

Student Representation on School Boards

State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council (SIYAC)

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Education Committee Chair

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Position

The State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council (SIYAC) supports SF86 for the establishment of student representative positions on each public school board. This would ensure school boards' attention to students' needs as well as higher levels of student engagement, civic education, and overall community involvement.

Current Situation

Adults make up only 8% of school buildings, with students representing the other 92% (Fletcher 2021). According to the Iowa School Board Association, during the 2024-2025 school year, only 53 out of the nearly 340 school districts in Iowa had a student representative on their school board. Of the hundreds of thousands of students across the state, there are only 96 student representatives. Students lack a direct path to discuss issues with elected school board members. The issues that school boards navigate have the most significant impact on students, yet they often lack effective communication channels to gather youth perspectives.

Current school board members tend to speculate but lack relevant experience regarding social and emotional factors affecting students. Moreover, the 18-and-older age requirement to run for an elected position prevents students from holding official school board positions. However, states such as Ohio and Virginia have demonstrated success in implementing similar laws requiring public schools to maintain a nonvoting, single-term, high school representative on school boards (Virginia LIS).

Rationale

SIYAC recognizes the authority of school board directors and does not seek to undermine their power in creating student-held positions. Instead, the role of student representatives would be to provide feedback to directors and offer perspectives that otherwise may escape notice of the adults. Since age requirements prevent students from holding an official school board position, school board members tend to make decisions for students, rather than with them. Having a student as a non-voting representative is more suitable for issues not related to students as well.

Students need an avenue to advocate for their issues and ideas that will directly impact their academic careers. One path for this type of communication would be through a nonvoting student representative. The student body would be able to communicate with this person, who would then present this feedback during official school board meetings. Having a student representative to reach out to is the best way to achieve this, given the time commitment of attending an official school board meeting. The representative should be a pupil aligned with the goals of the rest of the student body, whether selected through popular vote or teacher nomination.

The relationship between school board members and the student representative goes both ways. The student representative would be responsible for communicating school board decisions to the student body in a comprehensible manner, emphasizing the direct impact of those decisions on the student body. This enhanced involvement of the student body will ultimately facilitate a more effective board that is more responsive to the needs of the students. School board directors may be offered a broader sense of perspective when deciding policy because of student representative policy.

Recommended Action

SIYAC supports SF86, which requires each public school board to offer the position of at least one non-voting student representative from their local high school(s). The selection process will be at the discretion of the school board and the rest of the administration, although a guide could be provided with examples from current school districts' structures for effective incorporation through the Department of Education. Once selected, representatives will undergo the administration's orientation and will attend all open school board meetings throughout the duration of their one-year term. Requiring school boards to implement this change is the best way to make it consistent across the state and ensure its adequate implementation.

Sources

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