

Summer 1977

The Effects of an Active Student Council on Total Student Body Behavior

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THE EFFECTS ON AN ACTIVE STUDENT COUNCIL
ON TOTAL STUDENT BODY BEHAVIOR

A Research Project
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
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August, 1977

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THE EFFECTS OF AN ACTIVE STUDENT BODY
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This paper represents a study of the activation of a student council and its effects on total school climate. The activation program was outlined with specific activities described in detail. The study was designed to provide for a comparison of predetermined indicators which were measured before and after the activation took place.

Conclusions included positive observations made during the course of the study and recommendations for implementing more student involvement in the ongoing business of the school.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Most principals don't seem to understand that the student council is the perfect institution for a colony of slaves. They often ask me in effect: "I really don't want to give the students any power, but I want to make student council more effective." A school always gets the student council it deserves. If you want to keep the students in bondage, keep the council as it is (14:17).

The above statement helps to illuminate a concern the present writer had about the effectiveness of student councils which have been stifled by school administrators. It was the intent of this study, therefore, to involve a heretofore inactive student body in the ongoing business of the school and report any significant changes in school climate.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose was to investigate the comparative effects on student body behavior of an active student council with those of a previously inactive student council.

Limitations of the Study

The results of this study cannot legitimately be generalized to other schools since the writer surveyed only selected members of the regular teaching staff and student body during the school years 1975-76 and 1976-77 at Highlands Middle School in Kennewick, Washington.

Importance of the Study

It is important that students learn to live and take an active part in their society. The student council may provide this opportunity. Perhaps if students were encouraged to express themselves freely and take an active part in the management of their school, they would become better citizens. It is important, therefore, that a study be made to ascertain whether or not a total school attitude can be changed by activating the student council.

Procedures Used in Collecting and Analyzing Data

School teaching staff and members of the student body were asked to respond to a specific set of questions. The same questionnaire was used at the beginning of the school year. The data collected through these two questionnaires has been used for this comparative study.

DEFINITION OF TERMS USED

Core Classes

For the purposes of this study core classes are defined as two-period classes in which language arts and social studies are taught.

Middle School

The middle school generally encompasses grades five through eight; however, in Kennewick the middle school encompasses only grades six, seven and eight. The Kennewick grade arrangement is accepted for the middle school in this study.

Student Council

The student council is comprised of elected students and provides for student participation in school government.

Student Government

Student government is a process of allowing the student body to take an active part in the ongoing business and activities of the school.

Student Referrals

Student referrals are written notices sent by the teacher to the office in instances where student discipline or counseling is necessary.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature reviewed in this study was limited to that which dealt specifically with problems encountered in student councils and their possible solutions.

Research was conducted exclusively at the Bouillon Library located on the Central Washington State College campus. At the outset of study there appeared to be a vast amount of available information regarding student councils. However, research revealed a large number of sources which were either repetitious of previous works or unavailable. The following indexes and abstracts were consulted in the research effort:

1. Education Index, Vol. 17 - 46.
2. Current Index to Journals in Education, Vol. 1 - 7.
3. Dissertation Abstracts, Vol. 28 - 36.
4. Masters Abstracts, Vol. 5 - 13.
5. Research in Education, Vol. 4 - 10.
6. Educational Resources Information Center, 057 - 110.

The subject of student council effectiveness appears to have been ignored in recent years, although many studies were conducted during the 1960's. Due to the lack of recent research, articles have been relied upon to give an up-to-date background on the subject.

Advent of Student Unrest

The 1960's saw students beginning to express dissatisfaction with the role student councils played in school management. Keith (20:67) stated,

The student revolutions of the late 1960's, however, indicate that keeping the lid on student activities may only mean that when the lid blows it will be especially loud and painful. The effort to enforce "sandbox government" can lead to "no government." And even during periods of apparent harmony, it is those students who feel dominated or oppressed by careful administrative policies who will be the most constant source of friction and trouble.

It appeared as though educators were spending most of their time on individuals and individual subject areas rather than on improving total school attitude (30). In the process, student council organizations had broken down for a number of reasons. Lines of communications regarding student councils were poor. Little reading of current literature was taking place; therefore, those contributions to the councils' work were limited. Above all many of those who were involved with the councils were satisfied with the status quo and not concerned with potential growth within the organizations (23).

The foment and change of the times provided climate of change conducive to increased involvement of students in their school government. However, before student involvement could be changed, educators themselves needed a change of philosophy. They had to take a more active role in student council proceedings. No longer were they dealing with

a passive clientele. The young, questioning the establishment, demanded that their needs be met in effective compromise. Positive, regular, staff-pupil contact had become essential elements in alleviating student unrest.

