

Student Members of the School Board Exercising Student Voice in Education Policy

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Abstract

Despite their growing presence, student members of school boards remain relatively neglected in extant research. Drawing on notions of situational and institutional power, this study examines how seven U.S. student members of the board enacted their roles during the challenging 2020-21 school year and how adults responded. Findings highlight not only the seriousness of purpose with which students worked to elevate concerns and act in the best interest of their peers, but also the various suppression tactics adults used to undermine or silence their voices. We identify five commonly experienced suppression tactics, each of which reflects the pervasiveness of adultism.

Keywords: *Student voice; school boards; youth power; adultism*

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Recommended Citation: *Conner, J., Sippy, Z., & Brennen, A. (2023). Student members of the school board exercising student voice in education policy, Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 7(1).*

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Introduction

In the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic put the decision-making of local school boards into the spotlight, as they wrestled with whether and how to reopen schools safely, whether to require masking and COVID-19 testing and how to make up for learning loss. Board meetings became scenes of heated public testimony and tense exchanges among board members (Atterbury & Perez, 2021; Jones & Jones, 2022). The increased scrutiny and attendant politicization of school boards was further accelerated by the racial justice reckoning that followed the May 2020 murder of George Floyd and by the subsequent backlash to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives across the U.S.. This backlash, much of which has branded itself as “anti-critical race theory,” has included attempts by parents to pressure school boards to ban books that include discussion of race, transgender people, or homosexuality (Lopez et al., 2021).

Research on how school boards have negotiated decision-making during this challenging time is still emerging. This article contributes to this nascent body of work by focusing on one particular facet of school board meetings during the various educational controversies of 2020-2021: the role of school boards’ student members. Though most pandemic-era policies have faded to the background or been eliminated, the issues that were raised during this critical period are still very much alive. Indeed, last year in Boise, Idaho, a school board campaign pitted Shiva Rajbhandari, a high school senior, against Steve Schmidt, who was endorsed by the Idaho Liberty Dogs, an organization that works to combat the “spread of Marxism” in schools and advocates for book banning to prevent left-wing indoctrination of students by school librarians. Rajbhandari prevailed and has been sworn in as a duly elected member of the board (Rusby, 2022).

Student members of school boards occupy unique positions. Not only does their day-to-day experience in schools afford them a different vantage point than that of their adult counterparts, but they also represent those who are most directly impacted by the board’s decisions. Adult board members, by contrast, can operate as trustees who do what they think is best for students without having to feel the direct consequences of their decisions (Spring, 2011).

In the U.S., students have served on school boards since 1969, when California became the first state to appoint a high school student to serve on its state school board of education. In 1972, 15-year-old Sonia Yaco became the first documented case of a student campaigning for a position on her local school board in Ann Arbor, Michigan (Gross & Gross, 1977). Though she lost, around the country in the 1970s, students began to win seats on their elected school boards (Mitra, 2008). Currently, 33 U.S. states have laws that permit boards to include student members, and two states (Ohio and Massachusetts) actually require such representation (Cai, 2021; Pierrottet, 2022). Fourteen percent of the 495 largest school districts in the U.S. have student board members (Cai, 2021), and upwards of 400 students are currently serving on state boards of education or state advisory councils (Pierrottet, 2022).

The structure of the student member of the board position varies from state to state and district to district. In some cases, student representatives are elected, while in other cases, they are appointed by the superintendent or by other procedures outlined in district policy. Some student members of the school board have voting privileges; however, most do not and serve simply in a consultative or informational capacity (Cai, 2021). In most cases, student members of the board are excluded from “executive session” meetings, where adult members of the board convene to discuss sensitive personnel or salary matters as well as other agenda items. Little research has examined the experiences of student members of the board. This article begins to address this gap in the literature by asking how student members of the board understood and enacted their responsibilities during the 2020-2021 school year and how adults responded to their leadership.

Student Voice in Education Policy

Research on student school board members is scant. The published work tends to be dominated by advocacy pieces, which offer guidance on how to structure the positions and how to prepare students for the role (e.g., Bernard, 2005; Feuer & Mayer, 2009). Rennell (2003), who highlights examples of “effective” student member of school board programs in Anchorage, Alaska (established 1977), Montgomery County, Maryland (established in 1978), and Portland, Oregon (established in 1999), offers a list of nine “talking points” that can be used to advocate for the establishment of a Student Member of the Board (SMOB). These points include “youth keep adults on their toes,” “youth can advise you of the views of their constituency,” and “youth provide you with great public relations” (p. 5). In an article for *Education Digest*, Colgan (2002) incorporates anecdotes from students who have held the position, including one who served as the deciding vote for a proposed \$10 million elementary school renovation. Colgan also quotes a long-serving adult member who observes that student board members are often more prepared for the work than their adult counterparts. Colgan concludes that students are effective school board members, but his conclusions appear to be supported by anecdotal evidence, rather than systematic research. Analyzing sixteen public events that addressed a petition to change the name of a school in a symbolic act of anti-racism, including school board meetings that featured student representatives, Mansfield & Lambrinou (2022) similarly conclude that students can be thoughtful and capable policy actors.

One recent examination of the effects of the addition of student representatives to the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education found that “current practices allow school district leadership to benefit from the optics of student presence, but do not truly allow participation of students in decision-making” (Mattheis et al., 2018, p. 155). The researchers observed that, apart from leading the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, the student members were typically silent throughout most of the meetings. In addition, they found little to suggest that adult school board members “changed their behaviors or style of communication to accommodate youth voice” (p. 168). In addition to offering recommendations that the number of student representatives be increased to seven and the students be included in committee work, the researchers called for future research to include the voices and perspectives of the student representatives, especially these students’ own accounts of internal board politics.

