



School Board and
Youth Engagement Lab
Teachers College, Columbia University



Teachers College, Columbia University

THE MISSING PIECE

Symbolic at the State – Sparse
at the Local: Student Board
Membership in **Delaware**

Lydia Campe, MS

Research Assistant, School Board and Youth Engagement (S-BYE) Lab
Teachers College, Columbia University

Kiki Leis, Ph.D.

Senior Research Assistant, Center for Educational Equity
Associate Director, School Board and Youth Engagement (S-BYE) Lab

Jonathan E. Collins, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Political Science and Education
Associate Director, Center for Educational Equity
Director, School Board and Youth Engagement (S-BYE) Lab



**School Board and
Youth Engagement Lab**
Teachers College, Columbia University

The School Board and Youth Engagement (S-BYE) Lab at Teachers College develops research-based ideas and new technology tools for strengthening youth engagement and redesigning school boards to be more democratic.

Our mission is to provide rigorous, multi-methodological, community-based research and new technologies that contribute towards the larger goal of developing a functioning multiracial democracy around communities, particular school systems, in the United States and around the world.

Educational, not-for-profit use of this document is encouraged.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyzes the presence and design of student board membership policies across Delaware's 19 public school districts. While the state appoints a non-voting student representative to the Delaware State Board of Education, there is no requirement for districts to do the same.

As a result, district-level student representation remains uneven. Just over 42% of districts explicitly allow for student board members (SBMs), and among those, selection methods, eligibility requirements, and visibility vary significantly. Only one district lists an active student member on its website, and no district grants voting rights or offers formal compensation.

The variation in local policy reflects the absence of state-level guidance or mandate for student participation in school board governance. Some districts implement structured selection processes and set clear expectations for student eligibility, while others provide little information or rely on informal mechanisms. Notably, only a small subset of districts integrate Student Advisory Councils (SACs) to support SBMs, limiting opportunities for broader student engagement in decision-making.

Delaware's case highlights both the potential and the limitations of student voice in school governance when local discretion is not anchored by consistent state policy. This report underscores the need for greater clarity, visibility, and institutional support for student board members—and offers a foundation for future research and policy reform aimed at embedding student voice more deeply into the fabric of educational decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

In America, school boards are democratic institutions responsible for governing the vast majority of the nation's public schools. They serve three primary functions: overseeing the superintendent, constructing and codifying district policy, and managing the district budget (Land, 2002). With most school boards composed of publicly elected representatives, these members are, in theory, held accountable for ensuring that all children in their jurisdiction receive a quality education (Alsbury, 2008).

Yet the standard structure of school board governance suffers from a major representational blind spot. While board decisions directly shape students' day-to-day educational experiences, the students themselves have traditionally had no formal role in the democratic processes guiding those decisions (Levinson, 2012; Mitra, 2006). Instead, school board politics has long been dominated by adult stakeholders—special interest groups, organized parents, and advocacy organizations operating at local, state, and national levels. Largely absent has been the political voice of the students whose lives are most affected. In this research series, we refer to student voice as “the missing piece” in the broader puzzle of school board governance.

"The students themselves have traditionally had no formal role in the democratic processes guiding those decisions (Levinson, 2012; Mitra, 2006)."

This series is driven by a central question: What should school board governance with meaningful student agency look like? One emerging answer is the growing phenomenon of student representatives serving on school boards—a practice that has become more common since the turn of the 21st century (Rodríguez & Villarreal, 2012). But this development invites further inquiry. Empirically: How prevalent is student representation? What variation exists in students' roles, powers, and responsibilities? How are student representatives selected? These are the questions we examine state by state throughout this series.

At a deeper level, student board membership raises essential normative questions. What should we expect from student representation? Can students, who lack access to some of democracy's core mechanisms—such as independent media, constituency service, and free elections—be reasonably asked to represent their peers in political environments often marked by conflict over resources and ideology? And what does it mean to prepare students not only to be governed, but to govern?

