

Student Council Democracy Guide

A student-to-student guide to stronger student democracy

Introduction

This booklet is made by students – for students.

It was created through an Erasmus+ project between students from five NEXT high schools in the Copenhagen area in Denmark and Tuusula College in Finland. We worked together on these questions:

- How can student councils:
 - get more students involved?
 - actually have real influence on their school?

We quickly realized one thing:

There's no single "right" way to do student democracy.

But there are a lot of good ways.

This guide gives you concrete ideas, tools, and exercises you can use directly in your student council – whether you're just getting started or already up and running.

Chapter 1: What is student democracy – and why does it matter?

What is this about?

Student democracy is about students actually having a say. Not just on paper – but in real life.

Why does it matter?

School just feels better when you're actually being heard. Everyday school life makes more sense when students have real influence on it. When we feel like we can actually shape our school, we also take more responsibility and ownership – and we care more about both the school and each other. Engaged students strengthen the community, and a strong community makes both learning and daily life better.

A strong student democracy usually starts with a strong student council. And it's important that it's not just a small group talking among themselves, but that they actually involve and engage the rest of the students too.

You also need to think about how your student council is put together. How do you make sure it actually represents all students – especially at a big school? It's hard to run effective meetings if 50 people are sitting around the table, but at the same time, representation suffers if not all classes are included.

So think about how your student council can be both effective and representative. Should all study programs be included? Different year groups? Minorities? That's up to you to figure out.

Typical challenges

Student democracy often struggles with attitudes like:

"It's always the same people talking" or "the student council doesn't really change anything anyway."

In other words, some students see it as a closed club that they don't really understand.

That's why it's super important to build a culture where you actually talk about how you want your school to be – and how to get there. This means constantly making your work visible and being transparent about decisions. And in general, explaining why student participation matters.

What you can do

- Be clear about how your student council is chosen. Is it by class votes? School-wide elections? Are there rules about representation?
- Build a culture where you regularly communicate what you're doing (and what you've actually changed) – through meeting notes, school meetings, social media, open meetings, etc.
- Create a visible yearly plan (a "year wheel") with meetings and activities
- Use surveys (e.g. Google Forms) to get input from students
- Stay in regular contact with classes and bring their input back to the council

Exercise: From complaining to action (15 min)

1. What annoys you at school? Write down 3 things
2. Pick one
3. Figure out:
 - Who do you need to talk to?
 - What's the first step?
 - How will you involve other students before, during, and after?

Chapter 2: A student council that works

What is this about?

If a student council is going to work, it needs to be rooted in the student body – and it needs some structure. Otherwise, it can lose credibility and just stall.

Why does it matter?

Once you've figured out how your council should be set up, you need to organize it properly so things actually happen. Good structure means tasks get done, more people take responsibility, and the council is taken more seriously by both students and school management.

Typical challenges

Without structure, things quickly fall apart. The same few people end up doing everything, while others don't really have a role. Meetings become messy and confusing, and good ideas never turn into action because no one follows up.

What you can do

Roles:

- Talk about which roles you need and divide them (chairperson, vice chair, note-taker, treasurer, SoMe/communication, etc.)

Meetings and culture:

- Make a meeting agenda template and prepare before every meeting
- Set time for each point so meetings don't drag on
- Write short summaries after meetings and make them available to everyone
- Create simple rules for respectful discussion (no interrupting, everyone gets heard, etc.)

Between meetings:

- Follow up on decisions – someone should always be responsible
- Make sure classes are updated on what's happening

Exercise: Fix your setup (60 min)

1. Assign roles
2. Decide how you make decisions
3. Create a simple meeting template
4. Make basic rules for meetings and respectful discussion

Chapter 3: From idea to real influence

What is it about?

How an idea goes from “it would be cool if...” to something that is actually changed.

Why is it important?

This is about how an idea goes from being something like “it would be cool if...” to something that actually becomes a change at the school. Because that is where it all makes sense – when you can see that what you are working on actually leads to something.

If ideas remain just talk, people quickly lose motivation. On the other hand, when you succeed in making things happen, you show that the student council works, and then more people will want to get involved and participate.

Typical challenges

But it is not always that easy. Many ideas die along the way because no one really knows what the next step is or who is responsible for what. At the same time, it can be difficult to move forward if you do not have good contact with the school management. Therefore, it is important that you have a plan for how you work with your ideas – so they do not just remain ideas, but actually become something.

