

Raised voices

How often do we really listen to what our students have to say, and take it seriously? **Danni Almond** explains how doing just that is making a real difference in schools throughout the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham...



The distinct perspectives and actions of young people throughout schools have increasingly become of interest to educators, school leaders, parents and students themselves. The 'Pupil Voice' is giving students the ability to influence learning to include policies and programmes; therefore, it is short sighted of school leaders not to provide a suitable forum where their collective issues and views can be aired – and more importantly, heard.

The Pupil Voice initiative is one of the most important to be pushed forth by All Saints Catholic School in Dagenham, where I am LEC manager and pupil voice coordinator, in recent years. Raising the profile and effectiveness of the pupil voice amongst staff, students and possibly within the community has become a key priority. With this in mind, I decided to create the Student Council Summit, an initiative that would allow the student councils to come together and discuss their processes, ideas and internal initiatives.

And wonderfully, what started as a day of networking has grown to become an annual event sponsored by Student Councils UK. This year it brought together approximately 70 representatives from local schools; Helen Jenner, the director of Children's Services; Chris Owens from the Children's Services Select Committee; and a number of local councillors.

This Pupil Voice encourages students to voice their opinions, concerns and suggestions, which are largely insightful and innovative. We had two main objectives when we introduced the summit: the first was to build the skills of



student leaders and refine their knowledge base on how to run an effective school council. The second was to start a communication network between schools in the borough with the hopes of building relationships and improving individual school practice.

Where to start?

We got in touch with the nine secondary schools in the borough requesting that they send a maximum of ten students each. Within a few days, eight had confirmed their attendance.

We also decided to reach out to the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD) for advice. They were incredibly supportive of the initiative and put us in touch with the Children's Services Select Committee (CSSC). Comprising 19 councillors, the committee's role is to investigate Children's Services and services used by children to ensure that things are as good as they can possibly be.

The chair of the Barking and Dagenham (BAD) Youth Forum, and a co-opted member of CSSC, had previously



reasoning and the essential nature of adapting to a changing context. Before lunch there were two more workshops: Talk Vs Discussion, which highlighted the differences between informal 'talk' and formal 'discussion', and Effective Meeting and Planning Strategies, which examined meeting strategies and also aided students' understanding of how to create and follow a

asked the committee to review Student Voice as he had been concerned about inconsistent approaches across the borough. They agreed that the review should take the form of evidence gathering with a report of recommendations written on completion. The report would be presented to the council's Cabinet and Assembly for approval, and all cited organisations would be asked to respond to it. Realising the importance of our summit and the potential it had to bring genuine student concerns to the forefront, the CSSC asked if they could attend as part of their evidence gathering.

For the students, by the students

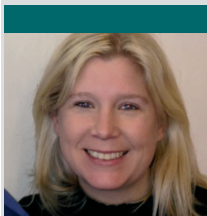
When questioning young people, teachers – and adults in general – can sometimes have a tendency to lead them to a desired outcome. We have found that it is far more interesting and beneficial to allow them the freedom to think independently. Young people think in a different way from adults and it is incredible to see what they are capable of imagining if we do not fall into the trap of leading them towards pre-empted responses.

Mike McGraw (who has been heavily involved with the Pupil Voice), Schools Council UK facilitator Sem Simpkins, and I organised the summit, however, we merely played a supervisory role on the day.

The summit was designed to be only semi-structured and wholly student led, thus allowing students to be creative and lead their own discussions; the results have been genuinely outstanding.

Sem welcomed everyone and began the day with a brief introduction, which was followed by the first workshop entitled The Role of the Student Council. Prior to the event, we became aware that many students were unsure of the duties and expectations of both the council as a whole and themselves as individual representatives, and this workshop was designed to address that.

Effective Decision Making Processes, the second 45-minute workshop, followed. It aimed to highlight the importance of democratic processes, united voices, clarity of



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successful action plan.

Students once again gathered after lunch in their school groups for an Action Planning session, where they were asked to put into practice the things they had learned in the morning session and create an action plan for the forthcoming year. The schools each fed their ideas back to the group as a whole. Our 6th formers acted as facilitators for the workshops and coordinated the change of sessions, action planning and all feedback. Helen Jenner, the director of Children's Services for Barking and Dagenham, officially closed the summit with an address to all in attendance.

Reaping the rewards

There is a strong commitment within the borough to raising the effectiveness of the Pupil Voice, and the fact that all secondary schools in the borough were represented at the Summit is testament enough to that. In the past, students have become frustrated to find their voices falling on deaf ears; at All Saints we are very proud to be leading the way in efforts towards a collaborative solution. We feel that it is important not only to seek out the views and input of the young people we teach, but to listen to and respect their voices also.

Above all, the student have benefited significantly – giving them ownership of their councils, the decisions they choose to make, and the activities they choose to pursue has resulted in a distinct sense of empowerment amongst them.

Through the summit we have also established greater networking links between the secondary schools in the borough and this has helped us to develop a more collaborative working environment.

In order to achieve our goal of raising the profile and effectiveness of the Pupil Voice we need support from all schools and school councils in the borough. Effectiveness will not be realised overnight, it is something that we will all need to work hard on together for an extended period of time. But it is imperative that we take the first steps on this road now and ensure that we encourage our young people to speak up and listen to them when they do.