STATE SPOTLIGHT: DELAWARE

Delaware offers an instructive case in partial recognition without full implementation. While the state does appoint a student representative to its State Board of Education, it provides no corresponding mandate or framework for student membership at the local district level. As a result, Delaware's 19 school districts show wide variation in whether and how they incorporate student board members. Fewer than half of districts explicitly allow SBMs, and among those that do, selection methods, eligibility requirements, and visibility vary significantly. No district grants student members voting rights, and only one district publicly lists a current SBM on its website. Delaware's example underscores the limits of symbolic inclusion at the state level when not supported by local policy infrastructure—another reminder that student voice remains the “missing piece” in much of school board governance across the country.

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected on all 19 school districts in the state of Delaware. The list of Delaware school districts was obtained through a state-wide database that provides updated enrollment data at the conclusion of each school year. Research involved website scraping of publicly available district websites and policy manuals. The dataset contains 21 variables related to SBM involvement and their role on the school board. Variables were analyzed independently for each district. Information was coded only if it was explicitly stated in publicly available district policy. If not explicitly stated, the variable was coded as *INF* (information not found). If the variable was not applicable, it was coded as *N/A*. Data was collected throughout November 2024.

RESULTS

Presence of Student Board Members

The governor of Delaware annually appoints an eleventh or twelfth grade public school student to serve, in a non-voting capacity, on the Delaware State Board of Education (Delaware Department of Education, 2025). However, there is no state-level policy in Delaware which dictates requirements for student board membership in individual districts. Thus, Delaware school districts vary widely as to whether or not they allow SBMs, how these programs are enacted, and what policy language they use.

47.4% of Delaware districts did not mention SBMs in their policy manuals and were coded as *NO*. 42.1% of the districts had policies explicitly addressing student board membership and were coded as *YES*. SBMs. Information was not available for the remaining 10.5% of districts, due to inaccessible websites or a lack of information on their policies, and were coded as *INF*.

Figure 1.1 SBM Policy By District

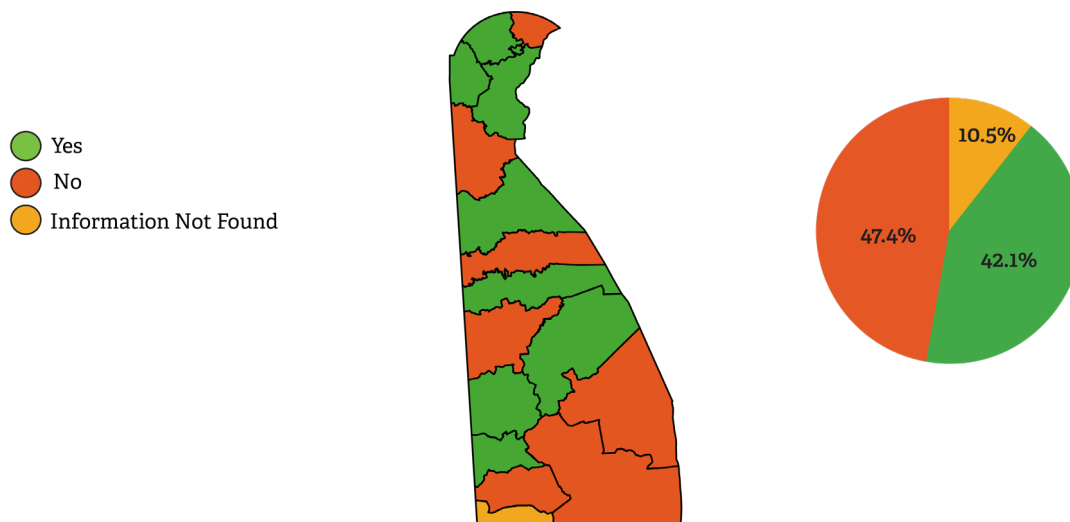


Figure 1.1: This graph indicates whether or not the district policy from each Delaware district explicitly allows for an SBM ($n = 19$). *INF* = Information not found. Information was gathered from Delaware school board district websites.

