SENATOR FOR A DAY MOCK LEGISLATION

Senate Bill 10 – Allowing High School Students to Vote in Local School Board Elections

What Students Are Saying About Lowering the Voting Age - The New York Times

By: The Learning Network

In January, Newark, N.J., voted to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local school board races. Supporters hoped that the ordinance would mark the start of a statewide and national movement. Critics said teenagers were "not ready to make these decisions."

We asked students what they thought: Is the current minimum legal voting age of 18 years old fair and appropriate, or should it be lowered? How old do you think people should be to vote in the United States?

If you thought all teenagers supported a lower voting age, you might be surprised. Read below to see the many reasons they gave for why people under 18 should — and shouldn't — be allowed to vote.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the conversation on our writing prompts this week, including students from Francis T. Maloney High School in Meriden, Conn.; Houghton High School in Houghton, Mich.; and Vanden High School in Fairfield, Calif.

Please note: Student comments have been lightly edited for length, but otherwise appear as they were originally submitted.

Supporters of lowering the voting age were clear: Young people deserve a say in the issues that affect them.

The voting age for school board elections should 100% be lowered to 16, and I'd even support this going into effect nationwide. As a nation, we talk about how we value democracy and always want everyone to participate, and I see no reason that this couldn't be the perfect opportunity to teach youth that their voices matter. They could question candidates and press them to make sure that their needs as a student body are met and could cement the habit of voting in their lives. Democracy requires civic engagement and learning by doing could be our best option.

Many of the critics say that 16 is too young to make an educated decision, but I wholeheartedly disagree. Students know the problems facing their schools. They are the ones that see the missing books on the shelf. They're the ones who know what it's like to follow the dress code. They're the ones who know what it's like to be a student at their school.

— Ian, MI

I feel that it is perfectly acceptable to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school board elections. In my opinion, lowering the age limit for voting in all elections is certainly a risky idea, but it works for situations like these. Not only do I think Baraka is correct when he says that the ability to vote prepares these teens for future elections, students should be allowed to have a say in what goes on

in their school. Age does not necessarily dictate a person's inherent responsibility or maturity — this is present in not just activists my age who are respected leaders in social justice and environmental causes, but also in the stories I've heard of reactionary adults, some of whom don't even have kids in their local school district, who go out of their way to attend school board meetings and vote in district elections in an effort to "protect" children from the moral panic of the week. Why are these people allowed to vote, but not students who actually attend schools in the district?

— Mikey, Valley Stream

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The sentiment of "they aren't taxpayers" also comes across as entirely ridiculous to me. Despite not being taxpayers, we still feel almost every change in law and curriculum within our cities and states, perhaps even more than adults in some cases, being firmly a part of the school systems. It's entirely reasonable that those being directly affected by a change in educational systems be allowed to vote on it.

— Olivia, Francis T. Maloney High School

When it comes to school board elections, I think that 16-17 year olds should be able to vote without question. The outcome directly affects them and their everyday lives. It's important to encourage younger generations to speak out and stand up for what they believe in. Age shouldn't be a factor in determining whether a group of people who are directly affected by an election should be allowed to be involved.

— Carley, Cumberland Polytechnic High School

Most 16-year-olds today are a lot more politically active than past generations due to events such as climate change, school shootings, and much more. Furthermore, 16-year-olds are directly affected by the choices made by those in office, especially when it comes to topics that have to do with education, gun safety, and environmental law. It would make sense to give 16-year-olds a place to make their voices count, especially when the choices made by those in office will affect those 16-year-olds for much longer than older adults.

— Laney, Valley Stream North High School

Others said voting was an important lesson in civics — one that better served students when they were still in high school.

Beyond giving students a voice in the decisions that directly affect them, passing this ordinance would instill a sense of civic duty among students that will last for a lifetime. Telling youth that their voice does matter and providing us a tangible way of expressing it will show youth the power of voting.

