

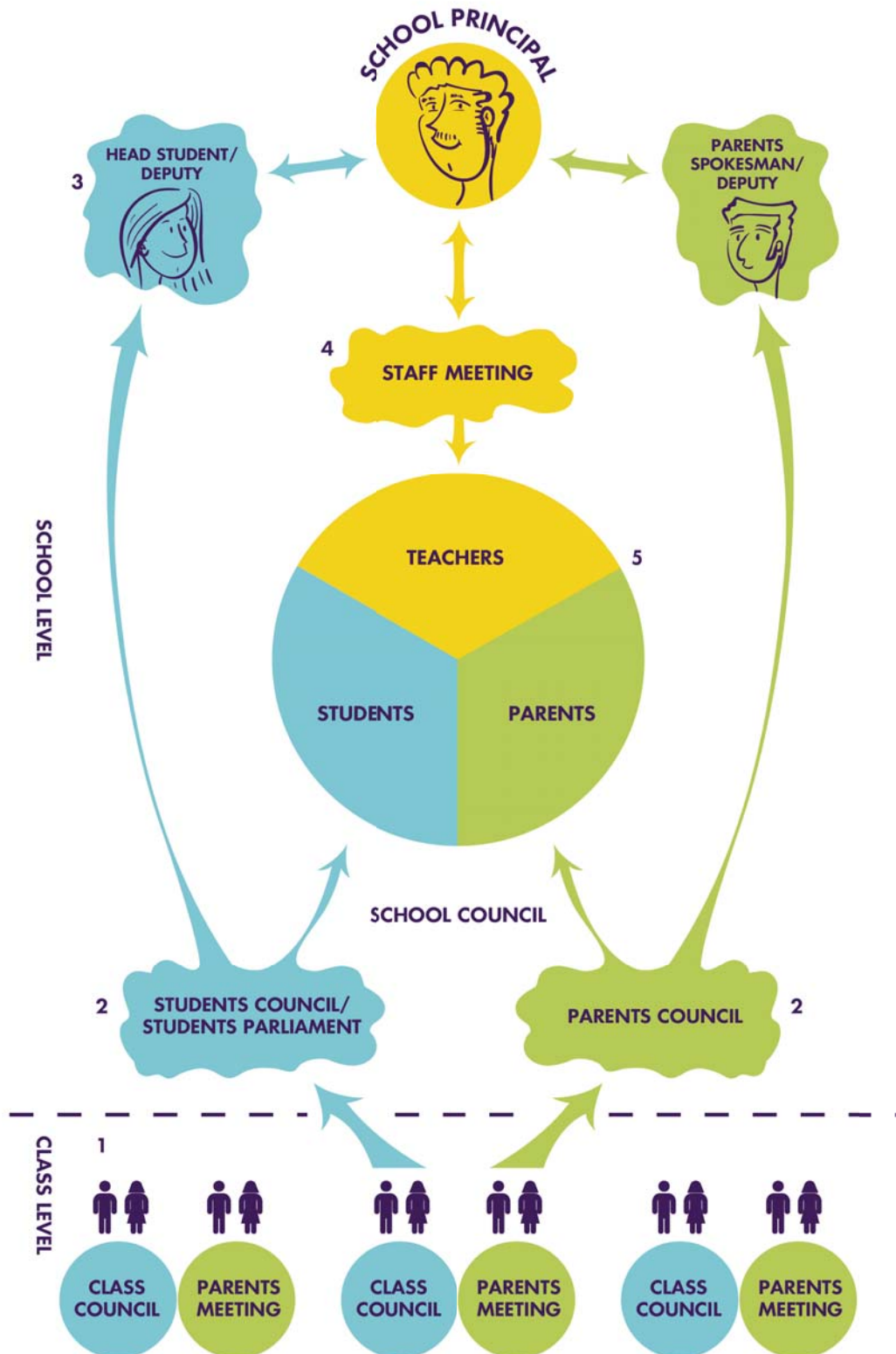
Democratic school leadership - Topic 3: Democratic school leadership – a whole school approach to EDC/HRE

Key question: How does democratic school leadership work in practice?

Preparation handout 3:1.

A framework for participation and decision-making in school

Numbers 1 – 5 refer to the notes below.



