

# STUDENTS ON BOARDS

*A MICHIGAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BOARDS TOOLKIT*

*For more resources, visit [masb.org/students](https://masb.org/students).*

# Contents

*Rationale for Students on School Boards*.....3

*Options for Students on School Boards*.....4

*Activities for Students on School Boards*.....5

*Critical Questions About Students on School Boards*.....6

*Sample Policy*.....7

MASB acknowledges and appreciates the contributions of:

**DEWITT PUBLIC SCHOOLS** [dewittschools.net/](http://dewittschools.net/) (sample policy)

**SOUND OUT** [soundout.org/about-us/#](http://soundout.org/about-us/#) (digital toolkit)

## Rationale for Students on School Boards

There are a lot of reasons to have students on school boards. Research shows\* that some of them include:

**Academic Achievement:** Meaningfully involving students on school boards helps to engage students, which raises academic achievement.

**Point of View:** School boards—and districts—can benefit from the opinions, knowledge, ideas and experiences of students.

**Accuracy:** Having students on school boards can help ensure that adults know what is actually happening in schools in real time.

**Democracy:** As the saying goes, “Anything *about* us *without* us is not *for* us.” Schools can put democracy into action with students on school boards.

**Real Learning:** Engaging students on school boards may be one of the most powerful ways to teach students about democracy in society.

**Effective School Improvement:** Engaging students on school boards can significantly improve the effectiveness of school improvement measures.

**Youth Development:** Students can become more effective learners when they are engaged on school boards, and skills learned in this environment (such as decisionmaking) affect them throughout their lives.

**School Culture:** The attitudes, policies and structures of schools may change when students are on school boards.

**Embracing Diversity:** Embracing a diversity of perspectives can make student voice a significant tool in the school leadership toolbox.

**Integrity:** Educators and school leaders have an ethical responsibility to engage students as partners throughout education, particularly in the decisionmaking that affects them every single day.

Perhaps the most important factor to engaging students on school boards is that it just feels right. Voters, teachers, administrators, parents, board members, businesspeople, higher education. . .each of these has a stake in school board decisionmaking. Students have a major stake too.

## *Options for Students on School Boards*

There are many options for school boards that are contemplating adding student representation to their governance approach. Here are a few:

### **Equitable Engagement**

School boards establish a tiered system that ensures equitable engagement for all students and adults in all schools throughout the district. Starting at the classroom level, students should identify other students they want to represent them. Similarly on the building level, students name their representatives. On the district level, building representatives gather to discuss issues and actions. An equal number of students to adults on the school board are elected to represent their peers at every meeting.

### **Complete Connection**

Creating a district student advisory committee with representatives from each high school can form a complete connection between students and adults. Students are chosen by their peers through processes designed to reflect entire student bodies, these are not merely popularity contests. As advisors to the school board, students are meaningfully involved throughout issues that directly affect them and have opportunities to introduce and challenge other issues accordingly.

### **Interested Parties**

A student is selected by the district school board to represent student interests in district policy-making. In the absence of a policy that addresses students' rights to meaningful involvement, the student speaks when spoken to, and does not bring issues to the floor. Their attendance represents adults' interest in student voice with some ability to affect change in schools.

### **Student Reporters**

Simply and routinely asking students to speak up about what they think about school board policy-making issues is the most basic form of student representation on school boards. Often a voluntary request, this sometimes happens through Facebook pages, online surveys or in-person student forums. Mostly it is done by asking students to attend school board meetings, then inviting them to speak at the appropriate times. These are well-meaning, but poorly informed forms of student involvement, as they do not require students have an active role in the process of decisionmaking beyond that of "informant."

## *Activities for Students on School Boards*

Students can do many of the activities of a school board, including contributing to school board decisionmaking and advocacy, as well as offering input on some personnel matters. That includes:

- **Vision:** Students can participate in setting the vision and goals of a district board of education.
- **Rules:** Student board members can inform board policies that give schools direction as they set priorities and achieve goals.
- **Hiring:** As board members, students can participate in the hiring and evaluation processes for district staff by offering input and relevant perspective.
- **Money:** Students can work closely with other board members who adopt the annual budget and play an active role in oversight of the annual budget.

A typical school board meeting includes all kinds of business items in which students can actively participate by asking good questions as well as sharing perspectives on student experiences and concerns, including:

- Curriculum selection and adoption
- School construction planning and oversight
- Vendor contract review and approval

Good school boards maintain a balance between the hard work of running the district and a focus on the district's priorities for academic achievement. Students should be part of all these activities and more!

