all forms of representation democracy: How representative is ‘representative’ democracy, really? Because of the real concerns inherent in this question, democratic systems in schools cannot be the only method for creating student ownership in education; staff *and student leaders* need to consult with *all* students.

This call for consultation has given rise to Ontario’s student trustees. Student trustees are elected by their peers to represent the student voice on Ontario’s school boards. Over the past nine years, under the advocacy of the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association (OSTA), that voice has been articulated by student representatives who have created advisory councils (student senates) at the school level to express the student vision for the school board. This empowerment of students in board decisions – both the individual elected as student trustee and those who sit on the representative student senate – is an effective way to involve students in education decision-making. However, because elected leaders and representatives can never represent their entire constituency, OSTA is working to create sinews of student consultation, beyond the student senate, to ensure the accountability of student trustees to the student voice.

The recently announced Ontario Minister's Student Advisory Committee is an interesting way to promote student ownership of education by bringing a student perspective directly to the minister; the real gem of the programme is a series of regional forums that will give many students the chance to speak up about their education. By linking to the programme to the student success departments in each high school, and by seeking to attract diversity in student membership (i.e. students of various socio-economic and academic levels, ethnicities, and engagement levels), the program will reach a variety of students with the message that their voice matters.

The program's shortcoming is that it could become a 'hit or miss', without the staying power of real change or the feeling of true ownership in education. Once the immediate sense of inclusion wears off, when the meeting with the Minister is over, disillusionment may return as the students begin to feel that the meeting represented a short vacation from the 'real world of school' where their voice 'doesn't matter'. My organization has suggested that the Ontario Ministry link these regional student voice forums back to already-existing student advisory committees (student senates) to ensure continuity and progress.

Schools and superintendents might also use the techniques of the forums in their own communities for a variety of purposes, including as an orientation for new students in high school.

### **Creating School Community**

Empowering students in decision-making is not merely about meetings with the principal, sitting at the school board table, or being consulted before a new school rule is applied, though these are important elements of ownership in education. To truly empower students, we need a fundamental shift away from the concept of education as a service adults provide *for* students to the concept of education *belonging* to students, as co-providers of the 'service package'. There is no reason, for example, that students should not be required to play a role in cleaning their schools. Too often, we see such tasks as cleaning erasers or scrapping gum off a desk being used as punishment, perpetuating the idea that service is something negative, to be avoided.

In fact, encouraging students to play a role in school cleaning could actually help to create niches, giving students ownership of parts of their classroom. One student could be in charge of stacking the library books, another in charge of keeping a clean blackboard, yet another tasked with organising the computer files. These simple tasks let students play to their strengths and

develop an attachment to their school that is a key first step in forging a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the tasks teach service and helpfulness, putting character education into action.

Indeed, this ability to inspire good character is one of the benefits of a school that teaches students that their opinions are valued. An inclusive school, one that values students' ideas and contributions, is one that is well positioned to create a positive school community. In such a school, all students are included – not in spite of, but ultimately because of, exceptionalities. We are stronger as a community through our differences; it is the duty and the gift of teachers that they can imaginatively welcome and nurture students' individuality in one community.

Extracurricular activities also play an invaluable role in building community. Students who are part of extracurricular activities feel an ownership of their education because they can practice their skills in a practical manner, free from the spectre of grades. The social aspect of student engagement is as important as the academic and decision-making aspects; experiential learning is crucial to education. At the heart of social engagement is the need for a deeper connection, a key element in developing a sense of ownership.

A school that values student leadership, opinion, and contribution establishes something of a social contract among all members of the school community. By promoting the concept of ownership in education, such schools can do much more than engage students in their studies; they can inspire them flourish – to become citizens who seek to improve the world around them.

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