

Reading & Discussion: Should Students Be on School Boards?

Reading One

What Decisions Do School Boards Make, and Should Students Weigh In?

School boards are authorities that set policy on matters such as budget, curriculum, and leadership in a given district's public schools. These boards, sometimes referred to as "boards of education," consist of elected or appointed citizens and help decide how hundreds of billions in government funds are [spent](#) on public schools each year. A May 2022 article by Anna Sudderth for XQ Institute, a nonprofit organization that aims to improve high school education in the U.S., [outlines](#) the primary responsibilities of school boards:

School boards are responsible for the education of a community's young people, ensuring all students have access to a high-quality, rigorous education that prepares them for college, career, and life. Boards usually consist of five to nine elected or appointed representatives from the community, who meet regularly to discuss and decide issues related to local schools. They base their decisions on input from the superintendent, families, teachers, students, and the general public....

School board members are elected or appointed members of the community who pursue a vision for local schools reflecting the needs of the students, the wishes of the voters, and the consensus of the community....

School boards address a wide array of issues, from the daily logistics of running a district to broader goals for the education of a community's young people. On a practical, day-to-day level, school boards:

- Hire and evaluate the superintendent
- Approve budgets
- Set spending priorities
- Approve textbooks and other curriculum materials
- Adopt the annual school calendar
- Make decisions regarding opening and closing schools
- Work closely with school and district leaders on school schedules, supplies, safety, discipline, classroom resources, facilities, and other issues....

Broader tasks include setting high academic standards, supporting teachers and staff, ensuring transparency and accountability, creating a safe and positive school culture, and advancing policies that allow every student to thrive.

<https://xqsuperschool.org/rethinktogether/what-does-a-school-board-do-frequently-asked-questions/>

Currently, school boards are embroiled in controversies in places ranging from [Pennsylvania](#), [Iowa](#), [Florida](#), and beyond, with intense divisions emerging around issues ranging from the rights of transgender students to how (and whether) to teach the history of race and racism in America. As reporter Katie Reilly [explained](#) in a November 2022 article for *Time* magazine, these debates have surfaced during school board races around the country:

In places across the U.S. with few competitive races at the state or federal level, it's the school board candidates who are making local headlines. A candidate in Zionsville, Ind.—north of Indianapolis—received national attention for a Facebook post in which he [declared “All Nazis weren't ‘bad.’”](#) In North Carolina, one candidate for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools [accused her opponent of making her 9-year-old son cry](#).

Conservative advocates and lawmakers have sought to [restrict how race and gender identity](#) are discussed in classrooms, calling for [bans on certain books](#) and arguing that lessons addressing systemic racism and identity will divide children and make white students uncomfortable. At the same time, progressive advocates have called on schools to address discrimination and to invest in social-emotional learning, comprehensive sex education, and diversity initiatives to make schools more equitable for all students.

Education issues are personal and polarizing for parents because the policies directly affect their children. And while school-board races are typically nonpartisan (meaning that candidates run on their own, rather than as part of a party slate), the politics are inescapable. Board members wield significant influence over what students learn and can play an important role in local political organizing.

<https://time.com/6228330/school-board-elections-midterms-2022/>

Missing from these debates is the question of whether students themselves should have a voice in decisions about their education.

There are a variety of ways that students could become more involved in school board decisions. In an August 2019 report entitled “Elevating Student Voice,” Meg Benner, Catherine Brown and Ashley Jeffrey, analysts for the Center for American Progress, [outline](#) a variety of ways to increase student decision-making power. They write: “Students have the greatest stake in their education but little to no say in how it is delivered. This lack of agency represents a lost opportunity to accelerate learning and prepare students for a world in which taking initiative and learning new skills are increasingly paramount to success.”

At the school level, Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey recommend a number of steps that administrators could take to increase student voice, including creating robust student governments, empowering student journalists to weigh in on important issues, and creating more democratic classroom practices. At the district level, the authors contend that:

[S]chool districts and boards should incorporate student perspectives in their decision-making process as well as implement policies that encourage schools to empower students to drive their own learning and influence school policies. To do so, district level policymakers should do the following:

- **Support state-required surveys and develop district-level student surveys to gather information about instruction and school climate.** Districts should... develop student surveys on the rigor of instruction, quality of teaching, and school climate while ensuring youth involvement in each step of the process. Districts should publish the school-level data and use the results to create improvement plans and support school leaders...
- **Include students on governing bodies and create student advisory committees to engage more student perspectives in important decisions.** District school boards should appoint at least one student member with voting power to the board. District boards should develop democratic processes to select the student and help the student representative develop strategies to gain input from diverse student perspectives before weighing in on school board matters....
- **Create specific initiatives to engage student groups that are historically marginalized.** While efforts to create strategies to engage all students are important, targeted programming enables specific subgroups such as students of color, students who identify as LGBTQ or students from other marginalized racial or ethnic groups to have a voice.
- **Encourage schools to build time for student-educator collaboration and enable personalized learning....**
- **Offer student-led conferences and provide training to teachers on how to conduct them.** Student-led conferences can be empowering for students—even very young students—but they involve a shift in the typical teacher-parent communication.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/elevating-student-voice-education/>

While a variety of steps at the level of individual schools might give students a greater voice in classroom discussion and school activities, some might argue that anything short of full representation on a school board risks tokenizing student input. For this reason, debates about the composition of local boards are likely to continue in the future.

