

National Association of State Boards of Education

## Engaging Youth in Education Policymaking

By Celina Pierrottet

As of 2022, more than 400 students serve as members of state boards of education or state advisory councils in 33 states (see map). Over the last five years, eight states have added at least one student member on their board, a state student advisory council, or a combination of board membership and advisory council, with Virginia's council being the most recently created.<sup>1</sup>

Although the number of students engaged in state policymaking in this manner has grown nationally, 18 states lack any student representation. More can be done to build on the momentum toward elevating student voice and leadership.

Dana Mitra, a leading student leadership researcher and founder of the *International Journal of Student Voice*, describes student voice as a pyramid, where agency increases

as students approach the top of the pyramid. The base of the pyramid is the need for being heard, followed by collaborating with adults and building capacity for leadership.<sup>2</sup> Methods for engaging youth range from soliciting student opinions through student surveys, opportunities for civic engagement at public meetings, focus groups, leadership roles alongside adults, and shared responsibilities to achieve agreed-upon goals, according to Mitra. However, each method has trade-offs. For example, selecting a few students to occupy leadership roles may limit the perspectives heard by adults.

There are several ways state leaders can maximize the number of students whose perspectives they hear and the level of youth agency. States can ensure that students are adequately, equitably engaged in crucial decision making by elevating student voice wherever possible, developing opportunities for students to collaborate with adult peers, and building capacity for student leadership at the state level, such as on state boards of education or in state education agencies.

### ELEVATING STUDENT VOICE

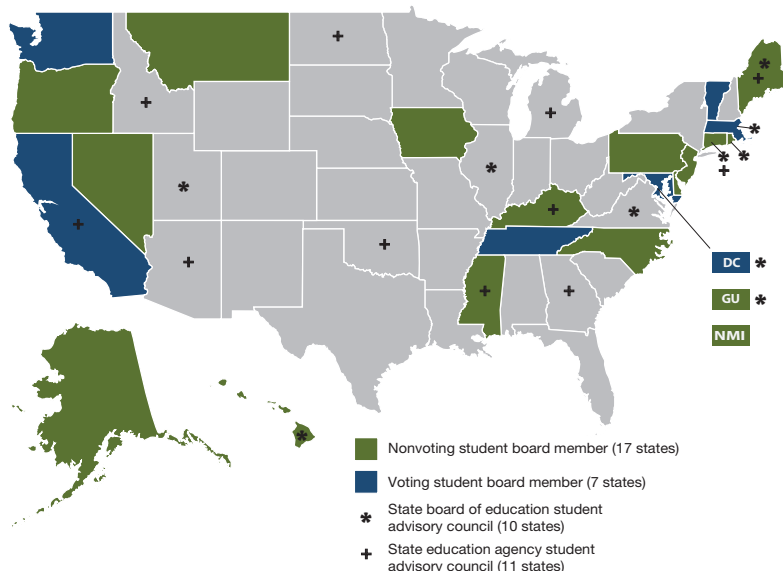
According to Mitra, surveys, focus groups, and interviews are the most common forms of youth engagement in states. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to include nonacademic factors in judging school performance, including input from parents, students, and teachers. Eight states have included school climate or student engagement surveys as part of their ESSA accountability rubrics, and five other states administer surveys and report the results publicly.<sup>3</sup> Seven states require student surveys to be part of a teacher's summative evaluation rating.<sup>4</sup> Vermont surveys students on risk-taking behaviors and collaborates with the local nonprofit, Up for Learning, to center youth in data analysis and action planning.<sup>5</sup>

State leaders also regularly consult students on other trending issues and use student leadership positions as a platform for student perspectives. On some state boards, student members or student advisory groups regularly make presentations. In Maine, student board members report on discussions from student cabinet and advisory council meetings, often touching on issues such as how state board members could better support students' mental health. The Illinois and DC Student Advisory Councils identify an area of focus each year and present recommendations to the state board.

Student leaders on state boards and in state education agencies have a unique platform for raising student issues in education policy and practice. However, student leadership positions are often reserved for the highest achieving students. Former Kentucky student board member Solyana Mesfin explained that the system prioritizes high-achieving students like herself. She suggests state leaders should intentionally uplift different student groups.<sup>6</sup>

Connecticut, Guam, Hawaii, Iowa, and Mississippi require a minimum grade point average (GPA) to serve on their respective state boards. In three of these states, the GPA requirement is mandated in law.<sup>7</sup> Such requirements may deter students from applying who may not be

State Education Leaders Engage Students in 33 States



[Correction: This piece originally lacked reference to a student advisory council in Michigan.]

the highest achieving students but may have equally valuable perspectives. Such requirements limit students' opportunities to provide input and the state's opportunities to receive a breadth and diversity of perspectives.

