



School Board and
Youth Engagement Lab
Teachers College, Columbia University



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THE MISSING PIECE

Local Control, Uneven Voice
— Student Representation
on **Virginia's** School Boards

McLain Miller, MS

Research Assistant, School Board and Youth Engagement (S-BYE) Lab

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



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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 examines the presence and structure of student board membership (SBM) policies across Virginia’s 136 public school districts. While Virginia state law permits the appointment of student representatives to local school boards in an advisory capacity, it does not mandate their inclusion. As a result, student representation remains uneven across the state. Our analysis finds that 55% of Virginia districts explicitly allow for student board members, but fewer than one in four of those districts visibly list student representatives on their websites. Among districts with SBM policies, the vast majority offer annual term lengths and limit students to non-voting roles. Only 8% provide compensation, and fewer than 20% require student board members to work alongside a Student Advisory Council.

These findings highlight both the promise and limitations of student participation in school governance across Virginia. The state’s permissive legal framework grants local districts the flexibility to design SBM roles that reflect community needs—but it also enables inconsistency, lack of visibility, and in some cases, symbolic participation without substantive influence. The absence of standardized selection processes and the wide variation in eligibility requirements further complicate the picture of what student representation looks like in practice.

As youth civic engagement becomes an increasingly urgent goal in education policy, understanding the structure and scope of student representation on school boards is essential. This report offers a detailed account of how Virginia districts are—or are not—incorporating student voice into governance. It provides a foundation for future research on the relationship between SBM policy and student agency, and it offers state and local policymakers a roadmap for strengthening student participation in democratic 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: VIRGINIA

Virginia offers a revealing case for understanding the landscape of student board membership. State law (§ 22.1-86.1) permits local school boards to appoint student representatives, but only in a non-voting, advisory capacity—and without mandating their inclusion. As a result, participation varies widely across districts. This localized discretion reflects Virginia's broader tradition of strong local governance, but it also generates significant inconsistency in how student voice is institutionalized. By analyzing policies across all 136 Virginia school districts, this report sheds light on how often—and how meaningfully—students are brought into school board governance in a state where the opportunity exists, but the mandate does not.

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected in two distinct periods. The initial collection process occurred from June to August 2024 via website scraping of publicly accessible district websites and handbooks. Each variable was updated during September and October to account for changes in policies for the new school year. The data collection process aimed to identify if a district had a policy to allow student board members (SBMs), what role the SBMs had on the school board, how the SBMs were selected, and who worked alongside the SBMs if they did receive support in their role. There was a significant amount of districts that used the same policy language in their handbook for student board member involvement.

Data was collected on every school district in the state of Virginia. The list of districts was collected through a state-wide database that provides updated enrollment data at the conclusion of the school year. Each variable was analyzed independently for each district. The dataset contains 21 variables related to student board member involvement and their role on the school board. Information was only coded if it was explicitly stated, otherwise the variable was coded as Information Not Found (INF). If the variable was not applicable, it was coded as N/A. This data is represented through graphs containing information based on the districts that allow student board members in Virginia.

