Introduction

This paper is based on the premise that there is a lack of participation among students in our schools, and that the primary reason for this is the absence of students in the decision making process. What I will outline is what the problem is, what attempts I and others have seen to help correct this problem, (in this area, as well as elsewhere) and how we at the Cambridge Rindge + Latin School can go about changing the structure of our school so as to involve our students in decision making, and eventually, involve the entire student body in making the important decisions that today are either either made for us, or aren't made at all.

Attempts to Resolve Problem

Throughout the country educators are faced with an increasingly difficult problem; how to motivate students to get the most out of their high school education. The problem is especially acute in large schools such as ours, where there are so many services available, and so many opportunities to get involved, that students often feel overwhelmed and out of touch with what is happening around them. In past years, attempts have been made to correct this problem at our school. In 1976 a Fairness Committee was set up to deal with concerns students had over their treatment in school, and it was a great aide in regaining students interests in their schooling, and in giving the student body a way to express themselves to others if needed. Unfortunately, the Fairness Committee disappeared over the recent years, and the only thing to take its place is an unorganized house government system, which noone really has any idea how to run effectively, and ends up being another instrument in our school not being used to its potential.

Ideas and Suggestions

The problem CRLS is facing is not one we have alone. Many school across the nation have had to deal with student apathy, and have run succesful programs in bringing in new ideas, and formulating new policy better suited to deal with modern day student concerns.

In early May, a group of students from CRLS, representing various houses traveled to New York to witness how 2 "democratic schools" were run. The first school, the Bronx School of Science had a small community type of student government, somewhat akin to the Pilot School here. The small, intimate climate there made it much easier to deal with others concerns, evident in the fact that there were no microphones, and that Robert's Rules were not followed. They discussed issues that were important to them individually, and also, those that directly affected them as a school. One issue was the lack of participation in their equivalent of the TAP program. Their discussion was very interesting, with challenges and confrontations that made for interesting discussion, while doing it in a fashion that neither hurt nor offended anyone. Unfortunately, that type of small community discussion is not a viable alternative at CRLS, since we have over 2500 students and staff members that could be involved. The important things to get from this group though, is that discussion among students and staff over what is happening around them greatly improves student and teacher morale, and their interest in their schools.
The second school we visited was the Roosevelt High School in the Bronx. (In fact, Roosevelt once had the reputation of being the worst school in the country!) There we encountered another type of small group discussion, where students were able to motion for different things, and run the entire meeting themselves, with input from the teachers and staff. This meeting was very interesting, since the students had obviously learned the process quite well, and were able to lead interesting informative discussions, with succinct, right to the point debate. The lesson we learned there was that when you set up a structure for debate like theirs, people learn to work within the system, which creates the opportunity for getting the most debate and discussion from your meeting.

The two local schools CRLS students went to were the Andover and Brookline High Schools. Both schools held a form of "town meeting" where anyone and everyone could participate, using strict rules about who could speak and when. This seemed to work especially well in Andover, where these rules were enforced, and students said that the meeting worked fine, even with over three to four hundred students there. The Brookline meeting was interesting as well, according to CRLS students, but the rules weren't followed as closely, and it often became disorganized and hard to follow. Students felt that the Andover type of system would work well in our school, with strict guidelines as to how the meeting was run, which in turn would make it easier for more people to express their views, without having to worry about being cut off or interrupted.

Change at CRLS

What must happen at CRLS is the adoption of some form of democratic school, taking things and eliminating others from different programs students and staff have seen before, in order to bring about a cohesive and smooth running forum for debate.

This process has been started here with the creation of a student government advisor, Mr. Jack Haverty, a science teacher here at CRLS, who hopes to work with students in order to bring about this system in the beginning of the next school year. Committees are already formed and debate has been going on for a long length of time as to how this system is to be set up, and to decide what we want and don't want in our system. Mr. Haverty also sent out a questionnaire to the teachers in our school, asking them how they felt about implementing a "democratic school" here. The teachers and staff overwhelmingly gave support to this idea, which is important if things are to run smoothly. We must have support from the teachers in the school, and talk with them in order to allay fears of their losing control of students, or the way things are run at CRLS. What must be stressed is that if students and teachers can work together, both of their interests will be served, and not only will student teacher relations improve, but both groups will get far more out of their experience in high school, and come out if the school with an understanding of how to work effectively with others, and how to work through problems; something very important, and hard to do, in the world today.

Conclusion

It is now widely recognized that students are not as involved today in school as they once were, and that something must be done to correct this problem. As evidenced by our examination of the different programs run by other schools, created to help change this lack of student involvement, there are things that can be done, and changes that can be made to help refocus our goals, and re-establish the kind of interest and student-teacher involvement in the way our school is run, that we once had in earlier years. With the support of the
administration, the school committee, and most of all the teachers and students, we can implement the kind of program, and make this dream a reality.