

THE ROLE OF STUDENT GOVERNMENT
IN LEADERSHIP TRAINING

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The word democracy was taken from two Greek terms, "demos" and "kra-tein" meaning "people" and "rule" respectively, and the word as a whole has become so much a part of society that the basic forms of democracy are included with practically every action taken by the American public. This strong self-government has carried over to the training of young people in the schools. This has been an important move on the part of the American public because through it the youth will be educated in such a way that they will be able to provide the country with informed leadership. It has been the opinion of the writer that the student government in schools should be considered as in-service training in leadership to the youth of this country. This opinion has led to study of the potentialities of leadership training through student government.

Statement of Problem

There are few schools that do not have some form of student government. But quite often it is found that these student governments are not serving as real training grounds for future leaders. The writer has held the opinion that, although there is a strong belief in and love for self-government, practices in student governments often miss the opportunities of guiding youth in effective leadership development. With this in mind, there was the desire to find an answer to the following questions: Are the student governments of schools serving as laboratories for leadership training in the state of Montana?

The term student government as referred to in this study is defined as a school's student council with its relationship to student activities.

Procedure

Two procedures were used in the investigation. The first was a review of literature in which a study was made of what had been done in student government in various parts of the United States. The second was the use of a questionnaire which was sent to the administrators and student body presidents of the high schools in Montana.

Limitations of Study

In this investigation, the review of literature was made in the library at Montana State College. The questionnaire was sent to high school personnel in the state of Montana.

The development, organizations, and types of student governments are discussed in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER II

THE DEVELOPMENT, ORGANIZATION, AND TYPES OF STUDENT GOVERNMENTS

In discussing the development, organization, and types of student governments, it should be recognized and accepted that the primary function of the school is to turn out good citizens. Can student participation on student councils help meet these ends? To investigate the possibilities, it was necessary to review a brief history of student participation in educational programs of the past.

History

Student participation in school administration might be dated back long before the time of Plato, but the first definite descriptions date from the 4th century B.C., or during Plato's lifetime.

In 386 B.C., he gathered a group of young philosophers around him and established his 'Academy,' a unique institution in which the teachers and students together owned and operated the school's property, chapel, library, lecture and discussion rooms, and living quarters. In it the schoolarchs, or student leaders, were elected every ten days on secret ballot by the students themselves.¹

This school soon became the pattern for many other institutions established throughout Greece by Plato's followers and others and it existed for more than 900 years, until it was abolished by the Emperor Justinian in the 6th century A.D.

A period followed the decline of the Greek state in which the idea of student participation was non-existent until its revival in the 15th

¹Mc Kown, H. C., The Student Council, p. 1-2.

century A.D. when Da Feltre revived the idea in his "Joyful House" in Venice.² Trotzendorf of Germany continued the idea during the 16th century by organizing an elected student senate to administer various activities in his school. He also assigned the older and more competent students to help teach the younger.³ This idea was utilized during most of the 17th and 18th centuries by various educators too numerous to mention. During the 19th century, the monitorial school paved the way for inexpensive education because it made it possible for one paid teacher and several unpaid student 'monitors' to teach a reasonably large number of students.⁴ From these steps in history, the idea of student self-government really caught hold during the latter 19th and early 20th centuries, leading to a variety of organizational patterns.

Student Council Classifications

In the discussion of modern self-government in schools, the various types should be considered. Since no two school settings are exactly alike, it is reasonably safe to assume that no two student governments are carbon copies of one another. However, this does not mean that there isn't a great similarity in these student organizations.

According to Mc Kown, student councils may be classified on three bases: (1) source of membership, (2) responsibilities assigned or accepted, and (3) general structure or organization.⁵

²Mc Kown, Extracurricular Activities, p. 84.

³Encyclopedia Britannica, 22:501.

⁴Brubacker, J. S., A History of The Problems of Education, pp. 217, 218.

⁵Mc Kown, The Student Council, p. 10.

