

## CHAPTER 16

# Student Councils in Public Secondary Schools in Kenya

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### **Abstract**

The inability of perfect system to promote student discipline in Kenyan secondary schools necessitated the introduction of Student Council system by the Ministry of Education in 2008, to make student leadership more participatory. Although Student Councils were introduced to enhance student participation in school governance and to avert previous cases of student unrest, concerns have been raised over the effectiveness of the Student Council system. This study sought to establish the issues and challenges confronting Student Councils, particularly, focusing on Bungoma North Sub-County. The target population of the study was 40 public secondary schools, 40 Deputy Principals, 400 teachers, 12000 students, and 1,324 members of Student Councils. The sample selected included 10 Deputy Principals, 100 teachers, 102 members of the Student Council, and 600 students. The study design included stratified sampling to obtain 10 schools that were used for the study. Interview schedules, survey questionnaires and focus group discussion guides were study instruments used in the collection of data. Pilot-testing with the instruments was conducted at two schools. The researcher found

out that Student Councils were facing challenges, such as inadequate support in their roles, opposition from students and teachers, lack of team-work among Student Council members, low motivation and isolation by other students. The school administrators will use these findings as a basis for assessing the status of Student Councils in their respective schools and address the challenges facing Student Councils using the suggested strategies. The study recommends that Student Council members should be exposed to more induction and leadership courses to improve upon their leadership skills.

**Keywords:** Students Councils, challenges, effectiveness

## Introduction

The concept of Students Council, popularly known as Student Government in other countries, is not new in the world. Such organizations exist in Colleges, Universities and high schools. The Ministry of Education (2009), as cited by Kenya Secondary Schools Students' Council (KSSSC, 2013) defines a Student Council as a representative body which acts as an avenue through which students in an institution of learning can be involved in the activities of the school, working in collaboration with school management, teachers, support staff, and parents for the success and well-being of the school and the students.

According to a research conducted by the Department of Education in Ireland in 2002, students do have a significant contribution to make towards the effectiveness of their school performance, and their involvement in the operations of the school is, in itself, an important part of the education process for the students. It is, therefore, important that they (students) be given the chance to express their opinions on issues that are of concern to them in the school; be listened to and be encouraged, actively, to take part in enhancing the aims and objectives of their school.

Research done in Africa and, particularly, in South Africa, shows the existence of Student Representative Councils (SRCs), which are statutory structures that provide various services to students, both at individual and group levels. In doing this, SRCs exercise economic, political and administrative authority, so as to manage student life's activities<sup>1</sup>. The Students Councils have been helpful in bridging the gap between the school/ University administration and the students' body.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://students-councilsouthafrica.com>

In Kenya, the Students Council is a new policy in secondary schools, because the Prefect system was the only known system through which students could participate in the school administration until 2008, when it was replaced by the SC system, due to its inability to address the increased cases of student unrest in secondary schools. However, Students Councils exist in Kenyan institutions of higher learning. In 2008, in the wake of post-election violence, violent strikes occurred in close to 1,000 secondary boarding schools (KSSHA, MOE & UNICEF, 2010). These schools were closed down abruptly for the situation to cool down. Furthermore, the Kenya Secondary School Heads Association (KSSHA), also, conducted a survey in 2008 to investigate causes of students' unrests in schools. These included bullying, inter-class rivalry, unresolved conflicts, lack of representation in decision-making and ineffective communication (MOE, 2013).

As a way of reacting to these issues, a national programme was established that necessitated the establishment of democratically elected Students Councils, developed in partnership with the Ministry of Education and KSSHA (KSSHA, MOE & UNICEF, 2010). On the same note, the then Parliamentary Committee, recommended greater participation of students in governance as a way forward (MOE, 2013). This marked the emergence of Student Councils in Kenyan secondary schools. The government has now adopted the Student Council system as a mechanism to enhance peaceful coexistence and eliminate conflicts in schools (MOE, 2013).