For Discussion:

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
 2. According to the reading, what do school boards do and who serves on them?
 3. What are some of the reasons that school boards have been at the center of so much controversy?
 4. According to the reading, what are some of the steps that districts might take to increase student voice in school policy?
 5. Which of the suggestions offered in the reading were most compelling to you? Why?
 6. In your experience, how have school board decisions affected you or your school? How?
 7. What impacts, positive or negative, do you think it could have if students had more of a voice in those decisions?
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Reading Two

When Students Run for School Boards

Some youth advocates have argued that students deserve representation on school boards, and that—rather than just being a constituency affected by school board decisions—institutions should change so that the voices of students are formally incorporated into the process of setting educational policy for districts.

In some instances, young people have stopped waiting for school boards to reform their structures and instead have decided to take action by running for school board seats themselves. And in some cases, they have won.

In an April 2022 article for *Ms*, a feminist magazine, Delilah Brumer [profiled](#) two young women who won seats as student representatives on their school boards in Massachusetts and California, two of only five states where student school board members' votes are actually counted like those of adult board members. Brumer wrote:

Rana Banankhah of California serves on her state's board of education, acting as the voice of over 6 million students. After making it through a process involving detailed essays, application questionnaires and [an appointment](#) by California Governor Gavin Newsom, the 17-year-old now

works with experienced and widely respected policymakers ranging from professors to school district administrators.

“I’ve seen that our state board truly does respect you and treat you just as every other adult board member, which I really appreciate,” Banankhah said. “To be treated like an adult, even though I can’t even vote for [U.S.] president, was really eye-opening.”

Banankhah and Livingston are [two of five teens](#) in the country who are voting members of their states’ boards of education. They help decide high school graduation requirements, determine teacher qualifications and develop state student assessments. They also bridge the gender gap in education leadership—since women make up only [31 percent of school district chiefs](#)....

Since July, Banankhah has focused her attention on increasing teen Covid-19 vaccination rates... She also is working with the California Association of Student Councils to draft and pass [legislation to create an advisory group](#) for current and future state student board members, allowing for more teen involvement.

“Students have an extremely valuable perspective that none of the other board members have, which is one in which they’ve actually lived the policies that the board is passing,” Banankhah said.

Livingston serves on the budget committee and regularly promotes the funding of mental-health focused resources for students and professional development aimed at educating teachers on the signs of a student in distress.

<https://msmagazine.com/2022/04/21/teenage-girl-students-state-boards-education/>

Not only are student board members among those most impacted by school board policy, they are also able to bring a youth perspective on contentious issues. In a November, 2022 story for Voice of America, journalist Dan Novak [interviewed](#) five young people who successfully campaigned for school board seats in Maryland, Wisconsin, and Virginia. These student school board members described the ways they are able to impact critical decisions about gender and sexual identity, teaching on race, and the allocation of school funds to support low-income students. Novak wrote:

Until recently, most school boards were thought of as non-partisan. But some school boards have been affected by political disagreements....

Debates about school policy can involve local and state school officials, school board members and parents. However, some districts permit student members on school boards. They provide the board with a student opinion on the board’s decision-making....

[Noa Blanken, a student representative in Harford County schools in northern Maryland,] said that many adults from outside the district have come to speak to the board during meetings.

She said many have spoken out against critical race theory, an idea that makes race a central consideration. During public comments in meetings “groups come and they get pretty loud and rowdy,” she said.

Blanken said some people who have spoken to the board support reducing funding for programs for poor students, like free school lunches. Blanken said she wanted to be a board member to support low-income students, who make up a large percentage of students in Harford County.

“These people are coming in and they are arguing that we need to focus all of our money on science and math and reading and history [to improve test scores] and take away all these other resources that these students so desperately need. And it's really upsetting to see”....

[Zach McGrath, a student board member at the Wauwatosa School District outside Milwaukee, Wisconsin,] said he believes student members have a “moderating effect on the discourse between the board members, because you don't want to get into a fit when it's in front of a student. You want to set a good example.”

<https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/in-america-some-school-boards-have-student-members/6845412.html>

These examples suggest that having student representation on school boards can bring an important perspective to public debates that might otherwise be missing. Nevertheless, such representation is missing in many parts of the country, and the youth leaders who are currently serving on school boards remain the exception to the rule.

For Discussion:

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. What are some impacts of having students as voting members on school boards? What examples from the reading stood out for you?
3. As school boards are drawn into heated political debates, what do you think are the best ways for making sure that student voices are heard?
4. As an exercise, imagine that you were responsible for designing a school board. Who would be eligible to run for school board, and who would have voting power? What would the responsibilities of the school board be? How would you want school board elections to be funded?
5. Are there issues you think your local school board should address, or policies they should change? What are they?