Relative to the limited research on student members of the school board, a larger body of work has documented student voice in decision making at the school level (Brasof, 2015; Mager & Nowak, 2012; Mitra, 2018) and in district-level initiatives and policies (Bacca & Valladares, 2022; Campanella et al., 2022; Giraldo-Garcia et al., 2020). In their study of two state-level student voice organizations, Holquist and Walls (2021) found that adult facilitators play a key role in shifting power to students and helping students to combat tokenization by policymakers. Some research has also explored how students influence school and district decision making through activism or youth organizing (Conner & Zaino, 2014; Dominguez et al., 2022; Taines, 2014; Wholey & Burkes, 2015). Collectively, this body of work demonstrates that when youth speak up, they often surface key equity concerns and propose workable solutions that if implemented, might result in more just schools and school systems; however, youth continue to face formidable challenges when they raise their voices to effect change within educational institutions (Bertrand, 2019; Welton et al., 2017). Despite growing rhetorical support for “student voice” and student agency among teachers and educational administrators (Brasof & Mansfield, 2018), displays of genuine youth power, especially the collective power of students of color, remain counter normative and threatening to many adults.

Youth Power

In the sociological and political science literatures, power has been conceptualized in a variety of ways. Theorists draw attention to different sources and sites of power (e.g., social, state, and economic, Wright, 2013) and different forms of power (e.g., power over vs. power to, Lukes, 1974). Some theorists have elucidated different dimensions of power: for example, situational power is the ability to determine who wins and who loses in public contests; institutional power is the ability to set the agenda; and systemic power is the ability to shape public opinion and ideology (Christens, 2019; Speer, 2008). Social movement scholars understand power as a dynamic exchange of resources and interests, and they discuss people power in contrast to positional power or power derived from property (Han et al., 2021). In the developmental and psychological literature, power is understood as a source of collective liberation and social transformation (Prilleltensky, 2008).

Scholars of student voice frequently conceptualize the power that students have relative to that exercised by adults (Welton et al., 2022). Such conceptualizations start with acknowledging that in schools, students tend to have limited, if any power, while adults, (administrators and teachers), retain authority over such matters as scheduling, discipline, curriculum, and assessment. Some scholars contend that in the context of student voice work, power is not a zero-sum game, observing that the more empowered adult educators feel, the more likely they are to empower students (McQuillan 2005; Mitra & Gross, 2009); others, however, argue that power dynamics are so entrenched in schools that any genuine attempt to challenge them necessarily involves adults relinquishing some of their customary grip on power, and this can be threatening and uncomfortable for adults (Evans, 2009). Emerging work suggests that one pre-requisite of effective student voice practice is shifting adult mindsets to

acknowledge student expertise, appreciate student agency, and value, rather than dismiss student critique and exercises of power (Conner, 2022)).

In this study, we draw on both Christens's (2019) arguments about the different dimensions of power (situational, institutional, systemic) as well as a hierarchical framework for conceptualizing youth power that ranges from youth concerns are "not even on the radar" to youth hold responsibility for both the decisions and their implementation (FCYO, 2019; See Table 1). This framework builds on conceptualizations of youth voice as a "ladder" (Fletcher, 2005; Hart, 1992), on which the bottom rungs constitute efforts that manipulate youth, appropriate their ideas, or use them simply as decoration or token members of an adult-led process. Higher rungs involve students collaborating with adults to make decisions and holding decision-making authority themselves.

On the youth power spectrum, student members of school boards can be positioned anywhere from level eight to level two. A SMOB with voting rights would be situated at level eight, while a SMOB without voting rights whose responsibility is framed as reporting on student activities to the board would likely be positioned at level two.

Table 1.

Spectrum of Youth Power (FCYO, 2019)

- 10 Make decisions and can ensure they are implemented
 - 8 Actively participate in decision making
 - 6 Have major influence over decision making
 - 4 Taken into account by decision makers
 - 2 Can get attention of decision makers
 - 0 Not even on radar
-

This framework is helpful in that it can be used to distinguish the institutionalization of student voice from student power. While scholars typically conceptualize student voice practices as those in which students "have a say" or have "influence" over the educational decisions that impact them and their peers (level 6), student power in the positional sense entails actual decision-making authority (level 8).

Research has examined the range of challenges youth face in attempting to exercise power within both educational systems and the broader societal context of neoliberalism (Christens, 2019; Kwon, 2013; Rosen & Conner, 2019; Welton et al., 2022). First among these challenges is the fact that youth power is constrained by existing structures. Particularly within schools, where there are clear and deeply-rooted hierarchies of power, youth are rarely accorded positions with any true decision-making authority. Most student leadership activities, for

example, are limited to event planning, rather than revising policy or engaging in budgetary decisions (Brennen & Kahloon, 2021). In the rare instances when a student position is created on a hiring committee, a taskforce, or a school board, who can participate may be restricted by such factors as a GPA requirement (Pierrottet, 2022) or access to transportation to attend a meeting (Leher-Small, 2019). Furthermore, student representatives are usually vastly outnumbered by adults in these bodies. Coupled with strong cultural norms that hold that children should respect their elders and defer to adult expertise, these structures generally work to undermine youth power and reinforce a sense of tokenization (Mattheis et al., 2018).

