



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



**CENTER FOR
EDUCATIONAL
EQUITY**
Teachers College, Columbia University

THE MISSING PIECE

Analysis of **Colorado Policies
on Student Members to the
Board of Education**

Rachel Liazos

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

Jonathan E. Collins, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Political Science and Education
Executive Director, Center for Educational Equity
Director, School Board and Youth Engagement (S-BYE) Lab
Teachers College, Columbia University



**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

INTRODUCTION

Locally governed schools are an American tradition predating the founding of the country itself.¹ While the structure of school boards has largely remained intact for centuries, there have been recent developments to revitalize school governance by allowing students to serve on school boards. The inclusion of student board members (herein referred to as SBMs) is designed to empower young people to participate in democratic deliberation as shared stakeholders. Proponents of student representatives argue that students are positioned differently from traditional board members, “as consumers and beneficiaries of the education system,” and therefore “have a different perspective than teachers, administrators, and parents — one that can shed light on new approaches or solutions.”²

“The inclusion of Student Board Members is designed to empower young people to participate in democratic deliberation as shared stakeholders.”

Initial research suggests that the presence of SBMs has had positive impacts on students by providing meaningful leadership experiences,³ facilitating meaningful opportunities for democratic engagement,⁴ and establishing trust between students and educators.⁵

The School Board and Youth Engagement (S-BYE) Lab within the Center for Educational Equity, at Teachers College (Columbia University) intends to contribute to existing scholarship on the theory and impact of student representation by establishing a national database on student representation. The S-BYE Lab aims to provide additional insights into how schools can leverage student leadership and ultimately explore the relationships between SBMs and school outcomes — including, but not limited to, student achievement, attendance, and engagement. In doing so, we hope to elevate the conversation on student representation in educational decision-making and provide policy recommendations to school leaders to facilitate effective student leadership opportunities.

Methodology

From February through April 2025, researchers collected data from nearly 200 school districts in Colorado to examine the presence and status of SBMs. This determination was made by reviewing school websites, district policies, and local news articles. The purpose of this data collection was to identify key information about student representation, including whether students are permitted to serve in a representative capacity on their local school boards and if so, how they are selected, how long they serve, and what powers they possess (e.g., the ability to vote or make motions). Each school district was coded using 21 variables related to SBM membership and involvement. Information was coded only if it was explicitly stated in a policy manual, on a school website, or publicly accessible on a school social media page. Otherwise, the information was categorized as Information Not Found (INF). If a coding variable was not applicable, it was marked as N/A.

¹ School boards were first established in 1647 by the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

² Mitra, D. L. (2006). Student Voice or Empowerment? Examining the Role of School-Based Youth-Adult Partnerships as an Avenue toward Focusing on Social Justice. *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*.

³ Schultz, R. A., & Lutz, L. (2018). Leadership impact experiences of student representatives to the Roeper School Board of Trustees. *Roeper Review: A Journal on Gifted Education*, 40(4), 234–244.

⁴ Benner, M., Brown, C., & Jeffrey, A. (2019, August). *Elevating Student Voice in Education*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/elevating-student-voice-education/>

⁵ Jerusha O. Conner, Rachel Ebby-Rosin, and Amanda Brown, *Student Voice in American Education Policy* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2015).

During the data collection process, researchers encountered several barriers to accessing school policies. For instance, some school websites were down or under construction at the time of data collection. Additionally, several school policies required an in-person appointment to view; and others required electronic permission through a school district email.⁶

Results

The data collected can best be summarized within five categories. Part A contains information on the number of SBMs in Colorado public school districts, including districts that have explicit policies governing SBMs and those that allow SBMs without a formal policy. Part B provides data on the length of SBM terms. Part C details how SBMs are selected, either through appointment or election. Part D describes various eligibility or participation requirements for SBMs. Part E offers insights into the authority held by SBMs on school boards, most notably their right to vote or make motions as board representatives. Part F examines how Student Advisory Committees (SACs) collaborate with local school boards.

