



School Board and
Youth Engagement Lab
Teachers College, Columbia University



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THE MISSING PIECE

Policy Without Practice —
Student Board Membership
Under **Utah's** Legal Framework

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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.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores student board membership (SBM) policies across Utah's 41 public school districts, with particular attention to how local implementation aligns with Utah Code § 20A-14-206—a state statute that allows students to petition for board membership. While this provision offers a promising legal pathway for youth inclusion, district-level policies and practices vary widely. Just over half of districts (53.7%) formally allow student board members, but only a small subset specify selection processes, term structures, or support systems. Fewer than 14% of these districts list an active student member on their website.

Among those with SBM policies, the most common term length is one year, typically aligned with the fiscal calendar. However, some districts use rotational models to include students from multiple high schools, while others provide no term details at all. All SBMs in Utah serve in advisory, non-voting roles, and none receive formal compensation. Only a handful of districts mention the presence of Student Advisory Councils to support or complement SBM involvement—despite the existence of such a council at the state level.

Utah's case illustrates the disconnect that can emerge between enabling policy and actual practice. Even with a statewide legal framework in place, student participation remains inconsistent and often underdeveloped. This report highlights the need for clearer implementation standards, stronger institutional support, and more visible pathways for student voice—ensuring that student representation is not only permitted, but meaningfully realized in school governance across the state.

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.

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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: UTAH

Utah stands out as one of the few states with a statewide statute—Utah Code § 20A-14-206—that explicitly enables students to petition for a seat on their local school board. Yet despite this legal provision, student board membership in Utah remains uneven and underdeveloped at the district level. Just over half of the state's 41 school districts include policies permitting SBMs, and even fewer have active student members listed publicly. Among districts that do authorize student participation, variation abounds: some follow the fiscal calendar, others the academic year; some offer rotating seats for broader representation, while many omit selection procedures altogether. Notably, while the state-level Utah State Board of Education maintains a robust Student Advisory Council (SAC), few local districts include similar support structures. Utah's case underscores the limits of policy without implementation—and reinforces the notion that student voice remains

the “missing piece” in bridging symbolic inclusion with democratic participation in education governance.

METHODOLOGY

Data was obtained for every school district in the state of Utah. Through November 2024, a list of districts was collected from a publicly accessible, state-wide enrollment database. The main data collection process included website scraping across school board sites to locate their policy handbooks. Across the state, many districts utilized similar policy language surrounding student board member involvement. Information on student board membership was thus only coded if explicitly stated in policy handbooks; otherwise, variables were coded as *INF* (information not found). If the variable was not applicable, it was coded as *N/A*.

The dataset contains 21 variables related to student board member involvement and their role on the school board, with each variable being analyzed independently for each district. Graphs and charts are included to showcase overall trends across districts in Utah regarding their SBM policies.