In addition, adults within school systems retain a great deal of power over youth, including the latitude to affect their future educational and professional trajectories. This power is wielded through the ability to assign grades; to rescind “privileges,” such as attending prom or speaking at graduation ceremonies; to issue detentions, suspensions, or expulsions; and even to call the police on a student and trust that those officers are more likely to believe adults than young people. (Such interactions are further complicated by racial dynamics; public school teachers in the U.S. are more likely to be white than their students, a growing proportion of whom are persons of color [Schaffer, 2021]). To punish or deter students from exercising their power in a way that challenges adult authority, adults often remind students of the power they hold over them. The fear of reprisal is often highly salient for students weighing whether and how to claim their power.

The structures that constrict youth power reflect a cultural norm of adultism: the prevailing logic that holds that adults know better than youth. Adultism shapes the ways that youth participate in systems, both in the domain of education and more broadly. Adultism both limits and undercuts youth activity, representing a significant barrier for youth to overcome (Conner et al., 2016; Gordon, 2009; Holquist, 2019). In order to contest adultism, youth must not only shift their own sense of what is possible and permissible, but also push adult mindsets, positioning themselves as either indispensable partners to continuous improvement efforts or as forces to be reckoned with (NSBMA, nd).

In addition to adultism, youth must contend with the neoliberal fetishization of youth empowerment (Brown, 2016; Kennelly, 2011; Kwon, 2013). Feeding the general public appetite for stories of heroic youth trying to change the world against all odds, corporate media is quick to serve up stories of individual youth change makers, divorced from the broader contexts of collaboration and support in which they have honed their ideas (Brown, 2016). These dominant narratives, which make it appear as if youth operate single-handedly, promote the false understanding that youth power can be built and exercised independently. These preferred stories displace other stories about the power that can be flexed when youth band together and collectively resist an unjust status quo or demand change. The neoliberal, atomizing cultural preference for the individualistic accounts may serve to dissuade some youth from organizing with their peers or working alongside adults to effect change, further attenuating their efforts.

White supremacy introduces yet another axis of social inequality that expressly stymies the efforts of BIPOC and undocumented youth to build power (Negrón-Gonzales, 2014; Ortega-Williams, 2021). While white girls, like Greta Thunberg, may be celebrated for their agency and initiative, even romanticized (Brown, 2016; Lesko, 2001; Taft, 2011), youth of color encounter well-established impediments to their exertion of collective or individual power. When they work in good faith within the system to advocate for their needs, they are often dismissed through discourses of surprise as “cute” (Bertrand, 2019) or through discourses of disbelief, as puppets of adults (Conner, 2016). When they work outside the system to demonstrate power, they are often maligned as thugs and violently suppressed. Corrie (2021) applies the idea of ephebiphobia, “extreme fear and loathing towards adolescents,” to explicate public attitudes towards working-class and BIPOC youth activists, “most particularly in this current moment young, Black men.” She argues that ephebiphobia constitutes “an additional set of forces” that BIPOC youth activists run up against and must find ways to circumvent or dismantle when attempting to exert their power.

A final obstacle that youth activists must navigate as they seek to build power is the ephemeral quality of youth itself. Although no social identity category is immutable, the category of “youth” is particularly transitory, and within education, the category of “student” is highly temporally circumscribed. In education systems, a student’s tenure at any institution is often limited to no more than four or five years. This time constraint means that institutional and collective memory often become a privilege held only by adults. These temporal advantages further strengthen the hands of adults, who know they can wait out particularly challenging youth, stalling or “talking an issue to death,” knowing eventually the student(s) will leave. In addition, the four-year window challenges students to build a form of power that rests not in individuals, but in organizations, clubs, and positions. To build lasting power, students must cultivate a form of power that can be distributed, passed on, sustained, and deepened by subsequent cohorts. In the short time they have then, students must work not only to relentlessly press the adults willing to wait them out, but also to consider how to recruit, prepare, and pass the torch to younger students who can carry on their work once they graduate, while courting enough adult favor to win institutional backing for the establishment and maintenance of student groups or positions. The obstacles that stand in the way of youth power are manifold.

Methods

Responding to Mattheis et al.’s (2018) recommendation to include the voices of student members of the board in research on their role, this IRB-approved, qualitative study (Villanova University FY2022-237) explored two core research questions: How did student members of the board during the 2020-2021 school year understand and enact their role; and how did adults respond to their voices and actions?

The primary data sources for the study were in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven student members of the school board. The interviews, which took place on Zoom, were led by Author 3 and subsequently transcribed. The interview protocol was designed to explore students’ motivations for joining the school board as well as their experiences as board members

during the 2020-2021 school year, with particular attention to decision-making related to COVID-19 and their interactions with the adult members on the board. Secondary data included newspaper articles and publicly accessible video recordings of school board meetings. These secondary data sources served triangulation purposes, adding further context and evidence to buttress students' accounts of their experiences.

Participants

The seven student school board members came from six different states. The two participants from the same state served on school boards in different counties. Three respondents identified as male and four as female. Four of the seven identified as people of color. Two respondents served on state boards of education in addition to their local district school board, while the others served only on their local boards. Four respondents enjoyed full or partial voting rights, while the other three did not have any voting privileges. During member checking, we asked respondents if they would prefer a pseudonym or their real name to appear in the article. Four respondents— Zach Koung, Solyana Mesfin, Jasper Coughlin, and Leo Flynn— chose to use their real names here.

Data Analysis

Drawing on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) four-phased approach for qualitative data analysis, we engaged in open-coding, axial-coding, selective coding, and concluding. Guided by our research questions, our analytic focus was on students' motivation for pursuing the SMOB position, the issues and concerns students raised when given the platform, and adult responses to their voices. Transcripts were coded by two researchers and then compared, so any coding disagreements could be resolved. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, we performed internal and external validity checks, including pattern matching, close examination of outliers, and member checking with all participants (Yin, 2014).