Concern for this change in student attitude was beginning to grow when Bowman (3:28) listed the following guidelines:

1. Show concern for students and be willing to listen to their problems which may mirror their needs.
2. Study and seek together the causes of their problems as well as solutions.
3. Include students in teacher-administrative plans for the life of the school, considering the plans which do make a difference to students.

Many schools were successful in their attempts to settle the unrest. One such situation was observed by Della-Dora (9:226) who wrote:

Some of these newer practices are more sophisticated means of manipulating students or are simply intended to "keep the lid on" but many are genuine changes in outlook among administrators to participate in school-life decision making. For example, I was selected for my present position through a process which included three interviewing teams: parent, staff and students in grades six, seven and eight. The students asked the toughest and some of the most relevant questions.

All schools did not allow student participation to the same degree; nevertheless, many did start allowing students to take an active part in social, academic and administrative decision making. The consequence was the

improvement of the human environment which facilitated learning within those schools which encouraged student involvement (17:53).

Purpose of Student Participation in School Management

Many factors led up to the involvement of students in school management. In 1973 Gainor (12:129) proclaimed:

One of the most effect vehicles for students to voice their opinion is a "Student Council" or some form of student government. The Student Council is composed of three important ingredients: students, teachers, and the principal. With this team working together it is exciting to put democracy in action. A Student Council should be able to suggest and assist in the implementation of extra-curricular and supportive educational programs. Some examples of these council functions would be to encourage and coordinate such student groups as library, athletics, school beautiful committees, liason committee that meets with the faculty and an assemblies committee. Active elementary school students given leadership opportunities and a chance to express ideas can make contributions to the life of the school and thus enjoy their young school years.

Lovetree (22:132) sees the reasons for involving students in an even broader sense. To illustrate he suggests:

1. It taps a source for new ideas.
2. People are likely to be more supportive of policies and programs that they feel they have shared in determining.
3. Participation in the democratic process is both educational and beneficial.
4. It allows others to get an inside view of the decision-making process. It gives them a greater understanding of the limitations that reality imposes on a decision maker.
5. It gives the principal another perspective on the operation of the school.

6. It has a tendency to make faculty groups and students more responsive, more courteous and more logical when dealing with each other.
7. It adds weight to recommendations that go to bodies outside of the school.
8. It provides a forum for "reality testing" ideas.
9. It provides a process wherein potentially explosive issues can be defused and given adequate and deliberate consideration.
10. It allows the principal to relate with students on a level other than disciplinary.
11. It complies with the spirit of court decisions which imply student involvement and determination of practices and procedures in the school.

Possibly the two most important concepts involved in student government are those of the concept of organization and the ability to work in a democracy. Defining the roles of the advisor, committees and members provide the organizational skills (2). Learning to use parliamentary procedure, conducting and evaluating meetings teaches the values of the democratic process (28).

Thus, varied factors can and do act as a system of reward for everyone involved in the process. Human nature dictates that when rewards are achievable they prove to be reinforcers. Thus, if the process is desirable and the rewards forthcoming, then behavior modification should take place (7).

Success of Student Participation

Student participation in the ongoing business of a school offers many opportunities for student and staff

members to work together. Through this experience they learn to live with each other through situations involving acceptance, concern for one another while exercising reasonable, constructive freedom (14:18). Consequently an active student body presents the opportunity for both groups, faculty and students, to grow.

The spin-off of such growth has been witnessed in the San Francisco Unified School District. The district had been plagued by vandalism losses averaging \$40,000 a year for several years. Through the involvement of students in an active program the losses were reduced to slightly over \$3,000 in a one year period of time. Student involvement succeeded where security systems, patrols, moral preachments and pleas for cooperation had long ceased to have any effect on the problem (34:24).

At Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut the whole concept of Student Council was thrown out. Replacing it was the Staples Governing Board which gave students a voice in cooperative educational decision-making. The staff and student body of Staples felt that the two-year-old organization had done wonders in bringing together teachers and students goals, philosophies and ideals. No longer did either group consider itself in opposition with the other, but rather shared the feeling of working together toward common goals (17:49).

Active student government has made an impact on society to the point of acquiring its own legal status. These councils operate as a separate entity of their respective school boards assuming "permissive powers" to perform any lawful function with board approval. Liability for the actions of these organizations rests with an agency relationship between the association, its members or employees, or on negligent supervision by district employees (25).

Since the liability for the actions of student councils now rests with the educator, it is to his advantage to supervise them closely and give direction when requested or needed. In doing so student interaction and acceptance will increase (11).