Also, lowering the voting age would help prepare students for a future of civic engagement by allowing them to practice the responsibility in an environment where they are supported by teachers, mentors, and parents. As it currently stands, youth are dropped into the bucket at 18, expected to learn with little preparation at a time when many are making the difficult transition into adulthood.

— Yenjay, Westfield High School

I think that it is a good idea to lower the national voting age to 16. A big part of the counterargument is that these young voters will be uneducated and vote for candidates that they aren't knowledgeable about. I believe that being misinformed is not something you just naturally grow out of and that 16 year olds do not tend to be more out of the loop than adults. The addition of more civics material in the classroom would be helpful to teach teenagers how elections work and how to vote responsibility, so that they can effectively advocate for themselves at all levels of elections.

— Chloe, Michigan

As a high school student, I believe that lowering the voting age to 16 is a positive step towards empowering young people and enhancing our political system. The decision by Newark's City Council to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school board elections recognizes the importance of involving youth in civic processes. It allows young individuals to learn about the democratic process, civic responsibilities, and the importance of making informed decisions. While critics argue that 16-year-olds may be underprepared, I believe that civic education should be strengthened to address these concerns. By enhancing civics curriculum in schools, we can better equip young voters with the knowledge and skills needed to make informed choices.

— Nathan, Conestoga High School

But even if some teenagers liked the idea of allowing students to vote in school board elections, not all were convinced the right should extend beyond that.

Students need to have a say in what is happening, and if anyone knows best about their school, it is the students who are in the school for nine months. I don't know if it's as crucial for students to be eligible to vote in presidential elections, as I feel 16-17 years old is still too young. They would make decisions as jokes and not necessarily for someone they want to be the president. Some students would take it seriously, and others would vote based on who they hear about more rather than a candidate who is good for our country.

— Rennon, High Tech High

I believe that the voting age should be lowered only pertaining to school-related elections (ex. local school board races mentioned in the article), to get teens to participate in politics and encourage them to slowly gain an interest in it. Voting in local elections as a teenager will help teens learn what it's like to vote before it truly matters. In my opinion, I think the current voting age, 18, is appropriate. Many students are ending their high school careers and starting college and I think at 18, individuals are more mature.

— Erin, Valley Stream North High School

Others argued that 16-year-olds weren't mature enough for the responsibility at all.

I don't believe the voting age should be lowered to 16 because I don't think 16 year olds are mature enough to accurately make a decision. As someone who is around 16 years olds regularly, and as someone who is going to be 16 in a few months, we don't make the smartest decisions at times. I think people should be able to vote at 18, just as it is right now.

— Lewis, Houghton High School

I would argue that no, the voting age shouldn't be extended to sixteen, due to the necessary teenage development that takes place between the ages sixteen and eighteen. Being a teenager of age seventeen, a teenager who would gain the right to vote should the age threshold be lowered, I have witnessed firsthand the actions of my friends and classmates — actions which unfortunately, I don't think leaves my class deserving of such a privilege. Just yet. The voting age of eighteen allows time for students to start thinking for themselves, to start becoming more independent and to start acting more like adults. Even just two years earlier, the immaturity of people around this age is astonishing. Biologically, teenagers need the time to develop into more mature adults. In other words, why mess with a system that already works? There are plenty of other ways to get young members of society used to political science; testing our already very delicate democracy with rowdy teenagers is not the way to go about doing so.

— Bennett, Glenbard West High School, Glen Ellyn, IL

They worried people under 18 were too impressionable to vote for political leaders whose decisions affect us all.

I personally do not agree with having the legal voting age lowered to 16. I say this because we are in a world where so much information and where young people such as myself have so much information, whether it's true or false, is thrown at them from social media apps … Voting is a very powerful and important thing that I'm not sure most people younger than 18 are capable of.

— Mason, Pennsylvania

As a 16 year old, I stand by the idea that my peers should not be allowed to vote, especially in presidential elections. While it is very important for youth to have a voice on issues that concern them, we are more likely to be pressured by our peers into having a specific view on any political or social aspect. This can be said especially for students voting in school board elections. Students are more likely to base their vote off the portrayed freedom they may receive rather than the true educational aspect, whereas adults who are either running for a position or voting are truly concerned with the child's education, and have had more experiences than the youth that can shape their mind to help form a proper decision.