### **Problem of the study**

Ndung'u (2014) posits that many secondary schools across Kenya adopted the Council System over Prefect system, which allowed students to exercise their democratic right at a young age, and reduce cases of schools unrest. However, in spite of the replacement of the Prefect system with the Student Council system, students' unrests and demonstrations still persist. Even with the introduction of Students Councils, schools in Tongaren Constituency still witness students' demonstrations and strikes. This, therefore, poses doubts on the effectiveness of the Student Council system, thus, making this study significant. This study, therefore, sought to establish the effectiveness of the Students Councils in relation to the roles they perform, how effective they were in carrying out those roles, the strategies put in place to improve their effectiveness, and the issues confronting Students Councils in secondary schools in Tongaren Constituency.

## Literature Review

According to Green paper on standards for the operation of all schools in Trinidad, Students Councils are formed to participate in the organization and administration of the school, provide leadership training ground for students; plan student activities; promote good human relationships with parents and residents in the school community; maintain links with other secondary school Students Councils to promote the welfare of the school; and to uphold and maintain the culture and traditions of the school. All these roles are aimed at creating a conducive learning and teaching environment in the school and promote attainment of student and individual goals (MOE Trinidad, 2005).

According to MOE (2013), administrators of the secondary schools were asked to set their own transition Calendar from the Prefect system to the Council system. Accordingly, it was expected that, by 2013, the Students Councils would be operational in all secondary schools. The same document points out that a survey had been conducted by UNICEF Kenya Country Office in collaboration with KSSHA and MOE, in March 2013, to find out the extent to which the SC system had been adopted. This survey revealed that 67% of the secondary schools had established Students Councils by the year 2013.

In Kenyan secondary schools, SCs comprise of the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson, Secretary General, six Council Secretaries in charge of academics, boarding, students' welfare, games and sports, clubs and societies, environment, and health and sanitation. The six Council Secretaries have assistants who work hand-in-hand with them to co-ordinate the activities of the respective departments and issues to be addressed in such departments. It is the responsibility of the Council Secretaries to air out issues in their departments during executive SC meeting for further discussion and action, where possible (KSSSC, 2013).

A Students Council can only be considered effective if it manages to create order and harmony in the school. This will, eventually, promote good relations between the teachers and the students in the school, leading to improved academic standards of the school. Effectiveness of a Students Council is measured in terms of its ability to promote school discipline by encouraging the rest of the students to co-operate with the management, teachers and parents and obey the school rules and regulations for the development of their school.

There is need for the Councils to consult the staff and school management on issues affecting the operation of the school to gain their support and review their work at the end of their Council year to assess the achievement of their objectives, identify their strengths in order to build on the areas of weakness for improvement in future.

Adoption of the Student Council system in secondary schools in Kenya has not been easy. In some secondary schools, the Students Councils face great opposition from the former Prefects, who ended-up undermining their roles. Some of the teachers also attack the Council leaders and side with the former Prefects. KSSSC (2013), also, highlights other challenges encountered by SCs, including lack of team-work, poor communication and feedback structures in the schools, lack of adequate leadership skills, lack of credibility of the young leaders, ridicule from fellow students, lack of motivation to serve selflessly, limited arbitration skills, lack of parental support to the young leaders in school, difficulties in balancing academics and leadership responsibilities, and inability to handle certain emerging issues such as drug abuse.

## **Methodology**

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The study targeted 40 Deputy Principals, 400 teachers, 12,000 students and 1,324 members of Student Councils. The sample for this study included 10 secondary schools, 10 Deputy Principals, 100 teachers, 102 Students Council members, and 600 students. The study employed stratified sampling to select the 10 schools out of the 40 public secondary schools in the sub-County. The researcher used simple random sampling to select sixty students from each of the ten selected schools. Purposive sampling was used to select ten teachers (5 male and 5 female) from each of the sampled schools. The Deputy Principals of the ten sampled schools and the Student Council leaders were automatically included, since Student Council is their docket.

