



Jasper Coughlin

Member, Massachusetts Board
of Elementary and
Secondary Education

Student Voice

Having an Equal Seat at the Table

“I’ve been receiving more work and losing my motivation to actually do it.”

“I feel myself being less energetic and enthusiastic.”

“This year blows.”

Earlier this year, I distributed a survey to 5,000+ students in high schools across Massachusetts. The respondents (some of whom I’ve quoted above) were split on in-person versus remote learning, academic readiness, classroom engagement—you name it. It reinforced my belief that student voice is far from a monolith. Yet they agreed on a general frustration with their schools—a sense of being shut out of their own education.

In particular, students are often left out of the policy-level conversation on mental health—perhaps the most consequential issue they face. They must be part of discussions about remedying it.

I set myself a goal of elevating student voice when I was elected to the Massachusetts state board last October. (I often joke that the pandemic is either the best or the worst time to become a board member.) Ironically, I am the only elected member of my state board and as such represent Massachusetts’s one million K-12 students.

For each and every discussion and vote, I listen to student voices and share them with the board before making my decision, but rarely are those voices taken seriously. “I’m sure your parents had some sort of sway in your vote” and “you’re a sellout and didn’t represent the students” are some of the comments I’ve heard from adult-age policymakers in response to my voice. Certainly, students often do not have the same experience or systemwide perspective, and I do not believe these adults’ doubts are malicious. When reasonable doubt turns into

delegitimization, however, I draw the line.

For all their platitudes about “the next generation of leaders,” many educational officials doubt whether student self-advocacy serves legitimate purposes. A student rep is advocating for mental health days? Well, the students are lazy and don’t want to work. Students are asking that the school invest in racial equity training? They don’t understand the issue and don’t appreciate all we’ve done so far. Those in power will dismiss student voices and use lip service as an escape route.

Student advocacy ought not be equated with ingratitude. We students are grateful for what has been done by previous generations for our betterment. Our advocacy is not an insult to these accomplishments but a request to build upon them.

I air these concerns not because I take them personally but because students are increasingly angry. I have felt it in my state, and if you seek it out in yours, you will feel it too. When students and their representatives are neglected, progress stagnates on issues important to them. They can see things not getting better, which fosters frustration.

A more diverse, forward-thinking, productive education system will include student voices. The need to elevate the student voice at local and state levels will far outlast my tenure, but I will keep trying because I believe active listening and response to students creates a better learning environment for all. ■