

Student board members make a difference

But to make that difference, they need a voice—and adults need to listen to them



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Policymakers at the state and national level would like local school boards to be active participants in creating schools where all students have high-quality learning opportunities. While numerous groups endeavor to make schools a better place for kids, adult leaders rarely seek input on how to do this from their most important stakeholders and informants—their students.

Education researchers advise that students should have a role in the school reform movement. Evidence suggests that an important first step in including students in the reform process is to give students a “voice”—in other words, to give them the right to speak for themselves about their educational experiences and the opportunity to be heard by those in places of power.

Creating a student position on each local school board is one way California school boards can give students a voice in improving their schools. In 2003, 28 of 35 states that chose to respond to a survey by the National School Boards Association reported that student representatives serve on local school boards throughout their states. Five of

program *really* working in schools?’ Monica Liu, the SBE’s 2007-08 student member, reflected. “We had to use our judgment to figure out what was best for all students, but we could not have made informed decisions without the student input.”

For student board members to contribute effectively, they need a system for collecting feedback that students can easily access. On the state level, Liu regularly met with youth leaders and disenfranchised students alike to gather ideas for improving schools. One group Liu worked closely with is the Student Advisory Board on Education, a program sponsored by the California Association of Student Councils.

CASC is a nonprofit, student-led organization that has helped foster student leadership at the high school level for more than 60 years. For the past 30 years, SBE has set aside time to listen to CASC students from across the state describe problems they face in their schools and their solutions to these problems.

To ensure the students’ presentations represent all of California’s students, CASC invites students from every district in the state

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these states, including California, allow students preferential voting rights. Students can express their opinions at meetings and their votes are recorded in the minutes, but they’re not tallied in determining whether motions pass.

The California State Board of Education makes room for student voices by appointing a high school student to serve on the SBE each year. State law grants this student member full participation and voting rights. The SBE student board member’s experience exemplifies how a local school board can embrace a student liaison and benefit from his or her input.

“Board members regularly looked to me to answer key questions, such as ‘What do the students think about this?’ or ‘We know how the program is *supposed* to work, but how is this

to Sacramento to participate in a planning conference prior to the SBE meetings. Attendees spend four full days brainstorming, prioritizing and coming to consensus about the most pressing issues facing their peers and how to solve them. Given the opportunity to speak truth to power, these students address the same issues administrators and school boards are facing—raising student test scores by increasing students’ motivation, lowering the dropout rate by improving teaching methods, and conserving energy by making schools more environmentally friendly places. Input from the planning conferences has been influential in helping to persuade the SBE to partner with students and state legislators to make important policy changes.


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At the district level, student school board members have the opportunity—and responsibility—to reach out to every student in the district. They can take advantage of existing structures like student councils to create a clear channel for student input to percolate up from pupils to administrators. Local school boards can partner with CASC to sponsor annual Student Advisory Board conferences at the district or school level.

On a daily basis, adult board members should engage their student colleagues in two-way communication so that the student representatives feel comfortable bringing real issues to the board. The student who merely updates the board about dance attendance is a figurehead. But when the student member serves the district as a liaison to the student body and a resource for candid details about school conditions, students and educators can act as allies to develop more effective local policies.

While much of the responsibility for representing youth views lies with the student members themselves, adult educators and officials must create the conditions for these student board members to succeed. A student board member can only thrive in a culture that embraces student input and a system that provides accessible channels for youth to provide feedback. Further involving students districtwide in the student member election process enables the student member to speak for a cross section of the student population. Ultimately, all students, from straight-A scholars to troubled freshmen struggling to pass classes, need to know that they have a voice in their education, and to understand how they can communicate ideas to decision-makers.

Boards can create this type of culture by developing a set of student board member expectations and encouraging student development. Boards can model the democratic process by encouraging schools to let students nominate and elect student board representatives. Then school boards can create space for student members to contribute and provide opportunities for these students to develop the skills needed to carry out their role. CASC holds annual training sessions for student board members where students learn to collect data by surveying student opinion, facilitating student focus groups and making data-driven presentations. Data-based representation of students' voices can be an important addition to districtwide school improvement plans. One consequence of including students in planning for school improvement is that students are more likely to partner with adult educators to make their schools better places. 

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