

Students' involvement in deciding on a new uniform

Salerno Secondary School, Salthill, Galway

1. How the topic was identified

- Students, staff, parents, management and other members of the school community felt that the uniform no longer represented Salerno as it had become unprofessional, unkempt and tatty looking. In particular, students did not have a sense of pride in their uniform. A consultation process was officially started in January 2015. In September 2015, Salerno offered an official trouser option to students as part of a revised uniform.
- Before 2015, the Salerno school uniform had been a straight-cut check skirt or tracksuit trousers with either a plain wool green jumper or jersey style PE jumper. Shoes were generally runners or fluffy boots, which were in style at the time.
- Most students opted for the tracksuit trousers and PE jumper as it was comfortable and warm. The skirt was unpopular because it was a straight, heavy and unsuitable for a variety of shapes and sizes – “it didn't suit everybody”. Students felt it was unflattering and uncomfortable. However, the tracksuit trousers were generally too long for students and often became ripped and frayed as a result.
- Students communicated to staff that they were comfortable, but they looked unkempt and would often get comments on the school bus about the state of their tracksuits.
- Management also felt it was time for a more streamlined uniform option.

2. The young people's participation in the decision-making

- The key decision-makers in the school are the Principal, Deputy Principal, staff and management.
- Other important decision-makers in this process were the students.
- The main person spearheading the uniform revolution was former Spanish teacher Bridie Higgins. She took on the role of consulting all the members of the school community and liaising with uniform suppliers.

3. How the views of young people were sought, and how they affected the decisions

SPACE

- The process of changing the uniform in Salerno stemmed from informal communication with students in class and officially through the student council and prefect system.
- Students were invited to participate by completing a questionnaire about their views on having a school uniform and on the type and style of uniform.
- Bridie distributed a questionnaire to a cross section of students, which included the student council and prefects, asking them:
 - » if they wanted a uniform;
 - » if they would they like an official Salerno jacket;
 - » if they would like a trouser option; and
 - » how they felt about the current options available.
- Bridie also surveyed the parents' council and staff.
- The results showed that a uniform was desired, one that included a trouser option, a more streamlined look and an official school jacket and scarf.

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- Students were involved in testing the fabrics and prototypes for the uniform.
- Once the selection was narrowed-down, prototypes were made and a cross section of students wore them to establish the preferred style and cut by getting the opinions of other students.
- They also tried a variety of coats: a fleece-lined, green waterproof style jacket was the most popular choice.

VOICE

- There is a strong student voice in Salerno due to the existence of the student council and prefect system. There is also a strong, well-established relationship between teachers and students.
- The council meet either once a week or every second week. The agenda of the meeting is mainly focused on going through suggestion boxes. Suggestion boxes are placed in each year block and students are encouraged to add their ideas, feedback, comments or concerns. These are read out at the council meetings. This process allows students to identify issues they want to address.
- From the initial idea of changing the uniform to its completion, the student voice was an important part of the process.
- Bridie ensured that the student voice was included throughout the process by consulting a cross section of students from different years, and including the student council and the prefects.
- The language used in the questionnaires seeking the students' opinions was clear and age-appropriate.
- Students were given an opportunity to evaluate the uniform options and give feedback on the fabric, style and other features. They were shown sample fabrics and colours to begin with, some plain green and some with a tartan effect.

AUDIENCE

- Salerno's ethos includes the voice of the student as a priority. Students communicate easily with staff. The official, established lines of interaction between the students, the council and management made communication clear and accessible.
- The Principal (Sister Gerarda Lawler) and Deputy Principal (Ms Marie Flannery) join student council meetings from time to time. This gives the students the opportunity to have their voice heard directly by management. It also shows that their voice is valued and appreciated by management.
- The student council is also invited to meet the Board of Management to inform them of their plans for the year and what they hope to achieve.
- During the consultation processes on the new uniform, Bridie ensured that the student body was the first to be communicated with, as they were the ones that would be directly affected.
- The Principal and management committed to taking the views of students seriously on the uniform issue.

INFLUENCE

- The views of the students were at the heart of the decision to change the uniform. They initiated the change and were consulted at every stage of the process.
- Bridie's surveys covered a wide range of participants – student council, students, staff and parents.
- All of the student feedback was considered and appropriate suggestions implemented. The Principal agreed to an option that was not her own initial preference, but that of the students.
- The result was a tartan skirt with a pleat from the hip down, more wearable than the previous design, and trousers in the same fabric.
- The influence of the views of students is evident in the style, colour and features of the current Salerno uniform. The students have a uniform with which they are comfortable and that gives them a sense of ownership, pride and belonging within the school community.
- Not only did the students decide on the change but they were also fully included in the process. They directly influenced the colour, style and fabric used for the uniform by evaluating the prototypes and giving suggestions. All student suggestions were taken on board, including their request for a zip on the pockets of the trousers to keep personal items safe.

4. Lessons learned

- The uptake of trousers was initially slow but when Kate Middleton was seen wearing a similar style, sales soon started to rise.

5. Subsequent developments

- We are now 5 years down the road, and the uniform continues to look smart. Students feel comfortable on a day-to-day basis (for example while traveling to school, being in class and in study).
- The uniform looks professional and gives the students a sense of belonging.
- The process of communication and change was very well thought-out and implemented: this can help us to plan the involvement of students in future decisions about the school.