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GOOD CITIZENS: HOW STUDENT COUNCIL IMPACTS SOCIALIZATION
NORMS AT DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
SCHOOL COMPLEX

by
Darren W. Palmer

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Masters of Arts Degree
of
The School Of Educational Leadership
at
Rowan University
(May, 2004)

Approved by

Professor

Date Approved

4-04-04

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ABSTRACT

Darren W. Palmer

GOOD CITIZENS: HOW STUDENT COUNCIL IMPACTS SOCIALIZATION
NORMS AT DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. SCHOOL COMPLEX

2003/04

Dr. Dennis Hurley

Masters of Arts in Educational Leadership

This study sought to learn how peer group behavior patterns among middle school students change for the better with the emergence of a student council. The setting was the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The school had undergone several reconfigurations to the student body in prior years. Since then it has been difficult to maintain a student body culture that was both stable and suitable for substantial academic achievement. This study was organized along the continuum of the academic calendar and interwoven within the customs and routines of the school. It took advantage of the inclinations of students (age 11-14) to belong with influential social groups and to express independence of adult authority by promoting the role of a student council. The study had three phases. Planning and organizational was phase one. Phase two was characterized by implementation, observation and recording. The final phase included culmination and analysis of the project's impact.

MINI ABSTRACT

Darren W. Palmer

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2003/04

Dr. Dennis Hurley

Masters of Arts in Educational Leadership

This study examined how behavior among middle school students at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex in Atlantic City, New Jersey was impacted by the emergence of a student council program. It followed the school's academic calendar and was interwoven within the customs and routines of the school.

Acknowledgements:

All praise is due to GOD.

I wish to recognize individuals whose contributions to this study made it possible. These include administrators at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School Complex, Debra Brown and Lois Lantz, whom allowed my unencumbered decision making in the creation and implementation of the student council project. Thank you to my colleagues at the Complex who contributed both moral and tactical support in this effort.

I wish to acknowledge Jennifer Preston and Pat Tweedle of the Parent Advisory Committee for their aid and support. To the student councilors who participated in this study, and their peers who inspired it, thank you. I wish to indicate my appreciation to my university mentor, Dr. Dennis Hurley, and my practicum instructor, Dr. Ron Capasso, for leading me through my first thesis writing experience.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Can students, when organized and supported by the school, demonstrate leadership adequate for influencing behavioral among their peers? This was the question investigated under this study. In arriving at the answer, peer influence was tested by mobilizing students for personal, civic and social development. A case study on student council organization was the laboratory for bolstering values and mores consistent with the school's mission. The formative challenges of organizing adolescents around norms that are not typical for them provide the means for analysis.

The study was of interest to parents, administrators and teachers with a stake in student achievement. It offers insight for those interested in how opportunities for leadership are embraced by adolescents. The work provides a glimpse into the social tendencies of middle school students. It contributes intervention for unfavorable behavior among a critical population in the school community. Finally, the study adds to research on the effectiveness of traditional civics education for addressing social norms. School leaders anticipate a reduction in the volume of referrals to the office for classroom disruptions. A different student culture was planned to emerge from the study; one that contrasted with the social norms of the target population.

Purpose of the Study:

This study sought to learn how peer group behavior patterns among middle school students change for the better through the emergence of a student council. The student

council project examines the tendency for students to willfully take on more desirable conduct in exchange for opportunities in peer leadership, self-organization and institutional mentoring. A menu of inviting activities and liberties were afforded to students at the school based on their compliance with achievement standards in citizenship. The study further examines if a group of students in leadership roles can influence a larger number of students who are not in leadership positions. Presently, there exists a good deal of interest among students for standing out from among their peers. And students in middle grades reach a point when they are eager to raise their social stock among peer groups (Abood 1995). This study provided a stage.

The purpose of this study was to establish a suitable platform for influencing how students socialize at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex. The reputation of middle grade students (grades 5 through 8) was a concern for many staff members at the school. The onset of adolescents coupled with uneven maturity among children made learning and instruction an overwhelming challenge. This project aimed to contribute to the impact students have on the school's culture of learning. The subject was approached using the case study method. It offers a written report to inform administrators, teachers, parents and colleagues in the field on the usefulness of this strategy. The program was defined as a strategy for changing prevalent student social norms.

Definitions:

Prior to addressing the fundamental design and specific aspirations of the study, it was necessary to consider what was commonly understood about this thesis and what should be understood going forward.

By *student council*, we refer to that organizational medium by which enrollees in an academic center work democratically to participate in the governance of their learning institution. More precisely, we mean the active sharing by students in the decisions about and implementation of educational policies and practices and the key issues that determine the nature of the world in which they live (Holdsworth 1996). When we speak of *civics*, we refer to that body of knowledge traditionally reserved for advancing the understanding of concepts and practices of citizenship in a democracy. *Civic dispositions or dispositions*, are defined here as such traits of character as civility, sociability, honesty, self-restraint, tolerance, trust, compassion, a sense of duty, a sense of political efficacy, capacity for cooperation, loyalty, courage, respect for the worth and dignity of each person, and concern for the common good (Patrick 1999).

Limitations of the Study:

The student council project was limited to a subpopulation of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex. The study was bounded to the Atlantic City Public School District, and thusly, to the demographics hosted there. It was a voluntary activity that anticipated moderate student turnover. The study was further limited by the duration and demands of the school day. Scheduling constraints make it less accessible than typical student social venues, such as recess and cafeteria periods. School sponsored extracurricular activities, remedial programs, and various individual and collective teacher initiatives further compete with the project for student loyalty.

Data collection tools were limited to a review of administrative records, material culture resulting from the project and recorded anecdotal observations of the project during implementation. The findings of this study were applicable to the group under examination and other adolescent groups with a similar demographic.

Setting of the Study:

The strategy for changing prevalent student social norms (i.e., student council project) makes a contribution to concerns of the educational practice at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex in Atlantic City, and in other small to moderate urban school districts in the United States.

Atlantic City, located in Atlantic County, New Jersey, is a multi-ethnic city with a tourist-based industry. It is the hub of the regional economy in southeastern New Jersey. The island community hosts a population in excess of 40,000 people and growing. It experiences an influx of over 100,000 visitors daily. Atlantic County has a population just over a quarter of a million people. Over 25% of the residents are under eighteen years old and nearly 18% are African-American. Whites (non-Hispanic) account for approximately 63%, and 12% are Latino. Nearly 12% of the population is foreign born residents. Over 20% of residents, age 5 and greater, report speaking a language other than English in their households (US Census 2000). Evidence of Atlantic County's increasing diversity can be seen further in the demographics of its schools.

Atlantic City Public Schools is a sending district for three additional municipalities in Atlantic County. They include Ventnor, Margate and Brigantine, New Jersey. The

Atlantic City School District includes eleven schools. There is one high school and ten elementary schools. The Atlantic City High School services 2,675 students, which includes EMR (Educable Mentally Retarded) students. The New Jersey Avenue School services 526 students, which includes EMR (Educable Mentally Retarded) and MH (Multiply Handicapped) students. The grade levels range from kindergarten through seventh grade. The Richmond Avenue School services 357 students, which includes a self-contained classroom. Grade levels there range from kindergarten through fifth grade. The Venice Park School services thirty-eight preschool handicapped students. The Dr. Martin Luther King School services 709 students, which includes two self-contained classrooms. Grade levels there range from kindergarten through eighth Grade. The Brighton Avenue School services 478 students. The Ohio Avenue School services 380 students, which includes one self-contained classroom. The Chelsea Heights School services 336 students. The Texas Avenue School services 406 students from kindergarten through sixth grade. The Indiana Ave School services 457 students, which includes one self-contained classroom. Grade levels there range from Kindergarten through Seventh Grade. The Uptown School Complex services 845 students, which includes one self-contained classroom. Grade levels there range from kindergarten through eighth grade. Together, eleven schools in the district service 7,280 students. Of these students 3,647 are male and 3,559 are female (NJDOE 2003).

The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex is one of ten elementary schools in the Atlantic City school district. The latest available statistics indicate that it is a kindergarten through seventh grade school with an enrollment in excess of seven hundred students. By

June of 2003, nine percent (9%) of students at the school had individualized education programs. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of students identify English as the first language spoken at home. The average number of students per class size is 17.8. The rate of student attendance in 2001-02 was 95.1%. The percentage of students who entered and left the school during the school year was 18.8% -- five points above the state average (NJDOE 2002).

