



# Realising our Voice

*Embracing the challenges and realising the opportunities of student voice at second-level*

**Unlimited Potential, Imaginative Results**

## REALISING OUR VOICE

*This publication was derived from a presentation made to the 4th National Symposium of the National Association of Principals & Deputy Principals (NAPD), in March 2010.*

*And is dedicated to the support and guidance of the ISSU Monitoring and Advisory Committee in the spirit of student voice.*

*Presented to the Tánaiste and Minister for Education & Skills,  
Mary Coughlan T.D. – September 2010*

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# FOREWORD

*“When young people speak it’s not enough to nod your head”*

Every young person has the right to have their views taken seriously whenever decisions are being made about them. *“Student voice is the active opportunity for students to express their opinions and make decisions regarding the planning, implementation, and evaluation of their learning experiences.”* **Rogers, A. (2005)**

The Irish Second-Level Students’ Union is a platform and indeed a catalyst for change in the way we look at the participation of young people in schools and the involvement of young people in society, as a whole. Founded in 2008, the ISSU aims to give students a voice in their education and in issues that affect them. In this publication, “Realising our Voice”, we dive into all aspects of student voice in Irish second-level education in 2010 and explore our vision for change over the next 5 years. In a nutshell, by understanding what students think, experience, feel and know – our knowledge and pre-conceived notions of education reform can be greatly enriched.

Meaningful student participation occurs when young people actively engage with adults as partners through learning, teaching, social-activism and leadership. The ISSU firmly believes that young people are not merely citizens in waiting and can contribute positively to society. To achieve this, we believe that we must challenge, empower, engage and listen to what young people have to say. Student Voice should never be a one-way

process or a passive process; it should be active and engaging. Student participation inherently requires simply being listened to and those views being respected. There is hope for schools, embodied in the growing buzz of classrooms brought to life by the growing assertion of students’ ideas, opinions and knowledge. There is hope for students, made real when students are engaged as education planners, researchers, evaluators, contributors, decision-makers and advocates.

To achieve meaningful student voice requires strong partnership, patience and courage. The ISSU has worked hard laying the foundations to support student voice at a national level, and with this to revitalise student councils at a school level. Students, parents, teachers, management and policy makers must first set their fears aside and take a chance on each other – remembering that students are best heard when adults take a step back and students speak up. Our message is – “engage and support students - expand your expectations. The impact is unlimited and the results are imaginative”.

The concept of student voice can be challenging, and it would be unrealistic to relate student voice with automatically agreeing with students. Real student voice is democratic, and is rooted in all partners having an equal say to come to the best solution. Student Voice in any form should be real and not directed in any way or indeed tokenistic

## REALISING OUR VOICE

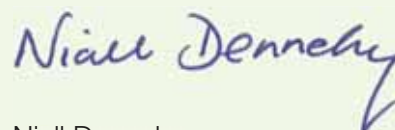
in approach. We should strive to involve young people in every facet of society, inside and outside the school walls, for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, communities and democracy. It is almost like building a bridge in the handover from one generation to another.

To quote Deborah Meier (1995) *“There is a radical and wonderful new idea here, that all children could and should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people’s ideas, analysers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on the world. It’s an idea of revolutionary implications – if we take it seriously.”*

Students should not be feared as “revolutionaries” wanting to undermine the system; students want to become actively involved in the decision making process at a local and national level and hence to become stakeholders in their own future. Traditionally, the views and opinions of young people were often discounted as having less legitimacy than the views of adults. Many critics of student voice would determine that it is “Radical” “Inconceivable” and “Unnecessary”. Are they right? In essence no, but in aspects yes. Student Voice is a precious dynamic equilibrium. It is critically important that you lay the foundation to support and encourage student voice, with this in mind student voice should be 100% student led and driven. The challenges students pose

in decision-making are coupled in the form of systemic roadblocks in schools/society and the patronising attitudes of some adults. However meaningful student participation engages students as decision makers who partner with educators to make decisions. Research has proven that when young people become actively involved in education and in decisions that affect them, the experience is rewarding, motivating, inspiring for all involved especially the young people who learn life skills, knowledge and flourish in confidence that text books just can’t provide them with. The prospect of accountability between students and educators shifts the burden of school change from sitting solely upon the educator’s shoulders, and shares the responsibility of school and social improvements with students and young people. It’s 2010, and the foundations for the second-level education revolution have been set – it’s now up to you. Can you support formally recognising the ISSU and students as partners in education?

Youth Participation isn’t something we do occasionally... it’s how we do everything.



Niall Dennehy  
General Secretary

# INTRODUCTION

*In ‘Realising our Voice’ we aim to give an insight into the current situation in relation to student representation and to highlight the benefits that student voice can bring to the individual school community and to the second level education sector, as a whole.*

Students are told little or nothing about bodies such as the National Educational Psychological Service, as for the National Council for Curriculum and “what now?” and sure aren’t the State Examinations Commission only the ones mentioned before the much mimicked “Léigh anois go cúramach ar do scrúidpháipéar na treoracha agus na ceisteanna a ghabhann le cuid A” spiel on the Irish aural tapes until it comes around to exam time when students start to get more of an idea of what exactly the SEC actually does. So you have to admit that it would seem a bit intimidating to students when they go to find out more about these bodies, what they do and how they are governed only to be faced with long, detailed report after long, detailed report on best practices, what changes need to be made, how best to engage students etc. in relation to various education matters that have been compiled by academic professionals and other stakeholders within the education system. Although, we have no doubt that these people are highly skilled in their areas and that they believe that they are working in the best interests of students – how about getting students involved and hearing what they have to say?, as after all they are the ones most affected by these education matters.

As for the Boards of Management of Schools, they’re kept very “hush, hush” altogether. You might

hear the odd mention of a board of management meeting taking place on some evening but other than that, it’s a mystery to most students as to what the board of management actually does. In a handful of schools, the board of managements meet on occasion with representatives of the student council but that’s as much student involvement with school boards of management that exists and even that’s few and far between.