Presence of Student Board Members

Colorado has a relatively small number of SBMs. As shown in Figure 1.1, slightly under 10% of school districts allow SBMs ($n = 15$). Even fewer (6.2%) have an explicit policy governing SBMs, as illustrated in Figure 1.2 ($n = 11$).⁷ Among the school districts that allow SBMs, only one district had an active SBM, defined as having the name of a student board member publicly available on a district website.⁸

District Allow SBMs to Serve on School Boards

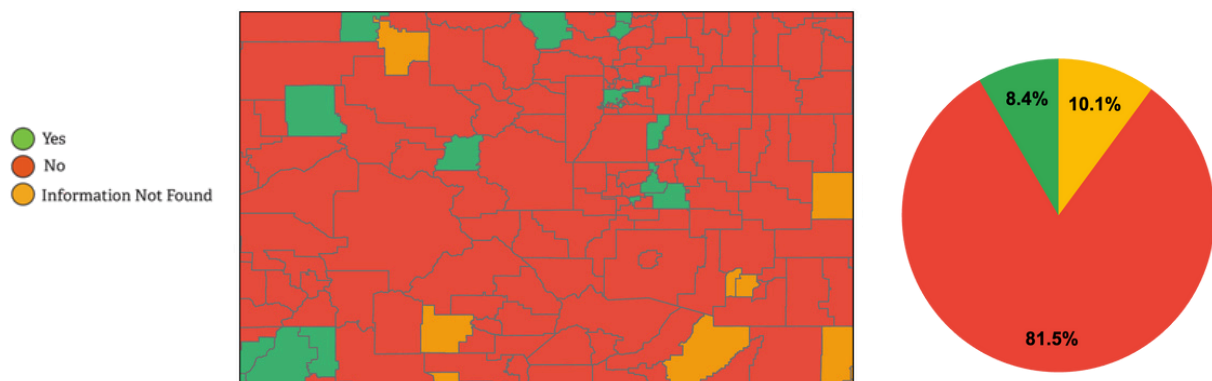


Figure 1.1. *Note.* This graph indicates whether or not the district allows for a student board member ($n = 179$). *INF* = Information not found. Information was gathered from Colorado school board district websites.

⁶ See Appendix for further breakdown of missing information.

⁷ There are a small portion of districts that allow SBMs, but do not have a current or updated policy. These districts include: Elizabeth School District, Mancos School District, Lake County School District R-1, and Johnstown-Milliken School School RE-5J (also known as Weld RE-5J). See Figure 1.2.

⁸ See Figure 1.3. There are many reasons why a district website may not include information about an SBM. There may be privacy concerns and or an overlap in SBM appointment and board election cycles at the time of data collection.

SBM Policy By District

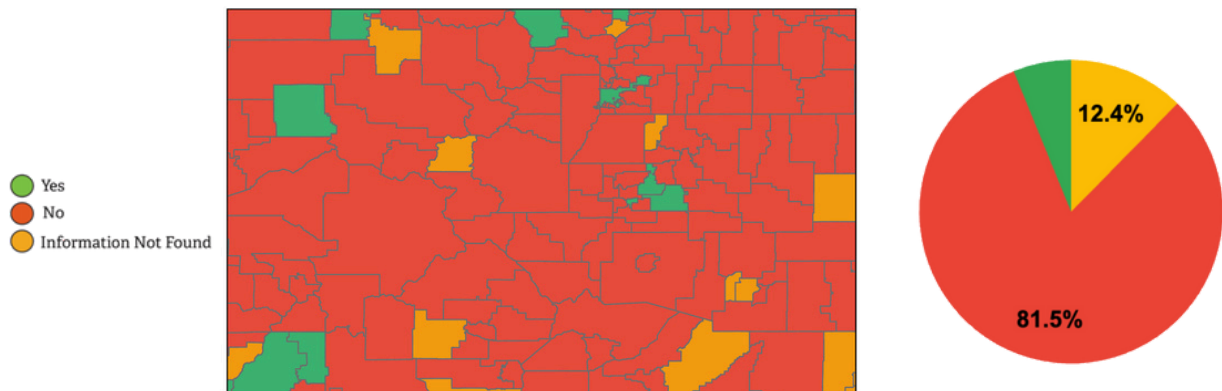


Figure 1.2 *Note.* This graph indicates whether or not the district policy from each Colorado district explicitly allows for a student board member per district policy ($n = 179$). *INF* = Information not found. Information was gathered from Colorado school board district websites.

