



School Board and
Youth Engagement Lab
Teachers College, Columbia University



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THE MISSING PIECE

Missing from the Mandate —
The Absence of Student Voice
in **West Virginia's** Governance

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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 student board membership (SBM) policies across all 55 school districts in West Virginia. Unlike some states with permissive or encouraging frameworks for student representation, West Virginia currently has no statewide policy authorizing or guiding the inclusion of students on local school boards. As a result, student participation in governance remains rare and inconsistently documented across the state. Our analysis found that only a small number of districts make any reference to student board members in publicly available policies, and no district grants voting rights or formally incorporates students into the decision-making structure.

Where student involvement exists, it often takes the form of informal advisory roles or loosely defined student leadership programs with no guaranteed connection to board governance. Most districts lack clear guidelines on eligibility, selection, term structure, or support for student participants. This lack of structure stands in contrast to the growing national momentum around youth civic engagement and student voice in education policy.

West Virginia's case underscores the absence of systemic infrastructure for including students in school governance—revealing how student voice remains the “missing piece” in the state's democratic education framework. As calls for civic learning and youth-adult partnerships intensify nationally, this report provides a foundation for policymakers, educators, and advocates to explore stronger pathways for student representation in West Virginia's public education system.

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: WEST VIRGINIA

West Virginia does not have a statute that explicitly outlines a process by which students can petition for a seat on their local school board. This may explain why only 3 of its 55 districts had a student board member (SBM) from 2024-2025. Even in the districts where a SBM was present, there was a lack of explicit details about various elements of the position, such as whether there were requirements students had to meet to run. What is clear is that, even when SBMs were allowed, their power was limited given that they did not have the power to vote or make a motion. Given this reality, student voice continues to be the “missing piece” in West Virginia's vision of democratic school governance.

METHODOLOGY

Data was obtained for every school district in the state of West Virginia. 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 Information Not Found (*INF*). 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 West Virginia regarding their SBM policies.

RESULTS

Presence of Student Board Members

Figure 1.1 SBM Policy by District

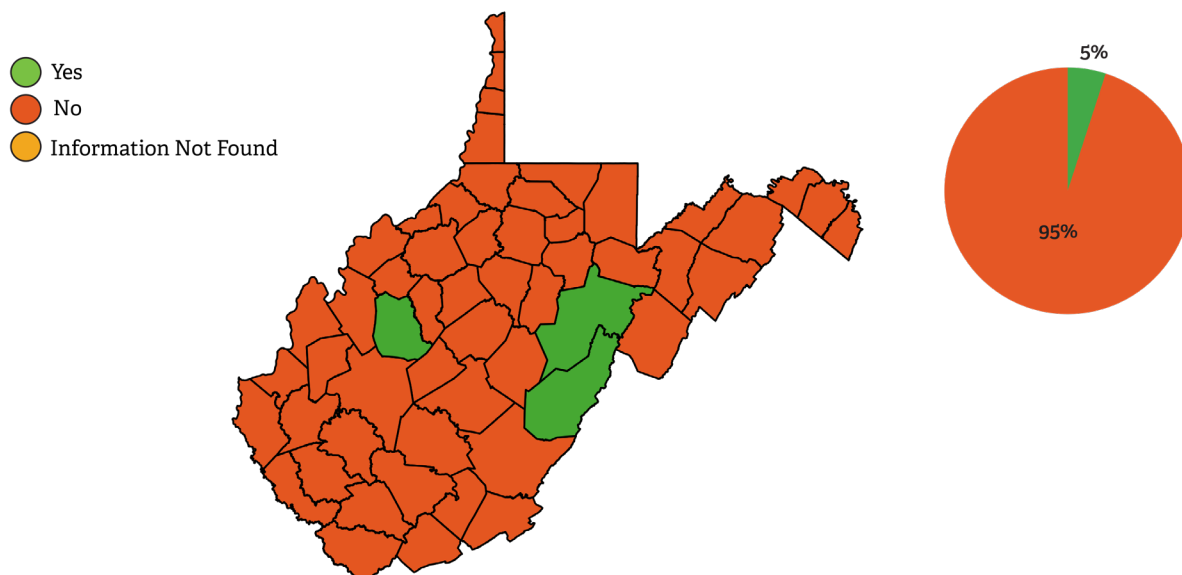


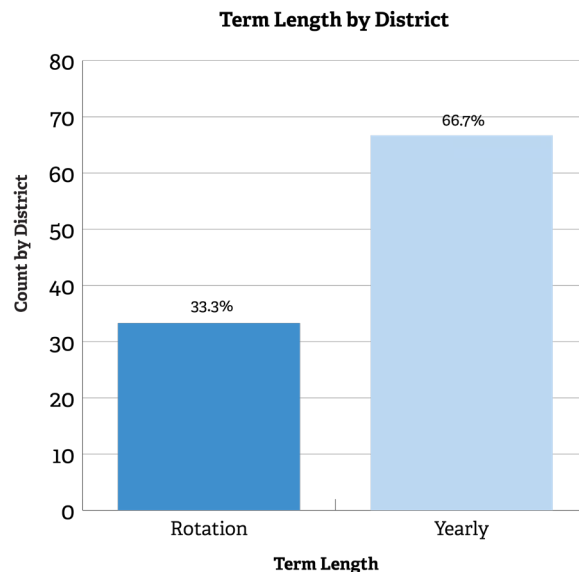
Figure 1.1: This graph indicates whether or not policy from each individual West Virginia school district explicitly allows for a student board member ($n=3$); INF = Information Not Found. Data was collected from West Virginia district websites.