Organization of the Study:

The study was organized along the continuum of the academic calendar and interwoven within the customs and routines of the school as much as possible. It takes advantage of inclinations among students (age 11-14) to belong with influential social groups and to express independence of adult authority by promoting the role of a student council. The plan was to root the student council concept into classroom instruction using social studies courses and civics lessons the medium. The structure and advantages of the student council was touted early in the school year. The desire was to preempt the onset of negative socialization patterns that might otherwise impede influence of this work. A committee was identified to support the project and facilitate the organizational process. The student council coordinating committee contributed to project efficacy and provided a means of imbedding the council into the school's present customs. The study had three phases. Planning and organizational was phase one. Phase two was characterized by implementation, observation and recording. The final phase included the culmination and analysis of the student council project.

In phase one, development of the apparatus for student council (including organizational and policy foundations) was undertaken. Students learned and exercised the democratic process. Students undertook nomination of their peers. Campaigning was undertaken, followed by elections, installation of officers, and the conduct of meetings by parliamentary procedure. In phase two shared ownership of the study with other stakeholders in the school was encouraged. These stakeholders included parent advisory council members, grade level teachers, and administrators. During this phase chronicling dynamics of organizational practices and data gathering occurred. Further during this phase, students assumed leadership roles in the school and were mentored by teachers. In the final phase of the study the project underwent culmination and further analysis. The results of the study buttress this thesis. The design of the study was flexible enough to permit innovation on behalf of the committee and, yet, not lose pace with data gathering objectives. The project was highly do-able because it required little more than cooperation from school administrators and a motivated faculty and student body. Administrative support for the aims of the study was secured at the start of the academic year. There was some history of formal student organizations in the school to draw upon for inspiration.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction:

Despite the arguably substantial resources conferred to public schools since the Nation at Risk report of twenty years ago, and numerous pedagogical interventions proffered by educators, public schools remain beset with the perception of under achievement (Coeyman 2003). One of the reasons often cited as a contributing factor was the erosion of discipline (Carter 1987). This report upheld that position and employed a traditional approach to analyzing the phenomenon of peer influence as a determining factor in the school's learning environment. What follows are an assessment of the circumstances observed at a typical school in southern New Jersey and a discussion of the logic that informs strategy.

Review of the Problem:

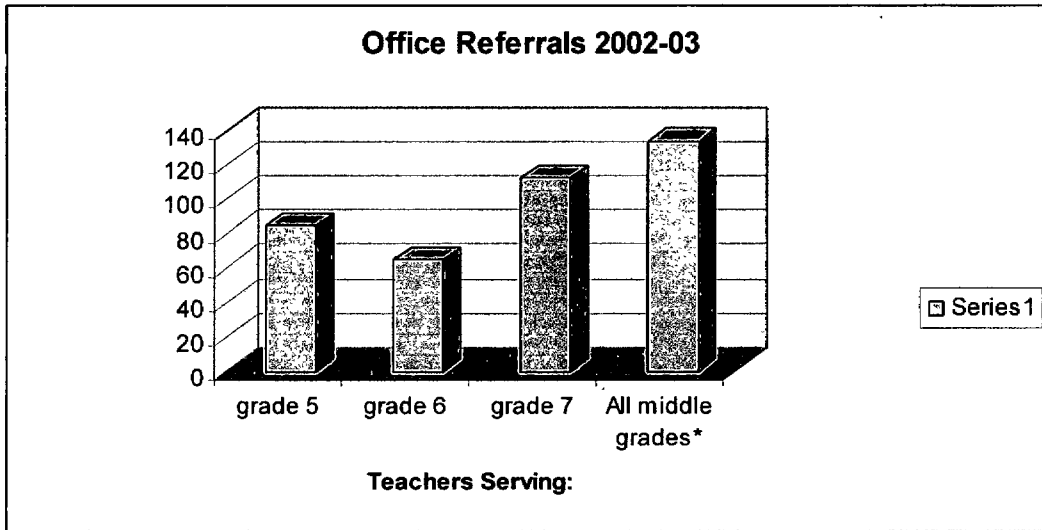
The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex has undergone several reconfigurations to the student body in recent years. After more than fifteen years as a kindergarten through sixth grade school, it was changed to a pre-kindergarten through fourth grade school for a period of one year in 1997 resulting from a change in district-level administration. The following school year pre-kindergarten classes were removed from the school building and the sixth grade level was reconstituted, along with a seventh grade for the first time in the school's history. Introduction of the seventh grade, and the addition of a self-contained accelerated learning class for eighth grade bilingual students in 2002, skewed the behavioral climate of the student body toward that typically found in

schools serving middle grade students exclusively. Finally, in 2003, yet another full grade level serving eighth graders was added. Due largely to changes like these it has been difficult to maintain a student body culture in the school that is both stable and suitable for academic achievement.

There was evidence that the standard of student conduct was injurious to the mission of the school. The school's mission reads: "Our school is committed to the development of the whole child – physically, mentally and emotionally. We shall establish a safe orderly, caring and attractive educational environment in which our students will learn to function productively and cooperatively in a diverse society and world. Learning shall be meaningful: it shall actively involve students in acquiring and applying academic skills, as well as cultivating artistic creative talents. To share this responsibility, we shall seek parental and community involvement."

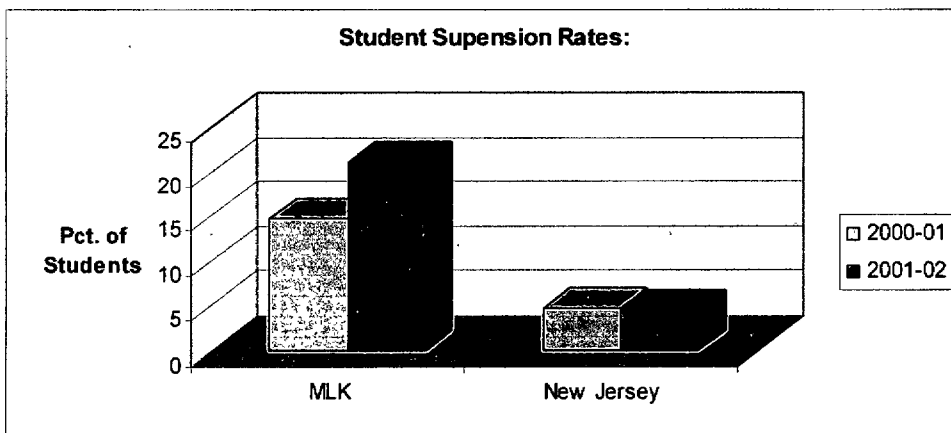
Yet, in the area of discipline, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex reported that 21.1% of its students were suspended from school – more than sixteen points above the state average (NJDOE 2002). School administrators related how the volume of referrals to the principal's office from classroom teachers, for middle grade students in particular, concerning discipline issues was overwhelming. There were nearly 260 referrals from teachers serving students in grades five through seven exclusively in 2002-03. An additional 133 referrals were written by teachers, and other faculty who serve middle school children among others – such as basic skills instructors and specialist.

Table 1.1:



The percentage of students suspended from the school during the 2001-02 school years was nearly 18%. The table below demonstrates the disproportionate number of student suspensions as compared to districts around the State of New Jersey (NJDOE 2002).

Table 1.2:



The prevailing sentiment among staff was that middle grade student behavior was problematic for the school. The tone set by this cohort, and the behavior they model for primary grade students - grades kindergarten through four- was a chief concern for many.

The consequences of nonconforming classroom behavior among students can undermine academic success. Typical results on the New Jersey Grade Eight Proficiency Assessments (GEPA) are an indicator. Scores on this test provide a snapshot of student achievement in middle grades throughout the district. General education students in 2001-02 achieved 33.7% proficiency in Language Arts Literacy, and 15.8 % proficiency in mathematics. On each assessment middle school students were thirty points or more behind the average proficiency of students statewide. As a result of statewide assessment scores, nearly fifty percent of students in the middle grades were targeted for remedial instruction in 2002. This scenario is of grave concern to classroom teachers due to complications that result from the slow pace of instruction and learning for all students. Meanwhile improving schools for children of poor and working class parents remain essential for social and economic reasons. Statistics offer impetus for improvement academically and socially. However, to achieve improvement it is important to know that school learning is a function of the interaction between student culture and the school's intentions (Spring 2000).

