Students on School Boards:
Balancing Representation and Fairness

By Stephen Sawchuk on June 13, 2019

Earlier this week, I published a story for *Education Week* on **the phenomenon of students with real, consequential votes on their local boards of education.**

As part of our exploration of **how students experience civics** in public school—beyond just their government classes—this story hinges on an imminently logical question: Students are affected by every board decision. So why do they seldom get a say on them?

While it's relatively common for students to serve in an advisory capacity, they very rarely get a full board vote.

My story looked at this issue mainly from a conceptual standpoint. It also profiled two wonderful young women in Maryland who vote on nearly all school board issues—and haven't been afraid to propose policies addressing tough topics like mental health and segregation.

As I promoted the story online, there were a number of interesting reactions. Many readers sympathized with the idea, but they raised some worthwhile and practical governance questions that deserve more attention than I was able to give them in my story. So let's dig in:

Do you think students serving on school boards should get to vote along with their colleagues? Read my story and weigh in!

Few Student Board Members Can Vote. Should That Change?
At a time when districts say they want to prioritize student voice and civics, student board positions tend to be advisory, rather than consequential.

Several commenters suggested that students should only serve on board if they're elected like other board members. (This is already the case in several states.) The problem with this is that is that most high school students don't turn 18 until late in their senior year. And since most secondary students aren't 18, they wouldn't even be able to participate in those elections. So how do you get around that? **One idea is to allow students to nominate the person who will serve as their representative—who then should be selected by voters overall.**

Stephen Sawchuk
Replying to @Altaira
By other students? By the community at large?

Altaira
I'd lean toward the community at large- maybe students could nominate?

Another idea: Make it easier for students to vote in the first place.
This comment, from Randy Geller, below, kicked off a thread on reducing the voting age to 16, so students can participate in board elections (and presumably, also run for office). While not a widespread phenomenon, **several cities are considering this idea, including Los Angeles, the nation's second largest district**.

Randy Geller
Replying to @Stephen
Usually, a qualification for serving on a publicly-elected school board is to be an "elector." An elector is a person who is legally able to vote. The voting age is 18 so most students would be ineligible to serve unless the law is changed. Should it be changed? I think not.
If you do believe in a voting student member, as opposed to only adults, what's the best way to pick that student? My colleague Christina Samuels offered this thought:

Christina Samuels
Replying to @Stephen
I "think" I support the idea of voting student board members...but it's hard for me to argue strongly for it if that student is not elected, at the very least by other students. Otherwise, the impulse might be for the board to choose a rubber stamper.

There are already a few models here: Montgomery County and Anne Arundel counties, both in Maryland, use different student representation methods. In Montgomery County it's ultimately done through a direct election of the secondary student body, while in Anne Arundel it's done through an Electoral College-like situation, in which representatives from each high school make the call among the finalists. (Debate and discuss which you think is more effective!)

Another commentator wondered about the shortness of student board positions—typically just for one year rather than the more typical 3-5 years in school districts.

Bill DeWitt, Ed.D. Replying to Stephen Sawchuk
I am a fan of student voice and support advisory groups that represent diverse students and meet regularly with the superintendent, but voting on policies that affect a school currently attended by that student is self-serving.
And selection process is uneven compared to other board members and with no chance for re-election, the community has no ability to hold this voting member accountable. None of this means that students do not have great ideas. Their voices need to be heard.

He's right on both accounts: I noted in my story that often the students on the board traditionally aren't always demographically or philosophically aligned with students in general —favoring students already deeply invested in school government, for example, or those who can make it through a screening process that can disadvantage certain groups of students. (Often boards require students to be "in good academic standing," which can mean having a certain GPA.)

And, yes, having a board member elected only by students does shut out other members of the community. On the other hand, regular school board members often are elected only by a segment of the population, too, with representatives from different "districts" or "wards" who are in theory balanced by at-large members.)

For all these reasons, civics advocates share some different opinions on the practical and symbolic value of students on boards. There aren't any easy answers here—but this is a topic that, in our mind, deserves some more debate and discussion.

And if you like this line of reporting, *Education Week*'s Citizen Z project is looking **at all facets of civics education, and there's plenty more to come**.