## *Critical Questions About Students on School Boards*

1. Does the district mission include the preparation of engaged citizens? Do policymakers believe it is their role to support this mission?
2. Do policymakers understand the connection between student engagement and meaningful student involvement? Are they committed to them both?
3. Are policymakers willing to adjust their culture and procedures to make students feel welcome and supported? Are adults willing for students to engage on the merits even when it conflicts with their own views?
4. According to Michigan's law, students cannot vote. With this in mind, are there other ways policymakers can include student voice in decisionmaking?
5. Is creating two student positions on the board of education the only approach? Could combining approaches successfully involve more students? Would an advisory group or having an equal number of student and adult positions on the school board provide students a more valuable experience in authentic decisionmaking?
6. What kind of training will student decisionmakers need to serve effectively? What kind of training will adult decisionmakers need to support student decisionmakers and get the most out of student involvement?
7. Will meetings be scheduled at times and locations that will allow student representatives to participate?
8. Does the policy provide students with the support they need to be successful, including training, staff support, mentor(s), and formal and informal opportunities to ask questions and communicate with their adult colleagues?
9. Does the policy ensure student members accurately reflect the interests and concerns of the student body and effectively communicate policymakers' decisions to the student body?

## Sample Policy

### High School Student Representation on the School Board

The Board encourages active and informed participation by an elected or student-appointed high school student representative. This student shall be seated with the Board but may not vote or introduce/support motions, but is encouraged to participate in the deliberation of Board issues.

Neither the representative nor alternate shall participate in closed sessions of the Board, unless specifically authorized to do so, nor be counted to establish a quorum of the Board. The student representative may not be seated during disciplinary hearings.

### Student Representation on the School Board - Regulations

Students are provided the opportunity for direct communication with the Board via representation on the School Board. This interaction benefits the District, the Board and the student body. The District gains an informed and civic-minded student body. The School Board benefits through the informed input and feedback from the viewpoint of the student body; The student body receives information directly from the Board and gains the experience of serving as a member of the Board.

#### A. Student Representative Selection

The student representative and alternate can be elected by the student body or appointed by the Board of Education. If appointed the process may include, at the Board's discretion: a written application and philosophy statement, an interview and a review of job expectations.

An orientation by the Board President will be conducted with the newly elected/appointed student representative and alternate at the conclusion of the election/appointment process.

The student representative will be seated at the first meeting in September as a nonvoting member of the Board and will end the term of duty at the close of school the following year.

The alternate will be seated with the Board when the representative is absent.

#### B. Student Representative Responsibilities to Student Body

1. Unless excused, the elected representative or alternate must be present at School Board meetings. Whenever possible, both the representative and alternate should attend the School Board meetings, although only the regular representative will be seated with the Board unless s/he is absent in which case the alternate will be seated with the Board.
2. The student representative and alternate will be expected to report to the student government body and report student activities to the Board. The Board may request written reports for review before scheduled meetings.

3. Approved minutes and a reporting of School Board activities will be shared at student government meetings.
4. The elected students must show a high standard of responsibility, decorum and dress when attending the School Board meetings.
5. If access is gained to confidential information or material not available to the general public, the representative and alternate are expected to maintain the highest standards of confidentiality. Failure to do so will result in removal from the position.

### **C. Student Representative Responsibilities as Part of the Board**

1. The student representative will serve as a sounding board for ideas and is encouraged to participate in the discussion and consideration of issues before the elected board.
2. While the participation and input of the student representative is desired on issues before the Board, by law, the student representative is not permitted to vote, to be counted as part of a quorum, or participate in closed sessions of the Board.
3. The student representative will be advised of the general duties of Board members by the Board president as the representative is seated with newly elected Board members.
4. The student representative will be notified of all Board meetings and forwarded the agenda and nonconfidential materials provided Board members prior to meetings.
5. The student recognizes that the Board is the policymaking and budget-determining body of the District and that the regular procedures for student or student government requests at the high school should follow regular high school channels.
6. The Student representative is a position awarded to a student body member and as such is a student privilege. The representative must follow the District Code of Conduct. Violations of the Code of Conduct may result in removal as the student representative from the Board of Education.

For additional resources (sample press release, social media graphics, sample newsletter articles and more), visit [masb.org/students](https://masb.org/students).