Appraisal of Major Concept Related to the Problem:

The student council model was chosen as the instrument for affecting the learning environment at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. school complex for three reasons. First, the student council model provided a longitudinal basis for prior research into its

effectiveness -- unlike more contemporary concepts such as anti-bullying programs and character education which share similar aims. Traditionally, student councils have addressed goals wider in scope than anti-bullying programs which concentrate on more specific motivational factors for school violence. Consequently, it has the potential to make a lasting impact on the culture of the school. Second, student council grants the opportunity to support classroom instructional activities in social studies and language arts, which in turn, could make a sorely needed impact on standardized test scores. Finally, the student council model was chosen because the school's vice principal perceived it as a suitable mechanism to involve the student body in an all encompassing formative discipline process.

As referenced above, discipline has been a chief concern facing America's public schools. Educators are finding that the root of the problem goes beyond rule breaking. Students today require more than consistent discipline policies. They need positive behavior instruction (Fitzsimmons 1998). A common feature of a school wide behavior system is clearly defined and communicated expectations and rules and clearly stated procedures for correcting rule-breaking behavior. Student council has been the *natural* model for addressing these objectives (Carter 1987). It should be noted, however, that there was no illusion about a dramatic impact from this intervention. The culture into which this experiment was introduced is thoroughly entrenched within the school. Factors contributing to it have their origin in the communities served by the school; in the school's customs and internal politics; and the popular adolescent culture that enraptures the student body. No single intervention over such a limited duration as this study will result in a sweeping turnabout of the circumstances hereunder examination.

Nevertheless, the student council model does have its advantages. It gives the perception, if not the reality, of authority to students who frequently act against it – presumably to garner some power for themselves. It provides a platform for self-esteem building among adolescents who frequently attempt to mask their lack of it by acting out in the school setting. Research into student councils nation wide find aims consistent with the most desirable aspects of schooling in America. They are said to: give students a voice; enhance personal and social skills; develop citizenship as a part of a national curriculum; and promote the development of the school as a community (Taylor & Johnson 2002).

The student council model described here was as much a means of behavior modification as an exercise in authoritative goodwill. Yet it was consistent with the axiom that if students are to learn how to exercise self-discipline, they need opportunities to plan and manage certain of their school activities – activities that provide them with models of good citizenship behavior (Carter 1987). Some student advocates advance this sentiment by asserting that students have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives despite being under the legal authority of academic institutions. “We live in a democratic community and student participation can be an apprenticeship for citizenship in this democracy... Student participation leads to more effective decision-making and learning: better decisions and learning is more effective when students are active participants (Holdsworth 1996).”

The research model designed for this experiment was influenced by sentiments like these about the ideal role of young people in decision making for them. However, unlike researchers in the field who have experimented with alternatives to the traditional student

council model by relinquishing adult authority over the direction and organizational design to students' altogether (Cole; Proctor 1994), this design strongly considers the general tendencies of students in this setting and options for more mentoring as opposed to less. Social demographics and the general experience of teachers with the student body dictate the approach chosen here as well. There was no excessive amount of self-esteem and attitudinal instruction which can be foreseen in support of children at this setting.

As an instrument for improving self-esteem and positive classroom norms, the student council model emerges as a logical application. The design of this particular project was consistent with literature that documents this approach for imparting civic dispositions within and among students. Traits of character such as civility, sociability, honesty, self-restraint, tolerance, trust, compassion, a sense of duty, a sense of political efficacy, capacity for cooperation, loyalty, courage respect for the worth and dignity of each person, and concern for the common good are expectations built into this model (Patrick, 1999).

Finally, the student council model for addressing behavioral norms herein discussed has an academic imperative associated with it as well. Research into the knowledge, attitudes and experiences of ninth graders in the United States revealed that students who performed well on civics test attended schools with a small percentage of students in poverty. White students scored higher than African American and Hispanic students on overall knowledge and on content and skills indices (Hahn 2001). When one notes the factors emerging from these outcomes (i.e. poverty, underachievement, disenfranchisement, etc.), the argument for including citizenship instruction into systemic

change initiatives and promoting achievement in our struggling schools becomes laudable.

To summarize, there was evidence that the present learning environment at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex was inadequate for the level of achievement desired by all stakeholders in the educational process. Anecdotal as well as objective data reported to the New Jersey Department of Education implied systemic social issues and academic underperformance. Like circumstances facing many of America's public schools, discipline is a major contributor (Fitzsimmons, 1998). A review of literature indicates that intervention into the influence of peer groups among adolescent children was appropriate for improving discipline in schools, and consequently the learning environment (Abood, 1995). Further, the student council strategy was a suitable means for teaching civic virtues, organizing students for mentoring and addressing numerous student-centered issues (Carter 1987; Patrick 1999; Taylor & Johnson 2002). The research presented here was a further examination of that hypothesis.

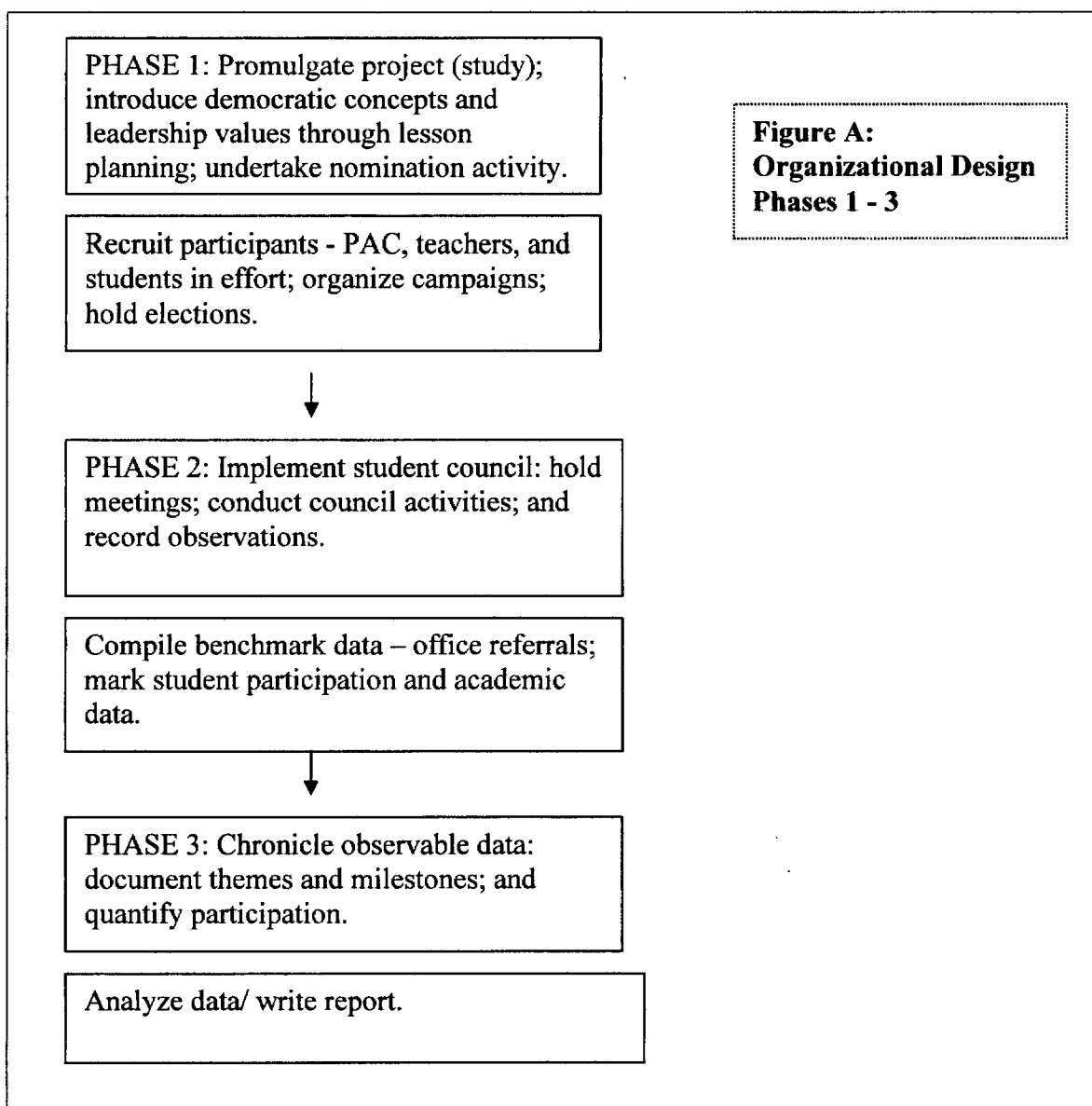
Chapter 3

Design of the Study

The student council project was a case study in organizational development and management. It observes and chronicles experiences participants have with meeting the aims of the project. The project not only asked if student councils effectively impact the culture of learning at the school, but also, what aids or hinders that impact. Therefore, the design and analysis of this project included an examination of data which imply an answer.