In ‘Realising our Voice’ we aim to give an insight into the current situation in relation to student representation and to highlight the benefits that student voice can bring to the individual school community and to the second-level education sector, as a whole. We will outline some examples of the situation when it comes to student representation abroad before going on to put forward ISSU’s proposal for students to be recognised as an official partner within the Irish education system.

The ISSU firmly believes that current decision-making processes are a tad boring and could do with some innovation in the form of student voice and that now is the time for a more positive and proactive approach to student voice to be taken and on reading this publication, we hope that you too will join us in these beliefs.

# HART'S 'LADDER OF PARTICIPATION'

*Roger Hart laid out his model for children's participation in "Children's participation from Tokenism to Citizenship", published by UNICEF in 1992.*

## HART'S 'LADDER OF PARTICIPATION'

Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' featured eight stages. The first three rungs of the ladder being manipulation, decoration and tokenism are false and empty methods of participation that can undermine young people's confidence in participation and decision-making processes, disinteresting them from seeking to participate in future. These are followed by "Assigned but informed" at which stage, young people are given specific tasks to complete by adults and the "Consulted but informed" stage at which young people provide feedback on projects being undertaken by adults but they are made aware of how their views will be taken into consideration during the project. The next rung on the ladder is the "Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children" stage at which the agenda is set by adults but young people are asked to participate in the decision-making.

The two most advanced stages of the ladder are "child initiated and directed" and "child-initiated, shared decisions with adults" which allow for young people to independently set and follow an agenda to achieve goals and which provide for an environment of cooperation, joint decision-making, co-management and shared responsibility with young people and adults engaging with each other using each other's resources and learning from each

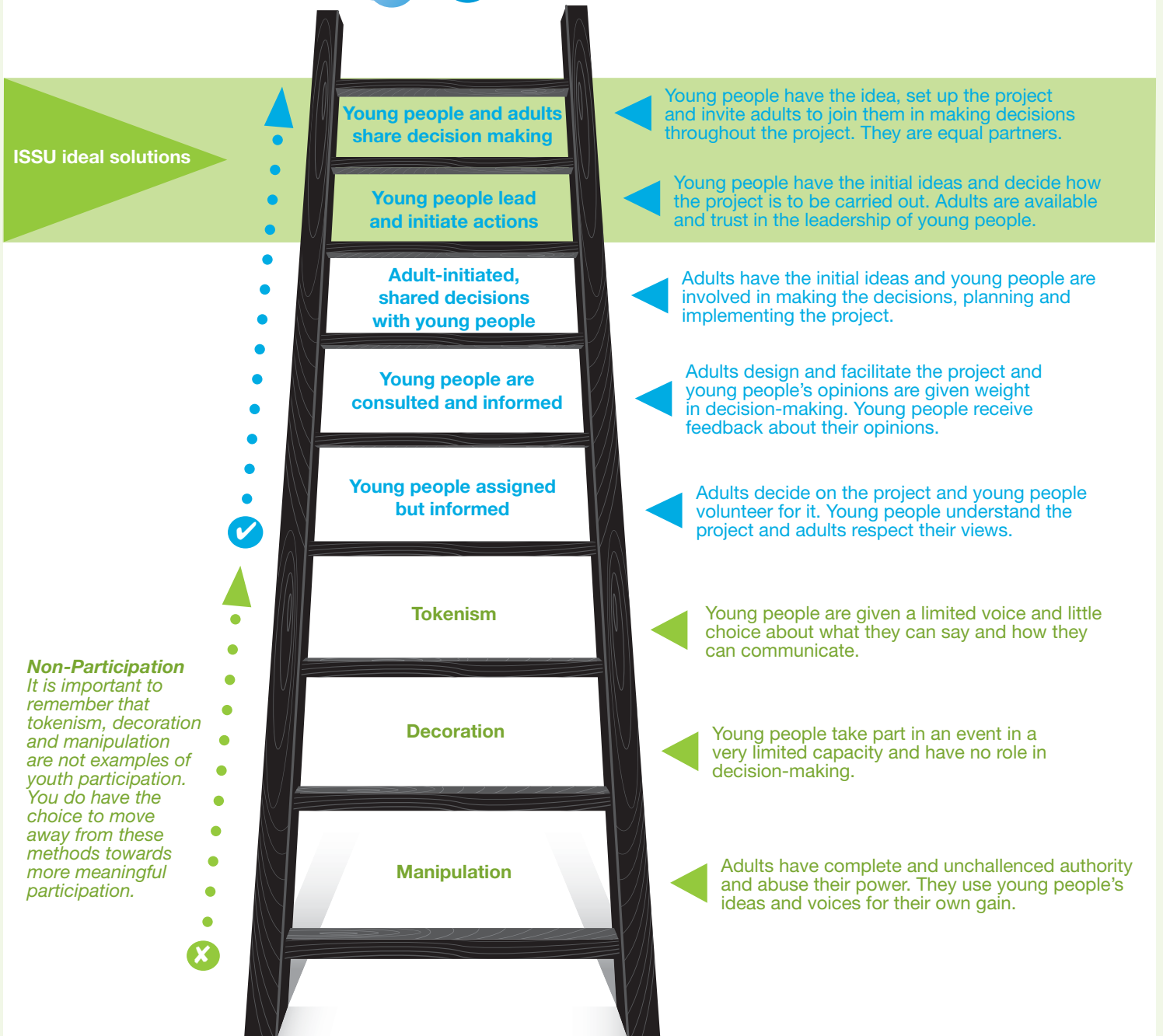
other's experiences to achieve common goals.

These two most advanced stages of participation are what ISSU strives to work according to through each of the organisation's structures and in every aspect of its work. "Child initiated and directed" participation is very much present in ISSU's regional structures, its working groups and the day-to-day running of the organisation by the ISSU National Executive Council. ISSU is one hundred percent student led ensuring that the organisation is working for and by young people but this is complimented by "child-initiated, shared decisions with adults" in the cooperation of the National Executive Council with the Monitoring and Advisory Committee (MAC) of the organisation. The MAC is made up of representatives from the key organisations within the education and youth sectors and their engagement with representatives of the ISSU National Executive Council in advising and guiding the work of the organisation is an excellent example of young people initiating and setting the agenda but making decisions in conjunction with adults. Thus, the ISSU has a healthy balance of the two most advanced stages of children's participation.

