

National Association of State Boards of Education

## ➔ Strengthening Student Engagement and Adult Support

By Naomi Porter

During my term on the California State Board of Education, I realized that student and adult board members alike struggle to effectively engage their primary constituents—students. Student state board members face the added challenges of making an impact during relatively short terms of service and of identifying mentors who can help them.

I faced those challenges. I was determined to help as many students as I could, engage in important conversations, and improve K-12 education in my state. In subsequent interviews, I found that other student board members faced these same challenges yet found ways to make an impact on their boards. I also found mentors who were willing and excited to support me. This support has lasted beyond my year-long term.

### SHORT TERMS BUT UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

Student terms are typically one or two years. But as Michael Keyes, student member on the Nevada State Board of Education, advised, “You might not get a chance to impact your community like this again. So at the end of your term, don’t think, ‘I wish I could have done that.’ ”

To be a student board member is to write your own job description. Claire Chi, who just finished her second term as student member on the Pennsylvania state board, concurred. “It is crucial that you go beyond meeting attendance,” she said.

Advocating for student-centered policies requires proactivity. States and school systems host few events that are avenues for direct student voice. While some states have student advisory councils that satisfy this need (see map), most student members must

decide for themselves how best to advocate for and serve students.

Only by being proactive can a student member reach students of all backgrounds, including those whose voices are typically unheard—for example, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, students from different geographic areas, first-generation students, and students from different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups. A student member enters the board term equipped with only their own context and experiences. To combat this limited perspective, I sent hundreds of emails to school leaders, superintendents, and student groups, offering to visit and listen to them.

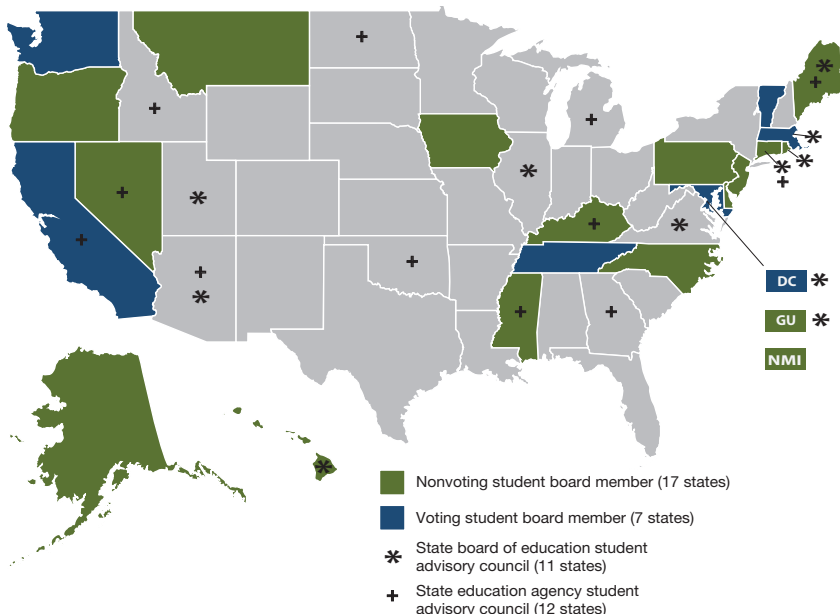
Chi had a similar approach. She led a group discussion on education policies with more than 160 students but realized that the group included only high schoolers. So she visited schools across the state to speak with younger students, including kindergarteners, to hear about their experiences.

Virtual platforms present added ways to engage. “Virtual office hours have allowed me to connect with secondary students, offering them a space to share their concerns and allowing me to gather diverse input on various projects,” said Anya Ayyapan, student member on the California state board in 2023–24. Like Chi, she visited elementary schools during her term, teaching even the youngest learners that their voices matter.

Successful student members leverage networks. “Significant change in K-12 education happens over time, so ensuring continuity is key to successful youth-led initiatives,” Ayyapan said.

In Nevada, Keyes worked to create a state student advisory board with the help of Nevada’s 2024 Teacher of the Year. “I couldn’t do it without her and other allies’ help,” he said. Such councils reach students from across the state, and with the widespread availability of online platforms to conduct meetings, it has

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never been easier to bring students together. New student state board members can inherit a standing advisory council and thus ensure that the state board has continuous access to many student voices.

## INNOVATIVE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Washington state has made notable strides in engaging students. The state board hires two high school students to serve as communications interns, for example, and it adopted a pet seal as the state board's mascot. While the stuffed seal is certainly fun, it also serves as a way to engage students. The board hosted a naming competition for the seal, and many elementary school students submitted names. The board hosted events where the seal was present, allowing board members to engage with elementary school students. The seal's adventures have been documented on Instagram, alongside state board updates.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the board has been able to "lean in" on social media and connect with a younger audience.

Randy Spaulding, executive director of the Washington state board, said that the board's events enable it to put "engagement on the front end." Valuing student input at the beginning of a decision-making process rather than merely seeking a stamp of approval at its end builds trust, an essential element of a viable democracy. When asked about his advice for engaging with students, parents, or other stakeholders, Spaulding said, "We are laying out concepts, not proposals."

Having a state student board member is an important way for state boards to demonstrate they value student input. The Maine state board has had student members since 2008. Martha Harris, former chair of the Maine board and longtime advocate for student representation, detailed the structure of the board's student positions. "We had decided early on to have two student members who were appointed in their junior year, and the senior could mentor the junior so the junior didn't feel alone," she said. In addition to having a peer mentor, the board designates one member who serves as a mentor to the student. Whether informal or formally assigned, having a mentor can

build connections across the state and seed a student's professional and personal growth.

Connecting with a mentor is a great first step in creating an environment where the student member feels included and valued. Lu Young, vice chair of Kentucky's board, encourages other boards to build "a climate on your board where the student member is not an afterthought." In such an environment, adult board members get to know student members and ask and encourage questions. Communicating norms is also important, Young said. "If we [the board] use first names, we should do the same thing with the student," she said, adding a board must "think about interpersonal norms, both informal or formal, because you want [the student] to feel legitimate and respected."

Stakeholder engagement is paramount, these students and adults agree. Harris summed up this sentiment: "You should go out and try and meet the students and learn what students are thinking and wanting." Rarely are students reading state board agendas, subscribing to state agency mailing lists, or taking the time to comment at board meetings. Students are on social media and in schools. Harris shared that her board holds their meetings in schools four times a year. Members interact with students in their own spaces of comfort—from the cafeteria to the classroom—to hear about issues affecting them and gain access to students' firsthand experiences.

## CONCLUSION

Students should be at the center of policies that affect their education, and their perspectives should be heard. Kentucky's Young shared her guiding mantra on work with students: "Don't make decisions about us without us." To engage effectively requires the ongoing efforts of adult and student members. Advisory councils, school visits, and initiatives to seek out the voices of those typically unrepresented are key strategies in student engagement. A modern education system requires modern solutions. In many states, adults and students are linking arms to innovate how they involve students in the decision making that affects their K-12 experience.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Washington State Board of Education (@therealsbeseal), Follow me, I'm Snorkels (the State Board's mascot, named by Payton)! I journey through WA schools and share what I learn + highlight SBE's work, Instagram page, <https://www.instagram.com/therealsbeseal/?hl=en>.