The two districts coded *INF* could not reliably be categorized as either allowing SBMs or not allowing SBMs. Delmar School District, with a population of under 1,500 students, does not have a complete policy manual available on their website. Though a handful of policies are linked, no policy that references SBM involvement is publicly available. The second district coded *INF*— the Caesar Rodney School District— has a complete policy manual available to the public. The table of contents included in the “Student” portion of this handbook shows a “Student Member of School Board” section, but the policy itself appears to be absent from the manual. No further information was found regarding the presence of SBMs in Caesar Rodney School District. These two districts are not included in the following analysis, nor are the nine districts which include a policy manual that does not provide for SBMs. The following sections provide further information on the eight school districts allowing SBMs.

District websites often included a “Board of Education” section with photos of school board members. If these sections included either photos or descriptions of current SBMs (for the 2024-2025 school year), this variable was coded as YES. Only one of eight SBM school district websites included an active SBM.

Figure 1.2 Active SBMs (2024-2025)

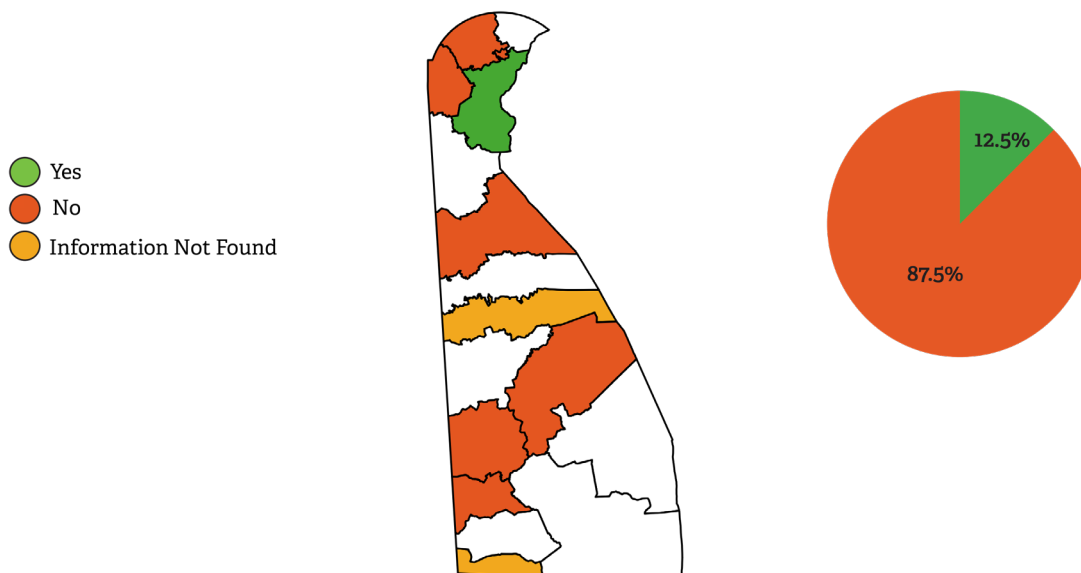


Figure 1.2: This graph indicates whether or not the Delaware school districts which allow for student board members include a current SBM listed on the district website (n = 8).

Term Length by District

Of the eight Delaware districts that allow SBMs, two districts do not provide any information about SBM term lengths. One district has SBMs serve on a rotating basis (coded ROTATION), with class presidents from each of the district’s seven high schools rotating service duties monthly. Five districts provide for yearly term lengths.

Information regarding beginning and ending dates for SBM terms was only found in four out of eight SBM districts, with all four mandating that SBMs begin their yearly service in July and end in June.