RESULTS

Presence of Student Board Members

Figure 1.1 SBM Policy by District

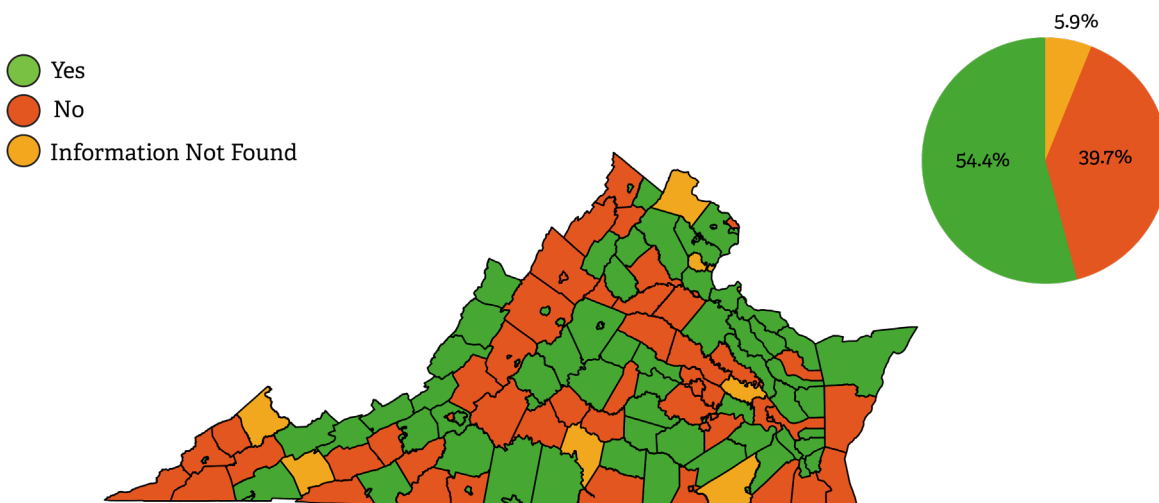


Figure 1.1 Note. This graph indicates whether or not the district policy from each Virginia district explicitly allows for a student board member ($n = 136$). INF = Information not found. Information was gathered from Virginia school board district websites.

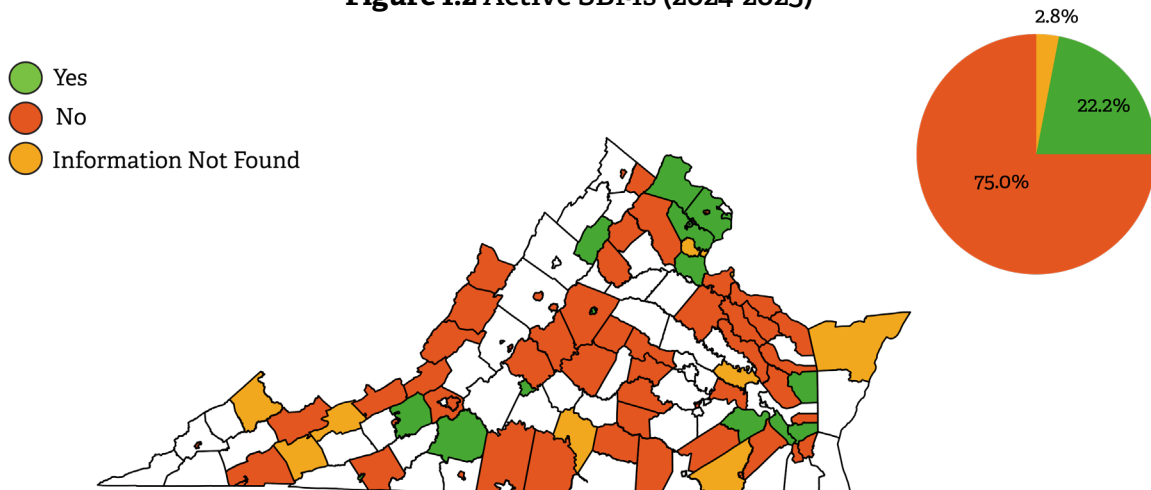
Figure 1.2 Active SBMs (2024-2025)

Figure 1.2 Note: This graph indicates whether or not the school districts that allow SBMs have listed the students on their website ($n=74$). INF = Information not found. Information was gathered from Virginia school district websites.

Districts varied in their policies on whether or not they would allow Student Board Members (SBMs). When looking at the data regarding if a district allows a SBM, a district coded *YES* does allow SBMs. A district that does not have a website that was accessible to the public or did not list their policies was coded as *Information Not Found (INF)*.

55% of the 136 school districts in Virginia have policies which explicitly allow Student Board Members ($n=74$). While over half of the school districts in Virginia allow Student Board Members, only 23% of those school districts have listed a student board member on their website for the 2023-2024 school year ($n=17$). 5% of the 136 school districts did not have a policy available to the public that listed if there were SBMs in their respective district ($n=8$).

Term Length by District

Term lengths amongst districts were classified in various ways. If a district uses an *ANNUAL* term length, this could refer to the school year or the fiscal year. If a school district uses the *ROTATION* term length, that would clarify that there are multiple SBMs selected at the same time and will rotate who attends the monthly school board meeting. This rotation schedule was listed clearly in the district policy. If a policy defines a SBM term length as *SEMESTER*, the SBM will serve for one semester of the school year and then a new SBM will take over for the remainder of the school year. These SBMs would be selected at the same time and the district policy would clearly define the term length. If a policy defines the SBM term length to be *TWO YEARS*, the SBM will serve for two consecutive years rather than one annual term before a new SBM begins their term. Finally, if a district did not list the term length in their policy, it would be coded *INF*. Any district that does not allow SBMs were not included in these graphs.