— Hannah, Cumberland Polytechnic High School, NC

No, the voting age should not be lowered because 16 year olds are influenced by the media very easily. Once the media has made up their mind and something starts trending, everyone will want to do the same. For example a rumor happened that Kanye West was going to run for president and

many teens were willingly going to vote for him as a joke. I don't think they are mature enough to realize how important those types of things really are. It's all jokes and games until they vote somebody for totally not fit to be our president.

— Jeanelle, Valley Stream, NY

And then there were several students who had a very different take: Don't lower the voting age, increase it.

Voting is something that is serious, because it can change the world you live in. In my opinion, I think the age of voting should be around 20-21. I think this because when you are older, this decision will apply to you more. When someone votes to choose a new president, it applies to older people, not so much to 16 year olds.

— J.R., Vanden High School

The brains of a teen don't stop growing and maturing until the early twenties. Decisions are often rushed and not thought through. They will follow almost anybody anywhere as long as it is trendy or they like the person. Now more than ever with social media everywhere, the youth never think about what is best but rather what they want to happen. Like how they will vote on a cool-looking fast food place instead of new roads and infrastructure. These are some counter arguments that people don't take into consideration when trying to have the voting age lowered. If anything, the age should be brought back to twenty-one. The brains of the voters are more mature and are in their last development stages. Their decisions are more prepared and are given with less of a bias than those of a younger person. Our country has problems with voting, we don't want any more than we already have.

— Sawyer, Houghton High School

Districts and States Give Students a Seat at the Boardroom Table - Education Next

By: Caroline Hendrie

University of Pennsylvania undergrad Zach Koung remembers the moment during a college class when his past caught up with him. "We were talking about school boards, and one of my classmates said, 'Wait, Zach, weren't you on a school board?'"

Yes, Koung said. Not only did he serve on his local board of education during his senior year of high school but he also wound up at the center of two lawsuits challenging his power to cast binding votes. "I never thought that at 17 I'd rack up the creds for that," he joked.

Koung, the 2020–21 student member of Maryland's Howard County Board of Education, can make light of his experience now, but it didn't feel funny at the time. Furious parents so aggressively protested his votes to maintain remote-only learning during the COVID-19 pandemic that he sought counseling and feared for his safety. "I literally did not leave my house because I was afraid," he said.

In August 2022, the Howard County board prevailed when Maryland's highest court upheld the constitutionality of allowing students under 18 to serve as voting members. In November, a separate federal lawsuit against the board was dismissed. With the court challenges over, Koung was free to speak out about giving students a direct say in the policy decisions that govern their public schools.

"Students are the most important stakeholders in their education," said Koung, who is simultaneously pursuing a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in education policy at Penn. "This is building civic engagement and helping prepare students for the world that awaits them once they leave school."

In this belief, Koung is not alone. School boards are being pushed to give students a seat at the table—and a vote when they get there—perhaps harder than at any time since the wave of student activism in the late 1960s and 1970s.

To be sure, student school-board members who wield a binding vote are not the norm, and court fights like those in Maryland remain rare. Still, the emergence of a startup national association of student board members—in concert with organizing and policy action at the state and local levels—suggests that if the issue has yet to reach your community, it may be coming to a school board near you.

"There is growing momentum around the issue," said Andrew Brennen, who is board chair of the Kentucky Student Voice Team. Brennen tracks developments on student board members for the newsletter "From Student Voice to Student Power."

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Varying Degrees of Authority

The roles of student board representatives vary widely by location, with little uniformity even within individual states. Some students sit on state boards, others on local ones. Some have binding votes, while others can't even sit on the dais with regular board members. Some are appointed by state or local officials after vetting by student government associations, while others are chosen in broad elections open to the full student body starting as early as the 6th or 7th grade.