RESULTS

Presence of Student Board Members

Figure 1.1 SBM Policy by District

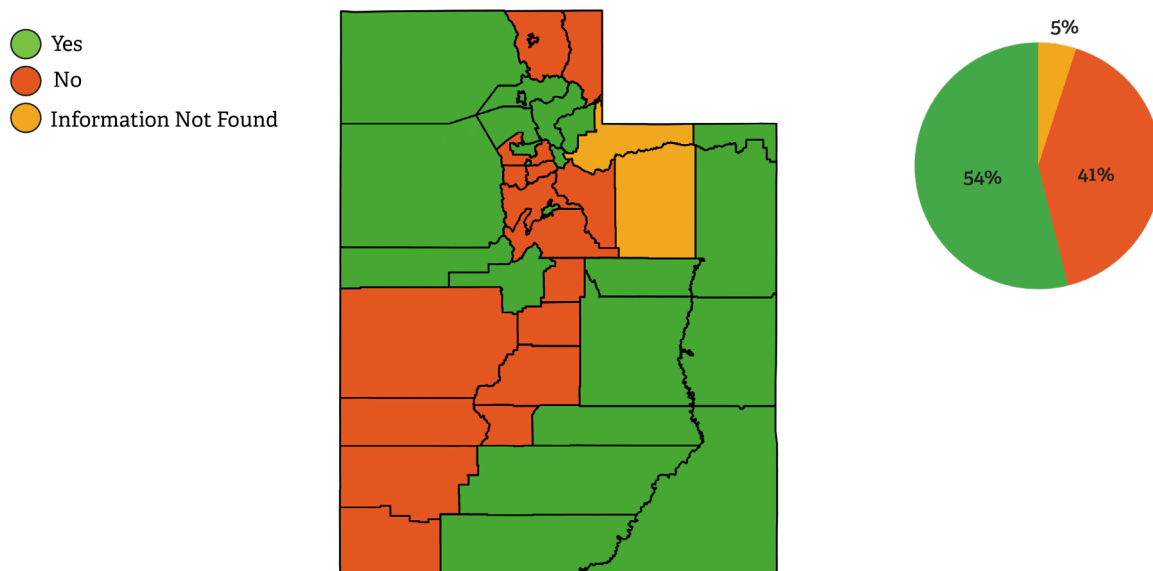


Figure 1.1: Figure 1.1: This graph indicates whether or not policy from each individual Utah school district explicitly allows for a student board member (n=41); INF = Information Not Found. Data was collected from Utah district websites.

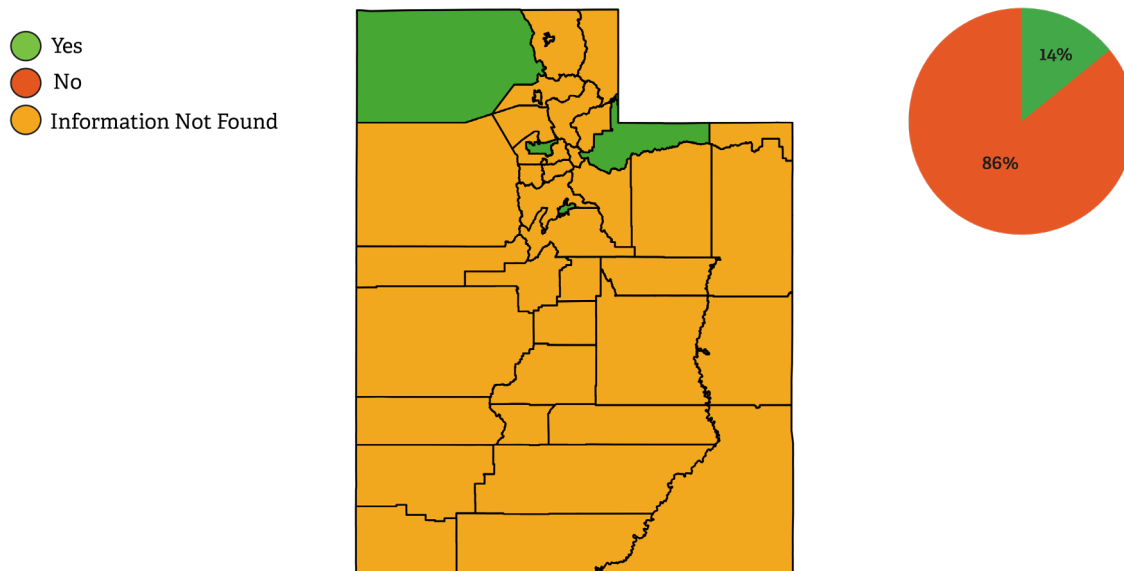
Figure 1.2 Active SBMs (2024-2025)

Figure 1.2 This graph indicates whether the Utah districts that allow for SBMs in their policy ($n=22$) list their students on their website; INF = Information Not Found. Data was collected from Utah district websites.