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. Only 5% of the districts in West Virginia ($n=3$) featured policies permitting the presence of Student Board Members (SBMs).

Active student board members were coded as *YES* if their name or photo was included on the district website alongside other board members. Amongst the 3 districts that include SBMs in their policies, none of the districts included an active student board member on their websites.

Term Length by District

Figure 1.3 displays the term trends amongst the districts that explicitly allow for SBMs in their policies. As indicated above, 66.7% of the districts set the SBM term at an annual length, coded as *YEARLY* ($n=2$). The other West Virginia district, Randolph County, establishes a rotational term in their policy ($n=1$), coded as *ROTATION*. In this case, each school in their district will have one representative serve for a certain period of time, providing the opportunity for a diverse set of perspectives and for students to advocate for their individual school concerns.



Notably, the three districts' policies did not include any information on term start dates or end dates.

Role of Student Board Members

Right to a Vote or Motion and Compensation

Across the districts in the state of West Virginia, 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. No information was found for any of the districts regarding compensation for SBMs.

Student Advisory Council

In some cases, a SBM could work alongside a Student Advisory Council (SAC). A SAC supports the SBM in decision making, and can also aid in the selection process of a new student board member. In our dataset, if a student does work with a SAC, the SAC variable is coded as *YES*. None of the West Virginia districts that explicitly allow for a SBM in their policies included information on whether they could work with a SAC.

Figure 1.3 This graph indicates the duration of a term than a SBM can hold in the state of West Virginia. This graph includes term data only for those who allow a SBM in their policy ($n=3$); *INF* = Information not found. Data was collected from West Virginia school districts' SBM policies.

Student Board Member Selection Process

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 if the specific selection method did not clarify an election versus an appointment.

Of the 3 districts that allow SBMs in their policies, 66.7% of these districts selected their SBMs through an election ($n=2$). Conversely, the Roane County school district was coded as *OTHER*; while they alluded to an appointment process, exact guidelines were not provided. indicated an appointment process in their policy ($n=1$). Specifics on each districts' selection processes are featured in *Figure 3.2* below.

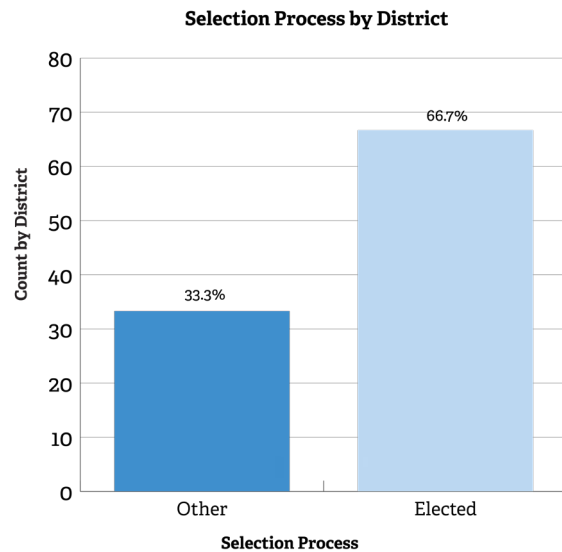


Figure 3.1: This chart illustrates the process in which districts that allow SBMs ($n=3$) select them; INF = Information not found. Data was obtained from West Virginia school districts' SBM policies.

Figure 3.2: This table displays the specific selection characteristics employed by the districts who possess policy on SBMs ($n=3$). Data was collected via district policy handbooks.

District	Selection Characteristics
Pocahontas County	The SBM is selected through a school-wide election.
Randolph County	The SBM is elected by their schools' Student Council or Student Leadership Organization.
Roane County	No exact appointment guidelines were given.

SBM Application Requirements

The 3 districts that included information on SBMs in their policies did not present any information surrounding certain requirements needed for one's application or consideration toward becoming a SBM.

DISCUSSION

It is evident that in West Virginia, there is a dearth of student representation through student board membership. Of the 56 districts across the state, only 3 districts permitted via their board policies a presence of a SBM. 22 of the districts in West Virginia do explicitly state the value of student government organizations, with policy language showcasing how the school board recognizes student government organizations as the official voice of the student body. With that being said, student board membership is not a common feature of West Virginia school board structures and policies.

“Of the 56 districts across the state, only 3 districts permitted via their board policies a presence of a SBM.”

Of the 3 districts that allow for SBMs in their policy, these districts did not explicate certain details of membership such as application requirements or whether SBMs partner with a Student Advisory Council. When information was provided on factors such as selection processes and term allotments, there was still a slight variation amongst the districts in their exact methods.

Policies on student board membership at the state level could also not be found.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

These findings indicate a continued need for research that explores the depth of student board membership opportunities and experiences. Specifically in the state of West Virginia, noting the lack of student board membership across districts is something that should be investigated. Moreover, expanded research in student board membership as a whole can lead to more sound policy in this area that ultimately strengthens student voice and student-adult partnerships.

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