Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

The Changemakers: A South Australian Example of Student Leadership and Collaboration Between Staff and Students

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Introduction

This tool was written by members of ‘The Changemakers,’ a student leadership group at Australian Science and Mathematics School (ASMS) in South Australia. These five students are in years 11 and 12. The ASMS Changemakers act as an intermediary between students and school leaders and teachers. The ASMS Changemakers work with school leaders and teachers to promote change within their educational environment.

This tool was written for school staff and students who are interested in student leadership and collaborative partnerships between staff and students. It may be used to establish ‘The Changemakers’ within your school.

This tool is about empowering students to have a greater voice within their school on issues such as curriculum, culture, and development. This provides a platform for genuine student leadership and agency, while promoting effective collaboration between staff and students. Student leadership and agency and effective collaboration between staff and students are essential to inclusive school communities that enable all students to thrive.

The ASMS Changemakers have become a group of innovation, collaboration and initiative that is operating in a few schools in South Australia. The implementation of ‘The Changemakers’ promotes collaboration within your school and is designed to help students work together with other schools to make sure that every school is the best it can be. By promoting change through student voice, it allows students to develop skills in public speaking, critical and creative thinking, and collaboration, all while helping their school and others. The ASMS Changemakers promote student inclusion in leadership activities and through seeking the opinions of others when making important decisions.

Ideas

**How did the ASMS Changemakers begin?**

The ASMS Changemakers began in August 2019 at a conference for school transformation, spearheaded by the South Australian Secondary Principals Association in collaboration with Professor Yong Zhao of Kansas University. Professor Yong Zhao assisted the group of students from ASMS who attended the conference, as well as student groups from other schools, to create leadership councils, which could effectively represent the school community and work in collaboration with school staff.

The ASMS Changemakers began with only six students from years 11 and 12 and has expanded to eight students from years 10, 11 and 12.

**How has the ASMS Changemakers evolved?**

From August 2019 to now (December 2020), the ASMS Changemakers has evolved from a small gathering of students whose aim was to renew student leadership within the school to an actively involved group that communicates with both peers and teachers to provide innovations and solutions to problems that students face. The group now focuses on effective collaboration between students and teachers.

Since it began, the group has acquired new members who provide a diverse range of skills and ideas that allow the projects to be targeted to a broad range of students. Not only does the group assess problems that ASMS students commonly face, but they have the greater focus on creating future pathways for the school system. By creating Changemakers, ASMS has a platform to find solutions and modernizations that fit well to their student demographic, effectively following the phrase, “for the students, by the students.”

**How does the whole school benefit from the ASMS Changemakers?**

There are prominent links between the Changemakers and school inclusion, positive school culture and student outcomes. By providing an effective way to enhance student and teacher communication and feedback, the foundations for an inclusive and positive learning environment are set. The primary benefit of Changemakers is that students feel like they are a part of the community because they get a say. Additionally, by involving students in whole-school transformation and decision-making, there are more opportunities for innovation and designing sustainable solutions to problems faced by school communities.

Furthermore, Changemakers provide the opportunity for students to take initiative, design solutions, and create future pathways that contribute to a positive school culture.

**Examples of actions and outcomes of the ASMS Changemakers**

The ASMS Changemakers have been involved in various activities at their school including:

* curriculum development
* redesigning the school day
* actively preparing for COVID-19 restrictions and online learning.

During the COVID-19 period in 2020, the ASMS Changemakers played a key role in the planning and implementation of online learning. The ASMS Changemakers found that the lesson structure during online learning was not functioning well and felt that the school needed a new way to study. Through collaboration with school leaders and teachers, the ASMS Changemakers changed the online learning structure to one subject a week with an assignment due the following week to consolidate and assess the learning. This structure functioned so well in the online learning environment that a component of it continued post-COVID-19 and still exists in the timetable through multiple lessons of the same subjects in a row. Additionally, surveys were created throughout the process of online learning to gather students’ perspectives and experiences with the taught curriculum. An overwhelming amount of feedback from students was about the mathematics curriculum at ASMS. This led to collaboration between the Changemakers and ASMS staff and resulted in developing and improving the mathematics curriculum and assessment practices.

The ASMS Changemakers acts as a continuous flow of communication between staff and students. It allows both perspectives to be considered on small and large school-based issues. A recent example of this relationship in action within our school community is the introduction of a new system for monitoring student’s development of their ‘soft skills’ or capabilities. The previous system for monitoring these capabilities was a web-based portfolio that students were required to update throughout their time at the ASMS. The staff at ASMS identified some key flaws within this system, specifically around student engagement. Throughout the ideation process, the staff and students were able to express their concerns and propose ideas to find a solution that would benefit all parties involved. By allowing students to drive the solution to a system that ultimately relied on their participation, an effective solution was designed and implemented. This solution led to increasing student participation and improved the way student’s development of their capabilities was monitored.

Actions

Throughout the evolution of the ASMS Changemakers and students’ involvement in addressing of a range of school-related issues we have found the response from students to school changes to be significantly more positive when students are the ones leading and presenting the solutions. We believe that this is due to the increased quality of the solutions and the feeling that the students have their own voice on issues that directly affect them and their school environment.

The ASMS Changemakers have identified the following key factors that have contributed to their success:

* Whole school leadership and commitment to change and improve student input
* School resources and capacity to support change
* Positive staff mindset towards collaborating with students
* Incentives to change
* Students’ initiative and motivation

While it is acknowledged that not every school has the privilege of the above factors, the following are prerequisites for implementing a Changemakers initiative:

* Having staff and leadership open to change
* Staff willing to cooperate with students
* Positive culture around innovation within education

Having discussions among staff and students regarding the above prerequisites and the suitability/readiness of the school for establishing a Changemakers group is the first step.

The following are suggested reflection and discussion questions for school leaders and staff to work out if they are ready and equipped for Changemakers:

* What would you change in your school if you had the ability to?
* Do you think your school is open to change? If yes, how do you know? If not, why?
* Is your school leadership open to input from students? If so, can you list examples? If not, why not?
* Are there staff willing to work alongside students to bring change in the school environment?

The authors of this tool (ASMS Changemakers students) acknowledge there will be some schools that are not ready and equipped for Changemakers. Rather than giving up, the following are suggestions for steps schools can take to prepare and move towards readiness for effective student leadership and collaboration between staff and students:

* Identify the factors that are limiting your school’s ability to introduce Changemakers e.g., school culture, openness to change, resources, etc.
* Focus on one of these factors at a time to bring change on a smaller scale. For example, if your school does not have a dedicated support system for change, focus on introducing school changes in a positive and small way to build up the culture around school change engaging students. Create an opportunity for students to work with teachers in the classroom when designing work or giving feedback. This can be the first step to creating a positive school culture of students and staff working together.

More Information

Australian Mathematics and Science School https://www.asms.sa.edu.au/

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