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Students on School Boards Policy Brief

**A report by the Minnesota Youth Council's Uplifting Youth Voices
Committee.**

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Section 1: Introduction

As established by [Minn. Stat. 124D.957](#), the Minnesota Youth Council Committee (MYC) is an official legislatively-mandated committee that provides advice and recommendations to the Minnesota State Legislature and the governor on issues affecting youth and serves as a liaison for youth around the state to the legislature and the governor.

The Minnesota Youth Council may select introduced bills in the House of Representatives and Senate for consideration for a public hearing before the committee; propose youth legislation; provide advisory opinions to the legislature on bills heard before the committee; and prepare a youth omnibus bill. The council is part of the Minnesota Alliance with Youth, a nonpartisan nonprofit group aiming to spur positive change for Minnesota's youth.

For the 2024-2026 term, the MYC's policy platform consists of several priorities that the council will spearhead advocacy on. One of these, and the subject of this report, is Uplifting Youth Voices in Local Government. To achieve this priority, the MYC recommends a proposal to mandate at least 1 student representative on every school board in Minnesota.

This report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the merits and benefits of ensuring youth representation and also address any questions and concerns that stakeholders may have about the proposal. It is based on rigorous published research, the authors' analysis, and the lived experiences of youth across the state. The MYC is committed to the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty in its advocacy; evidence is directly quoted from research studies

and academic papers. Any paraphrases are brief and can be verified by accessing the hyperlinked source. Any edits for grammatical clarity are noted using brackets or ellipses, and all sources are hyperlinked directly in the report and listed in Section 14: Endnotes to allow for efficient verification of citations.

The MYC welcomes critiques, questions, and analysis of our work. If there are any questions, concerns, or inquiries about any of the content presented within this report, please contact the Minnesota Youth Council's youthvoice@mnyouth.net

Section 2: Legislative Proposal

The Minnesota Youth Council recommends that the Minnesota State Legislature amend Minnesota [Statute 123B.09](#), Subdivision 1b by replacing the word “*encourage*” with “*mandate*” regarding student representation on school boards. Current statute allows, but does not require, student representation. The mandate would require each school board to appoint at least one high school student representative to the board. While this change is small, it would ensure that the 197 school boards across Minnesota that currently lack student representation include a student voice in their decision-making processes. We recommend that the proposal be passed during this legislative session but implemented beginning in 2027, allowing school boards sufficient time to prepare for implementation.

Additionally, we recommend language that strongly encourages school boards to provide student representatives with at least ten minutes of speaking time at each public meeting to offer perspectives on agenda items and policy discussions. This recommendation stems from conversations with current student representatives who report that their roles are often limited to sharing updates about school events rather than contributing substantive input on policy matters. In some cases, students indicated that they must obtain permission from administrators (e.g., a principal or superintendent) before expressing opinions at meetings. These requirements create unnecessary barriers that risk tokenizing student representation rather than meaningfully incorporating student perspectives into board deliberations.

Finally, we recommend that the statute encourage the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to collaborate with the Minnesota Youth Council, the Minnesota School Boards Association, and other relevant stakeholders to develop a clear implementation framework. This framework could outline best practices for the selection of student representatives, guidelines for removal, application procedures, and other structural considerations. The Minnesota Youth Council has already developed a draft framework for this purpose, which will be discussed in the next section of this report. Such guidance would help school boards navigate questions related to the role, expectations, and structure of student representatives, ensuring consistent and effective implementation across districts.

Meaningful student representation also strengthens civic education, providing young people with direct experience engaging with democratic institutions that shape their daily lives. At the same time, districts would retain local flexibility in determining the selection process and specific responsibilities of student representatives, allowing implementation to reflect the needs and structures of individual communities.

Section 3: Status Quo of Student Representation

Enfranchising students with representation on school boards is uniquely critical. Data shows that, on a variety of measures, only about half of students nationwide feel they have a voice in their school. For example, only 48.3% agree that “adults at this school listen to students’ suggestions,” and 45.7% agree that “students have a voice in decision making at school,” according to the [Quaglia institute](#). Membership on school boards could serve as a remedy to these concerns. School boards are one of the most impactful institutions that shape the lives of students. While school boards must operate within the guidelines of federal and state law, they still have broad latitude to set district-specific policies that impact the day-to-day educational experiences of students. As a 2023 [MPR News](#) report explains, school boards in Minnesota “can tailor policies to fit their district, including dress codes, curriculum or amendments to existing policy.”