Description of the Research Design:

The study occurred in three phases. In the first, students were primed for the experience. They were informed about the student council project and its aims at a mixer for parents, teachers and students in August, prior to the start of school. During this period milestones were laid for measuring the success of the project (Figure A). At the start of the school year, the project was touted at student assemblies, and during morning broadcasts. Using project memorandum, teachers were encouraged to embrace the project as a means of galvanizing students for a positive activity beneficial to the school. Social studies teachers in grades 5 through 8 were asked to teach their civic lessons in the later days of September as a means of rooting the virtues of the project in classroom instruction and teaching civic literacy. A school awareness drive was under taken during this period to create the necessary “buzz.” Students were encouraged to “seek nomination” for office in anticipation of October elections. The successes of these activities constituted early milestones in the study and provide a basis for a process evaluation.



In the second phase of the design the customary business of student council was undertaken (Carter, 1987; Dickerson 1999). Initially, the project observed active participation by teachers and student councilors. During this phase benchmark data was chronicled. Office referrals from the pervious year were documented for analysis in the study. Records on disciplinary activity for the prior year were gathered at the start of phase two. A second sample of the same kind was gathered for the first 100 days of the

school year. Grades of student councilors in the project were key data in the examination of the study. Councilors submitted two academic records during this phase. Academic achievement of councilors was compiled using a histogram for comparison. Student and faculty participation in the project was examined using material culture emerging from the project such as election ballots, sign-in sheets and meeting journals. Finally, during this phase of the study anecdotal information such as comments expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the project was chronicled (ad hoc) for examination later in the study.

In the final phase of the design, the study documented themes emerging from diverse material created by the project. It involved analyzing data against benchmarks and examined the findings for presentation and conclusions about the thesis. Activities to maintain the momentum of the student council organization continued in this phase of the design. In anticipation of the culmination of the project, efforts to inculcate the student council within the customs of the school and lay a framework for the future were advanced.

Design of the Research Instrumentation

Three samples were used to gather data in this study. Archival data was used to gain a general framework about the impact of the student council on decorum in the school. To this end, data on office referrals culled from the Star Base® accounting system was gathered (see Table 1.1). Academic report cards of student councilors were compiled for analysis. The purpose of this measure was to assess the influence the organization has on individual student achievement and conformity. An examination of student participation in the process was the second method of evaluating the project. Student council sessions

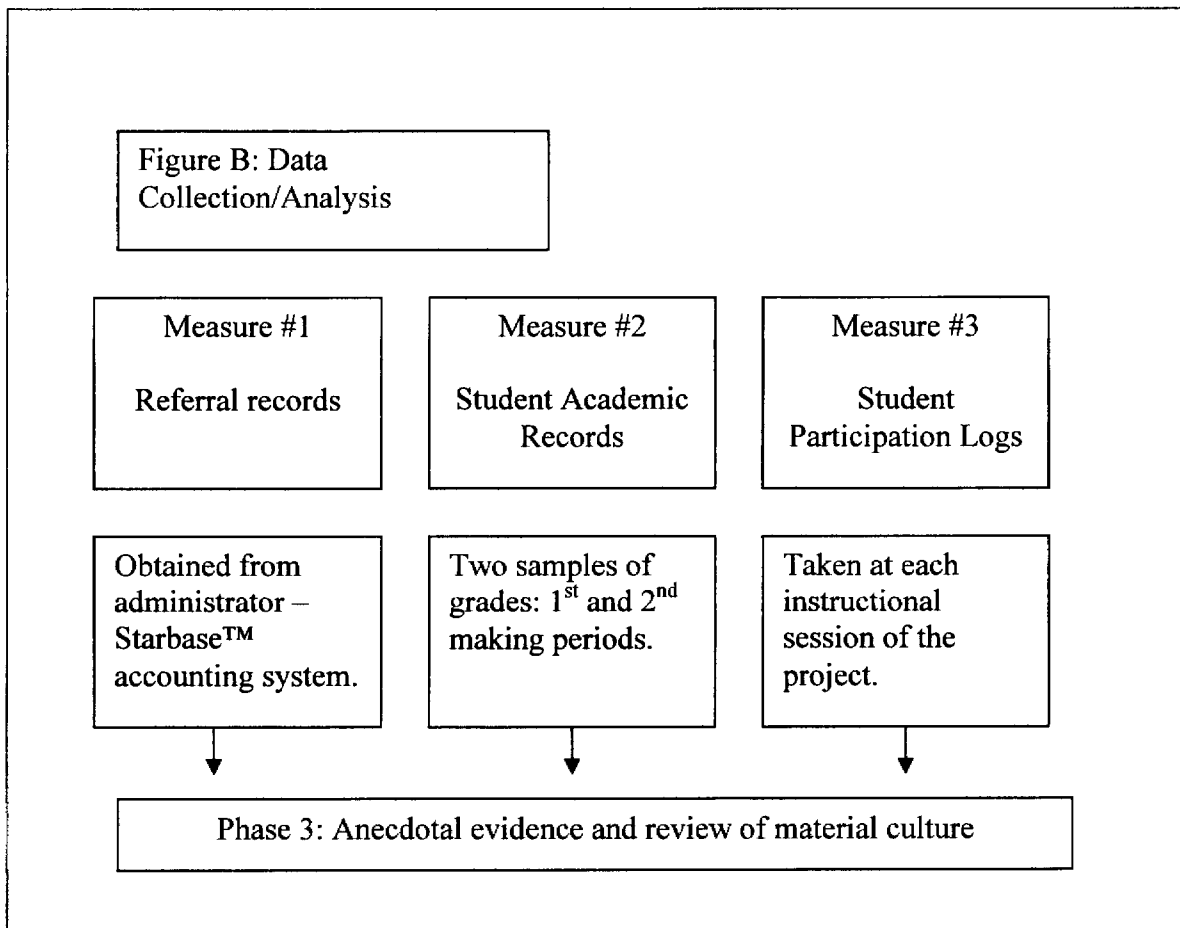
double as classroom lessons on citizenship where students actively participate in governance and develop civic literacy (see Figure B). These tools, together with an examination of milestones and a review of anecdotal data journalized in the minutes of the project sessions, provided the means for analyzing this study. Samples one and two were tooled using Microsoft Excel™ spreadsheets. The third sample, formative and anecdotal data, was gathered using diverse instruments materializing in the project portfolio (See Appendices).

Data Collection and Sampling Technique:

Referrals from teachers of middle school students were gathered from administrative records in phase two and compiled for analysis against records from the prior year. Student performance was measured using academic data volunteered by student councilors. Students were asked to submit two records for examination during phase two. These were report cards from the first and second marking period. Academic marks of councilors were recorded anonymously. Additional data was gathered from material emanating from the process. These included, but are not limited to student council minutes, committee updates, bulletins; miscellaneous notes and presentational material maintained using the journal and portfolio method.

Data Analysis Plan:

Referrals records were quantified and examined at two intervals in the school year. The records were compiled in Microsoft Excel™ and presented side by side using a bar graph. A discussion of the data considered changes from the prior year and factors influencing change after one hundred days into the study. Student academic records were compiled in Microsoft Excel™. Grades in math, science, reading and social studies were examined. Grades were coded (F=-2, D=-1, C=0, B=1, and A=2) to observe a maximum range of plus or minus zero; with zero referencing the average grade of “C” required as the minimum standard of achievement for participants in the study. Analysis of information included a discussion of student councilor turnover in the project.