Figure 1.3 Term Length by District

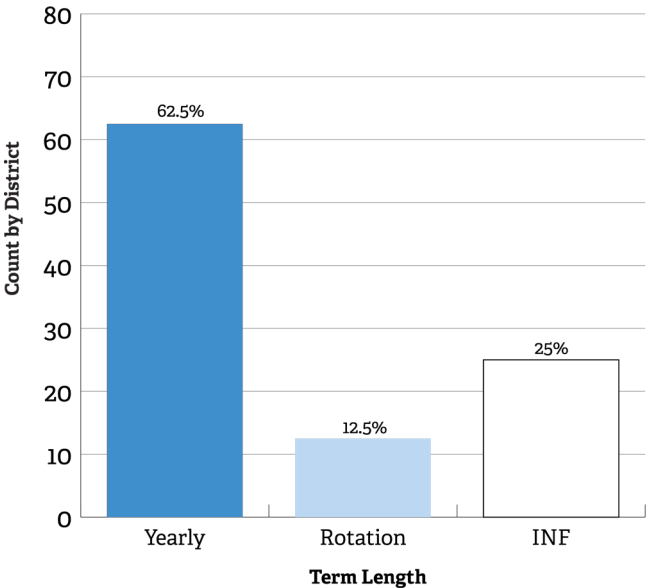


Figure 1.3. Note. This graph shows the length of time that SBMs served in each of the Delaware districts that allow SBMs (n = 8). INF = Information not found. Information was gathered from Delaware school board district websites.

Figure 1.4 Term Start Date

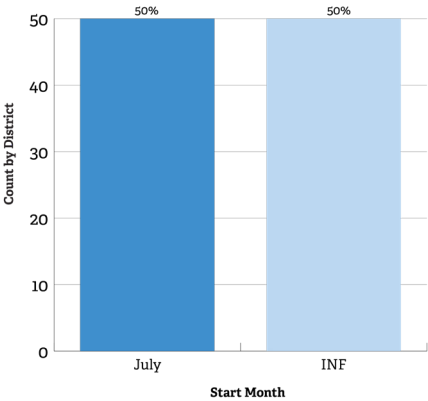
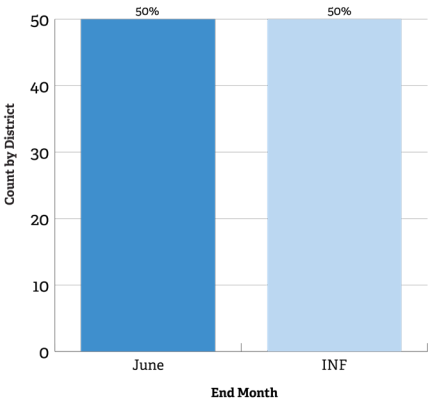


Figure 1.5 Term End Date



Figures 1. 4 and Figure 1.5. Note. These charts show the start and end dates of the SBM terms in Delaware. These charts include term data only from districts that allow SBMs (n = 8). INF = Information not found. Information was gathered from Delaware school board district websites.

Student Board Member Position Requirements

District policy for SBMs often delineate requirements for students seeking to serve on the school board. In Delaware, district SBM requirements often include upperclassman status, grade point average, membership on a “Student Advisory Council” (SAC), outstanding behavior, attendance record, and more. Students must meet these requirements if they are to be allowed to serve as SBM for their district. All but one of the eight SBM school districts in Delaware include SBM requirements. Seaford School District, coded as *INF* below, states in its policy that more specific information regarding SBM requirements would be established in regulation accompanying the policy. That regulation was not made publicly available.

Figure 2 SBM Position Requirements

● Yes
● No
● Information Not Found

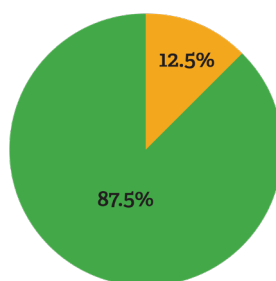


Figure 2: Note. This graph indicates whether or not the Delaware school districts which allow for SBMs outline requirements for SBM membership in their policy manuals ($n = 8$).

