Removing Barriers to Student Leadership

In the September 2022 issue of the Standard, students from the District of Columbia State Board of Education offered three ways to boost state boards engagement with students: including a student member seat on the board, creating a space specifically for student voice, and requiring student consultation on policy in bylaws. Inspired by what I have seen in my community, state, and state board, I want to provide a few more recommendations to encourage state leaders to support student members in their development as leaders.

Supporting student members from the start of their term leads to an environment where they feel comfortable engaging with adults when tough policy topics arise. Helping student members grow as leaders helps them better represent their peers. Programs like NASBE’s Student Engagement Collaborative and organizations like the National Student Board Member Association have provided me spaces to build relationships with other student members, engage with subject-matter experts, and learn strategies to be more effective.

It is important to encourage students to engage with a wide variety of policymakers. I co-chair the Maine Department of Education Student Cabinet, a student-led body that regularly interacts with department staff, legislators, and other policymakers. Student involvement is a two-way street: Just as students benefit from having their voices heard and having opportunities to grow as leaders, adults benefit as well. This spring, the Student Cabinet presented on student mental health needs to Maine’s Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. They provided the legislators with a diverse set of perspectives they rarely hear in the State House.

To make sure that policymakers hear from students, it is important to break down barriers to student engagement and ensure a diverse range of voices at the table. A barrier as simple as a lack of access to transportation can make the difference between a student who is able to share a perspective and one who is not. Other barriers are more systemic, such as application processes that prioritize GPA or adult recommendations, which can leave out important and underrepresented voices. Considering whether an applicant has experienced hardship in their educational experience, is coming from a nontraditional educational model, or is a member of an underrepresented or marginalized community can also expand the number of student perspectives that policymakers can access.

While student voice has often been missing from policy discussions, the movement to engage students in education policymaking has made significant headway, with 33 states now involving more than 400 students. My experience as a board member and as the chair of a student advisory group has shown me just how important engaging students is in creating a more effective, equitable, and just education system for all. Whether it be a student-led presentation to legislators on the mental health needs of students or a conversation with policymakers on the need for a more diverse, inclusive curriculum, students can provide invaluable insights to those making the decisions that impact students the most.