Districts across the state of Utah varied in their policies surrounding the presence of Student Board Members (SBMs). Districts coded as *YES* possess policies that permit SBMs, while districts coded as *NO* possess board policies but do not include a SBM. Districts coded *INF* either did not have an accessible website or did not clearly list their SBM policies. Among the 41 school districts in Utah, 53.7% have policies that explicitly allow for Student Board Members ($n=22$), as showcased in *Figure 1.1*. Importantly, the Utah state legislature does possess a code for a student petition for membership on a local school board, code 20A-14-206 (Student Petition for Student Member on Local School Board, 2018). Certain districts referenced this policy directly in their handbooks, while others did not.

Active student board members were coded as *YES* if their name or photo was included on the district website alongside other board members. Interestingly, while just over half of the districts in the state allow for SBMs, *Figure 1.2* displays how only 13.6% of those districts have included their active student board members on their website ($n=3$).

Term Length by District

Figures 1.3-1.5 reflect the term trends amongst the districts that explicitly allow for SBMs in their policies. A large majority of the districts, 81.82%, set the SBM term at an annual length, coded as *YEARLY* ($n=18$). Interestingly, 72.73% of the districts ($n=16$) establish the SBM start prior to the first day of school on July 1st. In doing so, these districts are choosing to follow the fiscal year calendar as their term ends on June 30th of the following year. However, a smaller portion of districts follow an annual term reflecting the school year calendar, as seen through the August and September start dates as well as the May and June end dates.

Roughly 9 percent of districts ($n=2$) utilized a rotational system in their term allotment, coded as *ROTATION*. In these cases, the districts often included multiple student board members from different high schools, which provided the opportunity for a diverse set of perspectives and for students to advocate for their individual school concerns.

Another 9 percent of districts in Utah that allow a SBM in their policy ($n=2$) did not indicate nor make accessible any information regarding their term length, and thus were coded as *INF*.

Figure 1.3 Term Length by District

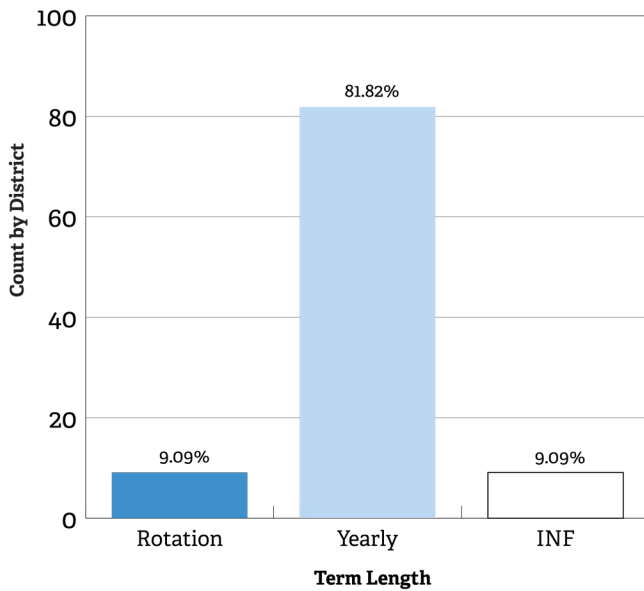


Figure 1.3: This graph indicates the duration of a term than a SBM can hold in the state of Utah. This graph includes term data only for those who allow a SBM in their policy ($n=22$); INF = Information not found. Data was collected from Utah school districts' SBM policies.