State education leaders can maximize diverse representation in student leadership positions by examining application processes for student members of state boards and state advisory councils and removing application requirements that may deter underrepresented students from applying. For example, the **Utah State Board of Education** codified diversity as a criterion for its student advisory council. To fill the 15 seats on the student advisory council, the board must consider geographic diversity; academic achievement diversity, including students with average or below average GPAs; whether students attend traditional, charter, or online schools; extracurricular involvement; and exposure to educational barriers like socioeconomic status and disabilities. The **District of Columbia State Board of Education** also requires student representation from Wards 7 and 8, whose residents are historically underrepresented in DC leadership.

## COLLABORATING WITH ADULTS

Students can thrive when given opportunities to influence outcomes by partnering with adult peers and recommending actions. The votes of student board members of the DC state board are recorded but do not affect the outcome of state board actions. However, the board allows student board members a full vote in committees, where much of its policy development takes place.

The DC board is developing a process for reflecting student voice in their social studies standards revision. During the Education Standards Committee meeting in May 2022, board members heard from students in Massachusetts and Kentucky about how education leaders in their states collaborated with students on developing learning standards.<sup>8</sup> The Massachusetts student representative, Eleni Livingston, shared how students weighed in on her board's decision to raise the state assessment competency score and recommended ways the state could support students struggling to meet the current competency score. By collaborating with

other students from across the country, state board leaders were able to hear what works and begin developing a process that centers students in their learning standards revision.

## BUILDING CAPACITY FOR LEADERSHIP

Although many states have student leadership roles, student leaders' participation is often limited to sharing opinions with adult leaders. Mitra describes building capacity for leadership, which includes enabling students to lead initiatives and make decisions, as the least common form of student voice.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, there are noteworthy examples. In 2021, **Connecticut** launched Voice4Change, a program in which high school students proposed and voted on plans to invest more than \$1.5 million in federal relief funds.<sup>10</sup> Department staff provided some guidance, but the Voice4Change program enabled students to submit proposals and persuade their peers to vote on proposals that would better meet the needs of their schools.

Students on the **Guam Education Board** proposed a curriculum for student mental health training in schools to build mental and behavioral health awareness and healthy coping mechanisms for dealing with emotional challenges.<sup>11</sup> The Guam Department of Education collaborated with the Island-Wide Board of Governing Students to create a survey assessing students' mental health challenges, and the two student board members, Grace Anne Dela Cruz and Isabella Paco, promoted the survey through social media. After receiving responses from over 2,000 students, Dela Cruz and Paco worked with the department's lead school psychologist and the University of Guam to coordinate and facilitate the training.

## QUESTIONS TO SPUR FULL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

To center youth in education policymaking and maximize youth input, states leaders can ask the following questions:

- Is there a range of youth engagement methods at the state level?
- Are there opportunities for students and state leaders to discuss student survey results?
- Do student leaders have opportunities to

share in the decision-making process, or are they limited to sharing opinions?

- What demographic data are needed to ensure diverse representation of student opinions in surveys and focus groups?
- Who is represented in student leadership positions? Who might be missing?

Youth engagement is key to effective policy-making. State education leaders seeking to elevate student voices can ensure students are continually a part of decision making. While no one method for engaging youth is sufficient, state leaders can leverage existing student leadership roles to increase youth input.

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## NOTES

1 H.B. 1188, 2022 Reg. Sess. (Virginia 2022).

2 Dana Mitra, "Increasing Student Voice and Moving toward Youth Leadership," *The Prevention Researcher* 13, no. 1 (2006): 7–10.

3 Phyllis W. Jordan and Laura S. Hamilton, "Walking a Fine Line: School Climate Surveys in State ESSA Plans" (FutureED, 2020).

4 Elizabeth Ross and Kate Walsh, "State of the States 2019: Teacher and Principal Evaluation Policy" (Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality, 2019).

5 Bernice Gamett, et al., "Participatory Survey Data Analysis as Catalyst for Empowering Youth as School Health Change Agents," *Health Promotion Practice* 20, no. 4 (2019): 483–88.

6 District of Columbia State Board of Education, "Student Voice and Engagement in State Standards Review Panel," YouTube video (May 25, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBCVS7Wex20>.

7 Connecticut, Guam, and Iowa have statutory GPA requirements. Iowa requires academic excellence, which the state board interprets as a minimum 3.0 GPA.

8 DC State Board, "Student Voice and Engagement."

9 Mitra, "Increasing Student Voice."

10 Connecticut State Department of Education, "Voice4Change," web page, <https://portal.ct.gov/Voice4Change/V4C/Voice4Change-Program>.

11 Sophie Nochefranca, "Upcoming Workshops Aim to Help Teens Address Mental Health Challenges," *Guam Daily Post*, February 5, 2022.