

Participatory School Democracy

At Theodore Roosevelt Elementary School in Binghamton, New York, teacher Mary Ann Taylor decided to tackle the problem of her school cafeteria. She described the cafeteria as a "war zone" where teacher aides yelled at children, students yelled at each other, food fights were common, and the place was a mess when students left.

Teacher Taylor set up a **Cafeteria Council** with elected student delegates from each classroom.

At every grade level, classes held discussions: What are the characteristics of an ideal cafeteria? What should be the rules for cafeteria manners?

Delegates carried their classes' views into the Cafeteria Council's weekly meetings, where they discussed these ideas under the guidance of teacher Taylor and the school's principal and shaped them into action proposals.

The Council also conducted a survey of all students, staff, and parents on how to improve the cafeteria. It also solicited ideas on an ongoing basis through a Suggestion Box. It published a monthly newsletter reporting progress.

The positive outcomes of all this effort were many: Student cafeteria behavior improved greatly; students were enthusiastic about improvements in the cafeteria; parent feedback was very positive; a recycling project was begun; and, most important, the school decided to keep its new delegate system of democratic student government as a way to deal with other problems in the school environment, such as fights on the playground or bad behavior on the school bus.