Figure 1.4 Term Start Date

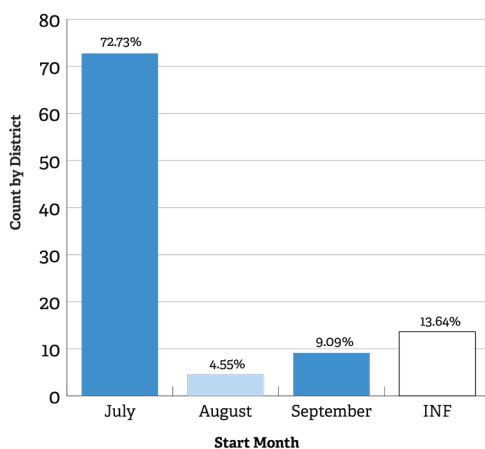
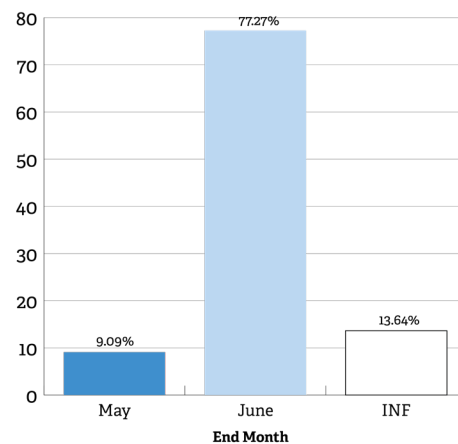


Figure 1.5 Term End Date



Figures 1.4 and 1.5: These charts demonstrate the start and end dates of the SBM terms in Utah. These charts include term data only from policies that allow SBMs ($n=22$); INF = Information not found.

Role of Student Board Members

Right to a Vote or Motion and Compensation

Across the districts in the state of Utah, the SBMs are uniformly established in policy as non-voting, advisory members. Therefore, they are subsequently not allowed to take part in a motion of any kind. Many Utah district policies do entitle SBMs to expense any allowances granted to other board members; however, no Utah district indicated formal compensation for SBMs in any manner.

Figure 2.1 District SAC Count

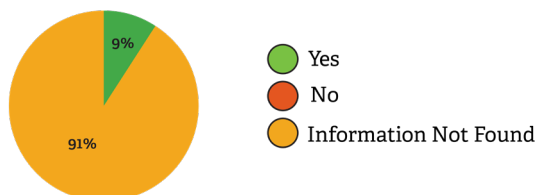


Figure 2.1: This graph conveys whether a school district that allows SBMs ($n=22$) additionally possesses a Student Advisory Council (SAC) that works alongside the SBM; INF = Information not found. Data was obtained from Utah school districts' SBM policies.

A small portion of school districts, 9.1% ($n=2$), convey in their policies that student board members can work alongside a Student Advisory Council (SAC), coded as YES. A SAC supports the SBM in decision making, and can also aid in the selection process of a new student board member.

Figure 3.1 Selection Process by District

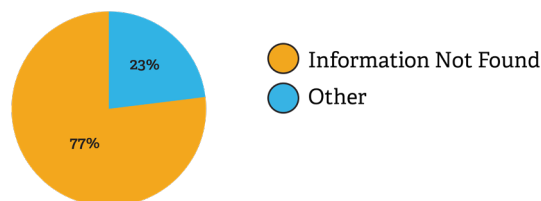


Figure 3.1: This chart illustrates the process in which districts that allow SBMs ($n=22$) select them; INF = Information not found. Data was obtained from Utah school districts' SBM policies.

Box Elder	Davis & Ogden	Park City	Salt Lake City
The student council accepts applications and forms a committee alongside the principal and the superintendent. The Board of Education makes the final appointment based on principal recommendations.	A High School Director is designated by the Superintendent to establish an evaluation and selection process.	The student government establishes the selection method with approval from the building principal.	A screening panel consisting of the principal, the student body president, and the school community council chair or parent-teacher organization chair from each high school will serve. One member from each screening panel will join the interview panel and will then select a SBM.

Figure 3.2: This table displays the specific selection processes employed by the 22.73% of districts coded as 'OTHER' in their selection process. Data was collected via district policy handbooks.

Within the dataset, SBM selection processes were coded as either *ELECTED*, *APPOINTED*, or *OTHER*. When selection policies are coded as *ELECTED*, this indicates that the student body either as a whole entity or through student government played a hand in electing a SBM. For a selection process to be noted as *APPOINTED*, an adult such as a school principal, board superintendent, or the full school board itself would solely select their SBM representative. Any district coded as *OTHER* reflects that districts may have either utilized both students and adults in their selection of SBMs, or that the specific selection method did not clarify an election versus an appointment.

