

Election Issues

*Elections can be stressful for both advisors and students. It is hard for a student to put him/herself forward and risk losing. Often, it is easier to blame the process than to accept that voters preferred another candidate. **Student governments need to control the election process to ensure its fairness and promote the democratic process.***

Karen Crawford 2003



Constitution: Many election issues will not arise if your student government constitution is well written and covers the issues involving student government officers and staff. Your constitution should define:

- Qualifications and terms of office - grade stipulations, behavior ethics, past experience (if general), ability to meet after school, the service year (when you take office and how long you serve), etc.
- Roles and Responsibilities - specific duties that the office performs plus the responsibilities (be as specific as possible). Instead of listing general responsibilities under duties of each officer, it is easier to have a section in the constitution that covers all officers/appointed staff. Items such as attending all executive board meetings and general assemblies, conducting yourself as a representative of the student government and your school at all times, etc. would be listed in that section. (Do take these example items for granted - list them as a responsibility!)
- Elected and/or Appointed Positions - not all officers need to be elected...does your constitution specify any appointed positions? Sometimes the most qualified student will not enter an election because he/she views it as a "popularity" thing. Consider that some positions--the recording or corresponding secretary, county liaison, Webmaster, etc.--might be better filled through an application/appointment procedure (this is especially true at the middle school level).
- Election Timeline - when will elections take place? The constitution should specify a basic timeline. For example--elections will take place the month before the end of school or in the fall by the third week of school. Don't be too specific in the constitution, but be sure that there is a reference in the elections article.
- Powers and Accountability (impeachment and succession) - before students are elected, they need to know and understand the powers and accountability of the office/organization. For example, if a qualification of an officer is to "demonstrate ethical behavior," then the section in the article covering impeachment should explain who can bring charges against an officer, the range of charges allowed, and how the charges are handled (committee comprised of the election board, adult staff, and administrative representation...right to a hearing...general assembly vote, etc.). Some violations of qualifications, such as failure to maintain an academic grade point average, can lead to immediate impeachment requiring no committee or general assembly action.
- Election Procedures - It is very important that the constitution cover basic election procedures (majority vote vs. popular vote, preferential balloting, eligible voters, when election rules are approved, etc.). The constitution should not list specific rules (campaigning, pledges, speech requirements, petitions, etc.), but should be general (i.e. "The Executive Board shall determine all campaign and election procedures during the month of February."). *See election rules and procedures below for more information.*

Election Rules & Procedures: Many student governments do not have their election rules in writing. This could create a major loophole if a student or parent were to file an appeal or grievance. Timing is also important. If election rules are determined too close to the election, it may appear that requirements are added to favor specific students or to keep out specific students. Mid-year is a good time to review election rules and procedures. Specific rules should not be spelled out in the constitution

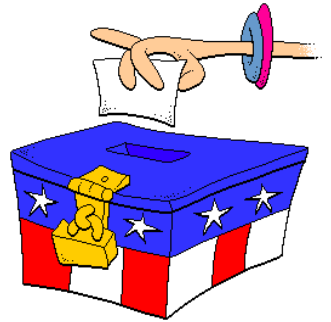


since new election/campaigning issues arise each year and anything in the constitution would require a constitutional amendment to change. Rules do, however, need to be in writing, covering all aspects of an election (deadlines, campaigning, speeches, finances, ballot integrity, if or how specific election results are shared, etc.), and they have to have the written approval of a part of the student government (executive board, special elections committee, etc.), the advisor, and the administration. Rules also need to be given to all candidates when they file for office. In addition, rules should also cover the appeals process and possible consequences for a breach of rules.



Voter Education: Voter education includes not only the students, but also the staff in a school. The student government must first educate the staff to the hands-on civic educational opportunity that the student government elections offer. When the staff takes the elections seriously, they will be able to model the attitude to the students. Be sure that the students have ample opportunity to read voter profiles (think about having a published voter guide or "meet the candidates" TV show) and question candidates (a public debate or town meeting) in order to make an informed decision. Consider collaboration with your local Board of Elections either by having a voter registration drive during the election process or even using official election equipment. What a great opportunity for public education and voter outreach!

Ballots: Design your ballots with specific, easy to follow directions. Have a specific procedure to distribute ballots to ensure that only qualified students vote, all students have the opportunity to vote, and that no student votes more than once. Involve students in ballot counting up to a certain degree (a team of students may be involved in only counting 100 ballots and turning in the signed tally sheet and ballots to a credentials team - that way, they do not know the overall vote breakdown). Be sure that the tellers committee has neutral adult observers. All members of the tellers committee should sign statements of ethics in the counting procedures and these, along with the ballots should be kept on file for a year. Many schools are incorporating technology programs for elections (scan-type ballots, computer/web-based programs, and official election equipment). Regardless of the method, be diligent in insuring the quality of the ballot, the voter's rights of a secret vote, and the integrity of the ballot tabulation.



And the Winner Is: Always hold a private meeting of candidates to announce election results before making a general announcement to the student body. This is an excellent opportunity to thank all candidates for their willingness to take a risk and to recruit these interested, qualified students into other positions in the student government. Consider having an administrator or other community leader make a few remarks about leadership to the group before announcing the election results.



And a New Year Begins: Plan a celebration time for the outgoing and incoming officers/staff. What a great opportunity to have a time of lessons learned, role-like time, and goal setting. Present certificates and gifts to the outgoing officers/staff and officially "pass the gavel" to the new president to start his/her term. This event not only brings closure to the year, but also decrees the start of a new student government.

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For additional resources: go to www.mcps.k12.md.us/schools/sga/resources.html