Chapter 4

Presentation of Research Findings

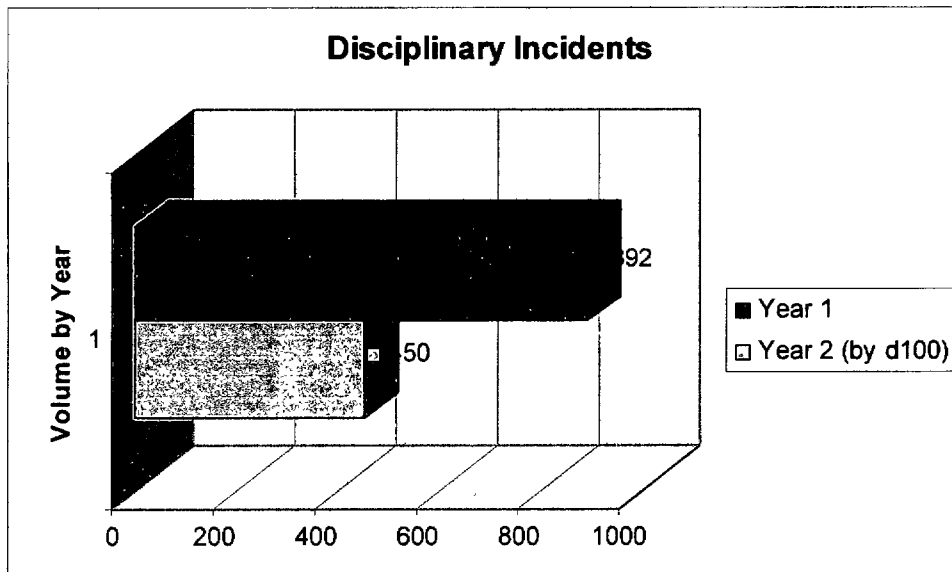
Introduction:

An examination of data is revealed below with a reevaluation of the grand tour questions which motivated this study. The observations chronicled below include quantifiable data only as a means of contributing to the qualitative discussion that is most suitable for a case study of social interaction on this scale.

Grand Tour of Thesis:

This study sought to learn if behavior among middle school students changes for the better with the emergence of a student council. When organized and supported by their school, will student council leaders exert a discernable influence on the behavior norms at the school?

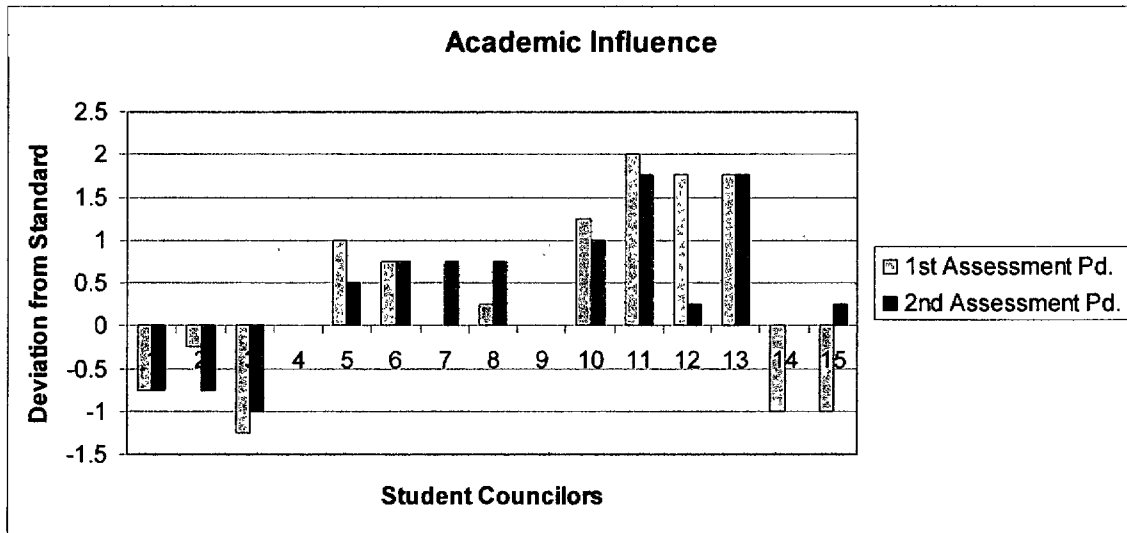
Table 4.1



The behavior norms under examination by this study refer to the number of disciplinary incidents and their real affect on the culture of learning at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex. One hundred days into the project for changing prevalent student social norms (i.e. student council), the number of disciplinary incidents was on a pace equivalent with that documented in the year prior to intervention (See Table 4.1). At the point of examination, the percentage of disciplinary incidents by middle school students was 64%. That was seven points above the number for the same group in the year prior to the intervention. Forty percent (40%) of middle school students subjected to discipline under this study were 13 years or older. Only 28% of students from this cohort were subject to discipline in the year prior. This fact indicates that behavioral incidents were mostly clustered among students in grades seven and eight. Based on disciplinary figures alone, there was no indication that the student council project had an impact on the established behavioral environment in this setting.

Research influencing the case study referenced a call for support of academic improvement. The project asked if student council impacts the culture of learning at the school. The study's impact on the culture of learning was interpreted through examination of disciplinary incidents and the results of student academic achievement. Participants in the study were expected to maintain an average minimum grade to show compliance with the project. Table 4.2 indicates the combined level of student achievement among actively participating councilors in the program in four core subjects during two consecutive academic periods.

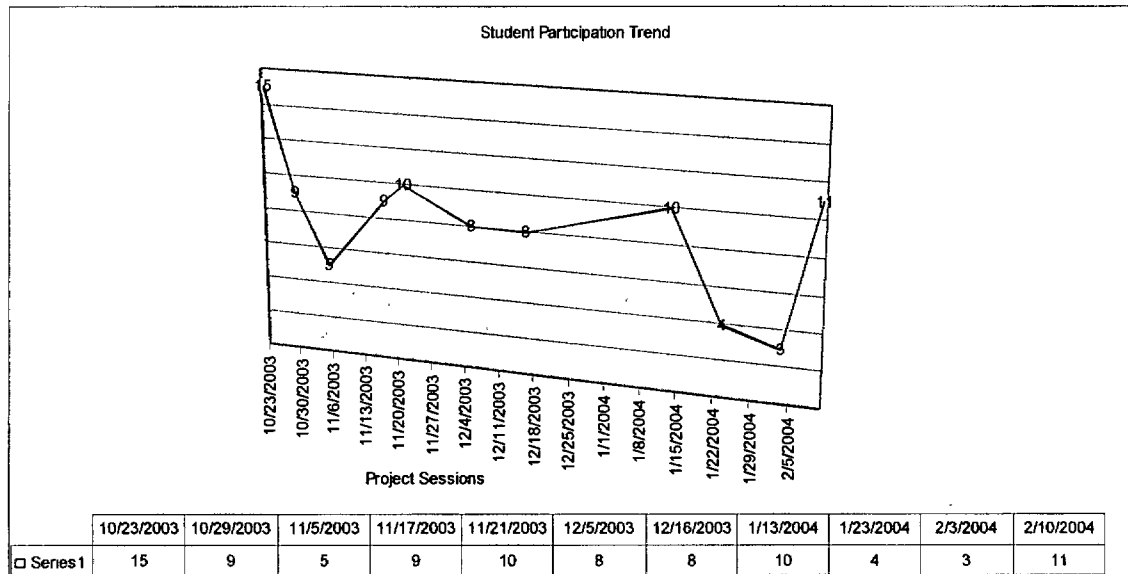
Table 4.2



Fifteen students were installed as councilors in this study. Of thirteen students who actively participated in the project from the start, eight (62%) successfully achieved the minimum standard of “C” in the first and second assessment periods. Nine of 13 (69%) students participating in study achieved the average minimum standard by the second assessment period. Three of 13 (23%) students exceeded the average minimum standard score after the first and second sampling periods.

Although the results were not compelling, the data gathered on students participating in the study as councilors show a positive influence on academic achievement over the first two marking periods. The influence of academic achievement by participants in the study can be further discerned by the rate of participation among councilors in the study.

Table 4.3



Student council meetings doubled as project sessions; when goals and objectives of the study were reinforced within the framework of student leadership and democracy. Attendance rates at project sessions resembled the academic achievement demonstrated during the same time period (highlighted in Table 4.2). Achievements among participants in the study were as uneven as their attendance at project sessions. While no correlation between the two could be responsibly stated, the relationship was implicit.

A third question raised by this study was what were the formative challenges of organizing adolescent youth around norms that are not typical for them, and what helped or hindered that organization? The atypical norms referenced here were the voluntary and active participation in an organization more highly regimented and structured than students were accustomed. To arrive at an answer to this question, an examination of key developments in the process was appropriate.

