



## Engaging Elections

Students often complain that student body elections are nothing but popularity contests, but isn't that what all elections are? Certainly the winner should be the student who garners the most support from the student body and who is trusted to represent their interests.

What students are really complaining about when they say the elections are just popularity contests is that the same students always seem to win—possibly because it's the same popular students who run every year. Putting yourself out there to run for office is a big risk, and many students don't want to chance the possible humiliation, even though they feel confident they have good ideas and would do a good job if elected.

So what can an activity adviser do to see that good candidates are elected without sacrificing the integrity of the election or the democratic principles of free elections? Follow these tips for engaging elections:

### ■ Evaluate your process:

Before election time rolls around this year, take a look at the process you are using. Once an election routine is estab-

lished, advisers and officers often just get out the old election file and do the same thing again. While there is no need to reinvent the wheel, it's not a bad idea to look at the procedures you use with an objective eye. Is there room for improvement? Carefully considering all aspects of the



election process may reveal areas that need improvement.

Plans for rectifying deficiencies should be established well before you begin the election season. An election committee made up of students who are active in your organization, a few faculty members, and a representative from your parent organization can be helpful in

planning new procedures.

### ■ Candidate requirements:

Make sure your requirements to run for office don't exclude good candidates by keeping the requirements simple. Set the GPA at whatever your school's requirement is for participation in activities (usually 2.0 or 2.5) and have a required number of signatures on a petition for office that is about 10% of the electoral body. So if there are 100 students in your class, a candidate for class office would need 10 signatures on a petition to be eligible to run.

### ■ Recruit candidates:

Putting a few messages on the morning announcements is generally not enough to ensure quality candidates. Consider other methods of getting the word out and encouraging students to run for office. To encourage candidates from a diverse spectrum of the student body, go out and actively recruit candidates. Sometimes all it takes is for the adviser to approach promising students and encourage them to run.

Ask other teachers to identify students who have potential to become student leaders. Then write those names on applica-

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tions and have a member of your group personally deliver it to the students, explaining that a teacher feels they would be an excellent candidate.

Another idea is to give every current member of your organization two applications with the instruction to hand them out to two students who they think would be a good addition to the group or leadership class.

Sponsor a workshop for potential candidates and open it up to all interested students. Be sure to publicize it widely. At the workshop, go over all the offices and talk about the duties of each job.

Put fliers up around school, arrange for announcements at class meetings or in social studies classes, ask the video club to create commercials to be aired at lunch or before school. Be creative in your efforts to attract candidates.

■ **Lessen the stress:** Given that speaking in front of an audience is the number one fear of most people, is it really necessary to require candidates to stand up in front of their whole class or school and give a speech? It might be necessary for positions like president where part of the job responsibility is speaking in front of groups, but you automatically exclude good candidates for many of the offices by sticking to this requirement.

Come up with an alternative like taping the speeches and playing them on the school's television system, or having a special issue of the school newspaper with candidate's platforms, or creating a Web site with candidate photos and information. The important thing is to make the student body aware of the candidates' qualifications and viewpoints, not subjecting them to the torture of speaking in public.

■ **Open elections:** Be sure the elections are open to all students and make every effort to get all of them to vote. Some schools model their elections after civic elections, requiring students to register first and use voting booths on the day of elections. This is a great exercise in civic education, but if you don't accompany it with a real effort to engage all students in the process, you'll end up with the same group of students who participate in everything else as the only voters.

A voter education campaign launched in cooperation with the social studies classes could help your election process in several ways. Drawing attention to the qualities of good officers and the responsibilities they have can help make the election more than a popularity contest. Encouraging teachers to use the election process as a teaching tool for illustrating the democratic process could call

increased attention to your elections and increase participation both by candidates and voters.

If you've tried these things and voter turnout is traditionally low, you might want to resort to a secret ballot in homeroom or second period classes to ensure that the vast majority of students have a voice in the outcome of the election.

■ **Voting process:** It's very important to protect the integrity of the vote. Charges of ballot stuffing or intentional miscounting can give students the impression that the elections are fixed anyway so why bother running? To ensure an accurate count in a timely fashion, many schools have begun using Scantron ballots or computers to conduct the vote. If counting ballots by hand, every stack of ballots should be counted by a pair of students, then recounted by a different pair of students, under the supervision of an impartial adult.

Conducting school elections is a challenging process. Before election time rolls around this year, take some time to review your procedures and consider what might be done to level the playing field of candidates and encourage more students to become engaged in the election process. With careful planning, your election process will be a winner.