

# 'They do have a say'

## Group gives kids a voice in government

By [Sarah Palermo](#) / [Monitor staff](#)

March 28, 2012

When 17-year-old Jennifer Tyrell was younger, she thought her high school years would be just like her brother's: go to school, do some learning, head home.

Maybe she'd take on one of the rare leadership roles for students, planning events with the student council or representing her peers as class president.

Instead, she's one of 10 Pittsfield High School students on the site council, a group the school created last year as part of a redesign program. In addition to the students, there are six faculty members and three community members on the council, giving the students a majority stake.

"The idea of students having a voice was happening other places," Tyrell, a senior at the school, said. "We were the way it was, versus this new idea. We weren't there yet."

Students with issues, ideas or complaints had nowhere to turn, said Bobby LeBel, who's also a senior and co-chairman of the council.

"Everything was decided by the administration and the school board. It was the typical 1980s high school. Students would just go in, do their stuff and go out. They weren't heard out and nothing happened," he said.

Derek Hamilton remembers those days, too. A 2000 graduate, he is now a social studies teacher at the high school and a member of the council.

"I didn't have many, if any, opportunities to share in the decision-making with faculty and administration. . . . (Now) adults listen to and encourage students to take the leading role. It creates ownership in the initiatives and policy changes and it has fostered a high level of respect for each other," he said.

The biggest challenge was making other students aware of what the group is doing.

The student members, who are all elected by their peers, weren't always clear what the group had done or could do.

That changed when they created a new policy granting privileges to students who maintain a certain grade point average. During a free period, students who have earned an "open campus" badge that week can spend their time in the hallway, library or at the picnic tables outside instead of being confined to their assigned study hall.

The council also recently developed a form for students and faculty to fill out for bringing issues to the council's meetings.

Last year, they drafted a policy outlining exactly who could march during the senior graduation (only students receiving Pittsfield High School diplomas that year, though in past years students who attend school out of town marched).

They also changed the school's community service requirements for graduation, adding a reflective writing piece, "to hold kids more accountable and allow them to really see what they are doing it for, so it's not just a number on a sheet they need to fill out," Tyrell said.

Tyrell and LeBel are both set to graduate this spring, but they said there's a bunch of younger students primed to take the council to the next level. Next year, it might tackle the school dress code, cell phone use restrictions and the grading system.

"The younger people can handle that," Tyrell said confidently. "Then they'll teach the even younger kids how to be like that, to get involved. It can only grow from here. It can only get better."

A few students from the council report to the Pittsfield School Board at its meetings or deliver council recommendations for policy changes, but other than that, the school board has kept a hands-off approach.

"We didn't even want a board member to attend their meetings as a liaison," said School Board Chairman Clayton Wood. "The group has teachers and other adults, but when there's a report, it's a student doing it, and that's really nice to see. It's something I hold a lot of promise for. The students will get a lot more out of anything done this way than just giving them a set of rules to follow."

Ross Morse, co-chairman of site council and a representative from the broader Pittsfield community, said the open campus policy works the same way as the site council.

"It's about a sense of responsibility. There are rewards for good and honest work, and if you do these things, you will be rewarded for them," he said of the open campus.

Similarly, the students on the council have stepped up to the challenge of taking ownership for their school.

"I'm amazed, delightfully amazed that they are willing to do so much. I'm amazed every day at the way they handle themselves and the community, that they're taking the lead on this and it's not just being handed to them."

In return, those students are being rewarded with more control over their education.

In fact, he said, "it's still a bit overwhelming in a way, that I don't know if the students understand yet the power they really have."