The concept behind 'Realising our Voice' focuses specifically on student participation in the Irish second-level education system, we will aim to relate Hart's model of children's participation to second-level student voice throughout.



# HART'S 'LADDER OF PARTICIPATION'





## REALISING OUR VOICE

### DEMOGRAPHICS OF AN AVERAGE SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL

In the average Irish second-level school, students far outnumber teachers, management and other staff.

A typical second-level school, for example, has:

**850**  
**STUDENTS**

**60**  
**TEACHING STAFF**

**12**  
**STAFF MEMBERS OF MANAGEMENT AND MIDDLE MANAGEMENT**  
(PRINCIPAL, DEPUTY PRINCIPAL, ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS,  
YEAR HEADS AND 6 NON-STAFF BOARD OF MANAGEMENT MEMBERS  
(OF A TOTAL OF 9 MEMBERS))

**12**  
**AUXILIARY SUPPORT STAFF INCLUDING SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANTS**

**4**  
**ADMIN STAFF**

## **DEMOGRAPHICS OF AN AVERAGE SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL**

Although, as previously shown, students occupy the largest majority in any given second-level school, students in fact have the least representation and say in the day-to-day running of the school. It can be easy to classify young people as ‘non-adults’, and thus to overlook the benefits of involving them in the decision making process.

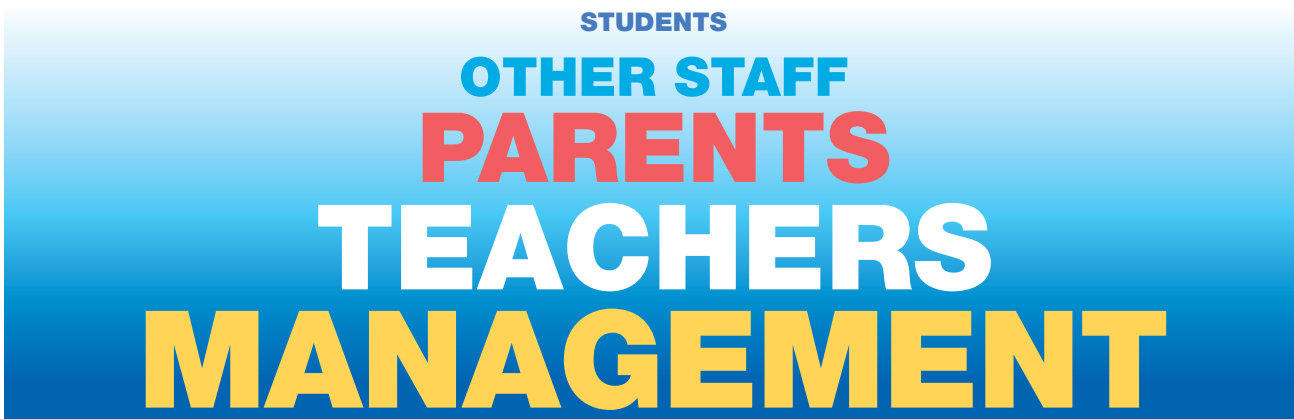
The majority of decisions concerning supervision, extra-curricular activities, in-house examinations etc. are made by the teaching staff, which occupy the second largest majority in the average second-level schools, in conjunction with middle management. Contributions from admin and other staff may be welcomed in issues of concern to them.

However, the largest proportion of decision-making power lies with the school management which occupies the third largest majority. In a typical vocational school, for example – there are roughly 45 times as many students as there are members of management. Of these, the members of each school’s board of management hold the most decision-making power with the final decision on many issues lying with the board of management. These decisions are made at the monthly meeting of each board of management on which sit, in the case of vocational schools, staff representatives, Vocational Educational Committee (VEC) representatives, community

representatives and parish representatives (all faiths eligible in the case of vocational schools) and parents’ representatives. We can see that all stakeholders within the school community are represented on the board of management of each school apart from students who, as we have previously shown (see page 9), occupy the largest majority within the school community. Some may argue that parents are representing students in their position on each board of management and we have no doubt that they have the best interests of students at heart.

As per the human condition, parents of students will naturally and understandably want what is best for their own children. However, to say that parents articulate and represent the views and voices of the wider student body would be misleading. Both students and parents are key individual stakeholders in education and undoubtedly it makes sense to include the voices of which education is intended to benefit. Parents and students are sometimes perceived as consumers of education rather than co-producers, and therefore unlikely to be included. We argue that their voices contribute invaluable perspectives vital to understanding the processes of teaching, learning, and change in any school.

*In the United Kingdom, the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (Kerr, et.al. 2003) reported that whilst 95% of school principals were satisfied that the whole school was involved in discussion and decision making about school matters only 57% of teachers and 27% of students agreed.*



# STUDENT VOICE

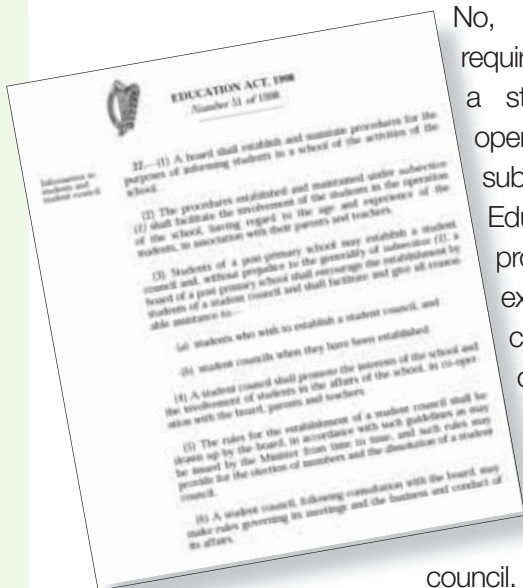
*Student representation has already been mentioned and this can occur through a couple of different systems such as a prefect system with student councils being the most popular system in the Republic of Ireland.*

## So what exactly is a student council?

Loosely, a student council is a representative body composed of students, elected by their classmates, to voice their opinions on student issues and liaise on their behalf with the other stakeholders within the school community. For a more formal definition, we can look to the Merriam-Webster dictionary which defines “student council” as “a group elected from a body of students to serve as representatives in school management”.