These in turn may generally be sub-divided into representative groups where personal prejudices predominate.

I. Types of Councils According to Source of Membership

- A. Representation of Specialized Interests
- B. Automatic Representation
- C. Representation by Principal or Faculty Employees
- D. Representation by Student Leader Appointees
- E. Representation of Unspecialized Units of the School
- F. Civil Service Types

II. Types of Councils According to Powers

- A. Informal Council
- B. The Forum
- C. Specific Service Council
- D. The General Council

III. Types of Councils According to Organization

- A. Single House Council
- B. Multihouse Councils
- C. The School-city

In considering any of the aforementioned forms of student government, three questions can be asked: Is there equitable representation to serve the needs of the groups? Are the duties and powers of the group well defined to facilitate the understanding of all those concerned? Is there structural efficiency or needless "dovetailing" which curtails proper function? Being able to answer these questions affirmatively will often determine the quality of the student government.

Organizational Development and Inauguration of a Student Council

The actual development and inauguration of a good student council is very important and a great deal of good thought should be given to every aspect. According to Blankenship, "It takes leadership of high quality to help young people do their own thinking."⁶ Consequently, much of the success of a student council depends on the sponsor elected, because it is his preparation, ideas, and connections with the administration and faculty that provide the challenge to the student leaders. His position should be one of genuine interest and he should attempt to guide the student leaders instead of suggesting to the whole group. This means that he should help the leader to think and not tell the leader what to do.

The function of the sponsor in the meetings themselves should still be that of the helper; he should ask questions to bring out additional facts on proposed subjects and help list advantages and disadvantages. Many sponsors are overanxious in seeing that the "right" decisions are made, but it would be well to remember that experience in planning and modifying plans that do not work help young people become conscious of the need to think things through more carefully. Plans made by the council should be changed by the council itself, and for the reason that the students see a better way to accomplish the job. The greatest values are received by the participants, and they adopt a feeling of responsibility to the whole school and learn to take responsibility intelligently--leadership and a willingness to learn to take responsibility are both end products of such a situation.⁷

⁶Blankenship, H. H., "The Student Council in Action", The Education Digest 22:44-46, January, 1957.

⁷Ibid., p. 46.

Student Involvement

Having discussed the history, council classifications, and the development and inauguration, the next problem to be analyzed would be that of involvement.

How has student involvement in the several areas of possible student government activities been developed? A starting point could be to sketch an outline of basic ideas as discussed by Willey and Strong.⁸

I. Define the areas of student government responsibility

- A. There is often confusion regarding the areas and limits within which the council may operate with power and authority and this results in failure. (Students resent not having the chance to make a worthwhile contribution.) Caution should be exercised because some student governments are delegated areas of authority which are so broad that neither the students nor the faculty administration understand its role.
- B. Three important areas included within the boundaries of power
 - 1. The areas over which the council has complete control with no interference from administration, faculty, or other outside force.
 - 2. The areas over which the control or responsibility is shared with faculty and administration.
 - 3. The area in which the council may express an opinion but has no voice in control.

II. Determine methods of discovering the needs of the student

- A. Personal contact
- B. Referendum

III. Devise methods to finance student government

- A. Compulsory or voluntary fees
- B. Activity fees
- C. Fund raising campaigns

⁸Willey, Roy, and Strong, Wallace, Procedures in Guidance, p. 116.

- IV. Organize an orientation program
 - A. Career days
 - B. Get-acquainted days
- V. Promote a leadership development program
 - A. Leadership classes
 - B. Co-curricular philosophy
- VI. Devise methods to publicize student government
 - A. School paper
 - B. Student body elections
- VII. Promote social activities
 - A. Dances
 - B. Mixers
 - C. Rallies
 - D. Athletic events

The latter four areas are those that are basically concerned with the mechanics whereby the students are actually drawn into participation, but this mere participation does not insure good government.