Figure 1.3 Term Length by District

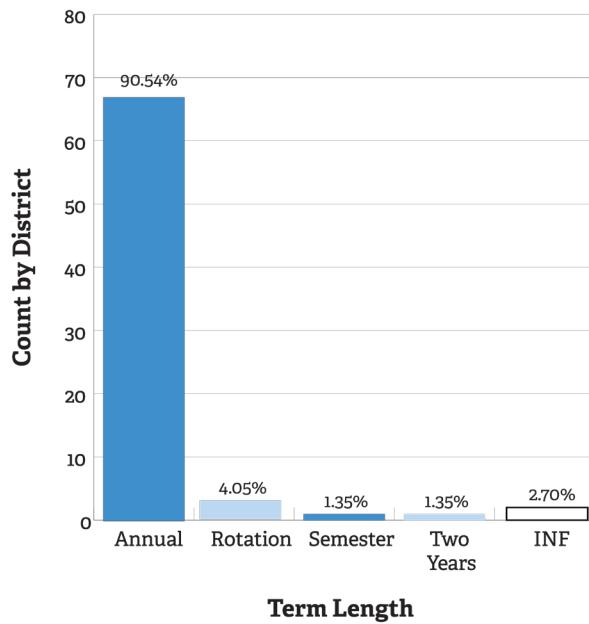


Figure 1.3 Note: This graph indicates the term length a SBM can hold by district within the state of Virginia. This graph includes data only from districts that have a SBM policy (n=74).

Figure 1.4 & 1.5 Note: These graphs indicate the start and end dates of the terms for SBMs (n=74). These graphs utilize data that is exclusively from districts that have SBM policies.

Figure 1.4 Term Start Date

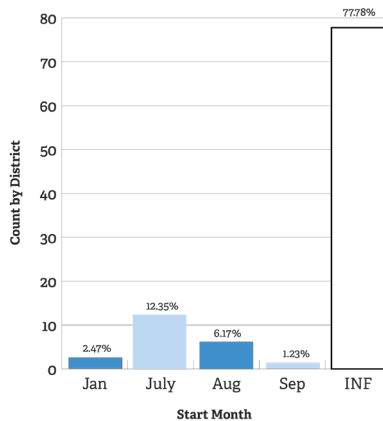
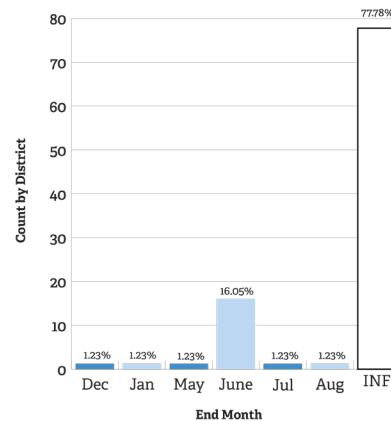


Figure 1.5 Term End Date



The most common term length for SBMs in the 74 Virginia school districts that allow SBMs is an annual length term with approximately 91% of school districts defining this term length in their policies (n=67). While the term length is consistently chosen across the state, the start and end months for these annual terms vary district to district. 63 of the districts did not state a start or end date for their SBM term length; however, of the remaining 18 districts that did record, the most common term length was July to June, or rather, following the fiscal year calendar.

Role of Student Board Members

Voting Power by District

Every single student board member is restricted to non-voting and advisory roles on the school board. This is following the state policy that allows SBMs on local school boards, but only in an advisory capacity (Appointment of Student Representatives to Local School Boards, 1999). Of the 74 districts that allow SBMs, only 8 districts did not state if a student could vote, nor did they have a policy available.

