

Consulting with students

Introduction

Consultation is a central component in planning and implementing change. The following is an outline of some key considerations for schools to take into account to ensure that consulting with students is positive and meaningful. However, the ideas could also be useful in consulting with parents or other groups.

1. Why?

At the outset, it is important to agree the purpose of the consultation and what it hopes to achieve. When this is not clear the process can drift and it is difficult to draw conclusions. A clear and focused aim is needed. For example, the aim of the consultation might be to investigate students' views regarding what they find positive and what they would like to see changed about junior cycle education, or it could be to find out are there areas of learning of interest to students which they would like to see incorporated into a new junior cycle programme?

It should be possible to develop a set of questions that will help you in planning for a new junior cycle and at the same time provide useful data for your School Self-Evaluation.

2. Who?

Since the focus of the consultation is on the experience of junior cycle it might be best to consult with students who already almost finished their junior cycle education or have moved onto senior cycle as they will then be in a better position to say what they liked/found challenging/would like more of/less of, etc.

3. Where?

The space should be welcoming and comfortable. The school library or canteen might be a better option than the classroom. Providing a cup of hot chocolate and biscuits can help create a relaxed and respectful atmosphere where everyone can contribute freely.

4. How?

Getting organised

The students need to know

- The purpose of the consultation
- Who else will have a say in the consultation
- What will happen to their views and how will they be used

You may also decide to write to their parents explaining the purpose of the consultation and what it will be used for. (See sample letter page 3)

Implementing the consultation

A facilitator and note-taker is needed. Good facilitation has a key role in determining the outcome of consultation and it is vital that facilitators are individuals that students trust, feel comfortable with and are respected by.

The facilitator should be

- A good listener and open-minded
- Skilled at ensuring that everyone is heard
- Sensitive to issues which may impede student's participation
- Aware of students' energy levels, attention spans and interests
- Skilled in communicating with young people in accessible language
- Able to make participation fun

The note-taker should

- Record accurately what students are saying (and not translate or interpret their views)
- Write up the notes after each session
- Circulate copies of the notes to the students so that they have the opportunity to check the accuracy of what has been recorded and then share the notes with the wider staff.

On the day

- Explain the purpose of the consultation
- Agree ground rules (no putdowns, take turns, listen with respect, confidentiality, etc)
- Give students a page with a question to complete. *What aspects of junior cycle learning did/do you like best?*
- The facilitator then writes all the responses on the board (and ticks those that are repeated more than once). The note taker is also noting any comments made in relation to the points put forward including any issues identified.
- When everyone has had a chance to have a say, students are asked to jot down their top three things about junior cycle in order of priority. The facilitator then notes beside each item how many students gave this item their priority vote. Tot up the results. Ensure that there is agreement on the outcome: *'Are we all agreed that these are the 3 things that the class thinks are best about junior cycle?'*
- Then repeat the process this time focusing on *'What did/do you not like about junior cycle education and why?'*

- Finally, you could pose the question *'If you could devise a new junior cycle curriculum – what kinds of changes would you like to see? Are there areas of learning that you think should be given more time or areas you would like to add? What would help you learn better?'*
- Wrap up by thanking the students and remind them how this information will be used.

Reporting

Write up a summary of the key ideas and suggestions gathered through the consultation and share it with staff. Discuss how the students' views can be considered within your overall planning process and in the context of your school self-evaluation.

Sample letter
**Student consultation regarding
the development of a new junior cycle**

Name of school

Dear Parent/Guardian,

You may be aware that new junior cycle programme is being introduced to all schools, beginning September 2014. This will provide schools with an opportunity to develop a junior cycle that meets the particular needs and interests of their students.

In this school, we believe that it is important that the views of our students would inform how we plan for changes in junior cycle. We are planning to consult students in //// class and it is our intention to use their views and suggestions to inform our planning.

Students will be given a summary of the key findings from the consultation when it is finished. Please contact the school if you have any questions or would like to discuss this matter further.

Yours sincerely,