Findings

Our findings are organized into two broad categories pertaining to how students interpreted and enacted their roles as SMOBs and how they perceived adults' responses to their work. We find that most, though not all, SMOBs used the power of the position to attempt to effect change in decision-making topics and outcomes, and these shows of power engendered backlash from adults. Furthermore, despite (or perhaps because of) adults' efforts to tokenize or marginalize student voice, SMOBs tended to agree that the role should be structured to grant greater access to participate in policy discourse and decision making.

Ways Students Exercise Power to Effect Change

Respondents differed in the extent to which they engaged in efforts to set the agenda or win public contests through casting a decisive vote or trying to advocate for a certain outcome. That is, they varied in their exercises of institutional and situational power in the school board arena; however, all but one SMOB in our sample did so, including some who were not accorded positional power through voting rights or the scope of their authority. In other words, the vast

majority of SMOBs in this study were not limited by constraints on their role from asserting their voices, introducing issues, and trying to influence outcomes.

With the exception of the one outlier student, who understood his role as “basically... to report to them on things that have happened in our school recently, whether it be sports or clubs or things students have told me that are important or relevant to the school board,” all students assumed their tenure as SMOB with certain issues in mind that they wanted to see addressed through board policy or action. Some of these issues were ones they campaigned on during their election process or ones they wrote about in their applications for selection. These issues included student mental health, anti-racism, and Title IX concerns. Educational equity was top of mind for many of the SMOBs in this study. For example, Jennifer, a SMOB without voting rights, discussed her concerns about the lack of representation of students of color in her school’s advanced courses. Similarly, Jasper, a student with partial voting rights, ran on a platform that centered issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and he worked to sustain efforts to change the high school’s Native American mascot. Four of the SMOBs emphasized that representing and “uplifting” the voices of marginalized students was a priority for them.

Shows of Institutional Power

If institutional power is understood as agenda setting, five of the seven SMOBs demonstrated institutional power by introducing resolutions and seizing opportunities during meetings to present concerns that demanded a response from their fellow board members. For example, when asked what power, if any, she had as a SMOB, Laurie pointed to her “ability to highlight, in public, issues that are happening.” She continued:

I think when I’ve spoken publicly, there are times where I see the community start to echo those demands, or we will kind of be doing it together. I will be advocating for something the community is also advocating for. And so I think when it comes from me in public, and then other people start to join on, I think that tends to create change. There have been times where I’ve really cared about something, and I’ve given a more forceful critical statement at the board meetings, and then I see change happen from that.

During a June 2020 school board meeting, Laurie raised the issue of social justice, highlighting the need to better support the academic needs and mental health of black students in the district.

Another SMOB, Zach, introduced motions, resolutions, and amendments. Although his “friendly amendment” to the grading policy to remove midterms and finals from the calculation was not accepted by the motion’s sponsors at the time he introduced it, the superintendent took his suggestion and came to the board at a subsequent meeting with a recommendation that echoed Zach’s proposal, which was then approved. Meanwhile, Zach’s motion that the district develop an LGBTQ+ studies course passed unanimously. Though his resolution to remove all school resource officers (SRO) failed initially, the board agreed to vote on the issue eight months later, after more data had been presented, community feedback received, and the Maryland General Assembly had met to debate the issue. During the interim, as part of the motion to delay the vote, no SROs were permitted to have a presence in Howard County schools.

Natasha introduced “an amendment to our legislative priorities... to expand SMOB voting rights,” highlighting the need for greater student voice in decision making. Jennifer used her “five minutes to speak” as a platform for raising topics and recommending resolutions, such as one calling for the establishment of a taskforce to consider changing the name of the district’s high school to honor an historic Black woman with deep ties to the local community. Her resolution was the focus of 112 minutes (nearly 80%) of one board meeting in January 2021. Another non-voting SMOB, Jasper, reflected, “While I don’t get to vote and make official policy for the school committee, I can sort of have that influence with the words I say. So, I try to use that as much as I can.” He was pleased that the day after he spoke out on student mental health needs at a school board meeting, the superintendent started a mental health workgroup in the district. By drawing attention to issues that concerned students or changes that they felt should be made, SMOBs helped to shape the agenda of school board meetings and priorities for the district, and in some cases, their efforts led to changes in district policy or practice.

Shows of Situational Power

Whereas all of the SMOBs, except two, took deliberate steps to exercise institutional power, only four of the seven participants in this study enjoyed voting rights, and therefore had the opportunity to flex what is known as situational power or the power to determine the outcomes of contests over policy decisions. Some of these four students even recognized that their vote was sometimes the deciding vote on a fraught issue. For example, Natasha observed, “In a lot of instances of our board, I’ve been the swing vote or the deciding vote.” Even when she chose to abstain from a vote, the simple majority vote changed from eight to seven, affecting the power dynamics on the board and the outcome. In local media accounts, Zach was framed as casting the deciding vote in a decision to keep schools closed in December 2020, when he sided with three others, splitting the board vote down the middle. Jasper recalled “really pushing hard and advocating for the hybrid model” when the board debated “full remote or full in person.” While the board approved the hybrid model, in other COVID-19-related decisions, Jasper’s position did not always win out. Despite losing these contests, he felt good about the positions he took. When asked what advice he’d give other SMOBs, he said,

Do not be afraid to vote no. I’ve had to do it three times. And each time I’ve been in the minority, and it’s kind of scary, raising your hand and saying no and then speaking about it in front of all these really accomplished people who feel very strongly about voting yes. But you have to hyper-focus on the needs of the students above all else. As long as you know that you’re doing what’s right for your students, then it doesn’t really matter how you vote. You’re voting for what’s right.