Not all student involvement in school management has been successful. A study of thirty schools by Duggal (10) in 1969 showed that student participation created new aspirations as well as new student frustrations. Students were too often unable to cope with the responsibilities involved in policy and decision-making. In the process of trying to make changes and implement those changes they found themselves bogged down by disagreement among themselves.

Other factors have helped to contribute to the demise of many student councils. Money problems plague these organizations which once relied heavily on fund-raising

projects for income. Such projects have become an unfavorable aspect of council life, consequently, unless alternatives were found the council became inactive. Also, the failure of many existing councils to formally evaluate their present programs led to their virtual nonexistence. An evaluation is imperative if the personnel, faculty and students are to keep track of past, present and future objectives and achievements (32).

Perhaps the student council can be used as an effective tool for modifying student behavior. Some instances have shown success in the past. However, there are no two organizations which function alike. The ratio of successful councils to those which have failed appears to be about equal. However, the barriers to success, though many, do not appear at this point to be overwhelming.

Chapter 3

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF STUDY

Study Setting

This study took place over a two year period beginning with the 1975-76 school year at Highlands Middle School in Kennewick, Washington. Highlands serves approximately 950 students from a slightly higher than average socio-economic background. Approximately 200 of the total student body are transient students due to the large amount of new construction in the area.

The A.S.B. officers at Highlands are made up of a student body president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer which are chosen through a popular ballot by the total student body. The only requirements are that the officers be students of "C" or better scholastic standing, the president be an eighth grade student and the treasurer a sixth grade student. The remainder of the student council is composed of one elected representative from each homeroom.

Prior to the 1975-76 school year Highlands' student councils had met only two or three times during the entire school year. These meetings were held in order to fulfill the state requirements regarding student approval of A.S.B. budgets and expenditures. The students were asked to voice their approval in order that it could be recorded

in A.S.B. records. Input from students regarding social activities, future A.S.B. expenditures and the ongoing business of the school were not entertained.

Harry Clemmons, Highlands' Assistant Principal for four years prior to the 1975-76 school year, noted:

"Our Associated Student Body prior to the 1975-76 school year was nothing more than a 'rubber stamp' approval committee for A.S.B. expenditures already encumbered."

Evaluation and Analysis at Outset of Study

The evaluative instrument used in this study may be found in Appendix A. The instrument was constructed by the Kennewick School District Action Team for Drug Awareness. This team was comprised of twenty-four secondary counselors, teachers and students with equal representation in each group from grades six through twelve. Its purpose was to identify major student related problems within the district at each building level. This writer was a member of that committee, and, along with student representatives from Highlands, was responsible for collecting and reporting data from our school. The initial data were collected during the second week of the 1975-76 school year from a total of 824 students. The final data were collected during the second to the last week of the 1976-77 school year.

The other major data source for the evaluation was a study of written student discipline referrals to the office.

An ongoing record was kept of these referrals during the 1975-76 and 1976-77 school years. The information was categorized yearly and results reported herein.

Initial Results of Study

The initial results of the instrument indicated that seventy-two percent of the respondents felt that theft was the major problem at Highlands. Vandalism was ranked second with sixty-eight percent and inter student problems third with sixty-seven percent identifying this area as a concern. Absenteeism (fifty-nine percent), student apathy (fifty-four percent) and smoking (fifty-four percent) were ranked fourth, fifth and sixth respectively as problems identified by respondents.

TABLE I

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED DURING THE 1975-76 SCHOOL YEAR
FROM 824 INITIAL STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE
EVALUATIVE INSTRUMENT

	Percent Identifying Problem
Theft.	72
Vandalism.	68
Problems Between Students and Students	67
Absenteeism.	59
Smoking.	54
Student Apathy	54
Need to Update School Rules.	50
Problems Between Administrators and Students	48
Problems Between Teachers and Students	48
Self Image of Students	47
Problems at Home	45
No One to Talk To.	44
Need for Adults to Talk to About Problems.	43
Use of Alcohol	42
Use of Marijuana	38
Teacher Apathy	36
Use of Other Drugs	34

A total of 768 student referrals were processed through the principal's office during the 1975-76 school year. Of this total over thirty-one percent were related to problems between students. Absenteeism (twenty-eight percent) and vandalism (twenty-three percent) ranked a close second and third respectively. Eight percent of the total referrals dealt with smoking problems while only five percent were conflicts between teachers and students.