Currently, adults who have not attended high school for decades vote for school board members and those members dictate policy with little to no guaranteed student input. Indeed, Terry Morrow of the Minnesota School Boards Association recently [testified](#) young people are only represented on 134 out of [331](#) school boards in Minnesota. While these 134 school districts ought to be recognized for empowering students with representation, it is critical to recognize that the status quo is woefully insufficient, that to have the right to a voice in informing school board policy should extend to all of Minnesota’s students, not merely 40%.

In the remaining 197 school districts, young people have no voice in district policies, no say in approving ballot referendums deciding if they can afford new textbooks and critical technology for their classrooms, and no way to ensure accountability for the school boards that intimately impact every aspect of their educational experience.

Section 4: Discussion of MYC Framework for Implementation

To ensure that student representation meaningfully reflects the voices, perspectives, and diversity of the student body, the Minnesota Youth Council (MYC) has developed a sample framework and application form outlining how student representation on school boards could be implemented.

The framework provides guidance to school districts on potential appointment mechanisms, responsibilities of the student representative, and procedures for removal if necessary. Its purpose is to reduce the administrative burden on districts by offering a ready-made structure that can be adapted locally. By providing these materials in advance, the MYC aims to make implementation as simple and flexible as possible for school districts across Minnesota.

The role of the student representative is to serve as a liaison between the school board and the student body. Student representatives act as spokespersons for their peers, providing insight into how board decisions affect students and sharing student perspectives on relevant policy discussions.

Student representatives would participate in open-session meetings in an advisory capacity only. They would not have the authority to make motions or vote on agenda items.

Importantly, the guidelines included in the MYC framework are not mandatory requirements. They are intended solely as recommendations that districts may modify based on their specific circumstances, size, and governance structure. School boards are encouraged to adapt the framework in ways that best suit their communities while maintaining the goal of meaningful student engagement.

The full MYC framework and sample student application form are included below.

 [Students on School Board Sample Framework.docx](#)

Section 5: Confidentiality, Independence, Life Experience, and Burden on Schools

School districts considering student representation on school boards often raise concerns related to confidentiality, independence, life experience and regulatory burdens on schools. These concerns are understandable but can be addressed through clear role design and empirical evidence.

Confidentiality

School boards regularly enter closed sessions to discuss personnel matters, student discipline, contract negotiations, and special education placements. Student representatives would attend open meetings only, with explicit exclusion from closed sessions. This model is already used in districts across states such as Maryland and Massachusetts, where student members participate in public deliberations while confidential matters remain restricted to elected adult members. Limiting participation to open sessions ensures that confidential information remains protected while still allowing student voices to inform public policy discussions.

Independence of Decision-Making

Some stakeholders worry that students may be overly influenced by peers, parents, or teachers. However, social influence is not unique to adolescents; adults are likewise shaped by media environments, professional networks, and partisan communities. The presence of influence does not negate independent reasoning. School board deliberation occurs in structured, public, agenda-driven settings that promote transparency and accountability. There is no empirical evidence suggesting that youth are uniquely incapable of forming independent policy positions, particularly in advisory roles.

Life Experience and Institutional Knowledge

The claim that students lack sufficient “life experience” is difficult to define and measure. There is no objective threshold of lived experience required for participation in public decision-making. Students possess direct, daily experience with the policies school boards create, including curriculum implementation, school climate, transportation systems, discipline procedures, and access to mental health resources. While adult members may bring financial or managerial expertise, students contribute lived educational experience. These perspectives are complementary rather than competing. Additionally, student representatives can receive the same onboarding and mentorship routinely provided to new board members, including orientation on district finance, governance procedures, and long-term planning.

Burden on School Districts

Another concern raised is that requiring student representation could place an administrative burden on school districts. However, the Minnesota Youth Council has already developed a framework outlining potential implementation mechanisms, as well as a standardized student application form. Providing districts with a ready-made structure significantly reduces the administrative burden of implementation. Additionally, the proposed legislation includes no punitive enforcement mechanism if a district is unable to find a student representative. This ensures flexibility while still encouraging districts to incorporate student perspectives into board governance.

When designed with clear boundaries—open-session participation, defined advisory (non-voting) status, and structured onboarding—student school board representation addresses confidentiality concerns, preserves decision-making integrity, and strengthens governance by incorporating the perspectives of those most directly affected by board policy

Section 6: Benefits of Student Representation on School Boards: Decision Making, Building Trust and Civic Engagement

Student representation on school boards is an increasingly widespread practice across the United States. According to the [National Student Board Member Association](#), over 500 student board members across 42 states represent more than 20 million students, a number that continues to grow. While most serve in advisory roles, some states have expanded this model. Maryland, for example, allows student members to hold binding votes, a practice recently upheld by the state Supreme Court.

