

How were students mobilised to support the demand for democratic SRC's?

A: Prefects were abolished at many schools in 1984 after students realised the prefect system was not based on their will. Students discussed SRC's as a replacement. The Congress of South African Students (then unbanned) drafted an SRC constitution which students favoured.

Parents were called in to discuss it before it was implemented. Students at some schools also spoke to the principal. But in the schools where students were completely united and had total control of the situation — like Mndeni Junior and Bopa-Senatla High — students just implemented SRC's. The principals were obliged to accept them despite the DET's opposition.

What campaigns were run alongside the demand for SRC's?

A: We addressed the demands for the abolition of corporal punishment, free textbooks, school uniform not to be compulsory and an end to the age-limit law. These campaigns and the subsequent victories mobilised even the most stubborn students. These demands were linked to the major one — for SRC's, and so the need for an SRC became crystal clear to many students.

How did the authorities respond to students' demands for democratic SRC's?

A: Principals at some schools wanted to impose the DET's Pupils Representative Council (PRC). The authorities could then wield an enormous amount of control over students by getting them to channel their grievances through PRC's.

The old prefect system had shown that the 'channeling' system was undemocratic. The principal would always have the final decision, regardless of how students felt.

The DET also tried hard to enforce their own SRC constitution. Students rejected both of these.

The police were the busiest ones responding to students demands with repression.

What were the repressive actions?

A: Police detained and harassed student activists, and sometimes went to ordinary students demanding to know the whereabouts of activists.

The state banned student meetings outside the schools. But they did not ban them in schools because they did not know what kind of meetings were held. But this did not hamper us in anyway because we were able to discuss and keep in touch inside and outside the schools.

Can you explain how you see a democratic SRC?

A: An SRC is an organ for voicing student feelings about the conditions under which they live and learn. A democratic SRC is a structure of students, by students and for students.

It is not a structure that conspires to overthrow teachers and principals. But because students are in daily contact with teachers, the SRC's must be an instrument for normalising relations between the students and teachers, principals and parents.

Exactly how the SRC functions is a matter to be decided on by those who elected it. It is accountable to no one but those students. If it is not accountable to the student electorate, then it is neither democratic nor does it serve their interests.

Did you win support for SRCs from the teachers, principals and parents?

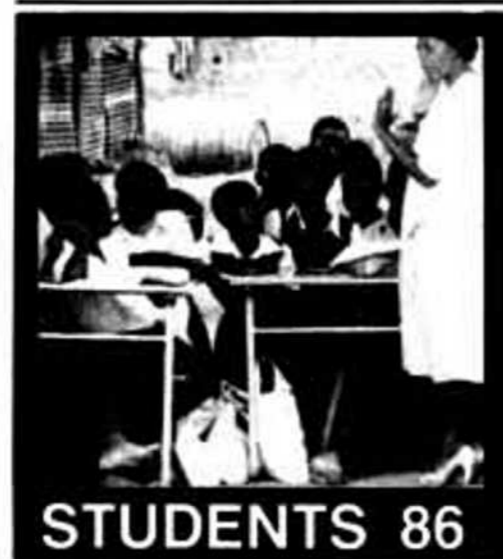
A: We enjoyed support from many teachers and some principals but



A democratic SRC is a structure of students, by students and for students, says SESCO executive

Tight structures make SESCO strong

Students are organising into deep-rooted structures in Soweto schools. Saspu interviewed SESCO president, Eric Nkomo.



they could not do it openly for fear of victimisation by the DET. Some teachers had serious problems with undisciplined students and there was no one to take this matter to except the student body, so they also contributed to the realisation of SRCs.

Did you discuss SRCs during school hours in the classrooms?

A: If the teacher was not in class for a period we would immediately start a discussion, using the blackboard for illustration. We didn't ask permission for these discussions. So much groundwork was done in this way that sometimes we would not even mention SRC's in mass meetings.

How is the SRC structured in your school?

A: There are two representatives from each standard on the SRC. These representatives then have their own meeting and elect the SRC office bearers.

Most SRC's are made up of many subcommittees - education, disciplinary, organising, fundraising, cultural, sports and the executive committee.

What qualities do you think students are looking for in the people they elect?

A: Students want a disciplined person who would make sacrifices for students when necessary, and who has the interests of students at heart. He/she must be vigilant in tackling student issues and be able to avoid being manipulated out of his/her mandate by other people, especially the principals. The person must be responsible at all times and must not do things that will cause shame to the organisation.

