



# IN THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE

Establishing student leadership in the fifth grade not only teaches kids to be civic-minded, but it also brings a dose of fun to the school and community

*By Elizabeth Benstead*

In order for roses to grow into vibrant, exquisite, fragrant, blooming flowers, you must cultivate the seeds from the start: Water, provide sunlight, fertilize, and repeat. I look at the young minds of intermediate elementary schoolers—fourth- and fifth-graders—and realize that I have been given a chance not only to mold young minds but also to cultivate the future leaders of tomorrow.

I believe that the three T's of philanthropy—time, talent, and treasure—are just as essential as the three R's. And an elementary-level student council offers intermediate students leadership opportunities that bring the school together with spirited activities, teacher appreciation, and most importantly,



philanthropic acts. Through participation in a student council, children can learn to become involved, civic-minded citizens, as well as see their involvement create change through multiple miniature lessons.

### **Electing a Council**

Three years ago, after moving to North Carolina and teaching and advising a National Association of School Councils Middle Level Gold Council of Excellence, I returned to an elementary school—Rocky River Elementary in Concord, North Carolina. The school didn't have a student council, and I spoke with principal Adrian Parry about establishing one for its fourth- and fifth-graders. She agreed wholeheartedly.

“Service learning plays a vital role within instruction here at Rocky River Elementary,” she says. “We have seen positive change over the last several years at our school with

intentional implementation of service learning and giving our children ample experiences to give back to our communities. Our students are now seeing their role in helping the greater world in our community.”

I came into the position as the student council adviser with fewer than 10 upcoming fifth-graders. I ended the school year by holding elections for an executive board. Currently, to run for co-leader, each candidate must have been an active member of the student council during the fourth grade, have no discipline referrals, complete an election application and letter of intent, receive a teacher recommendation, and write a one-minute speech.

Elections are based solely on the one-minute speech, which is presented to the entire fourth grade via our news station. There are no free candy giveaways, and there are no posters. Rocky River's executive board consists of co-leaders, a secretary, and delegates. If a

student runs for the office of co-leader and is not elected, he or she is automatically placed on the executive board as a delegate.

General council members (or homeroom representatives) also must complete a council application, which consists of three items:

- Why do you want to join Rocky River’s student council?
- Explain why you feel you are qualified to be a homeroom representative.
- Name one thing you would like to do for our school/community next school year.

### Initial Activities

The first year was difficult—a learning curve—and at times nail-biting, as I was used to working with middle schoolers. Our first school spirit activity was “Spooktacular Rocky River.” Every student (K–5) designed and colored a “spooktacular” Halloween/fall lumina on a white lunch bag. Student council members placed the decorated lunch bags, weighted with cat litter and lit by two battery-operated tea lights, along the road outside for passersby to enjoy on Halloween.

For our students to learn the importance of what it means to be civic-minded, the student council held a Veterans Day program that recognized current and former members of the armed services. Students received a yellow star to take home, on which they would write the name of a veteran or current service member and their military branch. More than 600 yellow stars were placed in our school’s vestibule.

Executive board members also created a Veterans Day PowerPoint presentation for the morning news, the entire fifth grade created paper poppies, and every classroom invited a veteran to share their personal story. General council members greeted each veteran as they arrived at Rocky River Elementary, and served as his or her host for the day.

Our first schoolwide community service project was to collect stocking stuffers for Toys for Tots in December. The executive board helped devise *Toy Story* trivia questions and, with the help of the U.S. Marine Corps., captured the holiday spirit at an all-school assembly while encouraging students to donate a stocking stuffer worth \$5 or less.

Five sneaky “elves” arrived from the North Pole and visited all classrooms throughout the two-week drive. The elves caused havoc around the school—TP-ing rooms, having snowball

fights, taping colorful balloons on desks, and leaving notes for all students. Last year, we donated more than 600 stocking stuffers.

### Encouraging Involvement


As the adviser of an elementary student council, my goal is to provide activities that involve all students. The fifth grade’s executive board and council members are the facilitators of these activities, and together, we strive to make sure that nobody in the student body ever utters the words, “Where’s the fun in this school?”

In addition, I try to choose activities that the majority of our elementary students will not only enjoy, but can also afford, since Rocky River Elementary is a Title 1 School in which approximately 75 percent of students receive a free lunch.

When the Boys & Girls Club of Cabarrus County approached me about a fundraiser to help students who are also supported by their organization, we jumped at the chance. The executive board decided to hold a Sweetheart Community Celebration for Valentine’s Day. We had a nominal charge of \$3 per person and included parents, siblings, and other family members. Activities included rock painting, face painting, jewelry making, coloring, bookmark making, dancing, and snacks. The day was a rousing success, with more than 350 people in attendance. In fall 2018, we planned a fall festival to help hurricane victims in North Carolina.

When I brainstorm activities the student council can sponsor, I think big to get my council to involve as many students as possible. Over the years, I’ve learned one important component in trying to have strong student body engagement: Get your faculty and staff on board, and the activities will run much more smoothly. Teachers are the best motivators and can encourage students to get involved.

Rocky River Elementary was honored by NAESP/American Student Council Association in 2016 and 2017 as an Honor Elementary Council—the only elementary school in North Carolina to be awarded this distinction.

As I look back on my first year at Rocky River, I wonder if I was a little bit crazy to do all of this. But you have to be a little bit crazy to be an adviser. I wouldn’t change my job for anything in the world. 

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**Elizabeth Benstead** teaches civic engagement, service, and service learning to K–5 students at Rocky River Elementary in Concord, North Carolina.



### CONSIDER THIS

Student philanthropy has a powerful economic effect, NASC reports. Affiliated student council programs collected 8.8 million pounds of food for the disadvantaged in 2017, and raised millions of dollars for charities such as the American Cancer Society, the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and Special Olympics.