Amid calls to elevate student voice in policymaking, how student board members are selected is just one in an array of questions being pressed by educators, policymakers, and most notably, students themselves. These players are examining not only the threshold question of whether K–12 students should be involved in education governance, but also which powers they should hold in such roles.

Besides voting rights, for example, should they have access to board sessions that are closed to the public? How should they be trained and supported? And what recourse, if any, should adult voters have to hold student representatives accountable for decisions that may affect families' lives, students' trajectories, and taxpayers' pocketbooks?

As causes go, student school-board representation draws far less attention than issues animating young activists such as climate change, gun violence, racial equity, or LGBTQ rights. Moreover, students face formidable barriers to expanding their participation on school boards and to exerting significant policy impact once there.

Those obstacles range from the brief and transitory nature of student leadership roles to skepticism and sometimes vigorous opposition from adults. In Kentucky, for example, state lawmakers in 2021 nearly succeeded in abolishing the seat of a nonvoting student member of the state board just months after the first one took office.

Yet supporters see this comparatively low-profile school governance issue as a means for students to influence a range of other causes that matter to their generation. And they point to examples of recent legislative and policy wins—such as helping lead efforts in California to give students excused mental-health days and fighting for free menstrual products in Maryland—as evidence that the student role can extend beyond tokenism.

“Young people are becoming more and more active in the issues of the day, in particular the issues that directly affect them—where education needs to go, how learning needs to happen in our country,” said Vicki Phillips, chief executive officer of the National Center on Education and the Economy, a Washington-based think tank that is incubating a national association of student board members.

The students organizing the national association are “incredibly thoughtful, well-researched, strategic young people,” said Phillips, who is also a former chief state school officer in Pennsylvania and superintendent of schools in Portland, Oregon, and supported student-voice efforts in prior positions at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and National Geographic. “Their orientation is about how to serve everybody well, and they need a seat at the table.”

Not everyone agrees. And nothing concerns skeptics more than empowering students to cast binding votes. “The largest stakeholders in the prison system are people behind bars, and I don’t think they get many votes on what to have for lunch,” said Reid Novotny, who authored unsuccessful legislation in 2021 and 2022 as a GOP member of the Maryland House of Delegates to curtail student board members’ voting rights. “There is zero accountability with a student member of the board to anyone who is a functioning adult paying taxes.”

Novotny’s views align with his former constituent Traci Spiegel, a plaintiff in the state suit against Maryland’s Howard County school board challenging the practice of allowing student members like Zach Koung to cast binding votes. Filed in December 2020, the suit came after Spiegel and like-minded parents watched in mounting frustration as the board deadlocked 4–4 in votes to allow a return to in-person classes. Permitted under state law to vote on a limited number of issues, Koung was among the four who repeatedly voted to remain virtual.

“I’ve never been against students having a voice in decisions,” Spiegel said. “I just don’t think they should have a binding vote. When you’re 17, you are incredibly idealistic. You don’t pay taxes, you would choose to eat pizza every night for dinner, you would drive your friends around at 3 a.m. How in the world can you make the same decisions as adult members?”

Asking students to vote on such issues as whether to cancel exams during the pandemic puts too much pressure on them, argued Spiegel, who said she's been inaccurately "painted as a racist, homophobic, extreme right-wing person" because of her stance. "The adults in the room should be ashamed to be putting a young person in that position."

Even some supporters of student board representation harbor qualms. Maryland state Senator Nancy King, a Democrat, recalls that when she was serving on her local school board, opponents of proposed changes to school-attendance boundaries directed their ire at the student member in person, in hostile phone calls, and on social media. "They would think that the student board member was an easy target," she said. Pressure can come from inside the classroom, too, King added. "Teachers might not like a contract issue, and the teachers take it out on the kid. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen."

Yet King has largely overcome her concerns. "I started out as a real nonbeliever on the student members having a vote. But then I saw many student board members being really well prepared, and in fact better-prepared than some of the adult members," King said. "So I have gone along with it, but it's not without some trepidation. I just think it's a lot of responsibility to heap on the kid."