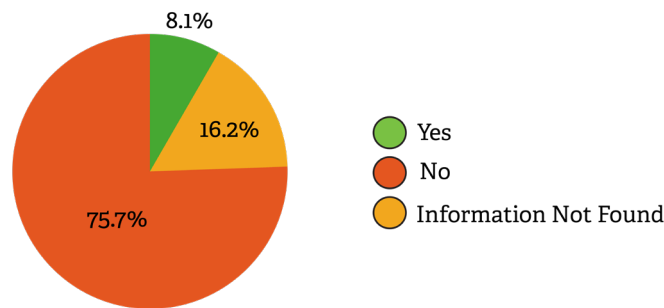


Figure 2.2 District Pay Count

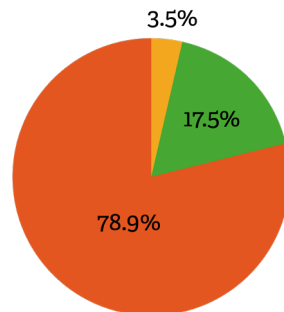


Figure 2.3 District SAC Count

Figure 2.2 Note: This graph indicates if a school district in Virginia provides payment to SBMs ($n=74$). This graph utilized data that is only from districts that have SBM policies. This information was collected from the Virginia school district handbooks.

Of the 74 school districts that allow SBMs, only 8% offer a form of payment to the SBMs ($n=6$). This payment can come in a variety of forms, including hourly pay, pay per meeting, or a scholarship.

Figure 2.3 Note: This graph indicates if a district has a Student Advisory Council that works alongside the SBM ($n=74$). The graph includes data exclusively from districts that have SBM policies. Information was gathered from Virginia school district websites.

A district may have a Student Advisory Council (SAC) at their high school that helps make decisions for the student body and may nominate or work alongside the SBM. The SAC may have a different name besides SAC but it will be stated in the policy if an SBM works with a SAC.

Of the 74 school districts that allow SBMs, approximately 18% of the school districts require the SBM work alongside a SAC ($n=10$).

Student Board Member Selection Process

Figure 3.1 Selection Process

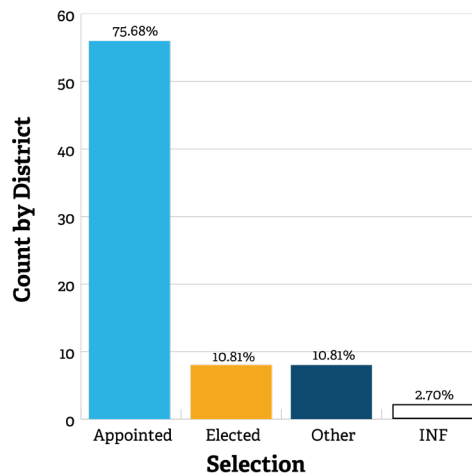


Figure 3.1 Note: This graph indicates the process in which school boards select their SBMs ($n=74$). INF = Information Not Found. The graph utilizes data that is exclusively from districts that have SBM policies. Information is collected from the Virginia school board handbooks.

Figure 3.2 Appointment Process

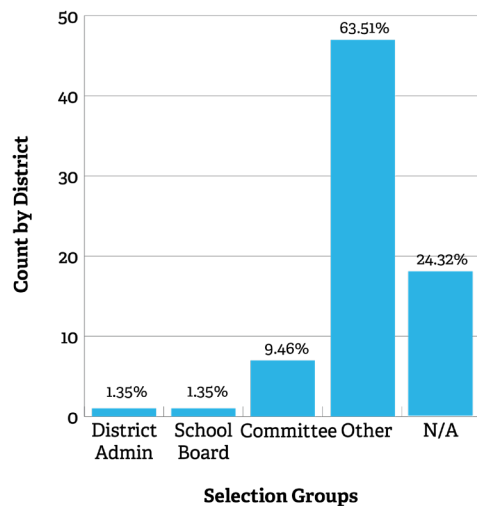


Figure 3.2 Note: This graph indicates the stakeholders making the decisions in the appointment process for SBMs ($n=74$). The graph utilizes data that is exclusively from districts that have SBM policies. Information was retrieved from Virginia school board handbooks.

Figure 3.3 Student Election Population

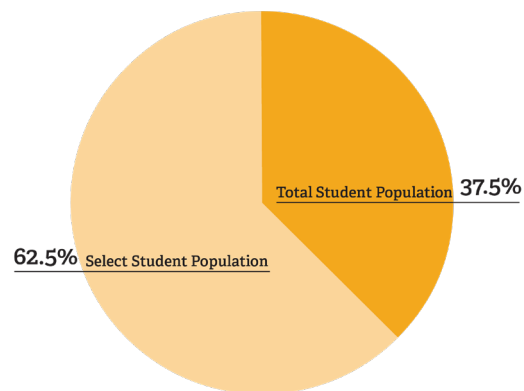


Figure 3.3 Note: This graph indicates who elects SBMs to their position if the SBM goes through an election process ($n=8$). The graph utilizes data that is exclusively from districts that have SBM policies. This information was found on the Virginia school board websites.