This trend underscores both the feasibility and value of incorporating student voice into school governance, providing a strong foundation for expanding representation in states where it is not yet required.

Including student representatives on school boards offers meaningful benefits that improve both the quality of **decision-making** and the relationship between schools and the communities they serve. First, student inclusion leads to more effective and responsive problem-solving. Students experience school policies in real time, giving them a unique and often overlooked perspective on how decisions impact daily life in classrooms, extracurriculars, and student well-being. This firsthand insight allows boards to better anticipate unintended consequences and craft solutions that are both practical and relevant. In many cases, students can also introduce innovative ideas that may not emerge in adult-only spaces, particularly on issues such as mental health, school climate, and technology use.

Second, student representatives play a critical role in **strengthening trust** and communication between school boards and the student body. A common challenge in education governance is the disconnect between decision-makers and those most affected by their decisions. By including students in board discussions, schools create a direct line of communication that reduces misunderstandings and increases transparency. Student representatives can both elevate peer concerns to the board and help explain board decisions back to the broader student body, serving as a bridge that fosters mutual understanding. This two-way communication improves policy outcomes while building a culture where students feel heard and valued.

Finally, student representation promotes **broader civic engagement**—not just among the selected representatives, but across the entire student body. When students see their peers actively participating in decision-making processes, it signals that their voices are both

legitimate and impactful. This visibility can shift school culture, encouraging more students to follow school board decisions, engage in discussions about policy, and feel a greater sense of ownership over their education. By creating a system where student voice is institutionalized, schools move beyond symbolic inclusion and instead cultivate a generation of students who are more informed, more engaged, and more likely to participate in civic life beyond high school.

In sum, student representation strengthens school governance by making it more informed, more connected, and more democratic. By incorporating student voices, school boards can better serve their communities while fostering a generation of engaged and empowered citizens.

Conclusion:

This report presents a clear and evidence-based case for requiring student representation on school boards across Minnesota. It highlights a significant gap in current governance. While school boards make decisions that directly shape students' daily experiences, many students across the state still lack a guaranteed voice in these discussions. As shown throughout this report, the current system leaves a majority of districts without consistent student input, despite clear interest from students in having greater representation.

The research and data presented demonstrate that students are both capable and prepared to participate in this role. Concerns related to knowledge, cognitive ability, independence, and life experience are not supported by evidence. Students engage daily with the policies school boards create, giving them direct and relevant insight into issues such as school climate, curriculum, and student well-being. This lived experience complements the expertise of adult board members and strengthens the overall quality of decision making.

In addition, this report has shown that student representation produces meaningful benefits for both schools and communities. Evidence from districts in Minnesota and across the country illustrates that including student voices leads to more informed and responsive policy decisions. It also strengthens communication between school boards and the student body, helping to build trust and reduce disconnect. Furthermore, institutionalizing student voice encourages civic engagement by demonstrating that participation in governance is both accessible and impactful.

The Minnesota Youth Council has also addressed key implementation concerns through a clear and flexible framework. By limiting participation to open sessions, defining advisory roles, and providing guidance for selection and onboarding, this proposal ensures that student representation can be implemented effectively without creating undue burden on school districts. These structures allow districts to adapt the model to their local needs while maintaining the goal of meaningful student inclusion.

The Minnesota Youth Council urges the Minnesota State Legislature to amend current statute and require at least one student representative on every school board. This is a practical and achievable reform that builds upon existing models already in place across the state. Minnesota has long been a leader in civic engagement and youth advocacy. This proposal continues that legacy by ensuring that all students have the opportunity to be heard. With hundreds of thousands of students impacted by school board decisions each day, it is both reasonable and necessary to ensure their perspectives are included. Students deserve a seat at the table.

Authors and Acknowledgements:

This report is authored by Minnesota Youth Council representatives Aanya Mohta, Daniel Song, Braden Cox, Zohha Khan and Aili Schultz.

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The authors appreciate the continued support of the Minnesota Legislature in sustaining the work of the Minnesota Youth Council and creating opportunities for youth to engage in policymaking. This report is ultimately grounded in the voices and experiences of students across Minnesota. Their perspectives are the reason this work exists and the reason it matters. Meaningful representation begins with recognizing that student voice is not optional, it is essential.