Table 4.4 – Qualified Student Council Achievements

Activity	Milestone:	Achievement:	Qualification:
1.	Was there a student council organization established at the school?...	Yes	The project successfully engaged the entire school community in the process.
2.	...that was structurally supported for future application?	Yes	Practices were established and material created during the study that holds value for future instructional and student leaders.
3.	...that was embedded within the school culture?	Yes	The project operated within the framework of existing school customs & timeframes
4.	...that promoted civic literacy and acceptable social norms.	Yes	The project used several means to impart traditional civic virtues.
5.	...that elevated student participation in school governance?	Yes	Several opportunities to give greater voice to students were seized.
6.	...that competed with typical student social allegiances?	Yes	There was evidence that the project influenced many students whom typically compete for social status in the school. The influence waned over time, however, as competition for student loyalty increased.
7.	...that demonstrated an impact on academic achievement?	Yes	Among the majority of participants in the study, the standard of achievement valued by the project was registered.
8.	...that demonstrated a positive impact on objectionable student social norms?	No	The picture framed by statistics on discipline implies no impact by the project.

The project successfully galvanized teachers, students and the parent advisory council in a school-wide civics lesson. Five grade levels participated in the nomination,

campaigning and voting processes. Over a dozen teachers volunteered to mentor students and aid their campaigns. The school experienced an unusual rally of interest across grade levels for a single activity. The level of enthusiasm and collective participation was paralleled by only two other activities – both of which had been long established in the school: the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee and the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. oratorical contest. Several materials were originated as management tools for the project. These include election ballots and boxes, a student constitution, instructional resources for civics, flyers, administrative procedures and rationale, attendance logs and benchmark activities and customs. These materials contributed to the impact of this study on the school beyond the experimental phases (See Appendices).

For both practical reasons and reasons of necessity, the project was designed to work within the framework of the existing school day. This objective was accomplished successfully. Regularly scheduled student assemblies were used as means of providing a stage for student councilors and elevating their status over the student body at large. The project successfully used classroom sessions, assemblies, bulletin board, community service projects and social events as means of advancing acceptable social norms and teaching civic literacy.

The student council project effectively achieved its objective for galvanizing interest among the school community and competing for student allegiances. Two-hundred-fifty-seven of 375 students in grades 4 through 8 participated in the nomination process. Eight students actively waged campaigns for office. Ten teachers volunteered as steering

committee members. More teachers were matched with students for mentoring during the campaign period and after they were installed in office. Finally, the program saw active participation by six teachers, two parent advisory council members and two administrators during the second phase of the project – when student council sessions were underway. The project accomplished three school based service projects and held four social functions for students.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications and Further Study

Introduction:

This segment of the study reviews the facts and assumptions by which the hypothesis was born. It appraises the grand tour questions that navigated the development of the project design. It also reaches conclusions and draws implications for the reader to consider in further evaluating the effectiveness of this project. This segment was further dedicated to a reflection on leadership skills. Those skills emerging from the application of the study in this setting, and those accumulated in its design and preparation were examined. Lastly, this chapter discusses the implications of the study on organizational change and considers areas for further study.

Grand Tour Review:

This study sought to learn how middle school students might influence their peer group if they were provided a social platform that could rival groups of their own making (Abood 1995). It asked if, when organized and supported by their school, student council leaders can exert a discernable influence on the behavior norms at the school. The study employed a limited number of instruments to reach a definitive conclusion, yet the implication was telling in the data that was revealed. Behavioral issues remained as acute in this setting as they had been prior to the study. This conclusion, however, requires some elaboration.

The invention (student council) employed by this study for rivaling negative peer group events that have traditionally held sway among middle school students did become evident. However, it was countermanded by several prevailing factors. First, the student council emerged as a new and untested option for student socialization. Beyond its first phase of operation it held limited opportunity for direct participation by the majority of middle school students for whom it was created. Its greatest opportunities for influencing student norms came during the honeymoon period in the school year when students were customarily at their best behavior. By design, once students were installed in office, participation was limited to open invitations for nonmembers to attend meetings and events staged by the members. The expectation was that through the continued support of teachers acting as mentors, use of the platforms created by the project for students to address their peers, and the resilience of student councilors for maintaining standards, the program could forestall the onset of pervasive negative behavior among nonmembers. There were mitigating influences. A number of factors that have typically served to influence the school's student culture materialized to rival the student council for eminence. The novelty of the school year waned by late November. The project saw a downturn in teacher participation just before the first academic marking period ended. Staff indifference to the project by some teachers became evident by the second phase of operation. And student attendance at project sessions started to ebb. Coincidentally, antisocial student behavior among middle grades students became more apparent. The very examples of student behavior that inspired this project intervention became evident when the formative challenges of maintaining its integrity were at their peak.

The impact of the project on incidents of misbehavior was evidently negated by day 100 of the project. And the prevailing culture of the school's learning environment at this setting proved a formidable obstacle to influence from this project. However, it does not stifle the argument for changing school decorum using the student council model.

Among others, the advent of four eighth grade classes and new teaching personnel appears to have been a contributing factor in the failure of this hypothesis to impact behavioral norms. The figures (shown in Table 4.1) comparing disciplinary incidents in year one (prior to intervention) do not include the greater volume of students introduced in the setting at the onset of the study in year two. There was evidence of teacher indifference to using student council as a tool for social intervention. And the project, while given freedom to mature organizationally, was not employed by administrators to aid in addressing incidents of misbehavior where it could have made a contribution. Finally, the formative stages of the project had not yet prepared student councilors for constructive interaction with their peers over potentially combative issues.

The project asked if student council impacts the culture of learning at the school. The study concluded that the culture of learning among student councilors was positively impacted. This fact was not only supported by the results netted from academic assessments in the first two quarters, but also by anecdotal evidence noted by this study. Communication lines between teachers, students and mentors were clearly open during the early phase of the project. An earnest effort to gather and follow up on student academic marks was accomplished. Some students voiced their concerns with difficult

teachers whom they perceived as hindering their achievement under the program. One student councilor [as documented in the portfolio] sent a poignant note to the project advisor describing her struggle to measure up to the aims of the project.

The project's implications for influencing the academic success of middle school students beyond the participant group remain unseen, however. The standard assessment for academic achievement, New Jersey Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA), examined prior to the advent of this project, was not available for reassessment by the time of its publication. Student council, still in its formative stages, was not a factor in the school's governance stratagem. Several possibilities for raising the eminence of the council, and to integrate it into the academic and social bulwark of the school, were identified by this study. Employing these strategies in subsequent years of the study will be most telling. Finally, several factors mitigating the impact of the project on social and academic achievement must be addressed in order to accurately discern its impact.

A third question raised by this study was, what were the formative challenges of organizing the student council, and what helped or hindered that organization? The study revealed how significantly the prevailing culture both contributed to stalled the objectives of the project. Aiding the formation and application of the study were the general enthusiasm of school administrators and staff. The additions of a full eighth grade, with ninety plus students, warranted a means of placating the behavior of middle grade students and ease the transition to a kindergarten through eighth grade school. Finally, the school had no recent history with a student council organization, or any that paralleled it,

other than the safety patrol. This left open the field of implementation. It made it possible for advisors to set and measure their own standards of achievement.

Table 5.1 – Competition for Student Allegiances

Academic Activities:	Social Activities:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spelling Bee • After School Learning Institute (Title I support programs) • Oratorical Contest • Academic tutoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boys basketball • Girls basketball • Golf • Choir • “Brother-2-Brother & Sister-2-Sister” Club (a teacher driven social/recreational initiative) • Multiple grade level fundraisers (5-8) • Parent Advisory Committee • Safety Patrol • Outside recreational and social commitments

Ironically, the same opportunities that propelled the study slowed it. Despite the enthusiasm for the project by school staff identified at the start, the project struggled to maintain direct support from teachers and other stakeholders after the first phase of its implementation. Less than a third of the way through the school year, a variety of activities emerged to compete for student allegiance and lure participation from teachers (See Table 5.1). Prior to the study, grade eight was limited to one self-contained class at the school. This year ninety additional students were added to the student body. Over

crowding and behavioral issues were accentuated in the setting. The last factor hindering the project was best characterized as benign indifference. The new-fangled approach to student management promulgated by this model was not optimized by school leaders. The novelty of the approach and the perception of ownership by a few advisors likely contributed to its underutilization in the management of behavioral issues among students.

Implications of the Study on Leadership Skills:

Many lessons on school leadership were provided by the study. The principles of developing and implementing strategic plans were learned. Student council was essentially an exercise in organic planning. The study manifested several procedures, practices, and rationale new for the setting. However, this project was essentially a model for influencing social interaction. To that end, effective communication and the inclusion of all members of the school community were lessons reinforced by this study. The ability to persuade stakeholders in the setting to aid in the application of this model was not taken for granted. A tactical approach to engaging students in the process of social development and culture building was a lesson learned through this process. The maintenance of academic standards and performance expectations were ideals confirmed under this study. Finally, patience and steadfastness with strategy were demonstrated facets of this project.