## Are schools required by law to have a student council?

No, schools are not required by law to have a student council in operation. Article 27, subsection 3 of the Education Act 1998 provides for the existence of student council in that it obliges school management to encourage the establishment of a student council. However, boards of management are under no legal obligation to ensure that student council are established in schools.



## DEMOCRATIC, STUDENT-LED STUDENT COUNCILS

In order for a student council to be a true medium of student voice, all officers must be democratically elected or ratified by the student body. Student councils will operate by different systems but it is advisable to have a system of class or year representatives in which each class or year elects a student to represent the group on the student council.

It is also vital that the student council is student led. This should mean that the agenda for each meeting is set by students (although teachers, management etc. may make a request to the student council that they focus on a particular issue) and that all meetings are chaired by a member of the student council. Student council liaison teachers act as an important support to the student council and link between the student council and the teaching staff therefore it is important that this role is allocated to a member of staff who has a good ‘radar’ for the needs and concerns of both the students and the school management, who is an effective negotiator, is well respected by both groups and has adequate time to do the job. However, it is important that the liaison teacher does not take more than a supporting and liaising role in the work and day-to-day running of the student council as it is imperative that the agenda of the student council is student-initiated, as in Hart’s ‘Ladder of Participation’.

### REPRESENTATION - THE CURRENT SITUATION

At present, student councils exist in a large number of schools but the real question is “Are they these student councils active?” It is not enough for a student council simply to be established or “exist” if it is not active and not truly representing students on a day-to-day basis.

Although it is not a legal requirement for student councils to be in existence in schools, as we have already seen, schools are generally viewed more favourably when it comes to a whole school evaluation if there is a student council in place. Therefore, a student council can sometimes be set up in a school shortly before a whole school evaluation is due to take place and so for the wrong reasons thus it is unsurprising that many of these student councils become inactive after a short amount of time or are merely tokenistic in existence.

Tokenistic student councils are those which are allowed to operate but are limited in what they are allowed to do and in what influence the students have in the day-to-day running of the school as regular meetings with the other stakeholders within the school community do not take place and so the student council is not given a platform from which to air the views of the student body. Student councils which operate in this way fall under one of Hart’s false methods of child participation and so are not an effective means of engaging young people.

Active democratic student councils do exist in some schools and many do fantastic work in the interests of students and the school community. Student councils are most successful in school environments in which all of the other stakeholders are encouraging of the work of the student council and willing to liaise with and cooperate with the work of the student council; in this way stakeholders encourage effective youth participation as set out in the most advanced stages of Hart’s ‘ladder’.

### Barriers to “student voice”

#### Structural Barriers

Adding student voice was an afterthought to education planning, occurring only with the drafting of the Education Act 1998, rather than viewing students as being central to the education system and so envisaging that a national representative body through the structures that the ISSU provides would be needed.

The post graduate diploma in education and professional in-service development training does not prepare or reinforce teachers’ ability to engage student voice.

Students do not receive training on student council participation or the issues that can be addressed by the student council.

Student council liaison teachers can often take too much of a leadership role when it comes to the student council. Hart’s ladder of participation shows that it is most effective when ideas are initiated by young people and so student councils must be student-led and student-focused.

Student voice activities are generally limited to one school or centre of education rather than aiming to cooperate with students in other schools.

#### Cultural Barriers

While some teachers recognise the benefits of engaging student voice, they are armed with good intentions, not experience-driven practice.

Although a student council support service exists for the purpose of providing initial in-service training for newly appointed student council liaison teachers, this service should also be directed towards encouraging student participation, empowerment and voice through the active democratic student council model (as outlined in this document) and the structures that the ISSU provides.

## REALISING OUR VOICE

The nature of the activities of the student council has limited appeal to a variety of students, particularly non-involved students or those of peripheral students.

Student council participation is often seen as separate and unrelated from subject classes, despite the opportunities for applied learning in communication, leadership, and social awareness.

Often student councils are only allowed to work on activities such as fund raising etc. rather than taking part in decision-making regarding school planning and policy, they are therefore prevented from effectively participating in the school community.

Lacking opportunities to participate, student council members complain to other students about their experience on the student council, disinteresting other students from becoming involved.

### Peripheral Student Participation

In particular students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, especially those as identified by the Department of Education & Skills under the DEIS social inclusion strategy (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) and in Centres of Education such as YouthReach are less likely to participate in student councils. However, they are key segments of the student population to whom the rewards of student voice and participation can be explored as involvement in their own education may aid them to feel more positive about their education thus reducing the likelihood of early school leaving (non-participation in school before reaching the age of 16 years or before completing 3 years post-primary education, whichever is later. The 'School Completion Programme' is a Department of Education and Skills initiative which aims to increase the number of young people staying in primary and second-level education.

This initiative is part of the DEIS strategy) and in the case of YouthReach, increasing the likelihood of young people completing the programme and creating opportunities to acquire qualifications. Therefore, it is imperative that barriers to participation in the case of educationally disadvantaged young people are overcome.

## VALUE OF "STUDENT VOICE"

Unfortunately, allowing students to voice their opinions is often viewed as a challenge as though it can only have negative results and this is why student councils do not exist or are merely tokenistic in some schools. Attitudes towards student voice seem to follow the age old mentality that "children should be seen and not heard" in that it is believed that if we give students a little power that they will seize it and use it to challenge authorities and begin a rebellion.

Dietel et al (1991) affirm that to become competent thinkers and problem solvers learners must:

- think and actively construct evolving mental models
- be able to interpret the information they receive and relate it to knowledge they already have
- be active participants in their own learning if they are to become competent thinkers and problem solvers.