District Allow SBMs to Serve on School Boards

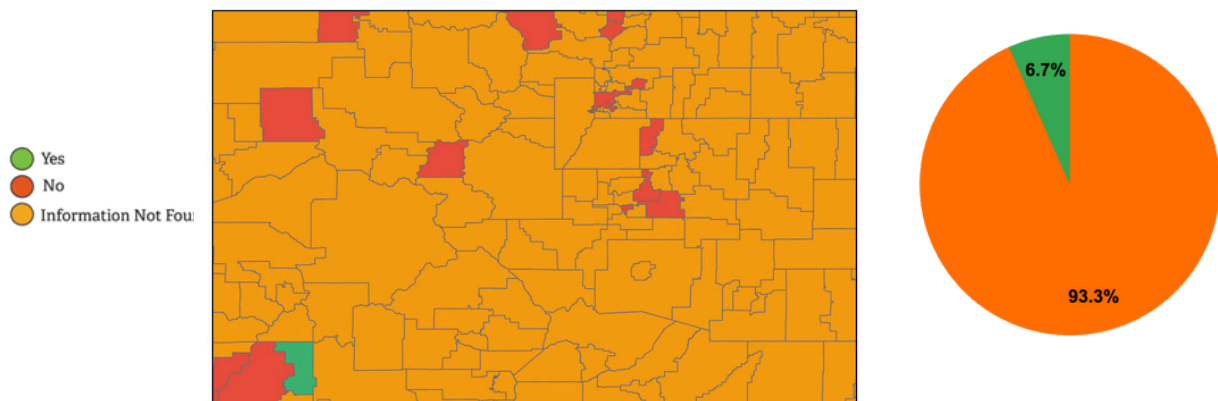


Figure 1.3. *Note.* This graph indicates if SBM is listed on the district website ($n = 15$). Information was gathered from Colorado school board district websites.

SBM Term Length and Dates

The majority of school districts in Colorado that allow SBMs have annual term limits. However, not all districts that allow SBMs have policy manuals that include information on term lengths and dates. Several school districts were coded INF, meaning the district allows SBMs but either lacks a policy altogether or has an existing policy that omits information on SBM term length, start, and end date. Among the school districts that have SBMs, a majority of terms start in August and end in May or July.

Term Length by District

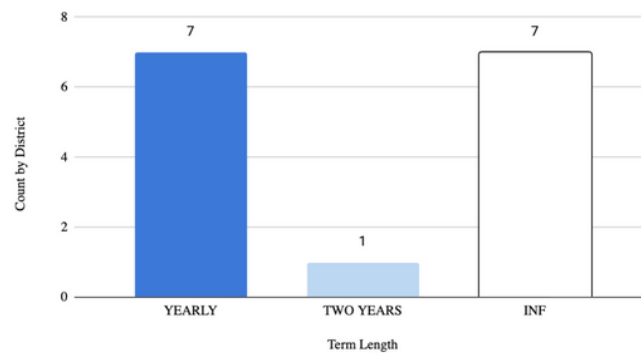
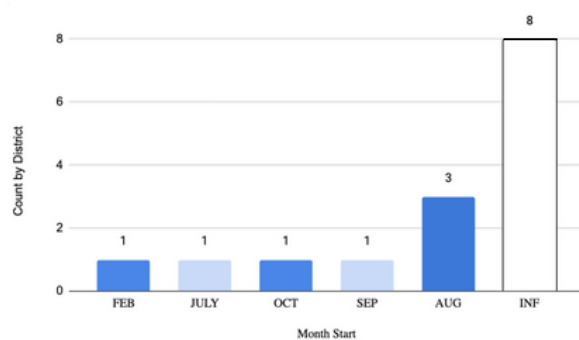


Figure 2.1. *Note.* This graph indicates term length among districts that allow student representatives. This graph includes data only from districts that have a SBM ($n = 15$). *INF* = Information not found. Information was gathered from Colorado school district policy manuals and or school board policy manuals.

Term Start Date



Term End Date

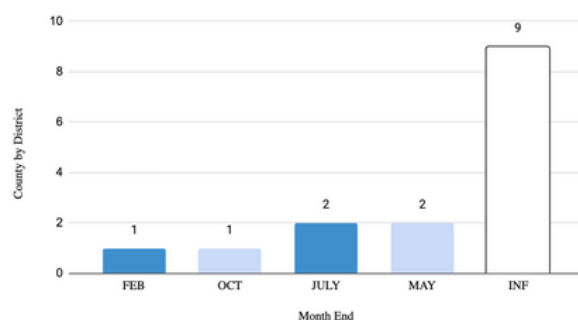


Figure 2.2 & 2.3. *Note:* These graphs indicate the start and end dates of the terms for SBMs ($n = 15$). *INF* = Information not found. Information was gathered from Colorado school district policy manuals and or school board policy manuals.