Although Jasper may not have always won the public contest, he exercised situational power when he explained his vote and tried to sway the opinions of other board members.

Unlike those SMOBs whose voting capacity accorded them situational power via positional power, Solyana and Jennifer resorted to various tactics to try to shape the outcomes of votes, thereby exercising a form of situational power. Solyana spoke up during meetings to voice the perspectives of students, especially “those marginalized students, BIPOC students, and

socioeconomically disadvantaged students,” and she “sent a lot of emails” to policymakers about how their decisions could impact students. Similarly, Jennifer attempted to influence outcomes by organizing a flood of public comment from peers in support of a resolution she was introducing at one board meeting.

The Argument for More Power

With the exception of one outlier student, all participants believed SMOBs should have full or enhanced voting rights, arguing that students were both capable and uniquely qualified to make decisions in the interest of their fellow students. The outlier student believed that SMOBs should have a vote on all issues except those pertaining to “someone else’s livelihood,” such as hiring, firing, compensation, and contract decisions.

Participants observed that students should have a vote because of their unique perspective as the targets or beneficiaries of school policy. Jasper pointed out that “students are arguably the biggest stakeholder in education.” Natasha echoed, “Most of the time, they’re the only board member, only public servants in whatever respective body you’re talking about, who has that firsthand experience of the impact the policies you’re trying to pass will have on students in your community.” In a press release, Solyana similarly asserted, “Students understand the impacts of the decisions school boards make because we live with them in a way that no one else does and we can serve as an important reality check.”

In addition to highlighting their unique vantage point as students, SMOBs also took on “fallacies” about students’ capacity to perform the level of analysis or research required to fulfill the responsibilities of being a school board member. Jennifer asserted, “We have the experience; we have the knowledge to be legitimate board members, so let us be.” Natasha dismissed those who would question

a student’s capability to read a budget. I don’t care how large your budget is. If you’re questioning a student’s ability to read a budget, if you’re questioning a student’s ability to be objective and really analyze policy and come to a good, productive, and fruitful decision about something, if you’re questioning a student’s ability to weigh pros and cons, to investigate all sides... [If you say,] ‘You’re not experienced enough; you’re not old enough,’... I can’t rock with that.

Jasper similarly took issue with adultist assumptions about students’ readiness for the work:

People like to assume that students aren’t competent, and adults really love to assume that they know better than a lot of students, which in some cases is true, but for matters regarding, say, student mental health or overall well being, there are a lot of students who are entirely more competent than a lot of adults in those scenarios.

Even though some participants were “sympathetic” to the counter-argument that students may be pressured by teachers or administrators to vote a certain way, and possibly be subject to reprisal if they did not, they believed that the benefits of full inclusion outweighed the potential risks, and they chafed against the limits set on their role, whether those were excluding them from certain votes and discussions or limiting their speaking time to only five minutes.

All respondents who saw the SMOB role as more than “reporting good news” explained that they took the work seriously, did the research necessary to inform their positions, actively participated in meetings, and used whatever authority they had to act in the best interests of students. Video evidence further supports their serious engagement. Whereas Matheis et al. (2019) observed SMOBs on the Los Angeles school board remaining silent throughout the entire meeting, we observed SMOBs routinely speaking up, respectfully voicing dissenting opinions, introjecting new topics, and trying to shape outcomes through their advocacy. Even Leo, who was something of an outlier in the data, used his five minutes to speak in one meeting to advocate against changing the date for prom, as the administration had proposed. Most of the SMOBs we observed elevated substantive concerns regarding sexual assault, student mental health, screen time, and equity issues. The initiative they displayed is particularly notable given none of the participants reported receiving any orientation or on-boarding, and some had to fight to be given information before meetings or to be included in the committees on which other board members served, such as curriculum and policy committees. Although their roles were circumscribed in different ways, all SMOBS in this study demonstrated commitment to their work, and all but one expressed deep interest in education policy. All believed the SMOB position should be set up in a way to give students more of a say in the policy decisions that impact them.

Summary

To summarize, although only four of the seven respondents held positional power in the form of full or partial voting rights, the majority of respondents exercised institutional power, working to set the agenda by introducing resolutions or amendments or by voicing concerns that were not otherwise considered; they demonstrated situational power by working to shape the outcomes of political contests among board members; and they argued for student members of the board to be accorded more power and authority to participate more fully in decision-making.

Tactics Adults Use to Suppress Youth Power

Some of the SMOBs in this study who had partial or full voting rights felt supported by some of their adult colleagues on the school board. Jasper reflected, “I did have a few allies on the board who really were sort of my cheerleaders.” Natasha indicated that despite some sexism, racism, and adultism, “the treatment has been pretty good. I’ve been pretty much viewed as an equal, and I would say that some of my board colleagues would probably tell you that they view me in higher esteem than some of the adults.” Zach, too, felt that his fellow board members were “incredibly respectful to me in conversation and genuinely wanted to hear what I had to say.” In videos, we observed board chairs and fellow members thanking SMOBs for their contributions, sometimes applauding them as “brave,” “thoughtful,” and “passionate.”