TABLE II

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED FROM 768 STUDENT REFERRALS
DURING THE 1975-76 SCHOOL YEAR

	Percent Occurrence
Problems Between Students and Students	31.5
Absenteeism (Truancy)	28
Vandalism	23
Smoking	8
Problems Between Teachers and Students	5
Use of Alcohol	2
Problems Between Administrators and Students	1
Theft	1
Use of Marijuana5
Use of Other Drugs	0

STUDENT MANAGEMENT CHANGES INITIATED

The beginning of the 1975-76 school year saw the need to elect new A.S.B. officers for the ensuing year. No changes were made in the process of campaigning or election over previous years. As in the past, the election resulted in the most socially popular students being elected to office.

Immediately following the election of officers, four hour-long sessions were held with the officers during which the writer discussed the following topics:

1. Basic parliamentary procedure.
2. Responsibilities of the total student body.
3. Responsibilities of each of the officers.

Three of the four new officers were members of the 1974-75 student council. They were amazed that their new positions were to carry with them anything other than a title. They appeared reluctant at first to assume their new responsibilities; however, as time wore on they accepted them more and more readily.

During the school year sixteen meetings were held with the total A.S.B. body. Along with acting on A.S.B. business as required by law, the council decided to start tackling some of the problem areas within the school. The first area was that of the eighth grade girls' restroom where the majority of the smoking offenses were occurring. The environment in this room had deteriorated to the point

where those who did not smoke would not dare enter. Doors were broken off the stalls; mirrors had been torn down; toilet seats were scarred with cigarette burns and the walls were covered with bits of graffiti. Several attempts by school officials to clean up this area had only resulted in their work being undone in short order.

The word went out to the total student body through A.S.B. representatives that this area was to be restored. It was also pointed out that following its restoration students themselves would monitor the area to prevent further destruction. Christmas vacation found school district crews painting walls, replacing stall doors and toilet seats. Students were involved in buying and installing floor length mirrors and removing cigarette stains and clever sayings from windows and the floor.

When school reconvened the restroom was in top condition. Though several conflicts resulted between the previous occupants and the reformers, the reformers gradually began to win. The end result has been that incidents of vandalism and smoking in this area are almost nonexistent at the time of this writing.

Bookstore

While work was in progress on the restroom, other A.S.B. committees were at work in other problem areas. The student bookstore which had been ailing for several years was restocked with new items, managed and maintained by students.

As a result of student management, its gross sales rose from slightly over \$500 during the 1974-75 school year to \$3,200 during the 1975-76 school year.

Sock Hops

The sock hops were taken over by students with respect to planning, lining up supervision and cleanup. The frequency of dances increased to one per month. Admission was charged to cover the cost of dance contest prizes, music and to generate some additional A.S.B. income. Students have accepted and carried out these responsibilities without question. In the past two years there have been no problems arising as a result of school dances.

The 1976-77 school year saw the new A.S.B. officers attending the Student Leadership Conference held on the Central Washington State College campus. They gleaned many new ideas from fellow participants as well as from those who put on the conference.

Other activities this year include:

- 1) Designing and buying an outside readerboard sign.
- 2) Raising general A.S.B. funds from candy sales, bookstore, popcorn sales and a new candy vending machine.
- 3) Planning and carrying out a spring party, complete with live band, for departing eighth grade students.

Harry Clemmons, principal of Highlands Middle School, remarked at the end of the 1976-77 school year:

"Thanks to the activation of Highlands' A.S.B. we now have students who feel that they have a responsible part in their education as well as in the business of the school."

Results of 1976-77 Study of the Evaluation Instrument

The same evaluation instrument which was developed by the Kennewick School District Action Team for Drug Awareness was used to collect data at the end of the school year to get a comparison with the response at the beginning of the year.

The results show that theft, indicated by seventy-two percent in the 1975-76 survey as being the greatest problem, continued to be a problem of equal magnitude with only thirty-two percent not identifying it in the second survey. The most dramatic positive changes appear to be in the areas of vandalism and student apathy. The initial results indicated that sixty-eight percent felt that vandalism was a problem while fifty-four percent felt that student apathy was prevalent. The results of the second survey indicated sixty-four percent feeling vandalism no longer existed and seventy-eight percent feeling that student apathy no longer presented a problem. Problems between students continued to be identified with sixty-seven percent responding in the first survey compared with forty-nine percent indicating non-existence in the 1976-77 survey. The feeling that absenteeism was a major problem by fifty-nine percent in the first

survey remained virtually unchanged with forty percent still feeling the problem did not exist. Seventy-eight percent of those polled in 1976-77 felt that student apathy was no longer a problem. This compares with fifty percent feeling the problem existed in the initial survey.