Data was collected through administering open-ended questionnaires for teachers and students, interview schedules for the Deputy Principals and focus group discussion guides for the selected Student Council members. Pilot-testing was done in two schools. Reliability of the instruments was assessed by using the test-retest method, and their validity was ensured by constructing them in line with the set objectives. These research tools helped the researcher to obtain qualitative data that was categorized under various themes and concepts, earlier discussed on the basis of opinions from the various respondents. From these

discussions, the researcher was able to make conclusions on Student Councils with regard to the challenges encountered by Student Councils.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This study was carried out to explore the problems and issues encountered by Student Councils in secondary schools in Bungoma, North Sub County. From the study, the researcher found out that Student Councils were faced by different categories of challenges, some of which emanated from the school administration and the teachers, the students' body, and others were related to the personality of the student leaders. The researcher, therefore, categorized the challenges and discussed them under the following themes:

### **Problems related to the School Administration**

When the student leaders were asked to mention the key challenges, they encountered while executing their roles, the majority of them cited lack of support and motivation from the school administration. The Chairperson of one of the Student Council said:

We are elected as representatives of the students and we should, therefore, fight for the students' welfare. This makes the administration to see us as their enemies. This, therefore, makes it difficult for us to get full support from the administration as we plan our activities. We have never attended any seminar or workshop on leadership; it's like the administration does not recognize our efforts in bringing order in the school, because we are not motivated in any way and the way we have so many indiscipline cases to deal with (Student Leader 1).

Another student leader from another school had the following to say concerning their relationship with the school administration:

The Deputy Principal, who is our patron, does not care about us; he is not there for us, and does not even join us in our meetings. Some of us here are not sure of our roles, because we were never inducted apart from the 30 minutes' meeting, we had with him, immediately after we were elected. He promised to take us for benchmarking to a neighbouring school, which he never mentioned the name and, ever since, he has never mentioned about it again. We don't have the authority over the rest of the students, because of lack of the Deputy's support (Student Leader 2).

The welfare Secretary of one of the sampled schools appeared so bitter when the researcher asked about the challenges they encountered

in their roles. His problem was the way the teachers handled the student leader. He said:

We are always intimidated by most of the teachers; they do not appreciate what we do to help them, especially, when they are on duty. They always come late to school, expecting to find everything in order, yet, when we fail in some way, they shout at us and harass us in front of the other students. This is very bad, because we expect the same students to respect us. The teachers abuse us and call us names when anything goes wrong; we are also overworked, yet, they expect us to perform well in class. Sometimes we are punished when we fail to reveal the names of undisciplined students and, mostly, we do it out of fear. I just want to resign, because I don't think I can take it anymore; pressure from teachers, from students, pressure from my own parents, because I am not performing well as they expect, pressure... I think I am just tired (Student Leader 3).

### **Problems emanating from the Rest of the Students**

The student leaders, teachers, and the Deputy Principals agreed that some of the challenges encountered by student leaders emanated from the student body. For instance, one of the student leaders said:

Most of the time, we have pressure to cooperate with students, since we were elected by them and we should fight for their rights. We also face opposition from our fellow students and, sometimes, we are isolated by other students who see us as their enemies, because we are fighting the administration. Some of us have received threats from other students, because of failing to protect them when they are caught in indiscipline cases. One of us was roughed up and beaten up during the holidays for failing to side-defend a student who was caught abusing drugs just recently (Student Leader 4).

During an interview with one of the Deputy Principals, the following statement got the researcher's attention. The Deputy Principal said:

Some of the student leaders are openly harassed by some of the students, especially, when they fail to side with them on some issues. Some of the students are also rude and do not take instructions from the student leaders, hence, it's difficult for some of the student leaders to punish to punish them, especially due to their small body size and the fact that some of them are in junior classes (Deputy Principal 1).

This was in agreement with sentiments from the majority of the teachers who reported that student leaders did not have enough authority over their fellow students, since they were elected by them, hence, they were expected to side with them all the time. Students, on their part, added

that some of the students incited them to resign their positions, because they were not paid.

