Election Prep – It's not too early

Gear up your elections committee to begin its review and updating of council procedures and rules in plenty of time for the spring elections, including setting key dates and deadlines.

For many students, running for a student council office is one of the most exciting risks they will take during their time in middle or high school. Elections give students the chance to share their visions they have for improving their schools and to learn how to effectively market themselves to their peers. While most students running for office will be familiar with the mission and purposes of your council and the duties of the offices they seek, others may be less articulate in conveying this in campaigns.

If it is not already part of your process, consider hosting a candidates' meeting where student council officers can share information, review the duties of the various offices, and respond to questions about campaign rules and member expectations. While many councils use this time to pass out copies of their constitutions or bylaws, they should not be the only documents that the candidates receive at the meeting. A well written overview of the student council and its guiding philosophies will provide candidates with a better understanding of the council that will help them in developing their campaigns and for those elected, a more efficient term of office.

There are several key subjects to address in the overview that will create a comprehensive picture for the candidates. Begin by discussing the purpose of the student council at the school. This may help candidates avoid making promises or dwelling on issues that are not considered an area of responsibility of the council. Include the role of the council and how it fulfills its role.

In support of the student council's role, its philosophy will also expand candidates' understanding for some of the 'whys' that often asked by new officers. Candidates that can assimilate how student councils improve their schools through representative teamwork, application of democratic principles, and high levels of student engagement in civic-based activities will be better prepared to defend themselves as the best choice for office and to work in support of the philosophy whether they win or lose their elections.

Even though the current officers may be facilitating the review of the positions on the ballots, having a handout of the officer duties should not be overlooked. With the duties, include a flow chart that illustrates the hierarchy of the council so that candidates understand where their positions fit into the council's organizational model. Expectations and consequences are two other topics to include with the duties. It is only fair that candidates know and understand fully the expectations that will be made of them before the campaigns begin. Doing so gives potential candidates the time and opportunity to do a self-assessment to determine if they feel they can truly commit the time and energy that they will be expected to give. Knowing how member infractions and poor performance is addressed by the council will reinforce the expectations and commitments that candidates can expect to accompany their offices.

Pulling everything together into candidate packets will make it easier for students to keep up with and to cover during the candidates' meeting. The final piece of the packet is one of the most important – a brief FAQ that will direct candidates to the documents or persons where they

can find answers to their questions. With all the pieces in place, candidates should have a meaningful election experience.

Election Planning Essentials and Tips:

1. Establish and communicate the elections timeline
- After it approved by the adviser and principal, share the timeline with the student body and faculty at least one month before the first key date.
- Make the timeline easily accessible to all students. Use hard copies and hyperlinks (if candidate forms are located online) and ensure every candidate has access to them.
- Identify who candidates can contact if there are any questions about the information
- Include locations and times for all timeline activities and events
- Tell candidates where to submit their forms.
- Place emphasis by bolding, underlining or other way of dates for candidate deadlines to submit anything like forms, signatures, and speeches.
- Some deadlines require that both dates and times are communicated to the candidates

2. Get principal and adviser approval on any rule or qualification revisions
- An important aspect of doing election reviews early is to give the adviser and principal sufficient time to read and evaluate any revisions to ensure they are appropriate.
- Candidate qualifications should be only those identified in the governing document of the student council (constitution or bylaws). Adding others may be argued as an effort to restrict or discourage students from running for office.
- Every candidate should be given a hard copy of all forms and rules pertaining to the election, or directed to their location online.

3. Welcome, congratulate and educate potential candidates
- Host a candidates meeting for students who are considering a run for office.
    - Students hear from current officers about their roles and responsibilities
    - The adviser addresses time commitment and expectations for officers
    - Rules and forms are distributed and reviewed
        - Some NASC councils require attendance at candidate meetings and it is the only way students can acquire their election packets.
    - Recognize that some candidates will be disappointed with the election outcomes, but that all are to be congratulated for taking this step to serve their peers.

4. Run elections like the real thing
- Give students a rich election experience by incorporating features of civic elections
- Invite the board of elections to assist and provide voting machines
- Run a voter registration
- Be prepared to manage a run-off vote, especially if there are multiple candidates

5. Remove the mystery of ballot counting
- Adopt an ethical process to count ballots
- Counting ballots is typically the responsibility of the elections committee
- Counting should include more students and at least one faculty member or administrator