All too often educational achievement is viewed as just the fulfilment of academic goals through obtaining a high level of points in the Leaving Certificate when really a wider view of educational achievement should be taken to include both academic and social goals. Through participation and empowerment, students develop important social skills such as critical thinking, negotiation, reasoning and public speaking. These social goals will prove hugely beneficial to students in their chosen career and so the acquisition of these skills should be viewed as educational achievement to



## REALISING OUR VOICE

the same degree that academic goals are viewed to be educational achievement. Research shows that when schools engage student voice they create opportunities to facilitate a stronger sense of:

- membership, so that students feel more positive about school
- respect and self-worth, so that students feel positive about themselves
- self as learner, so that students are better able to manage their own progress in learning
- agency, so that students realise that they can have impact on things that matter to them in school (Fielding & Rudduck 2002).

Participation and empowerment of students encourages them to take ownership of their own education thus students have a greater understanding of their educational goals and are working to an agenda negotiated by students. This gives students more confidence in their own learning and so enables them to reach greater educational achievement on an academic level.

'student outcomes will improve and school reform will be more successful if students actively participate in shaping it' (Mitra 2004).

Students are the majority stakeholder in education and so the majority of decisions made concerning education have the greatest impact on students. Many hours and much funding are spent trying to devise methods of improving the education system to achieve goals such as increasing student retention beyond Junior Cert level and producing better grades but why not ask students how things can be improved. After all, the education system is in place to cater for our students – students engage with curricula and other elements of the education system on a daily basis and so are the experts. We are in a position to provide valuable feedback which could be used in the development of education policy etc.

... 'Students can also contribute views about the kinds of learning they feel are most appropriate for them. Parents, teaching staff and students who

have taken part in planning a school's curriculum are more likely to be committed to making it work' (Ministry of Education, Victoria 1984).

Results of "Having A Say At School" (2009), a Scottish study of student councils conducted by Children in Scotland and the University of Edinburgh between 2006 and 2009, show that student councils "can be a vital link in the chain of decision making within a school, giving students a real voice in improving school life".

The results of the study, which was based on research from every secondary, independent and special school in Scotland as well as a sample of primary schools and all 32 local authorities, also highlights the biggest influence on the success of student councils and student representation as being the attitude of staff and advisors therefore it is essential that the other stakeholders within the school community recognise the importance and value of student voice and allow students to make contribute positively to decision making processes and to help improve life within the school community.

In summary, Jackson, David (2005) suggests six reasons why student involvement and student voice strategies make sense:

- educational values: valuing the learning that results when we engage the capacities of the multiple voices in our schools
- community values: school communities characterised by collaborative, aspiring, optimistic and high challenge cultures.
- rights: students are a significant voice in schools
- social responsibilities: young people have rights and responsibilities now enshrined in international law
- legitimacy: the authenticity of student perspectives about learning and school community
- pragmatics: if students are not allowed to change what they do, then we will never transform learning.



# STUDENT REPRESENTATION ABROAD

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## AUSTRALIA

The Australian Capital Territories Education Act 2004 Chapter 3 , Part 4, Division 2, Section 41 (Composition of school boards generally), Point 2 states that “The school board of a government school consists of – (f) 2 members (the *student members*) elected by the students at the school and appointed by the chief executive.”

The Education Act of the other Australian Territory, the Northern Territory also provides for students to sit on school boards of management (“college councils”) while the Education Acts of two of the six states provide for between one and two student members of boards of management with the majority of the other four other states’ Education Acts allow for an individual school board to set out its membership in its constitution or for the state Minister for Education to decide on the composition of the boards of management.

Strong relations exist between the Department of Education, other government officials and student representative bodies with the 2009 congress of the Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) being addressed by the Australian Minister for Education, Bronwyn Pike MP and was chaired by Alex Markham, Education Officer of the Victorian Electoral Commission. Congress was funded by the Values Education Program of the Dept. of Education and Early Childhood Development and the organisation also receives funding for a fulltime

coordinator to assist the student Executive with the day-to-day running of the organisation.

Representatives from the VicSRC were instrumental in the drafting of the ‘Melbourne Declaration’ in 2008, a policy paper outlining the National Education Goals for young Australians to provide the basis for the direction of national education over the next ten years. Initially only parents and teachers were to be consulted in the drafting of the declaration but student representatives advocated that it was vital that students were an active partner and they were duly recognised as a stakeholder.

## NEW ZEALAND

The New Zealand Education Act 1989 Part 9, “School boards”, Section 97 “Staff and student representatives, point 2 states that “A student representative on a board shall be a person who, on the day on which the roll for the election (or, where there is a supplementary roll, the supplementary roll) closes, is a student (other than an adult student) enrolled full-time in a class in form 3 or above at a school or institution administered by the board, elected by students (other than adult students) enrolled full-time in a class in form 3 or above at a school or institution administered by the board”

*[Form 3 is the equivalent of Ireland's 2nd/3rd year of second-level education at which stage; students would generally be aged 14 or 15.]*

### THE UNITED KINGDOM

In the United Kingdom, legislation allows for students to be appointed as associate members of the governing body of a school.

As associate members, students do not have the right to vote on any decision concerning admissions; pupil discipline; election or appointment of governors; the budget and financial commitments of the governing body. However, students can participate in drafting school policy and making important decisions concerning school planning and the day-to-day running of the school.

The Department of Education and Skills in the United Kingdom published its *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* in 2004. The strategy aimed to ensure a stronger voice for children in the development of policy and the design of services in every phase of learning.

*“Giving children a voice on matters affecting them, and encouraging them to speak up, is crucial factor in ensuring their rights are respected. While we know they vary in terms of influence, pupil councils are one way that children can learn to articulate their thoughts, opinions, judgements and feelings, so that they are participants rather than pawns in the education system.”*

(Tam Baillie, Scotland’s Commissioner on Children and Young People)

### THE UNITED STATES

According to the individual policies of 39 of the 51 states of America, 11 states allow students to join the district school boards, 5 allow students to join the state school boards and 12 allow students to join both with others largely having no policy in the area thus we can see that a huge majority of the states surveyed provide for student governance in some form be it on a local or regional level.

Student representatives are generally elected by the Association of Student Councils for the state in question and are usually in their final two years of high school with the designated term of service averaging between 1 and 2 years with some states having had student representatives on their school boards from as early as 1972!

