

National Association of State Boards of Education

→ Involving Students in State Education Governance

By Gary Colletti

As students seek new ways to enter the national conversation on topics such as school safety, many state boards of education are asking how to best incorporate student input into their decision making. Some state boards seek such input from designated student board members who participate regularly at state board meetings. At least seven other states have set up student advisory councils that meet separately and make presentations to the board.

Student participation at the state level has increased markedly since the 1970s. Twenty states and territories have at least one student member on their boards; 32 do not (see map). Delaware and Mississippi are in the process of adding student members,

and Utah's board decided to inaugurate a 15-member student advisory council in September.¹

Although members of boards with student members attest to their value, a 2005 NASBE report revealed that others questioned whether students were sufficiently mature, could make the required time commitment, and would obtain and share information appropriately. According to the same report, however, members serving on boards with student members reported a consistently positive experience, and opposition to student members was correlated with members' length of service on boards that had no experience with student members.²

WHY STUDENT MEMBERS?

Boards that are weighing whether to add student board members must consider the added value teenagers bring to the table. For one, they directly represent the very people

that education policies are meant to benefit. Student representatives on state boards can increase stakeholder engagement and develop civically engaged youth leaders, and their absence robs states of the benefits of meaningful perspectives on policy impact and unintended consequences of policies. Student representation opens up possibilities of two-way exchange. Students provide boards with input, and in return they receive guidance for sharing and explaining policies to their peers.

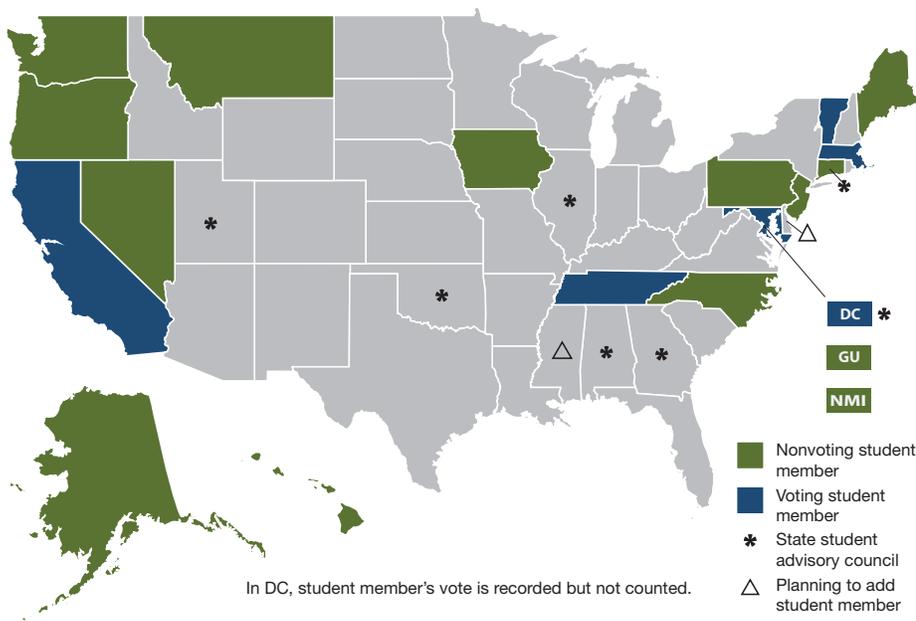
The leadership skills students gain from board membership—organization of time and content, civil discourse, research, communication and public speaking, and state-level policymaking—do not end with their terms of service. Young people with boardsmanship experience can apply these skills to ongoing involvement in their communities.

The payoff for investing time and effort in a new student member is greater the higher the level of student participation. Merely having young people present at meetings or educational events squanders the opportunity to have regular input from those who can translate the experience of being enrolled today's classrooms.

Hannah Trimarchi, who completed a term as Massachusetts's state board student member in 2018, reflected on what students can bring to the board table:

In order to understand the complex web of causality that leads to different educational outcomes for socioeconomic and racial groups, the educational community has to understand how policies surrounding testing, discipline, resource allocation, and teacher preparation impact classroom experience. I can think of no better way to understand the striking achievement gaps than talking to the sources of data themselves: the students. Having a student in the board room magnifies these invaluable opportunities for policymakers to

Map 1. Student Roles in State Education Governance



hear directly from the system's most important stakeholders.³

Sociologist Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation presents a hierarchy of youth participation in governance that can be useful in evaluating student membership on state boards.⁴ At the top of the ladder, youth and adults offer and accept each other's ideas, and young people's input on decisions is as valued as that of the adults. Toward the bottom, young people may be present for decisions or events that promote education but do not substantially contribute to policy discussions.