Of the 22 districts that allow SBMs in their policies, 77.27% of these districts either did not make available or specify SBM selection processes ($n=17$). However, 22.73% of these districts did detail selection processes that were all classified as *OTHER* ($n=5$).

Specific processes that warranted these districts being coded as *OTHER* are included in *Figure 3.2*.

SBM Position Requirements

Figure 3.2 SBM Position Requirements

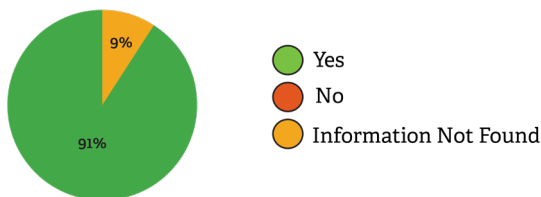


Figure 3.2: This graph indicates if there are any application requirements that districts who allow for SBMs ($n=22$) prescribe; INF = Information not found. Data was obtained from Utah school districts' SBM policies.

While many districts did not explicitly indicate their SBM selection processes, a large majority clearly laid out requirements for individuals to apply for student school board membership. General requirements included factors such as grade level and grade point average. States that chose to implement the statewide Utah code 20A-14-206 for local student board membership thus include the precedent that to qualify, students can submit a petition that “shall have the signatures of at least 500 students regularly enrolled in high school in the District; or at least 10% of the number of students regularly enrolled in high school in the District, whichever is less” (Student Petition for Student Member on Local School Board, 2018).

DISCUSSION

Student board membership policies vary widely across the state of Utah. A number of factors contribute to this conclusion. Notably, Utah policies fail to uniformly regulate SBM selection methodologies. Districts who included their selection processes in their policy handbooks all possessed differing criteria which resulted in a consistent coding pattern of *OTHER*, but inconsistent processes as a whole. Districts also varied in their term length requirements; while there was a clear majority of districts that followed the fiscal year calendar, other districts either did not establish term requirements in their policies or chose to set term lengths according to the school year. Furthermore, certain districts employed rotational terms that would allow multiple representatives to serve on the board, while others maintained a yearly term with one representative.

The most consistent portion of Utah policy on SBMs lies in its requirements section. As stated above, Utah possesses a similar code to the state of California that delineates the right of any

student to submit a petition in order to qualify for a potential student board membership. Moreover, it is important to again recognize that statewide a Utah SBM policy does exist, Utah code 20A-14-206 (Student Petition for Student Member on Local School Board, 2018). Yet, there is still variation across districts in utilizing this policy. While nearly half of the schools incorporate it in their board policy documents, many districts do not appear to follow through with implementation. Few districts even possess an active SBM on their website. Even fewer indicate the presence of a SAC that works alongside the SBM. This contradicts information collected from the Utah State Board of Education (USBE). At the state level, the USBE possesses a SAC composed of 15 total student members.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings from Utah highlight the ongoing need for research that examines not just the presence of student board membership policies, but the depth and consistency of their implementation. In particular, Utah presents a compelling opportunity to investigate how a statewide statute—Utah Code § 20A-14-206—translates into district-level practice. Why do some districts embrace the policy while others overlook or underutilize it? What factors determine whether the policy becomes a meaningful avenue for student participation or remains a symbolic gesture?

Future research should also explore the dynamics between state-level student engagement efforts, such as the Utah State Board of Education’s Student Advisory Council, and the uneven presence of local advisory bodies and student board members. Comparative studies could shed light on how different governance levels interact—or fail to—in advancing student voice.

More broadly, continued study of student board member experiences, selection processes, and support structures can inform more effective and equitable policy design. As school districts and state leaders seek to strengthen youth-adult partnerships in education, empirical insights will be critical to ensuring that student representation moves beyond permission to full participation.

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