“Citizenship Education policy brief: Involving Students in Governance”, a United States government document published by the Education Commission of the United States in 2004 recognises that “The skills of citizenship including leadership and informed decision-making must be learned. Involving students in governance is one way to provide opportunities for students to acquire and practice these skills.”

Larry Davis, executive director of the Washington State Board of Education, says “students offer adult board members an immediate understanding of how a particular decision will affect students.” and according to Bill Keys, school board president for the Madison Metropolitan School District in Wisconsin, this “takes much of the guesswork out of policy making, especially for those board members who may not have much experience working directly with students.”

# REALISING OUR VOICE

*Exploring the potential for student voice and participation at a local and national level.*

## **ISSU proposal 1** *for the appointment of students as associate members of school boards of management*

Article 15 of the Education Act 1998 recognises school admission, the upholding of the school ethos, the management of the school budget and school planning as being among the main responsibilities of school boards of management. While ISSU recognises that it may not be advisable for student representatives to have voting rights in sensitive matters such as those concerning student discipline and school admissions, ISSU believes that students should have the right to vote in other matters.

- **School ethos:** among the main responsibilities of school boards of management is to uphold the school ethos. Without students' cooperation, the ethos of a school cannot be upheld so who better to consult on such a matter than the students themselves?
- **School policy:** boards of management are involved with drafting school policy for example: anti-bullying policy and policy concerning the use of CCTV on school grounds. As the majority stakeholder within the school, it is imperative that students be consulted in the drafting of policy which is largely there to protect them.

- **School planning:** boards of management are involved with drawing up long-term and yearly plans for each school. It is crucial that students are involved in school planning as it is they who know what needs have to be fulfilled and what is best for them in the long-term and it is the students who will be most affected by school planning as it determines how their learning is to be facilitated etc.

Student representatives could be appointed to a board of management through the student council in consultation with management, be it that the student council chairperson would sit on the board of management or otherwise. It may be advisable that student representatives on the board of management be in senior cycle.

The Department of Education and Skills should make provisions for students in education similar to those set down for parents in "Parents As Partners In Education" (DES 1991) whereby the Minister would request that all school management authorities ensure that student councils are formed in association with each school, where they do not already exist, that they have the right to nominate a representative to the school board of management and that each student council be strongly encouraged to affiliate to the ISSU.

### **ISSU proposal 2** *for the students as an official partner within the Irish education system*

The ISSU firmly believes that students should be recognised as a formal partner within the Irish education system. Structures for student voice at local level need to be connect to a national office, the support for which ISSU provides. This allows democratic student voice and participation on a national and international level. As we have seen, student voice can add hugely to school life and ISSU is already contributing positively on behalf of the second-level students of Ireland to the education and youth sectors through its representation on the ICT Steering Group of the DES and the Youth Advisory Panel of the National Centre for Technology in Education. Similarly, through its participation on the advisory groups of the Educate Together Second-level project as well as through its involvement with organisations such as the National Youth Council of Ireland and the Children's Rights Alliance so why not allow us to further this work?

It took many years for parents to be recognised as an official partner within the education system but they finally gained recognition in 1991 with the National Parents' Council post-primary (NPCpp) as their umbrella body. This means that the NPCpp can nominate parents' representatives to sit alongside government, teaching union, management body and other representatives on various boards and committees within the education sector.

It is time that students are also represented on these committees through the ISSU. The ISSU has various officer positions on its National Executive Council as well as many different working groups as part of its structure and so

appropriate nominations to the committees within the education sector could be made by ISSU each year (or for the specified length of term of representation). Examples of the committees and boards of studies on which the ISSU should be represented include:

- **Higher Education Authority Advisory Group**  
– ISSU should be allowed the opportunity to nominate a representative to sit on the HEAA Group to provide second-level students' perspectives on how to ensure greater equality of access and participation in higher education.
- **National Council for Special Education**  
– It is important that students can contribute to ensuring that students with special needs are provided with adequate resources to enable them to develop to and achieve their full potential.
- **NCCA** [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment] the ISSU should be invited to sit on the NCCA itself and given the opportunity to nominate a representative to sit on the NCCA's various other committees and boards of studies such as the Junior Cycle Review Committee, Guidance Committee and subject committees as well as the Special Education Steering Committee. ISSU believes that students should be involved in all aspects of curriculum development to ensure that the needs of students are met in the best way possible. Senior cycle students could provide invaluable feedback on their own experiences of the junior and senior cycle curricula and recommend any changes that could be made to make the curricula more student friendly.
- **NEPS** [National Education Psychological Service] – students and equally those with special needs should be involved in the support of their personal, social and education development and so students should be given the opportunity to contribute to the work of NEPS through the ISSU.

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- **NEWB** [National Education Welfare Board] - Students are best placed to advise the NEWB on how to most effectively encourage students to attend school regularly.
- **PPEF** [Post Primary Education Forum] – The PPEF was established with a view to forming a common platform for all of the stakeholders within the post-primary education sector to discuss issues of mutual concern and common interest therefore, ISSU, as a stakeholder in the post-primary education sector, should be invited to take a seat on the PPEF.
- **Teaching Council** – Students have the right to understand about the regulations concerning teachers that are in place to ensure that they, as students, are taught by the adequately trained, skilled and competent teachers therefore, ISSU should be offered the opportunity to represent second-level students on the Teaching Council.

ISSU is currently drafting a formal application for recognition as an official partner within the Irish education system. In line with this application, we are also currently drafting an official proposal for student representatives to be appointed as associate members of school boards of management. We aim to present these to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills in 2011.

*"The time is always right to do what is right."  
Martin Luther King Junior.*

## STUDENT PARTICIPATION ANALYSIS - CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGY FOR REALISING STUDENT VOICE

### *ISSU proposal 1 for the appointment of students as associate members of school boards of management*

#### **Election of a student representative for associate membership of a school board of management**

In order for a student to be appointed to a school board of management, ISSU would suggest that the student be a democratically elected member of the school student council.

The student council in conjunction with school management would select one of the members to sit on the board of management. It may be advisable to put a minimum age level in place as is the case in New Zealand. We would recommend students from transition year or 5th year would be eligible for election – but, this would be at the discretion of each individual school.

