

THEN AND NOW

A history of Student Council

Student Council (StuCo) has been the voice of ASL students, the advocate for change, the organizer of dances and protests, and a leading influence at ASL. The Council's members, for more than 60 years, have faithfully served their constituents as participants in one of ASL's most formative extracurricular activities. Here, StuCo alumni and former advisors recall the highlights, hiccups and hallmarks from their council experience.

“It was a special group of kids who wanted to be there after school on Fridays to talk about how to make the high school experience better for their peers. StuCo taught me the value of developing strong, genuine relationships as the critical foundation for any team, and certainly for any leadership position.”

—Morganne Howell '12, student council president 2011-12

1960s

ASL graduated its first Class of seniors—a group of 12—in 1960, and Student Council was one of several clubs available to middle and high school students. **Bob Cavenagh '61**, who served as vice president in the 1959-60 school year, recalls meeting and talking with the other council members before retiring to Camden with some upperclassmen and women for a coffee. “I don’t recall any big issues,” Bob wrote. Similarly, former student council president **Charles Scudder '64** remembers his leadership role as one of many commitments. With the council’s help, the administration sponsored a Sadie Hawkins dance in 1962 and put clocks in the library and lunchroom. Charles’s classmates, **Jim McConkie** and **Dan Sanders**, were elected president and vice president of the junior class in 1962-63.



Dan Sanders, center left, shakes hands with running mate Jim McConkie, shortly after they won their student council election

1970s

If the first decade of Student Council was quiet and routine, the tumult of the 1970s offered plenty of opportunity for civil discourse and student activism. On 1 December 1971, to celebrate the opening of ASL’s new and permanent campus in St. John’s Wood, the School hosted a dedication ceremony. Amid much controversy, the guest of honor was former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, then Secretary of State for Education and Science. A group of high schoolers, including student council rep **Martin Hummel '73**, staged a walkout to protest Mrs. Thatcher’s appearance and was subsequently suspended for his actions. “My parents feared deportation for our family,” Martin recounted.



Margaret Thatcher dedicates ASL’s new building in 1971 despite some dissenting students



Martin Hummel, right, in a StuCo meeting in 1972

The following year, Martin served as president, and petitioned for an indoor smokers’ lounge “with a stereo system” on behalf of the student body. Remarkably, the lounge was granted. For fellow council member and president **Kevin Browne '72**, the most urgent protest of his time wasn’t over Margaret Thatcher, but the administration’s decision to replace the upper school director. In response to this teacher’s departure, Kevin led a student walkout during school that lasted for three days, resulting in an emergency board meeting during which Kevin brokered a deal so that students would return to class. Although he and others felt heard, their movement was outmaneuvered, and the council’s demands were ultimately dismissed. “The grown ups played hardcore politics with us,” Kevin explained. “It was an important lesson in realism.”



Kevin Browne, 1972

Still, there were other lessons to be gained from participating in student government. For **Dave Wicks '72**, serving his class infused him with self-assurance and compassion that helped inform his business career. Other council veterans, such as **Nathan Birnbaum '74**, have adapted a new perspective with age and feel softer towards the administration they once battled with. Learning how to negotiate and clearly communicate are among the benefits cited by numerous student council alumni, such as **Lesley Boucher '78**. The issues she and her peers tackled ranged from stocking the soda machines ("to pay for our dances!") to having open campus at lunch—a high school privilege still enjoyed today. **Cindy Butler '78**, president for one semester, believes her initiation into peacemaking started with serving on a panel to resolve hostility between ASL students and those of a neighboring school. Cindy shared, "I remember wearing a navy blue suit—my standard wardrobe when I later appeared in court as an attorney!"

Adam Rose '78 believes a key takeaway from his time in student government was learning Robert's Rules of Order, the standard procedure for running a meeting with motions and seconds. His council also participated in a protest, with some faculty and parents, over changes to the admission policy announced in 1976, culminating in a march to the US Embassy that attracted international media attention.



ASL students and parents march to the US Embassy

1980s

Student Council maintained responsibility for the social life of the School, and the 1980s ushered in a spectacular live music showcase that carries on today: Battle of the Bands (BOTB). **Dan Seligson '85** is still impressed that his council landed the Morrissey McMullin band to perform one year, and that BOTB expanded to include other schools. But the most memorable event of that era, according to **Alice Iacuesa (ASL 1979-2000)**, who oversaw Student Council from 1983 to 1984, was the talent show featuring **Avner Shapiro '85's** rendition of *Roxanne*. "My clearest memory," she concluded. "Anyone who was there will never forget it."

In 1984, new high school social studies teacher **Anthony Linick (ASL 1984-2002)** was asked to be the council's faculty advisor, a position he held for 15 years. Dr. Linick recalls two important initiatives the council undertook during his tenure: the launch of the Senior Award for Excellence in Teaching, which was given annually for almost 30 years; and creating the Student-Faculty Judiciary Committee. Council members weighed in on other issues, from whether to change ASL's colors (no!) to redesigning a letterman jacket—a keepsake Anthony wore to Thanksgiving last year.