SBM Selection

Among districts that allow SBMs, the vast majority are appointed. Students may be appointed in a variety of ways - by a principal, school committee, Superintendent, or a combination of different actors (coded as “other”). Of districts that appoint SBMs, the majority are appointed by the school board or school administration. There are a few districts that appoint SBMs through multiple administrative bodies, including school boards, committees *and* school administrations. Figure 3.3 provides a brief description of the three districts whose appointment process is coded as “other.” In contrast, an election process often involves the selection of an SBM by the student body or student council. In Colorado, only one district holds student elections to select SBMs.⁹

⁹ Windsor School District RE-4 (also known as Weld RE-4) is the only district in the state that stipulates a SBM must be elected. Per the district policy, SBMs are elected by the SAC/student government, with the approval of the high school principal.

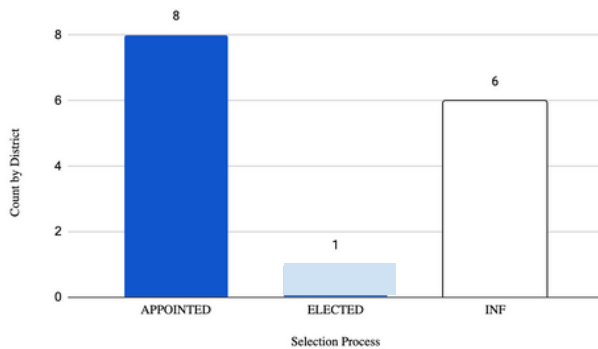
Selection Process by District

Figure 3.1. *Note.* These graphs indicate the SBM selection process ($n = 15$). *INF* = Information not found. Information was gathered from Colorado school board district websites.

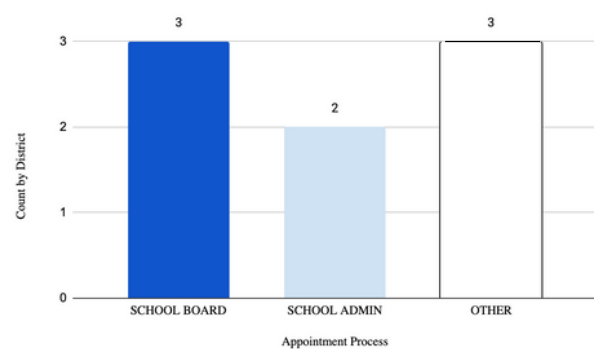
Appointment Process by District

Figure 3.2. *Note.* These graphs demonstrate the methods of appointment used to select SBMs ($n = 8$). *INF* = Information not found. Information was gathered from Colorado school board district websites.

Estes Park School District	School District 49	Montezuma-Cortez School District RE-1
Prospective SBM candidates are interviewed by the superintendent and a representative of the Board of Education. Recommendation is made by the building principal.	The Superintendent shall collaborate with zone and school leaders to form a representative group of student leaders.	An interview with 3 members of the school Leadership Team will be required, followed by the Leadership Team making a recommendation to the Board.

Figure 3.3. This table displays the specific appointed processes employed by districts coded as 'OTHER' as shown in Figure 3.2. Information was gathered from Colorado school board district websites and district policy handbooks.

SBM Requirements

Of school districts in Colorado that allow SBMs, the majority have requirements for application. However, of districts that allow SBMs to serve, roughly half of those districts are either missing district policies or have policies that do not provide information on requirements to serve as an SBM. The districts that have requirements include class year, GPA, no disciplinary offenses, letters of recommendation, and parent/guardian approval to participate. Figure 4.2 lists specific requirements available among school districts that have applications for students to allow them to serve as representatives to the school board.

SBM Position Requirements

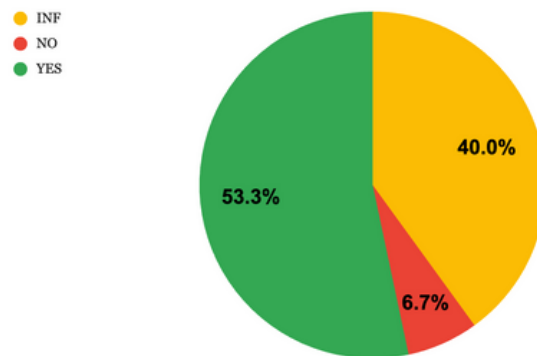


Figure 4.1. *INF* = Information not found. Information was gathered from Colorado school board district websites. This table displays whether districts that allow SBMs to serve have requirements for application ($n = 15$). Data was collected from school district policies and websites.