#### **Challenges**

School boards of managements, with the exception of those in schools run by a vocational education committee, are bodies corporate. As one cannot enter into a legally binding contract until the age of 18, students could not legally become a full member of the school board of management. However, as associate members of the board of management, student members would not have to enter into a legally binding agreement and therefore could still represent the interests of students at meetings. Restrictions regarding the issues which the student associate members could be present for discussions surrounding



could be set down formally by the Minister in an amendment to the Education Act. Similarly to the way in which parents' representatives can express parents' concerns at meetings, student associate members would be allowed to propose issues expressed by the student body through the student council.

### Opportunity

This proposal engages students at a local school level, and ensures that the voice of the student body is articulated during the key decision making process.

### Short-term and long-term strategy

The ISSU would run specialist cluster training workshops for student associate board members within each region under the ISSU regional for a network.

This would ensure that the student representatives fully understood the workings of and legislation governing boards of management thus meaning that the students would be adequately prepared to sit on boards of management, as associate members.

**ISSU proposal 2**  
*for the students as an  
official partner within the  
Irish education system*

### **The ISSU to formally support student voice and participation during the national decision making and consultation process**

As the national representative body for second-level students thus representing the interests of students as an official partner in education, the ISSU would ensure to nominate the most appropriate person to represent students on each committee or body within the education system.

### Challenges

Issues that would need to be taken into consideration include the timing of meetings. It is understandable that a large amount of meetings take place within business hours as the majority of the people attending the meetings are doing so as part of their jobs. However this would require student representatives missing school time in order to attend meetings. Delegation of work between a large diverse group of students as represented by the ISSU National Executive Council – is essential to ensure that the burden is not left on the shoulders of a small group of students.

### Opportunity

This proposal ensures that students are represented and contribute to the decision making process. As students are the largest shareholders in our education system (and the decisions made at these committees affect them directly), student voice can be a powerful element in proposed educational reforms.

### Short-term and long-term strategy

Continued investment and support in the operational management of the ISSU, including financial provisions to reimburse student 'out of pocket expenses' in their participation at national meetings.

The ISSU wishes to contribute to the existing and future education committees, but also as plans to develop ISSU steering groups – inviting those with expertise in a particular field to contribute. Student working groups feed into the steering groups and are chaired and facilitated by an ISSU representative from the National Executive Council.



# THE NEXT STEPS FOR STUDENT VOICE

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## *A Vision for Change*

- ✓ *For the provision of financial support to allow the ISSU secretariat to support the work of the National Executive of the organisation. This is crucial for the survival of the organisation and the advancement of Student Voice.*
- ✓ *The ISSU to build on its regional structures to engage and make as many young people as possible aware of their voice and the potential to have their voice heard through the ISSU.*
- ✓ *School boards of management to work closely with student councils including arranging meetings between both bodies or between representatives of both bodies on several occasions throughout each academic year.*
- ✓ *The DES to agree to liaise with the ISSU on all education matters in conjunction with the other education stakeholders.*
- ✓ *The DES to formally recognise students as a partner in education with ISSU as their national representative body.*
- ✓ *The DES to issue a memo to all schools asking that they ensure that they have an established, active, democratic and student-led student council in place and those student councils be encouraged to join the ISSU.*

# CONCLUSION

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*‘Realising our Voice’ has shown that, typically students are regarded as passive recipients of education, and are often seen as individual participants in and recipients of that education.*

We have also identified that there is a lack of congruence between the *intentions* to involve students and the *realities* of student participation. For the majority of students, when supported adequately and when given the opportunity to become actively involved in the decision making process, are prepared to take responsibility for their own education and learning. Democratic student participation in education is a key-element to any model for 21st century learning. Research has shown that when students are empowered, the energy they bring to any situation can be inspiring. Students have the unique ability to look at an issue presented to them and react to it in an individual positive way. Why does this happen? It’s because students are affected by these decisions on a day to day basis. No other stakeholder in education has this unique perspective, and it is remarkable to think that the segment that makes up the largest majority of our education system – are not involved in it. It goes beyond education, as students today are shareholders in tomorrow and need to be viewed as producers rather than consumers.

The perspectives of young people have been ignored or marginalised as official partners in their education because of the longstanding legal and social status of children as inadequate and incomplete beings who lack the cognitive and social skills to participate in decision-making about their own lives. This conception of young

people having a voice is not new, and the ISSU have been providing a successful model for this to work – we now ask the partners in education and the Department of Education and Skills to formally recognise students as partners in their own education at a local and national level.

As we’ve shown, student voice can play a hugely important role in the school community, throughout the education sector and in society as a whole. Students are well capable of articulating their views and providing knowledgeable insights into the world of education from a student’s perspective and the ISSU is well placed, as the national representative body for second-level students and the only true source of pure, authentic student voice, to provide a platform for these insights and the views and opinions of second-level students on a national level.

Meaningful student involvement cannot happen in a vacuum. Educators and students must take responsibility for learning through student voice by engaging students in conscious critical reflection by examining what was successful and what failed. Students and adults must also work together to identify how to sustain and expand a cycle of meaningful student involvement in which students are recognised as an official partner in the Irish system contributing to every aspect of their education. For student voice to work, the support mechanisms need to be put

## REALISING OUR VOICE

in place to ensure student voice can survive as an independent realism. However, it is important that these structures support, without taking over or interfering with the voices and ideas of young people. Effective democratic student voice does exactly what it says on the tin; the opinions, thoughts and analysis of youth – without the interference of adults.

The significance of students' ideas and options should to be taken seriously. We need to look to our colleagues abroad who have embraced student voice with open arms and reaped the rewards. The time has come to rid ourselves of the negative attitude that all too often is associated with youth or student empowerment in Ireland. It's time to

have faith in our students, it's time for change – we're not citizens in waiting. We are living in a world of innovation with endemic, global and social change. The work and workplaces in which young people today will eventually participate will change dramatically. The knowledge and skills required to perform in these new workplaces involve young people becoming autonomous and self-directed learners. New ideal models for ideal 21st century learning are fast approaching; therefore we need to challenge the position that decisions affecting young people are adult-determined. With this we are faced with an opportunity to rejuvenate student voice that will lead to endless possibilities over the horizon.