Guarantees of a Good Student Government

The principles that guarantee a good student government should be considered. According to Willey and Strong,⁹ these would include:

1. There should be administrative support in student participation that is free of such self-centered ends as using the student leaders as errand boys for the administration or to have them spy on their peers.
2. The student body should be aware of their limitations and opportunities and should strive for maximum participation.

⁹Ibid., p. 118.

3. The council activities should be both socially desirable and educationally worthwhile.
4. The foundation upon which good student council operation is based should be clearly defined by a constitution.

What would be gained from all this? Some people within the teaching profession as well as administrators have felt that student government is a waste of time. The authorities cited have felt that, if the program is handled properly, the whole school gains experience in democratic procedures, and young people learn to recognize the rights of others and develop a respect for minority opinions. By becoming conscious of the problems of the school, they had developed a greater loyalty, and student government has been a means of developing democratic qualities of citizenship.

In February, 1958, students from 34 foreign countries and 48 states assembled at Williamsburg, Virginia, to discuss "Democratic Leadership in the World Today--A challenge to Youth." Francoise Monier, a high school delegate from France, stated:

I think that this forum is proof that the more challenged students are, the more they learn--and the more fun they have, too. I have never had to work so hard on so many subjects as in these forums --and yet I have never enjoyed myself more.¹⁰

The findings of a questionnaire sent to the public high schools and to the larger parochial high schools in Montana for the purpose of studying attitudes of administrators and students are presented in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER III

ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS OF ADMINISTRATORS AND STUDENTS ON VALUES OF STUDENT GOVERNMENT

A questionnaire was sent to the superintendents and student body presidents of the public high schools and the larger parochial high schools of the state of Montana to investigate the attitudes and opinions of these people on some of the issues concerning student government. One hundred and eighty-five schools were contacted, with letters of explanation and identical questionnaires being sent to the superintendent and student body president in each school. A self-addressed envelope was provided to facilitate a better return. The enrollment of these schools ranged from 15 to approximately 1700.

Of the 185 administrators contacted, 151 returned the questionnaire giving an 82% return, though some were not answered fully. Of the same number of student presidents contacted, 116 responded, with a return of 63%. The 116 student responses were not necessarily from the same schools as those responses received from the administrators.

Since the study is concerned with student governments, the first question asked was: "Do you have student body officers in your school who have been elected in all school elections?" Of the 151 administrators, 132 indicated Yes, 10 indicated that they had the officers though they were not elected in all school elections, and nine reported that they did not have any student council. Several of the latter commented on an intent to establish a student government. Of the student answers, 100 of 116 indicated Yes, seven indicated that their officers were not elected in all school elections, and nine reported that they didn't have any student body officers. Again

notations were included pointing out that the administration had promised student government the following year.

A sub-question inquired as to Regular or Sporadic meetings, wherein 81 administrators stated that their groups met regularly, 53 marked Sporadic meetings, (some indicating "as the need arises"), and eight didn't respond to the question. Regular meetings were reported by 58 of 108 students, 42 indicated Sporadic meetings, and seven gave no answer. Several of the students who marked "Sporadic" commented that they would prefer regular meetings in order to strengthen their student governing groups. An indication appeared that some felt that they were mere pawns of the administration.

The tally of administrator responses showed 61 Spring student elections, 78 Fall student elections and three student elections at midterm, while one registered no answer. The students recorded 52 Spring elections, 54 Fall, while one submitted no answer. Both groups indicated that Fall student elections predominated over elections in the Spring.

With reference to the students' ability to choose the stronger candidates for office, 83 administrators felt that they made Conscientious selections, 51 felt that the elections were Popularity Contests, some indicated both, and eight did not answer the question. Of the students, 63 marked Conscientious selections, 43 marked Popularity Contests, and one did not submit an answer. The study showed that the students and administrators were of proportionate agreement as to how the students as a whole handle their elections, and there was an indication that the majority of the groups felt that their elections were conscientiously conducted.