### **Problems relating to the Personality and Background of the Student Leaders**

All the respondents in this study agreed that some of the challenges facing Student Councils have to do with the student leaders themselves, especially their personality, their academic performance and their background. For instance, during an interview with a Deputy Principal of one of the sampled schools, the following statement was recorded:

The major problems I have noted are lack of teamwork and lack of leadership skills among student leaders. You will find student leaders working as if they are competing for recognition from the school administration. Most of the time, the Chairperson does not work together with his team, he is always at war with the rest of the student leaders whom, in my view, have agreed to work against him (Deputy Principal 2).

Another Deputy Principal had the following to say, concerning the challenges encountered by Student Council members:

One of the major challenges has to do with the background of the Student Council members; some come from very humble backgrounds and this denies them the confidence and authority to command students from well up families. Moreover, some of them are weak in class and therefore there is no way they can command the students who perform better than they do in class. Some of them also have communication problems because of the mother tongue influence hence they are always laughed at by their fellow students when addressing them. This has made it difficult for them to direct the other students (Deputy Principal 3).

Majority of teachers on their part noted that some of the SC members were not firm in their decisions and could easily be swayed and compromised by indiscipline students. There were also cases of SC members who were drunk with power and wanted to be treated like teachers; they felt they could not be punished or reprimanded whatsoever. These are the examples of those who forgot all about their books and therefore their academic performance dropped drastically.

Ndung'u (2014) is in agreement with the above findings. He points out that if Student Council members are not competent or trained, they do not have the understanding of their roles or they work under strenuous conditions that do not allow them to execute their roles, they cannot function as intended no matter how well defined the governance



structure is defined. He also points out that SC members also encounter lack support from fellow students, excessive bureaucracy, limited intellectual capacity and overwhelming academic assignments.

Consequently, Republic of Kenya (2012) notes that sometimes Student Councils are not adequately involved in planning, organizing, sourcing, directing or leading, and controlling the activities, hence students feel negatively towards institutional goals and objectives. Both parties agree that Student Councils do carry out their roles amidst many challenges which reduce their effectiveness.

In conclusion, the findings clearly show that Student Councils do not effectively carry out their roles, due to challenges relating to the school administration and teachers, the students' body and the student leaders themselves, including lack of support and motivation, intimidation and harassment from both teachers and students, inadequate leadership and communication skills and poor performance in academics. All these challenges render them powerless before the rest of the students, whom they are expected to control, hence, reducing their effectiveness. These findings, therefore, have implications on the Student Council policy that was introduced in 2008. Being a recent policy that has not been fully implemented in all schools, the researcher believes that the following suggestions may help improve the status and functioning of Students Councils in schools, student governance and the general management of schools, especially, in Bungoma North Sub County and the larger Bungoma County if adopted:

- i) Deputy Principals need to organize for continuous guiding and counseling of the Student Council members to help them to remain in their positions and avoid issues of Student Council members resigning soon after elections because they are unable to cope with the school challenges.
- ii) Deputy Principals should also ensure clarification of roles of the Student Council members, immediately after elections to the different positions by organizing for induction and orientation forums. The Deputy Principals should also, clearly, elaborate on these roles, work closely with them, and hold their hands as they learn their new responsibilities.
- iii) The school administration should ensure that election of student leaders should be entirely free and fair, free from manipulation and rigging of some leaders. This will completely eliminate tension and suspicion during elections in schools, hence, burying cases of student unrests in schools. This will also help schools to

- get quality leaders who will, definitely, work hand-in-hand with the school management.
- iv) Principals in consultation with the Ministry of Education should set standard thresholds which the candidates for different positions should be able to meet before vying for those positions. This would help get issue-oriented student leaders.
  - v) Teachers and students should appreciate the work of the student leaders, because they do it not to benefit themselves, but they do it to help create a conducive teaching and learning environment and, hence, improved academic performance of the school.

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