The Implications of the Study on Organizational Change:

The project for changing prevalent social norms among middle school students using the student council model holds several possibilities for organizational reform. It demonstrates the need to integrate the numerous strategies used by leaders in the setting for improving student performance. Broader and more consistent application of the model could effectively communicate school values and expectations to its audience. The study revealed how many divergent activities exist in the setting. These activities, while ostensibly addressing the concerns for children, create a frantic environment in the school and contribute to an air of discontinuity. When overlaid by routine administrative and classroom demands, these activities contribute to undermining the learning culture. Student council holds potential for re-rooting the school to its mission and eliminating redundant activities that distract from academic and social priorities.

Despite the challenges experienced in the implementation of the project, it successfully maintained its inherent orderliness and created a forum for an exchange of ideas unlike any other program serving the middle grades. This accomplishment alone implies its utility for bringing a host of student-centered activities under a single rubric for educational leaders to manage more efficiently. It holds further possibilities for fostering interdisciplinary activities among teachers, engaging the community for service in a systematic way and, at the very least, underscoring core curriculum content standards in social studies.

Further Study:

The project lends itself to the following topics for onward study. What was the trend of benchmark data? Did standardized test scores show any discernable improvement under the application of this model? Did incidents of misbehavior among middle school students continue their trend, or did they begin to decrease under the influence of this model? Did the project capture the enthusiasm of its audience and propagate civic virtues two and three years after its introduction? Was the project earnestly employed as a tool for student management as its potential demonstrates? Did the project foster comprehension of civic literacy, and maintain itself as the standard for student achievement and social interaction? If continued, each of these questions can be answered using of the data (thematic and otherwise), practices and material originating under this study.

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Appendices

Academic Assessment Tool

Student Council Schema

Student Council Rationale

Student Council Bylaws

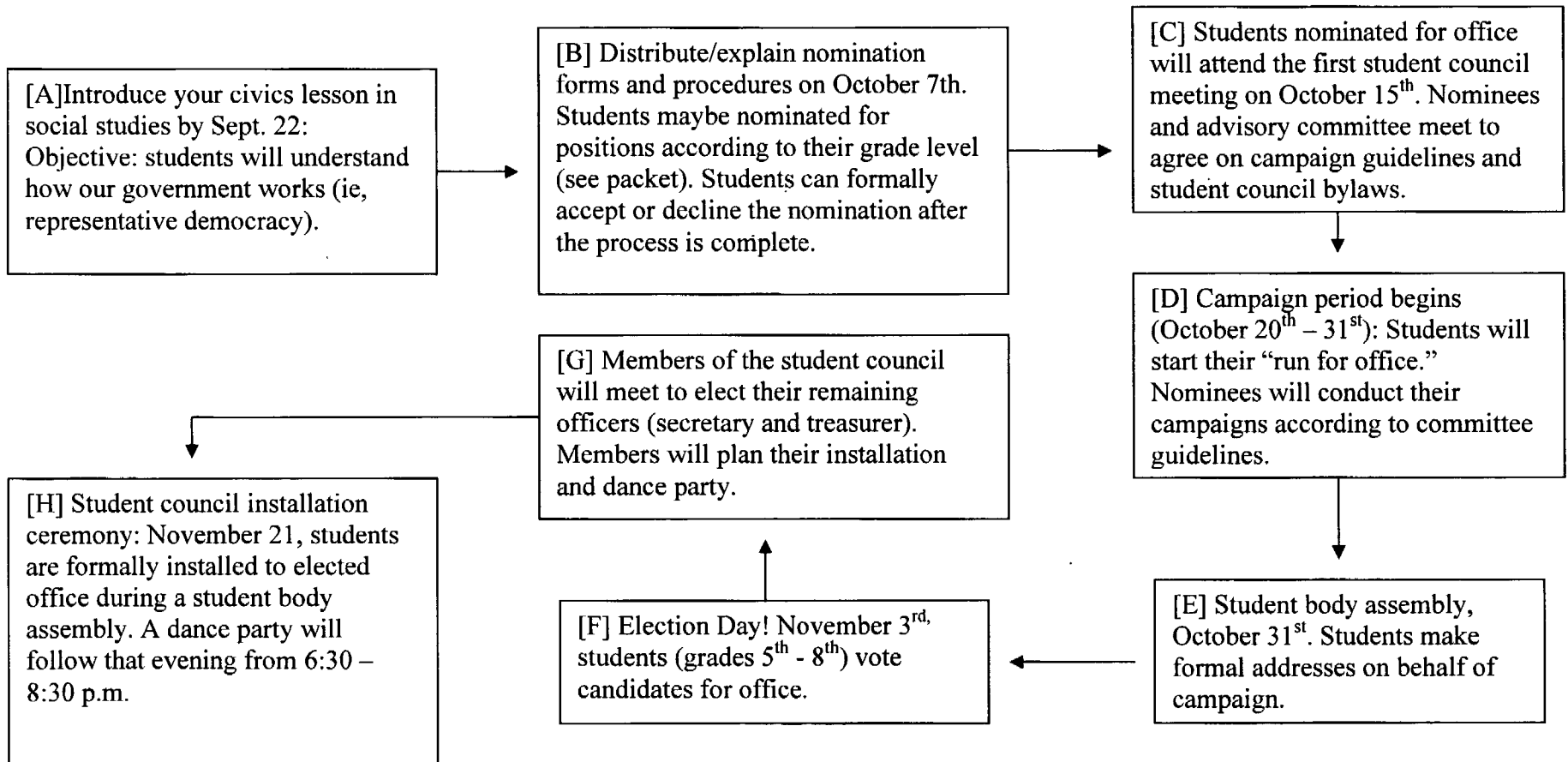
Resources for Teaching Civics

What Student Council Members Do

Do I Have The Civic Disposition?

Student Council Schema I

Grades 5th – 8th



Student Council Schema I

Grades 5th – 8th

(Rationale)

[A]

1. The intern seeks to learn if a student council organization will improve behavioral norms among middle grade students at his school.
2. Social Studies is the most accessible subject for teaching civics lessons.
3. Civics instruction is a New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standard (6.1).
4. Integrating student council with classroom instruction increases relevancy and provides a uniform means of raising interest among students.

[B]

1. Nominations are a means of enforcing democratic values.
2. Students receiving the greatest number of nominations will accept or decline their nomination. The student receiving the next highest number of nominations will then be permitted to accept or decline until all offices have at least one candidate.
3. The following officers will be seated on student council:
 - President (1) officer
 - Vice president (1) officer
 - Secretary (1) officer
 - Treasurer (1) officer
 - 8th grade representative (3)
 - 7th grade representative (2)
 - 6th grade representative (3)
 - 5th grade representative (3)

[Only 8th and 7th graders are permitted to hold positions as president or vice president on student council.]

[C]

1. Students will have the goals and objectives of student council reinforced.
2. Students will be addressed by administrator(s).
3. Students will benefit from support of the student council committee (PAC, Teachers, etc.)

[D]

1. This is a critical aspect of thesis.
2. A campaign creates excitement for the process; reinforces civics lessons; provides a student centered learning activity; and contributes to character building.
3. Candidates campaigning for office must identify a campaign sponsor (teacher).
4. Under the direction of their sponsor, the campaigner will make use of the following media devices:
 - Print media posters/banners/flyers
 - 1450 WMLK
 - Video tape
 - Homeroom period

- Informal communications (lunch period, etc.)
- Formal communications (assembly)

[E]

1. Candidates will use the assembly as a vehicle for their campaign to address the student body.
2. Activity is consistent with NJCCCS: 3.1 (speaking).

[F]

1. A popular vote will determine the outcome of the student council membership.
2. The voting process will be conducted by the student council committee.
3. The election will be certified by the building administrator.
4. The results will be announced on WMLK on November 3rd.

[G/H]

1. Formal installations of the officers on student council before their student body will capstone the election process.
2. A dance party gives the student council an opportunity to plan/work together and deliver to their student body a thing of value.
3. A dance party offers an incentive for the student body to maintain decorum.

Constitution of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex Student Council

Preamble: We the students of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex, hereby establish our Student Council in order to promote the development of self-discipline and good citizenship in each and every student.