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- The Irish Second-Level Students' Union would like to acknowledge the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Government Publications Office for permission to reproduce an extract of the Education Act 1998, Section 27.*

# APPENDIX

## ISSU Charter for Student Voice "ISSU Féidir Linn"

Recalling **Article 12** of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that "State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

and **Article 13:**

"The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice."

and **Article 14:**

"States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion."

And **Article 15:**

- 1.** States Parties recognise the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.
- 2.** No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of these rights other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order, the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

*and recognising:*

- 1.1** That this includes views on schooling and education and that students that are given the opportunity to contribute to and engage in decisions concerning their education and to take ownership of their own learning generally view

learning with a more positive outlook thus will work harder to achieve their full potential academically,

- 1.2** That second-level students are capable of articulating their views and opinions and that experiencing the education system on a daily basis means that students are best placed to provide insightful feedback into curricula, the assessment system and other education matters,

*ISSU affirms:*

- 1.1** That legislation should provide for student councils to nominate a representative in conjunction with school management to represent the views of their peers as associate members of school boards of management
- 1.2** That students should be recognised as an official partner in the Irish education system with the Irish Second-level Students' Union formally recognised by the Department of Education and Skills as the national representative body for second-level students and thus through ISSU's structure as a national umbrella body for school student councils.

*and commits to:*

- 1.1** Working with the other stakeholders and partners within the Irish education system to ensure students have an equal say, but most importantly not only to ensure that this voice is heard – but is listened to and respected;
- 1.2** Invest in the development of the national and regional networks of the ISSU to support student voice;
- 1.3** Develop strategy and policy in furtherance to the main aims of the ISSU and issues affecting students;
- 1.4** To be a modern, transparent, reliable and democratic organisation.

## REALISING OUR VOICE

### **Vision Statement**

*“The Irish Second-Level Students’ Union shall work towards an education system in which the views, opinions and contributions of students are respected and in which students are recognised as an official partner in creating an education that is centred around and caters best for students”*

### **Mission Statement**

*“The Irish Second-level Students’ Union will be an agent and a catalyst for change in the Irish Education system seeking to advance education by involving young people actively in all aspects of their education, and thus empowering young people to realise their voice.”*

### **Values and Commitments - The ISSU is committed to:**

- a. To develop policies and strategies on issues which affect Irish second-level students and bring the needs and rights of those students to the relevant authorities.
- b. To provide a transparent, democratic and reliable organisation.
- c. To provide training and assist in the development of second-level school student councils.
- d. To work closely with education, youth policy makers as well as our partners in the education and youth sector to continually develop a transparent, fair and modern education system.
- e. To work in collaboration with Government agencies and other educational institutions both in Ireland and in Europe.
- f. And most importantly, to give students a structured platform through which the voice of the Irish Second-Level Student can be heard.

### **These commitments are reflected in the following mottoes:-**

*“Youth infusion. We have the power to influence change. ISSU féidir linn”*

&

*“Connecting Students”*

&

*“Giving students a voice in their education and in issues affecting them”*



## REALISING OUR VOICE

### Realising our Voice Endorsements: August 2010

“ACCS is happy to endorse the efforts of the ISSU to have the student voice recognised in a practical way in the management of our schools and applauds the efforts of the ISSU in making this become a reality. Well done on producing the substantial document on the issue: ‘Realising our Voice’ as a first step towards achieving this laudable aim.”

*Ciarán Flynn, General Secretary, Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools*

“The ASTI is delighted to welcome the voice of Students’ to the debate on the future of education in Ireland. In ‘Realising our Voice’ the ISSU have outlined their position in a thoughtful and thought-provoking way. It is through co-operation among all the partners in education: teachers, parents, schools, and now students, that the future wellbeing of Irish education can be best protected.”

*Diarmaid de Paor, Deputy General Secretary, Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland*

“In ‘Realising our Voice’ ISSU have spelled out the considerable benefits of engaging students fully as decision-makers in their schools and in Irish education. Their recommendations provide a key to unlocking the huge potential that embracing student voice can bring to the educational process.”

*Emer Nowlan, Head of Education and Network Development, Educate Together*

“The IVEA is pleased to support this publication. It thoughtfully raises a matter that the Education Act (1998) put on the agenda, when it at Section 27, it addressed the matter of students being involved ‘in the operation of the school. Some dozen years on, it is probably time to think again about how this ‘involvement’ might be meaningfully operationalised - to the benefit of students, staff and management. This publication is a significant first step in the process.”

*Pat O’ Mahony, Education Research Officer, Irish Vocational Education Association*

“‘To achieve a meaningful student voice requires strong partnership, patience and courage,’ the JMB congratulates the ISSU on presenting the rationale and challenges supporting this statement in ‘Realising our Voice’ publication.”

*Ferdia Kelly, General Secretary, Joint Managerial Body*

“Codes of Behaviour in schools have been revised within the past two years. The views of all the partners, including students, were ascertained and included in the revisions - it is time to examine the case for broadening the participation of the student body.”

*Ciarán Mc Cormack, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals*

“The NPCpp admires the gusto and determination of the ISSU in their vision for realising student voice. We empathise with their struggle for due recognition as equal partners in education, and wish them every success in their endeavors.”

*Carole Trodden, Director, National Parents’ Council post-primary*

“This is a very welcome publication. Young people spend a lot of time in school and get taught about citizenship and democracy, but rarely get a chance to practice it. This publication makes a strong case and important contribution to the full and meaningful participation of young people in their schools.”

*James Doorley, Assistant Director (Advocacy & Representation), National Youth Council of Ireland*

“ISSU is a welcome and healthy development for young people in Ireland. By giving young people a direct voice in the education system and in decisions about education it builds a better society for all young people.”

*Michael McLoughlin, Director Central Services, Youth Work Ireland*



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**An Irish Second-Level Students' Union Publication**  
*powered and driven by student voice*