The reps must not neglect their school work and so set a bad example to students. Parents must not be able to think that student leaders are those who, because they are defeated educationally, agitate for 'boycotts and disorders' in order to have 'fellow-travellers' in their state of defeat.

Once the SRC is formed, what is it supposed to do?

A: It must organise workshops and seminars to talk about and define the SRC so it will be understood and supported by all students. Then it must prepare resources to run the SRC efficiently - an office with the necessary equipment, like a phone, and stationery.

Also SRC members must take the problems from students and discuss them in their meetings. If it's a simple problem they can just solve it. But if it's a complex one the SRC must convene a student meeting in the school.

How do you see the role of the SRC in politicising students?

A: Our SRC conducts discussions on the state of the nation to keep students informed. The education committee together with the cultural committee organises workshops and political debates. In our school we also take students to SESCO Councils and mass meetings.

Should the SRC participate in

the decision-making and running of the school as whole?

A: At the moment the problem is that decisions are taken first by the DET and then handed down to principals who want to implement them immediately.

The SRC together with parents and school staff must sit down and decide how the school should run because they know the school's problems better than the DET.

The SRC should at least be informed about whatever decision the administration takes, especially if that decision affects students.

Decisions about teachers can be worked out in a good spirit with them. It won't be 'a decision about teachers' — it can become a simple interchange of ideas. Much as students won't allow themselves to be governed undemocratically — I hope teachers also won't allow it to happen to them.

Once the Education Charter Campaign is completed and a charter adopted students will then be able to contribute to an education policy. But at the moment SRC's can't make a comprehensive contribution in their schools because it is a national issue.

How should the teachers, parents and the community generally participate in the running of the schools?

A: In some areas there are Parent-Teacher-Student Associations. There is an urgent and important need for their participation if the educational crisis is to be solved in this country.

It is not enough for parents to just glimpse at their children's school work and accuse them of 'playing' at school. Neither is it enough to praise their children for 'working hard' and passing. Because what they learn and pass is questionable. This warrants full participation in all matters involving education by parents students, teachers and the community at large.

How many schools in Soweto have democratic SRCs?

A: Out of 64 high schools in Soweto there are 59 with SRC's. Others like Ibhongo High are in the process of forming them.

How do different SRC's in Soweto have contact with each other and how do they relate to Sosco?

A: We have formed Area Committees in most parts of Soweto for the purposes of co-ordination. Through Area Committees SRC structures have been created where they weren't existing. If, for example, there are four high schools in one part of Soweto and there are only two SRC's, the Area Committee will then see to the formation of SRC's in the remaining two schools. There is also Sosco which encourages other areas to form structures.

Sosco co-ordinates and assists SRC's in the whole of Soweto and encourages students to form structures where none exist. If the SRC in a particular school faces serious problems Sosco can intervene. Also Sosco can solve the problems of students outside the schools.

Sosco is a student organisation in the community and is not waging the struggle in isolation from other organisations in the community.

Sosco and the Soweto Youth Congress, for example, have worked together to combat acts of political banditry of the so-called 'abosiyayinyova' in many parts of Soweto.

What other organisations does Sosco relate to?

A: Sosco does have a relationship with progressive unions which are affiliated to both UDF and Cosatu. There are still many things to do with the workers organisations. Worth mentioning is that Sosco has been instrumental in forming the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee.

How have students helped do away with school committees?

A: The PTAs are fast replacing the school committees that were functioning in the interests of the DET. We have asked our members to bring together their parents into one single body to replace the school committees which are now becoming a thing of the past in Soweto.

The future of the School Committees is not known at this stage — except that they will be swallowed up by the broad national democratic movement. For instance, we cannot allow a community councillor to be a member of PTAs.

How do you see the question of boycotts?

A: Many people mistake a boycott for a principle whereas it is just a tactic to achieve a particular objective. Students are not in a position to talk to the government. We use a boycott tactic to make our grievances heard and it has worked.

The boycott tactic has borne fruits in the total abolition of the notorious age-limit law, the DET bowing to our demand for SRC's and others.

Some students feel it is a waste of time to stay at school fighting for demands and they should rather be in the community fighting the police, army and the councillors? How do you see this?

A: Sosco believes that in the classrooms students can learn, strengthen their unity and consolidate efforts for the liberation struggle. On the question of the police, army and the councillors we say le Grange and Malan have long declared war on the students. Whatever happens when students encounter the belligerence of the police and the army, does not happen as a Sosco instruction.