Article I: Eligibility for Membership

Section 1- All students on Council must be good citizens. A Good Citizen:

- 1. Knows and obeys classroom, school, and bus rules.**
- 2. Follows safety rules and obeys safety patrol.**
- 3. Shows self respect.**
- 4. Is kind and courteous to others.**
- 5. Always tries to do his/her best work (has good work habits).**
- 6. Is responsible for his/her own behavior.**
- 7. Tries to prevent fighting or does not contribute to it.**
- 8. Is honest and fair.**
- 9. Practices good health habits.**
- 10. Tries to excel in the classroom.**

When a student is displaying the 10 rules of a good citizen, he/she is practicing self-discipline. He or she is in good standing with the Council

Article II – Operating Procedure:

Section 1 – Power for Making Rules

All rule-making power pertaining to the Student Council will be given to the officers thereof and to the principal of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex. Students from grades 5 through 8 will nominate their peers for Council. Election of officers will be by secret ballot and will take place by October 31st of each school year. Students in grades four through eight will vote for all officers to be elected.

Section 2 – President

The qualifications of the President will be that he or she is in the seventh or eighth grade, is a good citizen, is responsible, and maintains a “C” average or better in all subjects. The President will preside over all meetings of Council and will appoint committee chairpersons. This position will be held for the entire school year.

Section 3 – Vice President

The qualifications of the Vice President will be that he or she is in the seventh or eighth grade, is a good citizen, is responsible, and maintains a “C” average or better in all subjects. The Vice President will oversee the reporting of activities by the

various committees and clubs at the monthly Student Council meetings. The Vice president will stand in for the president in the event of absence or illness. This position will be held for the entire school year.

Section 4 – Secretary

The qualifications of the Secretary will be that he or she is the seventh or eighth grade, is a good citizen, is responsible, and maintains a “C” average or better in all subjects. The Secretary will record and read the minutes of Student Council meetings and keep the attendance file. This position will be held for the entire school year.

Section 5 – Treasurer

The qualifications of the Treasurer will be that he or she is in the seventh or eighth grade, is a good citizen, is responsible, and maintains a “C” average or better in all subjects. The Treasurer will perform bookkeeping functions for the Student Council. The treasurer is the chairperson of the fundraising activities for the Council and gives a report at each meeting. This position will be held for the entire school year.

Article III – Authorized Standing Committees

Section 1 – Health Committees:

The purpose of the Health Committee will be to promote good health and safety habits for the entire student body. The committee will be made up of students in fifth and sixth grade. The chairperson of the Health Committee will be selected from the Student Council by the President, but must be a representative from said grade level; or elected by the Council members at the discretion of the President. The chairperson will preside over the Committee meetings. The Committee and the advisor will determine what issues to cover in the best interest of the student body of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex. The Health Committee will present lessons about good health and/or safety to the primary grades (k – 4), and to middle grades (5 – 8) when appropriate. The Health Committee will meet once a month, make posters on safety and health issues, arrange for assemblies, and plan other activities in the best interest of the student body.

Section 2 –Safety Patrol

The purpose of the Safety Patrol will be to promote and enforce safety and self-discipline for the entire student body of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex. Members of the Safety Patrol will be fifth through eighth graders and will be good citizens. There will be one captain and two lieutenants. The captain and the lieutenants will be chosen by the other patrol members. Members will be assigned guard posts by the advisor. The captain will be responsible for making daily checks to see that posts are covered. The captain may place a substitute on an uncovered post from members who do not have an assignment should there be no one to cover

a post, the captain may assign a lieutenant or report the matter to the advisor. The captain or lieutenants will serve as a committee to report to the Student Council any problem relating to the safety or welfare of the student body.

Section 3 – Radio Club (1450 MLK or “What’s Happening Now Radio”)

The purpose of the Radio Club is to participate in delivering the morning announcements and daily broadcasts. Each month homeroom teachers will be asked to recommend students to the principal for the radio club. These students will be asked to prepare a weather report, a current event, or an item of special interest, such as a book report, poem, jokes, etc. These students will make the broadcast daily. The Radio Club advisor will designate a representative to serve on Student Council. The Radio Club representative on Council will be in grade six or seven.

Section 4 – Ecology Club

The purpose of the Ecology Club to promote a clean school environment, inside and outside. There will be a representative chosen from each homeroom to serve for the entire school year. Ecology Club will have projects to help the student body to learn about the ecology and to beautify Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School Complex. The chairperson will be elected by a member of the club. The chairperson will preside over all meetings.

Article IV – Authorized Activities

Section 1 – Good Citizens

During an awards assembly after each quarter, there will be recognition of good citizens. Citizenship awards will be presented by the Student Council President along with school administrators. Students receiving citizenship awards will be further recognized by the Student Council and awarded a small token at its next regularly scheduled meeting. The following items, for example, may be presented to the student: a certificate, a button, a craft, or a small token.

Section 2 – Other Activities

During the school year, students may suggest other activities that involve the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School Complex student body. Any activity for and by the students must be approved by a majority vote of the students and with the approval of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School Complex faculty and principal.

Article IV – Compliance

Section 1 – Probation

In the event that a member of Student Council fails to remain in good standing (i.e., for low grades), they will be subject to a probationary period not to exceed the next scheduled academic report (i.e., quarterly report card or interim report). During the probationary period the member will be advised to meet with his or her mentor daily. The member is prohibited from performing their duties on Council while on probation. The President, with the approval of the majority of members in attendance, will designate a member from Council to perform their duties during the period of probation. Attendance at Council meetings during probation is permitted; however, the member must abstain from voting.

Section 2 - Disqualification

In the event that a member fails to remain in good standing (i.e., for academic or social reasons), that member must be disqualified from Student Council. Said disqualification will be voted upon by the majority of members in attendance at the next regularly scheduled meeting following the incident.

Section 2 – Succession of officers

- 1. The President will be succeeded by the Vice President, if so willing**
- 2. The Vice President will be succeeded by the Secretary, if so willing**
- 3. The Secretary will be succeed by the Treasurer, if so willing**
- 4. The Treasurer and will be succeeded, after nomination, by a present Representative on the Student Council, if approved by majority vote.**
- 5. A vacancy by a Representative on Student Council, after October 31st, will be filled by a student from the grade level with recommendations from all of the teachers from that grade.**
- 6. All representatives must be approved by the majority of the Council members present.**

VI – Amendments

Section 1 –

Amendments to the bylaws must be approved by the majority of the Student Council members on roll at a regularly scheduled meeting.

Resources for Teaching Civics:

Below is a list of applicable references for reinforcing or teaching civics to you homeroom or class. They are merely suggestions. Use resources at you deem appropriate.

Ben's Guide to Government (for Kids): www.bensguide.gpo.gov

5th grade text: *Our United States*, Ginn Brudett Ginn -

- Reference, pg. 616-635
- Chapter 24 (Theme 4),
- pg. 574- 579

6th/7th grade text: *To See A World*, Houghton Mifflin -

- Chapter 27, Lesson 2 and 3,
- pg. 622 – 636
- Chapter 7, Lesson 1 (pg. 157)

8th grade text: *The American Nation*, Prentice Hall

- Chapter 8, pg. 244 – 245
- Reference, pg. 927 – 952

*Student Council Coordinating Committee
September 18, 2003*

For Homeroom Teachers...

What to Do About Student Council (Part I):

Discuss the “Civic Disposition” with your students during homeroom (consider using the transparency and overhead). There are three more supplements in your packet to aid you in a civics discussion should you choose to use them.

Ask students to consider whom they regard as a good nominee for “office.” Next, distribute one nomination form to each student who is present. Ask them to make their choice and return it to you that period.

Turn in your envelope to Mrs. Preston (or place in her box) by the end of the day. Students nominated for office will formally accept or reject their nomination through the PAC office. Those who accept will be announced to the student body on WMLK 1450. Those students will then identify a “mentor” and commence their campaign on Tuesday, October 14th.

Thank you, for helping!

Do I have the “Civic Disposition?”

Character traits:

1. Am I civil?
2. Am I honest?
3. Can I exercise self-restraint?
4. Am I tolerant of others?
5. Am I trustworthy?
6. Do I demonstrate compassion for others?
7. Do I exhibit a sense of duty?
8. Do I show a capacity for cooperation?
9. Do I see myself as loyal and courageous?
10. Am I willing to work for the common good?
11. Can I maintain a grade of “C” or better in each of my course subjects?
12. Do I want to be seen as a leader of my peer group?

If you answered yes to these character traits than you may have what it takes! Seek nomination for student council.

*Student Council Coordinating Committee
Monday, September 22, 2003*

Biographical Data

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