Despite pockets of support and moments of appreciation, most participants struggled to feel legitimated as full members of the board, including one SMOB who had full voting rights. Limited access to information, closed executive sessions, and strict limits on speaking time contributed to feelings of marginalization. The most obvious constraint that SMOBs faced,

though often taken for granted, was their time on the board. Unlike adults, who when elected to school boards, regularly serve 4-year terms (the exact term depends on the municipality), all of the SMOBs in this study served for only one year on their school board. In addition to structural constraints, respondents cited moves board members or other adults made in response to their attempts to influence decision-making that undercut their authority. All SMOBs who acted in ways that reflected institutional or situational power faced backlash from adults. This backlash took one of two forms: emotional or institutional/legal. In addition, all SMOBs had to contend with tokenization and efforts by adults to manipulate, control, or outright exclude them. We discuss these tactics of suppression below.

Emotional Backlash

Emotional backlash included efforts to scold, threaten, or intimidate SMOBs who introduced topics or voted in ways that adults did not like. For example, in one board meeting, a topic Jennifer had introduced was taken up by board members. The board members, several of whom voiced reservations about Jennifer's proposal, decided that the next step would be to go back to the students and survey them about their preferences. But Jennifer had already written and tried to disseminate a survey about this topic. When she tried to speak up to mention this pertinent point, she "got yelled at" for breaking protocol, since she was only supposed to speak during the five minutes the superintendent allotted for her. Jennifer recalled just "trying to say that [the survey already existed], and they're yelling at me, 'Jennifer, you need to stop!' because I'm not allowed to speak during that time. So that was how I got in trouble." Jennifer also got "yelled at," "harped on," and "in trouble" for wading into "board politics" at a subsequent meeting, when she tried to influence priorities for the strategic plan. Even though some board members had encouraged her to make students' voices heard in the decisions about the new strategic plan, when she tried to speak up, these board members did not defend her and instead allowed her to be dressed down and put in her place by the superintendent. Reprimanding students for "stepping out of line" during board meetings was one way that adults tried to curb their power and influence.

Because of their votes on COVID-19-related reopening decisions, both Jasper and Zach received hate mail and were subject to scurrilous personal attacks and threats that made them fear for their safety. While adult board members were also subjected to vitriol from the community for their decisions during this time, the attacks directed at student members were often steeped in adultism. Jasper recounted that following his no-vote to "give the commissioner authority to determine when schools would move back to full in-person models," a school board chair "actually told me that I couldn't think for myself. A woman and her friends told me that I was a sellout and that I should resign because I voted no on reopening." Zach was described as being manipulated and groomed by adults to further a political agenda. Right-wing protestors made plans to show up at his house during a school board meeting. The doxing, online attacks, and threatening messages he received following his no-votes were so vicious that local police were engaged and his school superintendent issued a public statement, which read in part:

Several adults in our community have felt empowered to harass, demean and aggressively bully our current student board member, Zach Koung, and I find these

actions to be reprehensible. We, as Howard County residents, should be mortified that a community that prides itself on civility has neighbors that would stoop so low as to harass any person, but particularly a student in order to silence their voice. I admire the grace and class in which Zach has handled the public attacks that he has received, but it is my responsibility to act any time one of my students is attacked.

During the pandemic, school board members across the country were targeted, threatened, and demeaned by members of their communities during public testimony and on social media. Student members of the board, especially those with voting power, were not exempted from these attacks. In fact, the SMOBs in this study were subject to a particular kind of disparagement that smacked of adultism, which rendered the emotional backlash they faced for their shows of power especially pernicious.

Legal and Institutional Backlash

In addition to emotional backlash, some SMOBs who exercised situational or institutional power encountered legal and institutional backlash. Following board discussions of school reopenings in the wake of COVID-19, legislative efforts were mounted to remove Solyana and Zach from their position. In Kentucky, where Solyana served, state representatives drafted and passed a bill that would eliminate the non-voting student and teacher representatives from the state board of education. One legislator in favor of this bill argued that high schoolers were “still in the process of developing their own thought processes, [which]... were not fully formed until after they had been in college for some period of time” (Clark, 2021). The bill changed the minimum age to serve on the board to 30. Although the bill passed in the House, and then in the Senate with amendments, when it returned to the lower chamber, it was defeated, thanks in part to an organized lobbying campaign by students from across the state to retain the student seat. In Maryland, a delegate representing Zach’s district introduced legislation to end the voting rights of the student school board member. Two lawsuits were also filed claiming student school board members violated the state’s constitution. An attorney for one of the plaintiffs argued, “Most Americans think [16-year-olds voting] is nuts, but obviously some Americans do not... The question is whether we want people who are considered legal adults making political decisions or whether we want to turn our political system over to children” (Woodward, 2021). (This legal challenge was eventually found in Zach’s favor, after it was appealed to Maryland’s highest court, the Court of Appeals, which unanimously affirmed the right of SMOBs to vote [Balangit, 2022]). As with the emotional backlash, the legal and institutional backlash was often steeped in adultism, suggesting that giving students any sort of say in decision making would be crazy and ill-advised.

While adultism prevailed in much of the discourse against SMOBs, in some cases the institutional backlash was more political. Natasha encountered several efforts by her colleagues on the board to nullify her vote when it had proven decisive. Natasha explained:

A lot of these nullification challenges are raised after the vote is called and the tallies are taken, because you realize, “Okay, well, if Natasha is not going to vote in favor of it, we don’t have the votes... And so we’ve got to curb the student member’s vote.” I realized it’s just much easier to pick off my vote than to flip another board member. You have to

put in effort to flip another board member, but there's minimal effort involved in trying to nullify my vote, especially if you know you already have the votes to uphold the challenge.