TABLE III

RESULTS OF 873 RESPONSES TO THE EVALUATIVE INSTRUMENT
DURING THE 1976-77 SCHOOL YEAR

	Percent Identifying Progress
Student Apathy	78
Smoking	74
Use of Other Drugs	72
Problems Between Administrators and Students	66
No One to Talk To	64
Use of Marijuana	64
Vandalism	64
Need for Adults to Talk to About Problems	60
Teacher Apathy	56
Problems at Home	54
Use of Alcohol	51
Need to Update School Rules	50
Self Image of Students	50
Problems Between Students and Students	49
Problems Between Teachers and Students	46
Absenteeism (Truancy)	40
Theft	36

Results of the 1976-77 Study of Student Referrals

One of the most important indicators of success here is the fact that the number of referrals to the principal's office is down from last year by ten percent. Problems between students which comprised over thirty-one percent of the referrals during the first year of study declined to twenty-eight percent during the second year. Twenty-eight percent of the referrals during the initial year of study dealt with absenteeism compared to forty-two percent the second year. This increase may be attributed in part to a tightening of attendance procedures by school personnel. Another area of increased incidence occurred in problems arising between teachers and students. The number of referrals here increased from five percent during the 1975-76 school year to seven percent during the 1976-77 school year. Vandalism declined during the course of the study from twenty-three percent to thirteen percent. Similarly, incidents of smoking reported to the office declined from eight percent to one percent.

TABLE IV

RESULTS OF 691 STUDENT REFERRALS
DURING THE 1976-77 SCHOOL YEAR

	Percent Occurrence
Absenteeism (Truancy)	42
Problems Between Students and Students	28
Vandalism.	13
Problems Between Teachers and Students	7
Theft.	4
Use of Marijuana	2
Use of Other Drugs	1.5
Smoking.	1
Use of Alcohol	1
Problems Between Administrators and Students5

Chapter IV

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that there exists a possibility of a direct correlation between more positive student behavior and the activation of the student council. The following positive observations were noted at Highlands Middle School during the course of this study:

1. The number of referrals to the office for student misbehavior declined by ten percent during the course of the study.
2. Students appeared to feel more responsibility toward their school and its staff by readily accepting responsibilities for improving the physical climate and maintaining these improvements.
3. School pride increased with respect to the physical plant, scholastic and extracurricular programs. This change is evidenced by a ten percent decrease in incidents of vandalism and a thirty-two percent decrease in the feeling of student apathy.
4. Students took some of the load off the job of the school's administrators by making themselves responsible for supervision and planning of social

events, policing areas of the physical plant for smoking and vandalism problems and being more responsible citizens which resulted in fewer referrals to the office.

5. The total school climate appeared to be growing healthier as a result of the combination of the above four observations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The author feels the following recommendations are in order for those who wish to attempt to improve school climate through their student council.

1. Student council officers should be elected in the spring of the year for the next school year in order to be ready to initiate their business immediately.
2. Responsibilities and duties of officers must be made known to those interested in the office before a final decision is made to run for election.
3. Student councils should be encouraged to meet a minimum of once per month during the school year.
4. Student council officers need to be directly involved in planning the agenda for every meeting.
5. The student body should be allowed to plan for social functions on its own and be made accountable to one staff member for approval.

6. Orientation of new student council members must be held with respect to duties, responsibilities and elementary parliamentary procedure before conducting the first business meeting.
7. It is important to foster the understanding between the principal and his or her faculty that students need and deserve to be actively involved in regular student council business.

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APPENDIX A
SAMPLE EVALUATION INSTRUMENT

KENNEWICK SCHOOL DISTRICT #17

Kennewick, Washington

The following are student-teacher indicated areas of concern within the Kennewick Public School system. Please indicate below the degree to which you feel each area is presently a problem.

PLEASE RETURN TODAY!

Percent
Occurrence

Not a Problem
A Problem

-
- 1) SMOKING
 - 2) USE OF ALCOHOL
 - 3) USE OF OTHER DRUGS
 - 4) USE OF MARIJUANA
 - 5) ABSENTEEISM (TRUANCY)
 - 6) VANDALISM
 - 7) THEFT
 - 8) NO ONE TO TALK TO
 - 9) PROBLEMS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS
 - 10) PROBLEMS BETWEEN ADMINISTRATORS AND STUDENTS
 - 11) PROBLEMS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND STUDENTS
 - 12) NEED TO UPDATE SCHOOL RULES
 - 13) NEED FOR ADULTS TO TALK TO ABOUT PROBLEMS
 - 14) PROBLEMS AT HOME
 - 15) STUDENT APATHY
 - 16) TEACHER APATHY
 - 17) SELF IMAGE OF STUDENTS