Notes

Before a discussion on issues and decisions begins, rules need to be in place to settle the question “Who decides what?”. Much like a community at the national level, a school community needs a formal institutional framework that grants students, parents and teachers their say and pays due respect to the legal responsibility of the school principal the teachers. (See [Reference Framework for CDC, Vol. 1](#), p. 27 f.). Across Europe, the rights of students, parents and teachers in co-decision-making differ from one country to another. In some countries, schools have a certain freedom in setting up their framework for participation and decision-making, while in other countries, this institutional framework is set by law. (See The EDC/HRE manual for teachers Vol. III, *Living in Democracy* that includes a lesson on how schools should be governed: <http://www.living-democracy.com/textbooks/volume-3/part-4/unit-9/lesson-4/>)

Whatever approach is adopted, how a school should be governed must be decided in a democratic way:

- How can all teachers, students and parents be given the opportunity to participate?
- How can decision-making be organized both democratically and efficiently?
- What are the responsibilities of the staff?
- What is the role and responsibility of the school principal?

The diagram shown on the previous page is based on a legal framework adopted. It is an example of how the questions mentioned above can be addressed. Alternati institutional designs also exist, but the questions they must answer are the same.

The following notes refer to the figures in the diagram.

Class level

(No 1) Democratic participation begins at the class level where all students may participate. Time for a class council or class assembly can be integrated into the timetable. At the lower and upper secondary levels, the students elect two spokespeople for their class or course. These spokespeople approach the teachers to represent the students’ interests, so they are not the teachers’ assistants. At the primary level, children do not elect spokespeople, but attend a weekly class council. Guided by their teacher, they learn to express their interests and views and to listen to each other.

School level

(No 2) In most countries, you will find provisions in the curriculum or legislation on the students’ right to participation. In the example shown here, both students and parents elect representatives to act on their behalf at the school level. This arrangement is both democratic and efficient, as participation in school governance requires time and expertise. As the school principal, you play an important part in encouraging and supporting the participation of students and parents at your school. (See [Democratic governance of schools](#), CoE publishing 2007, p. 37; <https://www.living-democracy.com/edchre-pack/>).

All classes and courses are represented by their spokespeople in the students’ parliament. This body meets regularly at least once per month. The agenda includes every issue in school life from the students’ point of view, such as the quality of teaching and learning, school meals, school facilities, rest and leisure, or safety. The school parliament can appoint a school cabinet with special representatives, or ministers, to develop activities with minimum support by teachers, such as staging discussions with party or NGO representatives, organizing a student café, school disco events, or movie shows. For an impressive example of what a student parliament can achieve, see the website of a comprehensive school in the UK, <https://pentrehafod.school>.

The same structure exists for parents. They elect spokespeople at the class level to communicate with the teachers in their class (no 1). The parents’ spokespersons attend the parents’ council at the school level (no 2). Here, the parents’ representatives share their experiences and views on the quality of teaching, assessment, their children’s well-being and safety and other issues.

(No 3) The students’ parliament elects two representatives, a head boy or girl and a deputy, as leaders of the student cabinet and as the students’ spokespersons at the school level. Likewise, the parents’ council elects two spokespeople. These top representatives for students and parents meet regularly with the school principal.

It is important that the school principal stay informed about moods and developments in the school community that may need his attention. The parents' and students' spokespeople will try to win the support of the principal and the teachers for their agenda.

(No 4) It is obvious that teachers need to meet regularly to deal with a wide range of issues in running a school, developing and improving teaching and learning, implementing the curriculum and new legislation, and many others. School legislation may be expected to specify the duties of staff and school principal and their rights of decision-making. The school principal chairs the staff meetings, also plays an important role in setting the agenda, providing information, or suggesting solutions. To a considerable extent, democratic school leadership depends on how the school principal and the staff share the responsibility and powers of decision-making (see [Democratic governance of schools](#), p. 36).

(No 5) In many countries, a school council or school board is required by law. In the example shown here, students, parents, and teachers elect representatives to sit on the school council. The head spokespersons for the students and parents belong to the council by virtue of their function. This school governing body varies from country to country. It may include representatives from the local community in addition to, or instead of, the students. The members may partly be co-opted rather than elected. The school council meets at least twice per school year. In our example, the school council, chaired by the school principal, decides on important issues, such as approving school rules, or the school curriculum. It may also evaluate applicants for the position of the school principal or deputy, and approve the school budget. Decisions by the school council are binding for the school staff and the principal. If the school principal disagrees with a decision, the matter must be turned over to the school authority. Meetings are not open to the public, and the agenda and minutes are partly confidential. Experience has shown that the representatives of the three groups do not tend to form blocks or outvote each other and that they are guided by responsibility and sound argument.