Because there were certain categories of issues on which Natasha was not permitted to vote, when a group of board members did not like the way she voted, they would argue that the issue at hand fell into one of those categories. For example, SMOBs in this district were not permitted to vote on school openings and closings. This provision was widely understood to pertain to charter schools; however, when Natasha voted against reopening schools to full in-person learning during the pandemic, and a group of board members disagreed with her, they tried to nullify her vote by arguing that this decision was pertinent to school openings and closings.

Natasha made the point that technically schools were never closed during the pandemic, but:

It doesn't matter what the Chair of the board says, what the Vice Chair said. It doesn't matter what legal counsel says; it doesn't matter what CEO says. [If] you have the majority votes to nullify the vote of the student member,... it'll happen. It's happened multiple times.

Although Natasha always disputed these efforts, she did not begrudge her fellow school board members the tactic. She reflected, "if they're nullifying my vote, I get it. It's par for the course. It's not personal; they're just playing politics. And unfortunately, I get the short end of the stick." While it was certainly less overtly adultist than other legal and institutional efforts to strip students of their power and silence them, the nullification ploy was still tethered to adultist presumptions that there are certain categories of issues on which students should not have a say.

Tokenization and Manipulation

When discussing their experiences as SMOBs, five of the seven respondents described experiences of tokenization. Some wondered how seriously their arguments were taken by adult colleagues on the board. Laurie, for example, said, "Sometimes with the principal, with district administrators, it can feel like ... they're tokenizing. They're not fully listening to what I'm saying or not fully considering it." Jasper, who described his non-voting role on the local school board as having "minimal consequentiality," recalled how after a particularly contentious discussion of requirements for synchronous online learning, fellow board members told him that they appreciated what he had to say and offered other "niceties" that seemed as if they "came from patronization. ... I don't know if ... they actually did listen." SMOBs sometimes felt as if they received pats on the back, when what they really wanted was for their ideas to be taken seriously and given due consideration by fellow board members.

Some SMOBs felt as if adults wanted their participation for show, rather than substance. Solyana described being used by her local school board "to just make them look good." Leo acknowledged, "I don't think I'm expected to help them with most things. They basically want to be doing their own thing." Jennifer recounted a number of frustrating experiences that disabused her of the idea that she could have a meaningful voice in policymaking.

I went into this thinking, "I can make some real change. People are gonna listen to me. I'm gonna be respected as the student liaison." No. No. We're viewed as little puppets, little window pieces to really kind of tell [the public] how great the board's doing. We

didn't do that! ... [When they shut me down,] that just really proved that I was just there to uplift their conversations and not add or contribute anything of my own.

SMOBs bristled against efforts by adults to use them. Jennifer's adamant, "We didn't do that!", her refusal to acquiesce to adult expectations that she would simply go along with adult agendas, is emblematic of her generation's desire to claim and flex their power; however, as Natasha admitted, "not everyone can bear" the consequences of refusing to play along and comply with adult expectations. Of her own ability to stand her ground, Natasha clarified, "I'm not saying I'm a superhero; I'm saying it's hard." SMOBs generally did not appreciate being used as decoration to justify or legitimate adults' plans or being given token status on the board, and most pushed back or resisted these moves in some way.

Exclusion

A final tactic of suppression that SMOBs recounted facing was outright exclusion. When asked if there were ever board conversations in which they were not included, all respondents answered affirmatively, without hesitation, voicing comments like, "100%," "definitely," and "So many, literally so many." In some cases, SMOBs recalled with frustration decisions that were made without their input. These decisions were either made by district officials and presented to the board for a rubber stamp or they were made by other board members in executive session, without the SMOB present. Asked about her district's COVID-19 plans, for example, Jennifer recalled,

That was kind of the Board's decision. We [SMOBs] were allowed to talk about it and bring it up, and they like to hear our voice if it goes along with their plans, but we're not really part of the conversation because the conversations before they have those meetings, when they're like in executive session, are where their decisions are already made.

Despite having voting rights, Jasper was not given an opportunity to offer input on the December 2020 amendments to regulations on student learning time until after the vote. He speculates that had he been able to say his piece in advance, he might have been able to swing fellow board members his way because several board members told him after the meeting that they appreciated the concerns about student mental health he had raised when explaining his vote. Even Leo believed that he could have given useful input on the district's COVID-19 response and other matters, had he been invited to do so. He recalled, "There's definitely been stuff that I feel like I could have influenced or at least given my input on... I think I could have been useful in certain situations." Rules that prevented SMOBs from either asking questions or offering feedback on pending decisions or excluded them from decision-making spaces functioned to suppress their potential influence and curb their power.

Summary

In summary, the SMOBs in this study reported encountering an array of tactics that adults in positions of power used to mute their voices, including emotional interpersonal backlash or attempts to intimidate and scare them; legal and institutional backlash or attempts to delegitimize their vote; efforts to tokenize or manipulate them into thinking a certain way, and exclusion from key decision-making spaces and processes.

Discussion

Focusing on the contentious 2020-2021 school year, this study explored how student members of the school board understood and enacted their roles and how adults responded to their actions. We found that most student participants used their SMOB position as an opportunity to uplift the voices of marginalized students, elevate substantive concerns about equity and student mental health, and demonstrate institutional or situational power. This included those students who were limited to “liaison” roles in which they were only allotted five minutes to speak and not permitted to ask questions or vote. Regardless of such constraints, most SMOBs in this study worked to introduce topics for consideration that were not already on the agenda, showing institutional power (Christens, 2019; Speer, 2008). They also took steps to try to influence votes and shape outcomes in a public contest, displaying situational power (Christens, 2019; Speer, 2008). We also found that adults responded to these shows of power by using various suppression tactics to either wrest power from students or curb their influence. These tactics included legal and institutional moves to strip students of their seats or voting rights, emotional backlash designed to scare and silence students, efforts to tokenize and use students to serve adult agendas, expressions of condescension that worked to undermine students’ arguments, and outright exclusion.