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Differences among States

Nationally, data on how many American school boards include student members is scarce. Those who follow the issue say no national database tracks that information. Research on student board members in the United States is also scanty, said Dana Mitra, a Pennsylvania State University education professor whose research focuses on student voice: "It's really hard to study it in the United States, because it's more of an anomaly than a part of how schools should be running."

In 2022, the National Association of State Boards of Education found that 24 state-level boards of education had student members, although 17 of them did not allow students to vote. In the District of Columbia and six states—California, Maryland, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Vermont, and Washington—the student board members held the power to vote on at least some issues, NASBE found.

In some states, students' powers have evolved. In California, for example, the state board has had student members since 1969, but not until 1983 did they get full voting rights and the right to be in closed sessions.

As for local boards, the National School Boards Association found in a 2020 survey of state-level affiliates that local governing boards in more than 30 states had student members as a local option. The NSBA report did not yield clear data on all states, however. And since its report in January 2021,

at least one state changed its law; New Hampshire now requires local school boards to have at least one nonvoting student representative from each of their public high schools.

Fourteen states reported to the NSBA that "having students serving on local school boards was not their practice"—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas.

Nationally, Maryland stands out for empowering student board members. Only eight of the state's 24 local districts have student board members with the right to cast votes that count, at least on some issues, but those eight districts educate more than three-quarters of Maryland's public school students.

Maryland's Anne Arundel County, which includes the state capital of Annapolis, is believed to be the nation's only local school board that grants its student members full, unrestricted voting rights on all matters—from the school system's budget and union contracts to hiring and firing the superintendent. "Our student member gets treated differently from student board members" elsewhere, said board president Joanna Bache Tobin. "There's never a moment when that student member has to leave the room when the board has to make the tough decisions."

During a more than four-hour public meeting of the Anne Arundel board in December 2022, student member Zachary McGrath limited his comments to joking about a local high-school football team and thanking Tobin and the board's vice president for being "mentors and friends."

He offered no remarks during the meeting's most contentious deliberations, on whether the 2023–24 school calendar should be adjusted to send students home early to accommodate equity-focused professional development for teachers. As board members divided 6–2 in a series of four votes, McGrath always sided with the majority without explaining his vote or participating in the discussions.

But McGrath and other board members said his influence is not always on public display. "I speak up a lot during the closed session, but then in the public session, I only speak when I feel like I am adding something to the conversation," he said. One example came as the board was considering a new online learning platform, and "the superintendent asked me, 'What is the student perspective?'" McGrath recalled. He replied that the platform with the better app would let students with long bus rides get their homework done en route. "When I said that, Dr. Tobin said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, that's why we have a student member of the board.'"

In California, districts must appoint a student school-board member if enough of those enrolled in their high schools sign petitions requesting it. Student members each have a "preferential vote," defined as "a formal expression of opinion that is recorded in the minutes and cast before the official vote of the board but is not part of the final vote tally."

In 2021, a new law extended California students' power to petition for board membership from local districts to county and charter school boards. That change marked a win for an association of student board members founded by Zachary Patterson, a Duke University undergraduate who served as the first student member of the San Diego Unified school board before graduating in 2022. Patterson is now helping organize the national association being incubated at the National Center on Education and the Economy.

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Student Voice

Patterson hopes the national organization will help counter what he sees as disrespect of students' capability to serve as board members. "We're at our early stages of figuring out this inherent adultism and addressing the barriers people have put in place to exercising student agency," he said.

Patterson's interest in student voice began when he was in 7th grade and saw "a disconnect between those serving students and the students. That put me on a three-year journey to create a student board member." Patterson said he "received significant pushback from a number of quarters, a strong belief that students weren't qualified, they couldn't handle it, and they weren't able to be advocates to help change their own school system." But in 2019, during his sophomore year, the campaign paid off when he was sworn in as the district's first student board member.

