



*“Engaged student councils can be a principal’s best ally. They can help push reforms that will benefit students; they can develop strategies in answer to student concerns that will help improve school climate. Let them be one of your partners.”—NASSP*

## **Raising Student Voice & Participation: Why the Nation’s Principals and Student Council Advisers Support RSVP**

### **What is RSVP?**

- Student engagement program sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the National Association of Student Councils (NASC). Visit [www.nasc.us](http://www.nasc.us)
- It is easily integrated into existing student council programs. Student council leaders plan and facilitate a series of summits that engage the student body in dialogues and assemble student action teams to carry out plans for resolving concerns identified in the summits.
- RSVP asks students what they care about, what proposals they have for community and school improvement, and what actions can be taken, in cooperation with adults, to implement their ideas for positive change.

### **Challenges Addressed by RSVP**

- Provides principals with a way to utilize the leadership of their student councils to engage students more and personalize their school experience.
- Involves *all* students and student populations—specifically giving those students who are typically not involved an opportunity to share their voices and participate in civic-based activities.
- Establishes a process and framework for developing and implementing student-directed projects.
- Brings abstract learning to life: “Students who learn about democracy in social studies courses but who fail to see it practiced in the classroom or school are given the message that democracy is a lofty ideal, but it is not for the real world. What is needed then is an approach to citizenship education that will not only prepare students for democratic participation but help them to appreciate the value of democratic institutions”. (Power 1993, p190)
- Extends opportunities for leadership and involvement to non-elected students

### **RSVP Supports School Reform Advocated by the Nation’s Principals**

In the widely recognized high school reform publication, *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*, six of the thirty-one recommendations relate to student voice and leadership. RSVP provides your school with a systematic and comprehensive way to begin to address each:

- Promote service programs and student activities as integral to education, providing opportunities for all students that support and extend academic learning.
- Accord meaningful roles in decision making to students...in order to promote student learning and an atmosphere of participation, responsibility and ownership (One specific strategy mentioned to accomplish this: “Provide student government...with opportunities to be included in decisions of substantive issues.”)
- Advocate and model a set of core values essential in a democratic and civil society.
- Connect the curriculum to real-life applications of knowledge and skills to help students link their education to the future
- Promote policies and practices that recognize diversity in accord with the core values of a democratic and civil society
- Develop political and financial relationships with individuals, organization, and businesses to support and supplement educational programs and policies.



*“The United States is experiencing a decline in civic participation, with high levels of apathy, distrust, and disengagement among young people... Schools offer a unique opportunity to reach a large number of young people at a time in their lives when they are developing their core views about public life and civic engagement. This program gives students a chance to talk to each other about things that matter to them and to come up with new approaches to school and community improvement.”—RSVP School*

#### Implementation Guide

### **How is the Principal Involved in RSVP?**

Principal support is crucial. As with most school-based activities programs, NASSP believes that principals have the responsibility to review and approve activities. The principal can also help influence and guide the RSVP process as well as get buy-in from the faculty for the project. In addition, the principal can:

- Be a resource for students by helping students understand community resources available to them.
- Check in regularly with the RSVP Leadership team to hear how the process is working and to learn about any potential issues
- Help sustain the support of local policy-makers and community leaders for the student initiatives as well as invite various community leaders in to serve as consultants to the students.
- Encourage parents to get involved.
- Help students celebrate successful initiatives.

### **How is the Student Council Adviser Involved in RSVP?**

The role of the student council adviser is vitally important. The student council adviser (or another interested faculty member, *e.g.*, a government teacher) oversees all of RSVP's processes and products and serves as the primary point of contact in the school. The student council or RSVP adviser is also the individual who sets the tone for youth-adult partnerships at the heart of this initiative. Since the project is student-focused and driven, it is important that this individual be prepared to guide the work, not direct it. She or he is wonderfully positioned to ensure that the process gives students both the confidence and skills to develop effective decision-making. The adviser will be the person most able to ensure the contributions of all students, not just a subset of student council or some other segment of the student body.

The student council or RSVP advisers' responsibilities include:

- Attending a state or regional training and helping familiarize the school community with the resources, training, and information received there
- Working with the Leadership Team to launch RSVP and introduce it to the school and community
- Guiding the work of the school's RSVP Leadership Team
- Assisting students on the Leadership Team with the Student Facilitator training
- Keeping the rest of the faculty informed about the project and arranging the necessary space and time for student summits.
- Organizing—with the Leadership Team—the presentation of the Civic Action Plan and any end-of-year celebration conducted in the school.

## THE SUMMITS—AN OVERVIEW

Visit [www.nasc.us](http://www.nasc.us) or email [rsvp@nasc.us](mailto:rsvp@nasc.us) for more information.

### RAISING STUDENT VOICE AND PARTICIPATION

Schoolwide summits, conducted with and facilitated by students, lie at the heart of RSVP. To begin, the student council organizes an RSVP Leadership Team that is diverse, representative, and capable of listening to and honoring student voice. The Leadership Team selects and trains student facilitators to lead summit groups.

