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ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

The power of student voice

There is a rise in youth activism across the country in social and racial justice issues like Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ rights and ending the school-to-prison pipeline. Students are holding rallies, starting petitions and attending virtual school board meetings, which have been more accessible to students due to COVID-19. Students want to have input on policy decisions affecting them. Yet, the majority of school boards do not have student representation. This is a missed opportunity for students as well as for the adults making decisions. School boards can benefit from gaining a student perspective, and students can feel heard, effect change, and learn about civics, school governance and policy.

The National School Boards Association found that as of January 2021, only 67 of the 495 largest school districts (14%) have students serving on their governing boards. Among the 67 districts, the majority have one student board member. In some districts, students are selected by their peers, while in other districts, students are appointed by the board. Most student representatives serve for one year and do not have voting rights. www.nsba.org/Perspectives/2021/Students-Serving-on-School-Boards

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

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Salem-Keizer Public Schools, OR

The school board in Salem, Oregon, recently appointed their first student advisor. The district already had a district-wide student advisory committee, but felt the new role of student advisor would create a direct way to get input from students on board decisions. The new student advisor will serve a one-year term as a non-voting member. <https://salkeiz.k12.or.us/news/sksb-appoints-student-advisor/>

Eugene School District, OR

The Eugene School District has a “Student Advisory Panel” that attends all regular public meetings and represents students’ interests. The panel consists of one representative from each high school. According to their board policy, “the student representative shall receive notice of meetings, the agenda and the appropriate agenda materials; be provided a place at the Board table; and shall have the same privileges of discussion as apply to Board members. The student representative shall not be a voting member of the Board.” www.4j.lane.edu/board

According to a report by the Center for American Progress, there are advantages and disadvantages to having students on your school board:

Advantages

- Gives students real power over state and district policies, including hiring and budgeting
- Gives voting student members equal power to adult members
- Allows students to gain experience with governing bodies
- Fosters open conversation between students and adult decision-makers



(Over)

Disadvantages

- Engages only a few select students
- Often includes students for whom the current education structure is already working
- May not influence change if the student is not a voting member
- Dependent on the structure, risks student representatives not feeling empowered to voice their opinions or to disagree with adult authority figures

www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2019/08/14/473197/elevating-student-voice-education

Having student representation on your school board is just one way to listen to students. There are many strategies for schools and school boards to increase student voice, such as student surveys, student councils and youth participatory action research.

In Minnesota, St. Paul Public Schools has a student engagement and advancement board comprised of high school students in grades 10 -12. The students work on multiple initiatives each year to increase student voice in decision making at the Board and Administration level. “The SEAB’s role is not to speak for students, but to develop and implement strategies that amplify student voice.” *www.spps.org/seab*

Chicago Public Schools district formed student voice committees at 16 high schools about six years ago, and now there are almost 200 of the committees in primary and secondary schools. “Students involved in the committees have become more active in causes in their communities and have also gotten their classmates involved in local issues, such as the census. These students have also provided feedback on online learning that has taken place during coronavirus closures.”

<https://districtadministration.com/chicago-public-schools-student-voice-committees-youth-activism-civics-social-studies>

Whichever strategies your school and district choose, make an intentional effort to include diverse student voices. The Springfield Renaissance School in Massachusetts has a high school student voice group that works on race and equity. It has tackled issues like Latinx representation in the curriculum and the use of racial slurs by opposing teams in sporting events.

<https://districtadministration.com/student-voice-diversity-diverse-curriculum-springfield-renaissance-school>

Make sure you’re giving all students equal opportunities to share their ideas. Don’t just invite the top-performing students or the outgoing students in leadership roles to join committees. Seek out students whose voices you haven’t heard.

Resources

SoundOut, a non-profit that works with K-12 schools to increase student involvement

<https://soundout.org/>

Michigan Association for School Boards Students on Boards Toolkit

www.masb.org/students