Student Board Member Selection Process

The selection process for SBMs varies widely by district. For an SBM selection process to be considered an appointment, the process must not be open to input from the community or student body at large. Appointments will typically be made by a principal, superintendent, or the local board of education. If the selection process allows for the student body or larger community to vote for their SBM representative, regardless of whether the SBM is subject to vetting procedures or ultimate approval by the board of education, the process is considered an election. Districts whose processes do not fit into these categories are coded as *OTHER*.

Of the eight Delaware districts that allow SBMs, two school districts select their SBM by appointment, two districts hold SBM elections, and three do not fit into either category. One district does not provide any information as to how SBMs are selected.

Figure 3.1: This graph describes the selection processes used by the Delaware school districts which allow for SBMs ($n = 8$).

Appointment Process

Only two Delaware school districts select their SBMs by appointment. One district relies on school administrators to recommend a candidate for the SBM position, which is then approved by the school board. The other district appoints their SBMs by committee,

convening the principal and student government advisor to review self-nominated SBM candidates and select the SBM.

Election Process

Two Delaware school districts choose SBM by election. One school district allows the entire student body to elect their SBM representative, though eligible candidates are determined before the election process by a committee of school administrators and student council members. The other district only allows members of the Superintendent's Student Advisory Council to vote for their SBM.

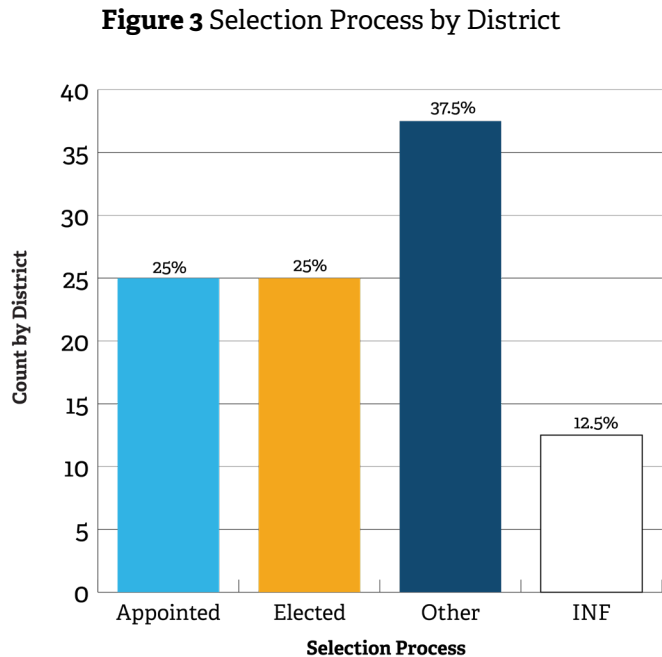


Figure 3. Note. This graph describes the selection processes used by the Delaware school districts which allow for SBMs ($n = 8$).

Other Methods of SBM Selection

Three Delaware schools utilize different selection processes. One district employs a tiered appointment system, allowing members of student government to choose a candidate for review by the principal. If accepted, the principal will forward the nomination to the school board for ultimate approval. Another district uses a committee which includes the school principal, student council advisor, and student council president. This is coded OTHER because of the student representative in the appointment process. Finally, one school district automatically appoints the student body president of each high school in the district to serve on the school board on a rotating basis.

Student Advisory Council

Of the eight Delaware school districts which allow SBMs, five include student advisory councils (SACs) which work alongside the SBM or have some involvement in school decision-making. These groups may also be called student councils or student governments.