Like Patterson, many current student board members argue that policymakers make better decisions when students have a say. "Who knows more than our students about how these issues are really affecting our learning in the classroom, what the classrooms and the hallways of our school buildings even look like?" asked Arvin Kim, the 2022–23 student member of the school board in Montgomery County, Maryland.

That firsthand knowledge can be especially important amid culture-war conflicts on school boards over how to treat race, sexuality, and student discipline, supporters argue. Among them is Eric Luedtke, a former teacher and Democratic state legislator who is now chief legislative affairs officer for Maryland Governor Wes Moore. "To the extent that the culture war debates are about what students should be exposed to, shouldn't students have a voice in that discussion?" he asked.

Student board members tend to boast impressive resumés—and head to top colleges after graduation. While such exceptional students may help assuage doubts about student board members' maturity and judgment, some see the pattern as a problem.

"We have no student-voice movement unless we have every type of student represented," said Solyana Mesfin, the Kentucky state board's first student member. As a child of Ethiopian immigrants, Mesfin sees a need to foster leadership among an array of students, including students of color and those in urban and rural districts with scarce resources.

"I've been in student advocacy ever since my freshman year, and the majority of the time I was the only Black student, the only first-gen student, and the only low-income student," said Mesfin, now at the University of Louisville. "I didn't feel like I fit into the student-voice movement."

Mitra, the Penn State professor, agrees that it's important to address what kinds of students serve on boards. "Of all the kids in a school, the kids who want to be on the school board are the ones

who are going to be the most like the adult school-board members," she said. "The struggling kids are not going to talk to the high flyers about their experiences."

In Georgia, youth organizer Julian Fortuna thinks students are better off concentrating on collective action "rather than focusing on getting a position." A sophomore at the University of Georgia, Fortuna helps train high school students with the youth-led Georgia Youth Justice Coalition, which worked with the national Partnership for the Future of Learning on a 2022 model school-board policy on student members.

"I'm not against young people occupying these positions, but we can't just rely on the individuals," said Fortuna. "It's important that people think of democracy as something we exercise every day. The danger is that students will think that voting once for a student representative is all they need to do."

Back in 1975 when he served as Anne Arundel County's first student school-board member with the right to vote, Anthony Arend said he never portrayed himself as speaking for everyone. "We emphasized that we were not representing all students. I was the member of the board who happened to be a student," recalled Arend, now a professor at Georgetown University and chair of its department of government. "We had to counter the view that we were creating a special-interest position on the board. That was something that was very important in the conceptualization of this."

But today, student board members say they take pains to represent their fellow students accurately. Montgomery County's Kim, who had to campaign for his position in an election open to all of the district's middle and high school students, said he relies on a network of student leaders whom he calls his "cabinet."

"Having 400 diverse voices from across the county and across grade levels provides me with so much insight about the issues," said Kim, whose priorities are mental health, school safety, and educational equity. "It's a model that shapes so much of my work. It's crucial in representing students."

Eric Plankey, the 2022–23 student member of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, is helping organize more channels for participation beyond traditional student-government structures such as the commonwealth's Student Advisory Council. The elected chair of that council—Plankey himself in 2022–23—serves as the board of education's voting student member.

Plankey has worked to get more district school boards to follow a state law requiring them to have not only elected student representatives but also student advisory councils to advise the student school-board members. "You have to build an infrastructure for student voice, because student representation is not a one-person job," he said.

Looking back on his time on the Howard County board, Zach Koung said he has no regrets, including about his votes to delay a return to in-person learning. Like most other student board members, Koung served for just a year. But he said his presence played a role in policy changes aligned with his liberal values.

To promote student mental health, he said, he successfully pressed for relaxed pandemic grading policies. While he did not win his fight to remove school resource officers from all schools, they were taken out of middle schools, a move that he applauded. And as a champion of diversity, equity, and inclusion, he is especially proud of the addition of an elective course in LGBTQ studies.

“Everything that I campaigned on, I did,” said Koung. “Yeah, we might only have a year. But we’re very effective in our jobs, and we can get it done.”