Question 4 inquired of the personal interest shown by the student officers in their respective offices after their election. Of the 142

administrators, 106 indicated that the students did show an interest, 30 indicated that little interest was shown, and six gave no answer. The students reported on 80 returns that the officers showed an interest, while 27 returns indicated a lack of interest on the part of the elected officers. This could indicate either an inconsistency in answering the questionnaire, or else that even though their election was a Popularity Contest, the students involved rose to the occasion and gave a fair account of themselves in office.

Of the 143 administrators with student officers elected in all school elections, 135 indicated that the central student government provided for representatives from each class, four reported no representation by classes and three did not answer the question. The students registered 104 having class representation, two indicated representation other than by class and one return registered no answer. Again the two agree proportionately. The questionnaires which contained the "no" answers included comments in favor of homeroom representation due to their larger enrollments.

As to the question of student body officers showing good qualities toward leadership in conducting student business, 122 administrators recorded Yes and 20 No. In answer to this question, the students registered 93 in the affirmative, nine in the negative and five did not answer. This indicated a general feeling of support for the student leaders and implied a respect for their abilities in leadership.

A question was posed inquiring into the amount of authority delegated to the student body officers in order to enable them to assert leadership. Of the administrators, 115 felt that the student officers had enough delegated authority, 18 felt that they did not, and nine had no answer. The students generally agreed with 81 feeling that they had enough authority, 24

feeling that they did not have enough, and two did not answer the question. As anticipated, this question brought various comments from both sides and some of these in turn are listed below.

Administrators

1. "Inadequate time is available for these meetings."
2. "I suppose that we are reluctant to let go of too many responsibilities and place them in the hands of the students."
3. "I feel that those elected are not capable of the responsibilities."
4. "We do not have time to provide proper counseling and to work with them."

Students

1. "Our advisor tries to push things through and many matters are taken up in the office that should be handled through the student council."
2. "We meet only a few times a year and have no programs to work on. The advisor takes all of the authority and controls the business that we discuss."
3. "Need regular meetings!"
4. "Too much dictation from the administration."

These comments, on both sides, indicate some lack of understanding between the administrators and the students.

Question 8 proved to be poorly worded. It had been intended to find out whether the schools had school-sponsored orientation programs which in essence were devised to strengthen and perpetuate student governments. Of the administrators, 91 answered Yes to having a program, 41 indicated they did not, and 10 did not understand the question. Of the students, 52 recorded they had such a program, 51 indicated they did not and four did not understand the question. This implied that there is a good possibility of more constructive work to be done in the field of orientation.

Only 34 administrators attested to their student government having a parliamentarian, 104 had none, claiming that the advisor served in that capacity, and four gave no answer. Similarly, 23 students indicated their group had a parliamentarian, 83 reported No, and one gave no answer. The study showed that a definite area for form and control is being left out of most student governments in the state.

Both the administrators and the students attested to having a faculty advisor for the student governing group.

Of the administrators, 103 felt that the school had an Active student organization, while 33 considered the student organization as being Dormant. Six made no answer. The students again were in proportionate agreement with 86 attesting to Active organizations, 20 to Dormant organizations, and one registering no answer.

The final question asked if the individual felt that the student government in his school was a waste of time. Of the administrators, 26 felt that it was, while 116 indicated that it was not. The student marked 15 Yes, and 92 No. The questionnaire showed that the majority of the administrators and student officers felt that student governments were of definite value. However, it also showed that 18% of the administrators and 14% of the students answering felt that the student government was a waste of time.

In Chapter 4 a comparison is made between the findings in the survey and the findings from the review of literature, and a conclusion and recommendations are presented.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To find an answer to the question: Are the student governments of schools serving as laboratories for leadership training in the state of Montana?, a review of literature was made and a questionnaire was sent to both the administrator and student body president of each of the public high schools and several of the larger parochial schools in the state of Montana. The review of literature was made to investigate the values in and proper procedures for good student governments, while the purpose of the questionnaire was to find existing attitudes on student government of administrators and student officers within the state of Montana.

