

From our Chief Executive



Lt. General Arjun Ray, PVSM, VSM (Retd.)

Dear Friends,

Student Voice and Student Leadership
Address Fifth Investiture, Bangalore
29 September 2007

In my talk at the last Investiture I had left two messages on leadership for the Students' Council to consider: represent the voice of the students, and try to make a difference so that the School and the local community become a better place. This morning I will go one step forward and share my thoughts on how student voice helps in empowering and developing student leadership. The concept of student voice is alien in India because of the hierarchical structures that still exist within most families and schools. But this must change if educational reforms are to take place.

Leadership is the central idea of our school. The vision we have set out is to create leaders and world citizens through the traditional values of love, empathy and discipline – children who will grow up with an understanding of life and be rooted in their local culture.

Student leadership arises when students play a decisive role in the success of school improvement and educational change. As adults we should not think of students as being the beneficiaries of change. Rather, the thinking should be that they are the agents of change. The Student Council must, therefore, prepare a comprehensive vision for students as partners in school change. I believe that the correct attitude should be: teachers work with students in schools as opposed to working for them.

Student leadership arises when they empower themselves to become lifelong creative and independent learners, wherein students take responsibility for their learning. In this changed scenario, students become their own teachers and expect their teachers to facilitate their learning. One very effective tool to being about this transformation is student voice. Student voice must not be mistaken for disrespect. Respect for authority, a moral virtue, underlines the notion of respect. A person who does not respect authority does not respect himself and will never be able to develop the desire to learn.

We expect the Students' Council to assume a lead leadership role in empowering students to take on the responsibility for learning. Some of the areas where student voices can be vocal are by:

- a. Partnering teachers in designing curriculum, even lesson plans, and assessment strategies. This is called co-construction and inevitably leads to better academic performance, improved discipline and a passion for learning.
- b. Being co-opted in decision-making in major policy areas regarding school improvement.
- c. As school researchers and even learning evaluators.
- d. Addressing social and environmental issues by either social activism or through dialogue with community leaders.

For any voice to be heard it has to be clear and unanimous. Discordant voices can create disharmony and confusion. To harmonize student voices team-building through empathic communication is indispensable. This is a function of student leadership.

Team-playing in the Knowledge Age is crucial because all of us work and live in a multicultural environment with varying perspectives. Given the complexity and integrative nature of common issues and challenges organizations face, we need teams to come up with acceptable solutions. No single person has the answers. Strong teams ensure emotional bonding, a sense of being cared for and confidence in attaining goals.

Team-building is about empathic communication. The most important lesson I have learnt in conflict-management is that, conflict, alienation and misunderstandings within families, organizations and society, and even between nations, arise when communication breaks down. We don't listen to what the other person is saying, and we don't make ourselves understood. That is the crux of the problem. Empathic communication is about the art of listening with the intent of understanding and not reacting. Listening is not for the purpose of evaluating, or probing, or advising. It is just for understanding the feelings and perspective of the other person. When we do this teams are built on strong foundations.

Student voice is about action, about setting examples, about laying the foundations of school reform and active citizenship. Student voice will strengthen your commitment to learning, to community and democracy. Our answer to all the problems the world faces today is to rely on the youth. They are the future, they are our hope. With this sober thought, I once again congratulate all student leaders elected to the Students' Council, and wish you all the very best. I sincerely hope you will make a difference.

With Warm Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Arjun Ray". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

**Lieutenant General Arjun Ray, PVSM, VSM (Retd.)
Chief Executive Officer,
Indus Trust.**