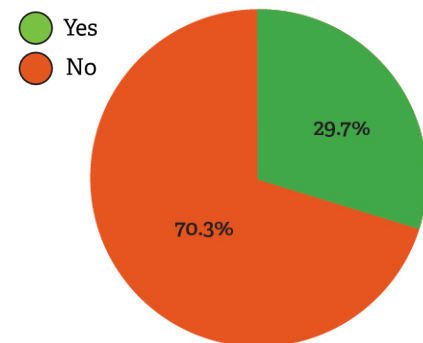
There are various ways the districts chose to define how a SBM is selected for their term. If a SBM is *APPOINTED*, the SBM is selected by the school board, school administration, district administration, school-based committee, or a combination of these groups. If the SBM was appointed by a combination of the groups listed above, this was coded *OTHER* under Figure 3.2. This is clearly listed in the policy. If a student is *ELECTED*, the policy stipulates the election is by a specific group of students or the entirety of the student population. If a policy does not state how a SBM is selected for their term, it was coded *INF*. If a SBM is selected in an alternative way besides an election or being appointed, this was coded as *OTHER*. All other districts that do not have a policy allowing SBMs were not included in the graphs or statistical analysis.

The process for a student board member to join the school board varies across districts. According to the data collected, 76% of the districts allow appointments for their SBMs ($n=56$). These appointments are completed largely by a combination of school and district leaders. Approximately 11% ($n=8$) of the districts that allow student board members choose to elect their student board members by either the entire student body or the student advisory council with 5 out of 8 of the elections for student board members are held by the student advisory council.

Figure 3.4 Note: This graph indicates if a district has certain requirements for SBMs to apply ($n=74$). The graph utilizes data that is exclusively from districts that have SBM policies. This information was found from Virginia school district websites.

Many of the districts require the students to meet a set of standards. Approximately 30% of the 74 districts that allow SBMs list a set of requirements for the students to meet before they apply for the position ($n=22$). These standards include grade level requirements, high attendance at school, and a minimal to no disciplinary record.

Figure 3.4 SBM Position Requirements



DISCUSSION

Virginia's permissive legal framework around student board membership offers both opportunity and ambiguity. While the state enables local school boards to appoint student representatives, it stops short of mandating their inclusion or defining their roles in meaningful detail. As a result, the policies governing student participation vary significantly across districts—from how student board members are selected, to the length and structure of their terms, to whether they receive any form of support, visibility, or compensation.

This patchwork of implementation reveals both the flexibility and fragility of student voice in Virginia's education governance system. In some districts, students are granted structured annual terms and incorporated into broader advisory councils. In others, the

policies are unclear, the positions are symbolic, or the role is entirely absent. The majority of student board members remain in strictly advisory roles, with limited access to the decision-making processes that shape their educational experience.

What emerges is a striking reminder that student voice remains the “**missing piece**” in the puzzle of democratic school governance. Even where students are nominally included, the conditions under which they serve often fail to meet the standard of meaningful representation.

"Without clearer guidance or stronger accountability mechanisms at the state level, many districts **risk relegating student participation to tokenism** rather than treating it as a cornerstone of democratic education. "

Without clearer guidance or stronger accountability mechanisms at the state level, many districts risk relegating student participation to tokenism rather than treating it as a cornerstone of democratic education. Recognizing—and remedying—this gap is essential to building systems that not only educate students about democracy, but engage them in its practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should investigate how different models of student board member (SBM) selection—such as appointment versus election—shape student engagement, perceptions of legitimacy, and feelings of agency among SBMs and the broader student body. Understanding these dynamics may help clarify the conditions under which student participation moves from symbolic to substantive.

Additionally, researchers should examine structural factors that may influence the adoption of SBM policies. For example, does district size, demographic composition, or resource capacity correlate with the presence or strength of student representation? Comparative studies across districts—and eventually across states—could shed light on patterns of access and equity in student governance.

Expanding this line of inquiry will deepen our understanding of how students experience power and voice within institutional decision-making. As policymakers and educators seek to foster civic learning through authentic democratic participation, evidence on the impact and design of student board roles will be critical to ensuring that student voice is not only heard, but structurally embedded in the governance of public education.

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