Bayfield School District 10 JT-R	The student representative must be at least a Sophomore (10th grade level) and not more than a Junior (11th grade level).
Denver County School District 1	In order to be appointed to and continue to serve on the SBOE, a person must be both at the time of appointment and at all times in office a full-time student enrolled in one of the high schools of the Denver Public Schools; Each student board member will carry a minimum 2.5 grade point average at all times.
Durango School District 9-R	The student representative must be at least a 10th grader/sophomore, complete application, and be interviewed by the Board.
Ellicott School District 22	HS Junior or Senior. To be eligible for appointment as a student representative, a student must maintain a grade point average (GPA) of 3.25 or higher and during the term of office, must not receive a grade lower than a C in any subject during any grading quarter.
Estes Park School District R-3	The student representative must be a 10-12th grade student.
Harrison School District 2	Two SBMs (Junior and Senior): Not have any disciplinary offenses incurred in the last year. Have parent/guardian approval to participate. Provide two recommendations. Maintain 2.5 GPA or higher. Be a sophomore (or junior, if both positions are vacant) planning to attend Sierra or Harrison High School the following year.
Hayden School District RE-1	Have parent/guardian approval to participate. Provide two recommendations (can be from anyone, student peer, family member, mentor, teacher, or community member). Be a sophomore (10th grade) planning to attend Hayden High School the following school year.
Windsor School District RE-4	The representative must be a member of the Junior or Senior class, an executive member of the Student Council, maintain a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or better, not have any disciplinary referrals, and be an exemplary role model for the student body.

Figure 4.2. This table displays the specific prerequisites for districts that have requirements for SBMs ($n = 8$). This information was gathered from district policies.

District SACs and Student Engagement in School Governance

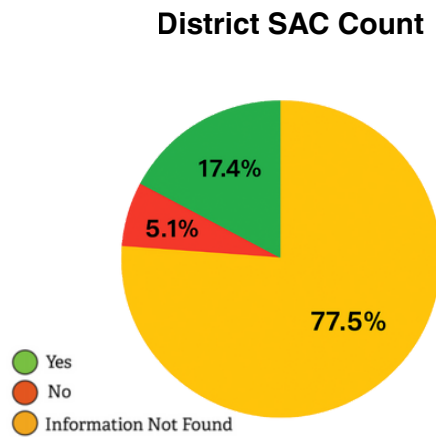


Figure 5.1. INF = Information not found. This table displays the distribution of districts that allow SACs ($n = 179$). This information was gathered from district policies. INF refers to districts that did not have accessible information regarding SACs and “NO” refers to districts that allow SBMs but do not have a policy allowing SACs.

SAC in District With SMBs

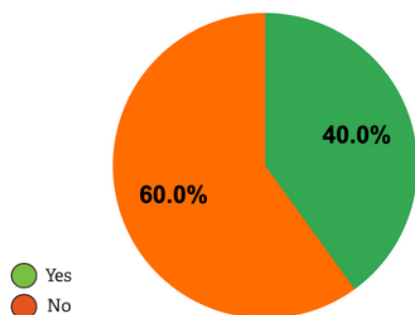


Figure 5.2. This table displays the distribution of districts that allow SBMs that have SAC ($n = 15$). This information was gathered from district policies.

Despite a small presence of SBMs, Colorado has a significant number of student advisory councils (SACs) that work alongside the Board of Education. The SAC is distinguished from an SBM, insofar as SBMs are considered a member of the board whereas SAC consults with the board periodically on school matters. Roughly 20% of school districts in Colorado have a SAC as demonstrated in Figure 5.1. Of the districts that have SBMs, less than half (40%) have a policy that explicitly allows a SAC.¹⁰ However, it is important to note that there are alternative methods of student representation and engagement outside of a SAC that are reflected in school policies. Students can serve on advisory councils, including District Drug Abuse Education and Prevention Advisory Council and District Accountability and Accreditation Committees.¹¹ Additionally, several school districts provide student representatives who serve on the Colorado High School Activities Association (CHSSAA), which does not work alongside the board, but provides students an opportunity to engage in local governance for high school activities and sports.