Summary

The review of literature showed a prominent history in the advent of student participation and the part it played in developing educational procedures. Since these educational procedures are presently handled by trained administrators, the student participation has been concerned more with self-government. The study revealed the following criteria of a good student government:

1. There should be administrative support in student participation that is free of such self-centered ends as using the student leaders as errand boys for the administration.
2. The student body should be aware of its scope of operation and its opportunities and should strive for maximum participation in the program.
3. The council activities should be both socially desirable and educationally worth-while.

The questionnaire revealed general agreement among the administrators and student presidents on the values of student government. The majority agreed that students made conscientious choices of candidates in their elections and also felt that the officers in general took an active interest in their elective offices. The survey revealed that the general opinion of the administrators and the student presidents was that student officers showed good qualities of leadership. The question of delegated authority aroused the most interest in the survey and apparently was the crux of the problem of student government in the state. A relatively large number of schools did not have school-sponsored orientation programs devised to strengthen and perpetuate student governments. It was also found that a large majority of the polled schools did not have a parliamentarian in their student organizations. Generally speaking, the majority felt that their central student governments were active organizations and not a waste of time.

Conclusions

With reference to the problem, "Are the student governments of schools serving as laboratories for leadership training in the state of Montana?", the following conclusions indicate that they are.

1. Student governments in general are well established and appear to be growing in Montana high schools.
2. Students generally rise to meet the needs of the office to which they have been elected.

The study also indicated some areas that could be improved to help strengthen student government. These areas are as follows:

1. Student government programs have been curtailed in those areas where administrators are reluctant to delegate responsibility to student groups.

2. It was indicated that there is a lack of understanding of what is expected of student governments by the administrators and by the students.

. Recommendations

In line with the indications that a minority of the schools in Montana do not develop leadership through their student governments, the following recommendations are made.

1. A study should be made into time allotted to student government in high schools.
2. A study should be made to determine the backgrounds and attitudes of student government advisors.
3. A study should be made to determine the methods used in Montana high schools to promote student government and the relative effectiveness of each of the methods discovered.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

Letter Sent to the Superintendents
and to the Student Body Presidents

March 26, 1961
Belfry, Montana

Dear ,

In conjunction with writing a professional paper for my Master's degree, I am sending a copy of the enclosed questionnaire to both the superintendent and student body president of the high schools in the state of Montana.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to inquire into the existing opinions and attitudes of administrators and students with reference to their student governments. It is hoped that you will answer the various questions in a thorough and unbiased manner to facilitate a good cross-section of present state views on student governments.

I am hoping to finish my degree this summer and any help you can give me by filling out the questionnaire will be sincerely appreciated..

Enclosed you will find both the questionnaire and a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Respectfully yours,,

Jack Kober

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire Answered by Superintendents
and Student Body Presidents

1. Do you have student body officers in your school who have been elected in all school elections? Yes____ No____
 . If yes, do these student body officers meet in regularly scheduled meetings or only sporadically? Regularly____ Sporadically____
2. Do you have your student elections in the Fall or Spring? Fall____ Spring____
3. Do you personally feel that the students of your school make conscientious selections for student officers or does it usually become a popularity contest? Conscientious____ Popularity Contest____
4. Would you say that the majority of the elected student body officers take an active interest in their offices? Yes____ No____
5. Does your central student government provide for representatives from each class? Yes____ No____
6. Do you personally feel that the student body officers of your school show good qualities toward leadership in conducting student business? Yes____ No____
7. Do you feel that your student body officers are given an adequate amount of authority to express leadership? Yes____ No____
 . If no, why? _____

8. Do you have a program in your school devised to strengthen and perpetuate a student government? Yes____ No____
9. Does your group have a parliamentarian? Yes____ No____
10. Does the student body group have a faculty advisor? Yes____ No____
11. Is your central student government an active organization in your school or is it dormant? Active____ Dormant____
12. Do you personally feel that the student government of your school is a waste of time as it now exists? Yes____ No____