Figure 4 District SAC Count

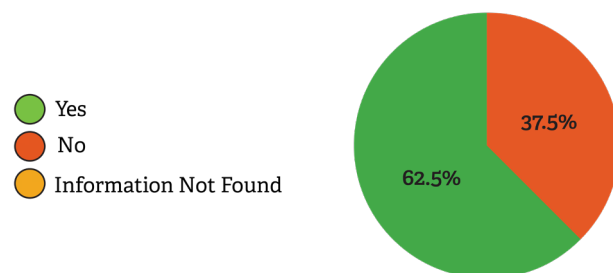


Figure 4. Note. This graph indicates whether or not the Delaware school districts which allow for SBMs utilize SACs which work in partnership with SBMs ($n = 8$).

Voting, Motions, and Payment

Student board members have very limited power in Delaware. No Delaware district allow their SBMs to vote on matters brought before the board of education, nor are they allowed to call a motion. SBMs serve in an advisory capacity only. No SBMs are compensated for their service.

DISCUSSION

Student board membership in Delaware is characterized by inconsistency and fragmentation. Although the state appoints a student to serve in a non-voting role on the Delaware State Board of Education, it does not provide any mandate or regulatory framework for student representation at the local district level. This absence of state-level guidance has resulted in a highly uneven policy landscape: fewer than half of Delaware’s 19 districts explicitly allow student board members, and even among those that do, no two districts approach the selection process in the same way.

This variation reflects a broader tension in educational governance—between local autonomy and equitable access. On one hand, the lack of uniform regulation grants districts the flexibility to tailor SBM policies to local needs and contexts. On the other hand, it allows for the possibility of weak or symbolic participation, and in many cases, no student voice at all. The majority of SBMs serve in advisory roles without voting rights, and most lack formal visibility on district websites or in public records.

Delaware’s case illustrates how easily student voice can become the missing piece in democratic school governance—acknowledged at the state level but unsupported where it matters most: in the schools students attend every day. Without a clearer, more enforceable policy framework, the state risks perpetuating a system where access to representation depends more on local initiative than on a shared commitment to youth civic agency. Strengthening statewide policy could help ensure that student participation is not an exception, but a norm.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should examine how different selection mechanisms for student board members—such as appointments versus elections—shape student engagement, perceptions of legitimacy, and overall school climate. Investigating how these processes affect students’ sense of agency and connection to governance could shed light on the democratic potential of SBM programs beyond their formal design.

Additionally, structural factors such as district population size, funding levels, and administrative capacity warrant closer study. These variables may influence not only whether a district adopts SBM policies, but also the depth and visibility of student participation. Understanding these correlations can help identify where gaps in representation are most likely to occur—and why.

More broadly, continued research into the experiences and outcomes of student board members can strengthen the evidence base for embedding student voice into school governance. As states consider how to expand youth civic learning, studying the lived realities of student representatives can inform policy reforms that ensure participation is not only symbolic, but substantive.

REFERENCES

- Alsbury, T. L. (2008). *The Future of School Board Governance: Relevancy and Revelation*.
- Delaware Department of Education. (2025). *State board of education*. <https://education.delaware.gov/community/governance/state-board-of-education/#:~:text=Non%2Dvoting%20members%20are%20appointed,State%20Teacher%20of%20the%20Year>.
- Kahne, J., Bowyer, B., Marshall, J., & Hodgins, E. (2022). Is responsiveness to student voice related to academic outcomes? Strengthening the rationale for student voice in school reform. *American Journal of Education*, 128(3). <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/719121>
- Land, D. (2002). *Local School Boards Under Review: Their Role and Effectiveness in Relation to Students' Academic Achievement*. Review of Educational Research.
- Levinson, M. (2012). *No Citizen Left Behind*.
- Mitra, D. L. (2006). *Student Voice From the Inside and Outside: The Positioning of Challengers*.
- Rodríguez, R. G., & Villarreal, A. (2012). *Student Voice: A Key Element in Effective School Governance and Accountability*. IDRA.