

Typical Engagement? Students on School Boards in the U.S.

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A recent study reported that as much as 92% of any individual school building population in the U.S. is comprised of students, with adults accounting for only 8% of the total humans in any given school. Much the same as Australia, there is a growing concern for the vastly underutilized majority here as we struggle with how to make schools more effective for all students. As part of my work through SoundOut (<http://soundout.org>), I provide technical assistance and training to districts that are interested in systematically engaging students in education policy-making. I have researched more than 40 years of involving students as school board members, and follow national trends carefully. This article is a report and analysis focused on the growing interest in the practice of engaging students through boards of education, both at the state and local levels, across the U.S.

There are several types of practices that involve students with school boards. The lowest bar is simply and routinely asking students what they think about school board policy-making issues. This can be a formal process mandated through policy, conducted through online surveys or in-person student forums. Another practice is to require regular student attendance at school board meetings. Both of these are generally seen as non-meaningful forms of involvement, as they do not require students have an active role in the process of decision-making beyond that of "informant".

Higher up the ladder is the practice of having student advisory boards that inform regular school board decision-making. This is the case in Boston, Massachusetts, where the Boston Student Advisory Council (<http://bostonteachnet.org/bsac/>) is a citywide body of student leaders representing their respective high schools. BSAC, which is coordinated by the administered by the district office in partnership with a nonprofit called Youth on Board (<http://www.youthonboard.org>), offers student perspectives on high school renewal efforts and inform their respective schools about relevant citywide school issues. In addition to personal skill development and knowledge building activities for their 20-plus members, BSAC students have strongly influenced district policy-making about cell phone usage, truancy, and reducing the drop out rate. They also have regular dialogues with the district superintendent and school board members.

The Denver, Colorado, Student Board of Education (<http://studentboard.dpsk12.org/>) is a group of 30 students who represent the 15 high schools in the city. They are charged to serve as leaders in their schools and represent all students at the district level. Students create projects that affect their local schools and report back on them to the district. They have also created a curriculum that is used in several high school leadership classes. However, these students have to ask permission to speak to their regular board, and that does not happen frequently. According to a recent local newspaper article, the district has trepidations about giving students a regular voice in school policy-making. A school district attorney was quoted saying, "The law

does not provide for a means by which to create a student position on the board, whether it's a voting position or not.”

One of the main issues in student involvement in boards of education is whether students are legally allowed to sit on boards, and if they are allowed, whether they have a full vote akin to their adult peers. A 2002 study posted on the SoundOut website (<http://soundout.org/schoolboardlaw.html>) identifies laws regarding student involvement on state and local school boards in 39 states out of 50 states across the U.S. The results vary: As many as 16 states have laws allowing students to sit on school boards at the state level, with no vote. 20 states allow the same at the district level. Six states disallow either entirely, while seven allow full student voting on the state and district levels.

Despite being allowed otherwise in those seven states, only California and Maryland actually have full-voting members on their state boards of education. Both of those states have highly influential student organizations that openly lobby for student voice. The California Association of Student Councils (<http://casc.net>), founded in 1947, proudly proclaims that all their programs are student-led. One of their most powerful activities is the Student Advisory Board on Legislation in Education, or SABLE. Each February SABLE convenes in the state capital to set education priorities and share them with key decision-makers. They have a direct audience with the Senate Education Committee, and their influence helped form a position for a full-voting student member of the California State Board of Education, whose position was created in 1969. They gained full voting rights in 1983, including closed sessions. The Maryland Association of Student Councils has similar impact in their state, with a student member serving in a regularly elected position annually.

As I have written about in *Connect* before, I have more than a decade working with hundreds of schools across the U.S. and Canada to promote meaningful student involvement. Among the things I have found is an inherent dilemma in the type of special positioning students on school boards receive. The dilemma is that while an extremely limited number of students gets an opportunity to share their voices with adult decision-makers in the system, this type of “convenient student voice” is generally conducted at the adults’ convenience and with their approval. In a growing number of states, the status quo of being excluded does not suit students themselves anymore. Currently, a disjointed but growing movement is seeking to increase the authority of students in school policy-making and decisions. In Hawaii, there has been a non-voting student representative on the state board of education for more than 20 years. However, a recent proposal would eliminate the position. A new Facebook page (<http://on.fb.me/gtnZqK>) seeks to maintain that role. In my home state of Washington, a group of independent students (<http://on.fb.me/heGVyN>) are working with the state’s Legislative Youth Advisory Council (<http://lyac.leg.wa.gov/>) to lower the voting age for school board elections to 14, which, while not necessarily installing students on school boards, would give them a concrete say in education policy-making. In Maryland, where students already have a role on the state board of education and in many district boards, in counties across the state there are active campaigns to increase the effect of student voice, with students calling for a full and regular vote in education policy-making. (<http://bit.ly/eBt0BH>) There is even an instance in Maryland where an 18-year-old

named Edward Burroughs (<http://edwardburroughs.com>) was elected to his local school board through regular office after running an effective campaign.

These examples allude to the process of what I refer to as *engagement typification*, where the roles of students are repositioned throughout the education system to allow Meaningful Student Involvement to become the standard treatment for all students, rather than something that is exceptional. Consistently positioning students as in special positions doesn't allow adults, including educators, administrators, or parents, to integrate students throughout the regular operations of the educational system. While seeing their peers as school board members is enticing to a number of students, most are disallowed them from seeing *themselves* as regular and full members of the *leadership* and *ownership* of education, or as trustees for their own well-being. That is what differentiates Meaningful Student Involvement (<http://soundout.org/frameworks.html>) from other attempts at student engagement and student voice: Positioning students as full owners of what they learn. Involving students on school boards is a step in the right direction; the next question is whether anywhere in Australia or the U.S. is ready to go the full distance.