What you can do

- Invite the school management to a meeting where you establish a structure for how the student council works with ideas. Who should you contact when an idea has been approved? Should there be a contact person in the management? What can you expect in terms of budget?
- Between meetings:
 - Follow up on what you decide. There must be someone responsible for each point
 - Think about how you follow up with classes
 - Think about how you communicate results to students (classes, assemblies, posters, etc.)

Exercise: Idea → plan → action (15 min)

1. Choose an idea
2. Decide:
 - Who does what?
 - When?
 - What is the goal?
 - How will you communicate it to students afterwards?

Chapter 4: Get more people involved

What is it about?

How to engage more students so it is not just the same 5 people deciding what gets discussed and what is “right”. On large schools with many different students, study programmes and types of students, it is especially important to think about representation. In some cases, it makes sense to have several people in the leadership or executive group so that more perspectives are included.

Why is it important?

A strong student democracy is about hearing as many voices as possible and discussing real opportunities and ideas for improvement. The more perspectives involved, the better the results.

In practice, however, not everyone gets heard – especially quieter students. Therefore, it is important to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels safe to participate and share their opinion, even if they are more introverted.

The more support the student council has from students, the better the solutions – and the more legitimacy the council gains.

Typical challenges

The student council is often challenged by the fact that the same people participate. Members may also be very similar. Minority students may not be represented, and quieter students may not feel included. It may also not be clear how to join or how to submit ideas.

What you can do

- Create a suggestion box for ideas and wishes. Use social media actively to show what you are working on
- Conduct surveys:
 - For example, once per semester with questions about wellbeing, facilities, teaching, social life, etc.
- Hold open meetings:
 - Invite all interested students
 - Possibly collaborate with management so each class sends representatives
- Use anonymous responses:
 - Especially for sensitive topics
- Organise events and workshops:
 - Use alternative formats like dialogue cards, quizzes, etc.

Exercise: Quick campaign (10 min)

1. Find a problem many students know
2. Make a plan:
 - How do you make it visible?

- How do you involve students?

Chapter 5: Collaboration and good debate

What is it about?

In chapter 4, the focus was on getting more people involved. In this chapter, it is about creating a good debate culture where everyone feels safe to participate.

How do you work well together in a student council – especially when you are different and do not always agree?

Why is it important?

When you actively work on how you communicate and what values your discussions are based on, it leads to a more positive debate culture where it is okay to disagree.

It is important to develop a shared understanding of good debate and interaction so that everyone feels heard and respected, and so conflicts do not escalate. A good discussion culture strengthens the community.

Typical challenges

Some members may dominate discussions and define what is “right”, shutting others down. Disagreements can become personal instead of focusing on the issue. This can make fewer people want to participate, which harms both the student council and the school.

What you can do

- Create a document with rules for behaviour in the student council:
 - Describe values, tone and expectations
 - Include rules about discussion, turn-taking, respect, rumours, digital behaviour, etc.
- Use active listening – try to actually understand each other
- Consider how decisions are made (consensus vs voting)
- Use a neutral meeting facilitator if needed

Exercise: Make your own rules (15 min)

1. Create 5 rules for good behaviour
2. Discuss what happens if rules are broken
3. Agree on how to ensure a safe environment

Chapter 6: Keeping it going

What is it about?

This is about how to make sure the student council does not just run for half a year and then stop. It often happens that new members feel like they have to start from scratch because nothing has been passed on.

If you want a strong student council, you need continuity – building on what has already been done instead of starting over every time.

Why is it important?

With good structure and handover, new members can quickly get started and build on what already works. You improve over time and avoid repeating mistakes. It also keeps motivation higher because progress is visible.

Typical challenges

Knowledge and experience disappear when people leave. New members are unsure about their role. Projects are not completed. Work can slowly stop without anyone noticing.

What you can do

- Create a yearly plan:
 - Plan meetings, activities and focus areas
- Save summaries, ideas and experiences in one place
- Ensure proper handover between old and new members
- Assign people responsible for maintaining overview
- Follow up on projects
- Celebrate your results – even small ones

Exercise: Plan your year (20 min)

1. Create an overview of the school year:
 - Meetings
 - Events
 - Goals
2. Discuss how to ensure good handover
3. Decide who is responsible for documentation

Conclusion

A strong student democracy does not require everything to be perfect. It just requires that someone is willing to do something – and that there are reasonable structures around the engagement.

Start small. Get some wins. Build from there.

And most importantly: Make sure more voices are heard.

Good luck with your student council work at your school!