The present study extends research on power in school board politics and the role of SMOBs in two key ways. First, it highlights the important distinction between formal positional power and informally enacted power. While it is certainly true that the SMOBs with full or partial voting rights had greater access to power by virtue of their position than those whose roles were severely circumscribed and framed more as consultative or symbolic, some in the latter camp still exercised considerable institutional and situational power. This finding suggests that even when they are not formally situated at level six on the Spectrum of Youth Power – “have major influence over decision making” (FCYO, 2021), SMOBs who bring an activist sensibility to their position can indeed claim such power for themselves. At the same time, our findings illuminate the precarity of level six for those who are formally positioned there, especially in times of crisis and political contention. Students who cast what could be considered a “decisive” vote in a heated contest were subject to particularly harsh forms of reprisal by adults, and even their allies on the board could not mitigate or prevent these attacks. Without formal mechanisms protecting their rights to participate in decision-making, youth faced efforts by adults to exclude SMOBs from influencing key votes. Additionally, while SMOBs with little formal authority or “consequentiality” could be more easily dismissed or silenced than those with voting rights, even those SMOBs with nominal positional power were the targets of manipulation, tokenization, exclusion, and retaliation. This is an important finding because it challenges prior conceptions of youth-adult power sharing. For example, Hart’s (1992) ladder of children’s participation identified eight rungs of decision-making agency, control, and power that adults can give to children. While Hart framed manipulation, tokenization, decoration, and adult-initiated/shared decisions with children as discrete rungs on the ladder (one through three and six respectively), our findings show these approaches to be more overlapping and fluid than separate and distinct.

Adult board members can share decision-making authority with a SMOB, while still tokenizing or using them.

Second, our findings underscore the entrenched nature of adultism. Adultism, the notion that adults know better than youth what is best for them, is suffused through all youth-adult interactions (Fletcher, 2005). It ranges from condescending compliments, to structures that limit youth to performative roles, to legal and legislative arguments that youth are incapable of mature reasoning and judgment. Even countervailing structures designed to increase youth power and position youth as equals to adults, such as the SMOB position, are permeated by adultism.

This finding has important implications. Though students may be strong enough to weather attempts to suppress their voices, if we are serious about giving students a say in the decisions that impact them, it may be necessary to reconsider governance structures that allow various axes of power to continue to undermine student voice and adultism to prevail. Other research has highlighted the importance of having more than one SMOB serving at a time and recommended that they be permitted to participate in board committees in addition to board meetings (Mattheis et al., 2018). Onboarding programs are also needed to prepare students not only for the work but also to combat the inevitable adultism they may encounter. Some models for training and supporting students to serve on boards exist (see, for example, Youth on Board and the National Student School Board Member Association). In Denver, members of the Student Board of Education receive training twice a month on “topics of youth organizing, ethnic studies, how to conduct research, policy development, and public presentations” (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2022, p. 4). Beyond highlighting the need for onboarding and ongoing training or support, the participants in this study made a powerful case for extending full voting rights to SMOBs, emphasizing their capacity and willingness to do the work and resist pressure by adults to vote in certain ways. Even so, when full voting rights are granted, mechanisms for SMOBs to report possible acts of reprisal or attempts by adults, such as their teachers or principal, to influence their votes may be warranted. Additionally, adult school board members and administrators may benefit from training on how to engage collegially with SMOBs and how to disrupt patterns of adultism.

This study also raises implications for education more generally. If students are unprepared to analyze budgets, read carefully, make critical decisions, and articulate a position, then what does that say about the school systems designed to teach them? In a system that is effectively teaching students, any given one of their students should be able to excel at these tasks and step into the SMOB role. Furthermore, the capacity and commitment to the work demonstrated by the students in this study suggest that schools would be well served by engaging more students in this type of consequential decision making. Beyond adding student members to a school board, schools can leverage student voice in decisions about policy and practice by expanding the scope and charge of student councils beyond prom and pep rally planning (Brennen & Kahoon, 2021), establishing student advisory boards for principals and superintendents, supporting rigorous student journalism, and including students on continuous

improvement teams, climate committees, and other groups focused on school improvement (Mitra, 2018).

Limitations

Given this study's small sample size and its qualitative approach, which precludes generalizable findings (Yin, 2014), future studies might engage a larger sample to consider how the experiences of SMOBs either track or differ by the constraints put on their roles and by the exigencies of the moment. Questions remain about the extent to which the formal limits on their roles impinge on their capacity to effect change. Although some non-voting SMOBs in this study, like Laurie, felt they had been successful in enacting change, in a larger sample it would be interesting to explore whether distinctive differences emerge in the types of wins that SMOBs with and without voting privileges claim. Finally, more work is needed to understand how adult decisionmakers view students in these positions and how these perceptions shape their engagement with and responses to the students.

Conclusion

Though not without critique, local school boards are a cherished democratic institution. They are widely regarded as a bulwark against the privatization or dismantling of public education as a public good (Ravitch, 2010). Students have a compelling interest to participate in school board decision-making, and SMOBs offer a viable channel for such participation. Far from party-planning, the work SMOBs undertake is substantive and consequential. Because the decisions school boards make have clear bearing on students' lives and implicate the responsiveness and functioning of their educational institutions, SMOBs take the work seriously; it is adults who seem to "play politics" when students sit with them at the decision-making table.

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Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful for the support and assistance with the research provided by Caroline Feldman and Megan Simmons.

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