Dr. Linick wears his ASL varsity letter jacket, November 2022

The weekly Friday afternoon meetings he presided over, during which students learned to think on their feet and Dr. Linick steered everyone towards "the art of the possible," were time well spent for Dan Seligson. "I so enjoyed the banter and the wit of our young people, and I learned a lot," he explained. Former president **Chad Ruble '89** recalls, "Our relationship with the administration was very collaborative. Our proposals felt taken seriously, and their support of student advocacy gave me confidence, in college and beyond, for navigating

administrative structures." **Jacques Soenens '89** served with Chad, as VP. He shared, "Student Council gave me my first take at how to build community." Jacques now serves as a director on the American School in London Foundation Board alongside **Bill Scheffler '66**. While Chad and Jacques appreciated the opportunities they had to step into leadership, representing the student voice on various advisory committees with faculty and school leaders, he might argue that the 1988 Halloween dance is their council's greatest legacy. "Somehow, we were able to procure a truck full of Hollywood props—tombstones, fake blood and a professional cobweb machine—to transform the Commons into a haunted house!"



VP Jacques Soenens, left, and the Student Council during an offsite meeting in 1989

1990s



Students were once permitted to smoke in an outdoor area known as the pit

For years, one of the most divisive issues between school leadership and the Student Council related to cigarette smoking, first on campus, and then during school hours. The indoor smoking lounge of the '70s was eventually replaced with an outdoor space called the pit, where students took cigarette breaks in between classes. When smoking on campus was prohibited, Student Council proposed the pit be transformed into a

senior lounge. In 1995, with the arrival of new high school principal **Coreen R. Hester (ASL 1995-97; 2007-17; 2022-23)**, came a new policy that officially banned smoking during the school day. Naturally, this was not welcome news to many students. Former StuCo treasurer and president **John Jensen '97** remembers this indignant outrage. "Now, it is crazy to think that smoking during school could have ever been sanctioned," he mused. Former vice president **Brock McCormack '98** stands by Mrs. Hester's decision. "Banning smoking was the biggest controversy of the year," he remembers, "but clearly was the right call."



"I think our greatest victory was extending the hours of the tuck shop!" wrote **Oli Wiener '96**. Mrs. Iacuesa recruited him to Student Council as a freshman in 1992, as a means to help grow his public-speaking skills. "From working to gather support from different constituents, to creating an action plan and then implementing it—I carry those lessons with me to this day," John Jensen wholeheartedly agrees. "Being voted president by the student body remains one of the biggest accomplishments in my life," he said. John learned how to advocate for what he felt was right, make a persuasive case, demonstrate autonomy and earn others' respect. "Dean of Students **Kevin Conaty (ASL 1991-2017)**, Mrs. Hester and other administrators were willing to engage in open dialogue with us," John explained. "This is just one of the many ways ASL stands out and prepares students for life. From presenting to the Board of Trustees to defending open campus, I gained the confidence to lead from the front. I wouldn't be where I am today without Student Council."



The Student Council in 1994

Interfacing and collaborating with adults was a formative experience for Brock McCormack. For him, it was less about the issues they faced than it was the chance to feel like a grown-up who had a seat at the table. "I thought of myself as mature and responsible to be included in adult meetings," he said. "I'm thankful I could be part of something that really impacted the School."

2000s

High school math teacher **Tony Bracht (ASL 2002-present)** has been student council advisor since 2009. A veteran of student government in high school and college, Mr. Bracht was president of his own high school class, so supporting student government is a strong priority for him. "When you look back through the meeting minutes in the '70s and '80s, you find that a lot of conversations repeat themselves over time," he explains. "Do students have enough space, and are we using it effectively? Is student voice represented in decisions that stakeholders make?" To Mr. Bracht, the overarching theme that informs each council's agenda, proposal, debate and dispute is the reach of student influence in a distributed leadership model. "The goal is always for students to have input," he said.



Mr. Bracht, front row left, poses with the math department in 2003-04

Former president **Morganne Howell '12** advocated for students to have a say in the plans for ASL's campus expansion, set forth by the Board of

Trustees and the New Frontiers capital campaign. "My goal for the 2011-12 school year was to expand the scope of the council beyond social events." Consequently, Morganne and the other officers: vice president **Sophia Jennings '12**, treasurer **Taylor Lambert '12**, secretary **Julian Nebreda '13** and PR rep **Elizabeth Robertson '14** attended meetings and several external events, including representing ASL when former US President Obama delivered a historic speech to Parliament. "This was an absolute highlight of my time in London," Morganne gushed.

Senior Sunrise and Senior Sunset also began under Morganne and her council—two events that still serve to meaningfully bookend the senior experience for Grade 12 students.

Student Council today

Now more commonly known as StuCo, Student Council has 24 representatives: six per grade. The council votes on the officers, and presidential candidates present speeches to the whole student body but are not chosen by popular vote. Meetings are no longer held on Friday afternoons, as they did under Dr. Linick; they now meet on Thursdays to accommodate athletes who wouldn't be able to participate in Friday meetings or activities because of sports.

The Battle of the Bands has greatly evolved from the concerts in the Commons of 20 years ago, too. "Bangers and Bash" is a high-school wide, half-day event held at Canons Park in June, where student musicians perform on a live stage. "Some of these musicians have gone on to pursue professional careers," Tony Bracht shared. In an effort to be more inclusive, StuCo events, such as prom, are free of charge. A public Instagram account, @hsstuco, helps promote council activities, reports on meetings and seeks feedback from peers. ■

FOOTNOTE

This is an abridged version of an article that appears on our website. To read the original piece, and more news about ASL alumni, visit asl.org/alumni/alumni-news