

Student Voice

Three Ways to Boost Student Engagement with State Boards

We are two of four student representatives selected to serve on the District of Columbia State Board of Education. We co-chair the Student Advisory Committee (SAC), attend all state board working sessions and public meetings, and sit on several state board committees. We believe student engagement plays a critical role in the success of education policy in our city and that meaningful engagement of students gives our state board a critical window on the state of schools and what policies are truly needed at a given time. We have three recommendations for other state boards that would like to increase student engagement in their work, as DC has.

Have at least one student member on the board. The DC state board has four openings for student members. To boost student representation from traditionally underrepresented groups in education policy, one slot is designated for a student who lives in or attends a school in the city's Ward 7 or Ward 8. Student members are appointed for at least one year and have all the responsibilities of the elected state board members. This recommendation elevates student voices and gives stakeholders a better idea of student priorities. As student representatives, we not only bring personal experience to the table, we also bring the experience of our peers through what we hear daily in the halls of our schools. Student members can conduct outreach in a way that elected board members cannot: through talking casually to students in school.

Create a space specifically for student voices. The SAC is one of

the state board's committees, made up of about 40 students who meet bimonthly. The goal of the committee is to provide education agencies with student voice, advise the state board on resolutions and projects, and carry out specific projects that engage students across the District. In February 2022, the SAC published a citywide survey that focused on student experiences in school during the pandemic. This survey was made by students, for students. Based on the results, the SAC created recommendations to guide its work and that of the state board moving forward. Everyone should have their voice heard in the work of a board, but having a space exclusively designated for students is powerful. The SAC ensures that the information the state board receives is relevant to the current state of schools, and it increases students' motivation to respond to outreach meaningfully.

Require (through bylaws) that the board engage with students before voting on resolutions. It is easy to promise that student engagement will occur, but the only way to guarantee continued inclusion of students is through its codification in board policies and practices. These bylaws should hold the board to high standards. Boards have—and should use—the ability to build relationships with students and student groups, who will then share their perspectives with the board. That can only happen when boards hold themselves to rigorous standards for student engagement. ■



Liv Birnstad
Student Representative
DC State Board of Education



Juliana Lopez
Student Representative
DC State Board of Education