Whether or not a board has student members, it is important to review how young people are involved. Do students initiate discussion, and do other board members listen to them? Are students merely informed about education decisions at meetings? What happens when students have opinions that differ from those of adult board members?

STUDENTS' STATE GOVERNANCE ROLES

Like their adult counterparts, students can serve state boards of education in many ways and come to this work by various routes. John-Paul Hayworth, executive director of the DC State Board of Education, sees gains from having student members: "Student representatives serve a vital function on our state board. They ask insightful questions and often help the state board focus on the heart of the matter—students. . . . Their voice is a powerful instrument, and we as adults should do all we can to hold up a microphone for them."⁵

In six states, the governor appoints students as sitting members.⁶ In eight, state boards select from among a pool of student applicants.⁷ In some states, student councils elect student members.⁸

Student members speak on education issues before the board and vote in California, Maryland, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Vermont, and the District of Columbia (though in DC, student votes are recorded but do not affect the outcome). Where student members do not vote, they advise boards and participate in discussions. The 2005 NASBE study found

that students on boards where their votes counted also sought ways to gain the deep information necessary to make informed votes.

EQUITY IN OPPORTUNITIES FOR SERVICE

Boards can lead the way for other state policymaking bodies by modeling equity in student involvement. It is important for boards to ask themselves whether and how they are gathering young people's perspectives—and whose perspectives. Insight into the current classroom experience is useful, but one high school student in their junior or senior year may not accurately represent the diverse needs of peers across the state. Thus, some boards may opt for advisory councils, as Utah did. "It was decided that students would have a bigger influence if there were more of them because each student has a perspective and experience that is all their own," according to Utah student Kate De Groot.⁹

The way students gain their state board seat may also have equity consequences. Do all students have an equal opportunity to learn of the position, apply, and undergo the selection or election process? If not, selection of one student may not reflect student voice well.

The National Center for Learning and Citizenship highlighted considerations for student involvement:

Students of any background must believe that leadership opportunities are open to them both now and when they are adults. Processes for student involvement that are fair and equitable can serve as strategies for making boards and other governing bodies more representative, and for cultivating leaders from minority communities.¹⁰

Policies that provide opportunities for student board members to speak to and hear from their peers are one way to increase student members' impact. Another is staggered terms for two students, where students with a year's experience mentor new student members.

When state boards discuss policies, they often ask whether they will truly help students. Student members and advisory coun-

cils are means by which boards can gather student input. Whether they have student members or not, state boards should explore the extent to which students are participating in state education policymaking.

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NOTES

1 Mississippi's board voted to add a student member in November. Recently, Delaware General Assembly passed House Bill 455, establishing a Delaware 11th or 12th grade student as a member of the state board of education. See Delaware State Legislature, 149th General Assembly, House Bill 455 (2018), <https://legiscan.com/DE/text/HB455/2017>. Utah State Board of Education Policy 5008, Student Advisory Council, September 6, 2018, <https://www.schools.utah.gov/file/4a4c2e00-c916-4890-b901-8ee78d1f7ffa>.

2 National Association of State Boards of Education, "Student Leadership in Education: An Analysis of the Student Voice on State Boards of Education" (Alexandria VA: NASBE, 2005), http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/Rep_Student_Board_Members_2005.pdf.

3 Hannah Trimarchi, Massachusetts State Board of Education student member, 2017–18, email conversation with author, October 2018.

4 Roger A. Hart, "Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship" (Florence: UNICEF, International Child Development Centre, 1992).

5 John-Paul Hayworth, Washington DC State Board of Education, email conversation, October 2018.

6 These states are California, Connecticut, Maryland, Nevada, Tennessee, and Vermont.

7 These states are Alaska, the District of Columbia, Iowa, Maine, North Carolina, the Northern Marianas, Oregon, and Pennsylvania.

8 E.g., Guam's Island-wide Board of Governing Students, the Montana Association of Student Councils, the New Jersey Association of Student Councils, Hawaii State Student Council, Washington State's Association of Washington Student Leaders, and the Massachusetts State Student Advisory Council.

9 Marjorie Cortez, "Student Council to Advise Elected Utah State Board of Education," *Deseret News* (September 6, 2018).

10 Jeffery J. Miller, "Involving Students in Governance," Policy Brief (Denver: Education Commission of the States, National Center for Learning and Citizenship, November 2004), http://specialedlaw.blogs.com/home/files/school_governance.pdf.