

Senate Bill 9 – Allowing High School Students to Vote in Local School Board Elections

Should Students Vote for School Boards? The Case for Lower Voting Ages in Local Elections

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/should-students-vote-for-school-boards-the-case-for-lower-voting-ages-in-local-elections/2024/01>

By: Evie Blad

January 30, 2024

The jump from theoretical discussions about democracy in high school to the reality of absentee ballots, closed primaries, and registration deadlines can feel abrupt, youth advocates say. And that can make some would-be first-time voters reluctant to engage with a fundamental component of democracy.

Organizers pushing for a more gradual on-ramp to participation in the electoral process scored a major win this month when Newark, N.J., became the latest city to allow 16-year-olds to vote in local school board elections.

Civics-minded advocacy groups like Generation Citizen have pushed for lowering the voting age for local elections so that young people can take more incremental steps to introduce themselves to the voting process. They've also pushed for schools to teach older students more about the practical process of voting so they are better prepared for their first time at the ballot box.

Registering, heading to the polls, and casting a ballot the first time can feel like setting out on a long road trip without ever learning how to start or steer a car, said Yenjay Hu, a 17-year-old New Jersey advocate who supported the Newark effort.

"Voting right now is treated as: Before you're 18, you're just not competent at all," said Hu, a senior in nearby Westfield, N.J. "And then as soon as you turn 18, you're expected to know everything about the electoral process, everything about elected officials and government. We don't really think that is a constructive way to create educated voters in the future."

Hu and his organization, Vote16NJ, are also pushing for a statewide law that would lower the age for voting in school board elections. Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, recently endorsed the idea in his state of the state address.

"I know, to some, this proposal may sound unconventional. But voting is a lifelong habit. And studies show that, if a person votes in one election, they are more likely to turn out in the next election," Murphy said in the Jan. 9 speech.

Supporters of a lower local voting age say their aims extend beyond improving the experiences of first-time voters. Research shows that early voting experiences can be habit-forming. And, in some countries that have lowered the voting age, researchers have found a subsequent increase in turnout among voters of all ages.

A push for teen voting in school board elections

In passing its policy by a unanimous city council vote Jan. 10, Newark joins a small number of communities that have lowered the voting age for local elections, most often school board races.

“We should be putting [students] closer to the decisionmaking table for the policies that directly impact them,” council President LaMonica McIver said before the vote in a discussion documented on a livestream.

Five cities in Maryland allow 16-year-olds to vote in municipal elections under a state law that allows city governments to adopt youth voting policies. Voters in Berkeley and Oakland, Calif., have passed local ballot measures in recent years to allow 16-year-olds to vote in school board elections, but those policies have not yet been enacted.

Youth advocates have lobbied for similar changes in Hawaii, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, and New Jersey. They face resistance from skeptical lawmakers in many places.

“For me, personally, I would like to see us getting our eligible voters, 18 and older, engaged in voting,” Boston City Councilmember Erin Murphy told public radio station WGBH in April, explaining why she opposed efforts to lower the voting age. “I would put more energy and efforts into finding out why they’re not coming to the polls.”

As Newark debated its ordinance, opponents speaking in public comment sessions suggested adding a new cohort of younger voters would unfairly benefit Democrats. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds can’t drink, and their car insurance costs more, suggesting they aren’t ready to make adult decisions, one commenter said during a livestream of the meeting.

Hu, the youth activist, countered that argument in an interview with Education Week by [pointing to research](#) finding that while teenagers may be less mature than in areas of “hot cognition,” like responding quickly in emotionally heightened circumstances, they perform similarly to adults in areas of “cold cognition,” which are longer term, more deliberate decisions.

“We think voting should be treated like driving” where teenagers gradually gain more freedom through a full license after demonstrating responsibility under adult supervision through the use of a learner’s permit, Hu said.

Voting for the first time at age 18 can be particularly difficult, said Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, which conducts research on young voters.