Discussion and Implications for Future Research

There is little evidence of widespread student representation on Boards of Education in Colorado. Of the districts that allow SBMs, there is wide variation between districts. It is also difficult to get the full picture of SBM status in Colorado due to the considerable number of districts that lack policies altogether, or omitted relevant information from district policies.

¹⁰ These districts that allow SBMs and SACs include: Denver County School District 1, Elizabeth School District, Garfield School District RE-2, Hayden School District RE-1, Johnstown-Milliken School District RE-5J (Weld RE-5J), Windsor School District RE-4 (also known as Weld RE-4).

¹¹ From the policies it was unclear if any students currently serve in these positions and if so, how they were selected.

Of districts that allow SBMs to serve, there is no discernible pattern in implementation and practice of student leadership. Across the State there are different processes for selecting students (either in the way of appointment or election), requirements for students to apply to serve as an SBM, and term lengths (including differing term starts and ends). Notably, the one universal policy for existing SBMs in the state is that they all serve in a non-voting advisory capacity.

Based on these findings, future research should examine the effect of SBMs on school characteristics and outcomes – including student achievement, engagement, and propensity to engage in democratic processes outside of a school environment. Additionally, future research may seek to distinguish between states and districts that allow SBMs to vote versus districts that do not. Further investigations should look into how student representation and decision-making authority contribute to more equitable student outcomes and renewed trust in democratic processes.

Appendix: Note on the Accessibility of Public School District Manuals in Colorado

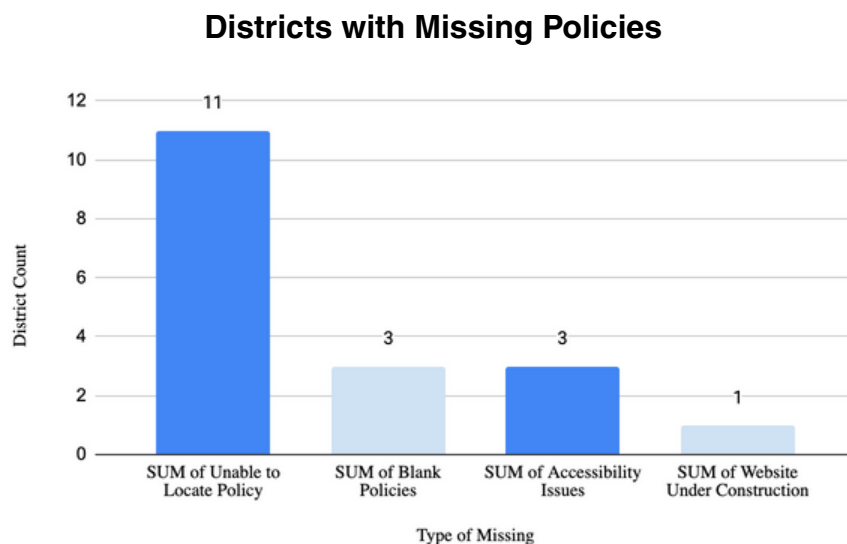


Figure 6.1. This table displays the districts that did not provide updated school board policies ($n = 18$). Unable to Locate Policy refers to districts where there was no policy manual located on the school website. Blank Policies refers to districts that designated a policy section on their website but there were no policies listed. Accessibility issues refers to districts where either researchers needed to schedule an in-person appointment to view the policy or required editor access to view online policy. Website Under Construction refers to districts in which websites could not be accessed because they were in the process of renovation. Approximately 10% of districts in Colorado had missing policies that were omitted from this study.

REFERENCES

- Benner, M., Brown, C., & Jeffrey, A. (2019, August). *Elevating Student Voice in Education*. Center for American Progress.
<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/elevating-student-voice-education/>
- Conner, J. O., Ebby-Rosin, R., & Brown, A. S. (2015). Introduction to Student Voice in American Education Policy. Teachers College Record, 117(13), 1-18.
- Mitra, D. L. (2006). Student Voice or Empowerment? Examining the Role of School-Based Youth-Adult Partnerships as an Avenue toward Focusing on Social Justice. *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*.
- Schultz, R. A., & Lutz, L. (2018). Leadership impact experiences of student representatives to the Roeper School Board of Trustees. *Roeper Review: A Journal on Gifted Education*, 40(4), 234-244.