Starting college may mean moving to another state or municipality with differing voting laws, understanding whether primaries there are open or closed to people of other parties, locating polling places, determining ID requirements, and quickly learning about down-ballot races with little background knowledge. All of those things can make voting intimidating, Kawashima-Ginsberg said.

“All of the sudden, [teens] lose that sherpa or guide” of a parent, mentor, or teacher who can help them jump over logistical hurdles, she said.

Keeping the focus close to home—or school

School board races may seem like an unusual target for young, first-time voters.

The hyperlocal elections, often held in different months than general elections with higher-profile races, typically have some of the lowest voter turnout. In Newark, for example, just 3 percent of voters turned out for the most recent school board election in April 2023.

But the races may help boost students' voter engagement because they can easily see how policies about school facilities, sports programs, and curriculum affect their day-to-day experiences, Kawashima-Ginsberg said.

Even in communities that don't allow for younger voting, schools can use discussions about elections with students as young as elementary school to build the sense of community responsibility that leads to greater civic engagement down the road, Kawashima-Ginsberg.

And educators can prepare older students for their first time in the voting booth by including lessons on the practical process of elections within broader lessons on American democracy, or by encouraging them to volunteer as an election worker, she said.

"When we hear stories about what's happening in Washington or what [Republican presidential candidate] Nikki Haley is wearing to campaign in Iowa, young people, our surveys show, are sick and tired of it," Kawashima-Ginsberg. "But when the discussion becomes, 'should your sibling have an art class?' or whatever the school board is debating, it becomes a tangible opportunity to see how government is supposed to serve a community."

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Pa. Lawmakers Move to Let Teens Vote in School Board Races

<https://www.mychesco.com/a/news/social-issues/teen-issues-interests/pa-lawmakers-move-to-let-teens-vote-in-school-board-races/>

By: Timothy Alexander

January 28, 2026

WEST CHESTER, PA — A student-driven push to expand youth voting rights in Pennsylvania took a major step forward as state lawmakers circulated a memo outlining legislation that would allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school board elections.

The proposal, titled "Lowering the Voting Age for School Board Elections," was circulated on January 21 by state Reps. Chris Pielli of Chester County and John Inglis III of Allegheny County. The forthcoming bill would give high school juniors and seniors a direct say in the local elections that shape school funding, curriculum, activities, and student safety.

Supporters argue that students are uniquely affected by school board decisions yet remain excluded from the democratic process governing their own education.

The effort is being advanced by The Fund for Women and Girls, which created and leads Vote16PA, a nonpartisan, student-led civic engagement initiative focused on expanding youth voice in school governance. Students involved in the program not only advocated for the idea but also helped draft and edit the legislative memo before it was submitted.

Participants said the proposal reflects years of frustration with being shut out of decisions that directly affect their daily lives. Students in the Vote16PA cohort include high school and college participants who have met with legislators, built coalitions across the state, researched voter expansion, and developed communications strategies to advance the policy.

Advocates point to examples beyond Pennsylvania. At least nine municipalities in states including New Jersey, Maryland, Vermont, and California have already lowered the voting age to 16 for certain local elections. Research cited by organizers shows that earlier voting is associated with higher rates of long-term civic participation.

Blake Emmanuel, director of advocacy and policy at The Fund for Women and Girls, said data from the United States and abroad consistently shows that voters who begin participating at a younger age are more likely to remain engaged over time.

The memo's circulation marks the transition of Vote16PA from a classroom concept to an active legislative initiative. Student leaders emphasized that the proposal is not symbolic but intended to provide meaningful representation in elections where students are the primary stakeholders.

Organizers said the work is far from finished. Vote16PA participants plan to continue educating peers and community members, building bipartisan coalitions, and tracking the legislation as it moves through the General Assembly.

The Fund for Women and Girls said it will continue investing in civic education and youth leadership as part of its broader mission to advance equity and remove structural barriers to participation. More information about the initiative is available at <https://www.thefundcc.org/vote16pa>, and the legislative memo can be viewed at <https://www.palegis.us/house/co-sponsorship/memo?memoID=47939>.