



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



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

THE MISSING PIECE

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



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School Board and Youth Engagement 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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INTRODUCTION

Communal participation is the hallmark of what makes school boards unique sites for democratic governance. As local governing bodies, school boards are meant to serve as a direct link between the community and its shareholders. Board members who are elected, are meant to be beholden to the citizens who elect them.¹ However, in the past few decades local school boards have experienced a loss of “policy-making power,” limiting their ability to represent the interests of the community they have been elected to serve.²

In response to this decrease of democratic influence, some districts have been able to broaden communal participation most significantly by incorporating student voices. When school boards allow students to participate, they expand this democratic power by allowing students, who are the ones affected by educational decisions. Student Board Members (SBMs) are often introduced to bring in authentic student perspectives into these discussions. Cited as the key to “bridge generational gaps between [the] adults” who govern school boards and “the students they serve,” SBMs are positioned as significant contributors who can effect meaningful change and help restore some of the representative power of school boards to effect true change.³

“When school boards allow students to participate, they expand this democratic power by allowing students, who are the ones affected by educational decisions.”

However, the reality of student participation is often more compromised. Oftentimes, the limitations and requirements for SBM positions, reflect and reproduce the inequalities that are embedded within the education system. Instead of democratizing school governance, such practices almost tokenize student participation. To evaluate the true nature of an SBMs role, it is necessary to examine the policies on student representation on school boards, providing a more holistic view into SBMs.

State Spotlight

Washington organizes SBM policies into two separate documents: one outlines the general ability of SBMs to serve in the district, and the other provides detailed procedures on an SBMs position. The state also provides sample SBM policy and procedure documents, which districts customize to set guidelines on term lengths, start and end dates, and academic eligibility requirements for SBMs. Despite the presence of such guidance documents, Washington does not have a binding statewide policy on SBMs, leaving school districts to develop their own rules and privileges. The lack of a centralized policy introduces great irregularity in district policies and leads to an unequal distribution of power in student voices throughout the state. For instance, while some districts allowed SBMs to vote in an advisory capacity, other districts ruled out the ability to vote entirely.

¹ Sell, Samantha. “Running an Effective School District: School Boards in the 21st Century.” *The Journal of Education*, vol. 186, no. 3, 2005, pp. 71–97. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42742618>. Accessed 5 Aug. 2025.

² *ibid*

³ 7 Benefits of Student School Board Members - New York State School Boards Association. 7 Apr. 2025, www.nyssba.org/news/2025/04/07/on-board-online-april-7-2025/7-benefits-of-student-school-board-members.

Further, districts also varied in their policies on position length, leaving SBMs to serve for a range of a single semester up to a two year term. Such variations illustrate the value each district places on student representation and demonstrates differences in how student voice is prioritized by educational leaders.

Methodology

Between February and May 2025, we collected data on Washington's 296 school districts to examine the requirements and guidelines surrounding student board members. This process involved a systematic review of district policy handbooks and websites to determine whether a district included an SBM and the terms of their position. Each policy was analyzed to catalog how SBMs were selected, the length of their term, and the extent of their responsibilities.

Each district was coded for 21 variables on SBM representation that was explicitly stated in a district's policy. If a variable did not apply to a district it was coded as Not Applicable (N/A) while a lack of sufficient information for a variable was coded as Information not Found (INF).

Since the website of the Washington State School Director's Association (WSSDA) has a list of all the districts in Washington that allow for SBMs, our first step in this process was to cross reference this record with the listed policy on a school district's page. In doing so, many discrepancies were found as some school districts were left off of WSSDA's list and others districts on the list no longer permitted SBMs to serve on their board.

Results

Presence of School Board Members

Washington had a moderate number of districts that allowed SBMs on their school board. Most of these districts provided a list of active school board members on their websites, demonstrating the presence of SBMs. In some instances though, districts did not include SBMs in such lists. In this case, we would examine the meeting minutes from various school board sessions throughout the 2024-2025 academic year.

In these meetings, time given to student representatives' presentations was clearly labeled, confirming their presence. As shown in Figure 1.1, approximately half of the districts in the state allow SBMs to serve on boards ($n = 148$). Nearly all districts that had an SBM had an explicit policy on SBMs listed on their website, with the exception of two districts, as seen in Figure 1.2. Out of the districts that allowed SBMs, 130 school districts had active SBMs, meaning that an SBM was listed as a school board representative publicly available for the 2024-2025 school year. As illustrated in Figure 1.3 the other 18 districts did not list an SBM on their website or in their meeting notes.

⁴ Both the Kahlotus School District and the Dayton School District have listed an SBM but do not have any school board policies available on their district websites.

SBM Policy By District

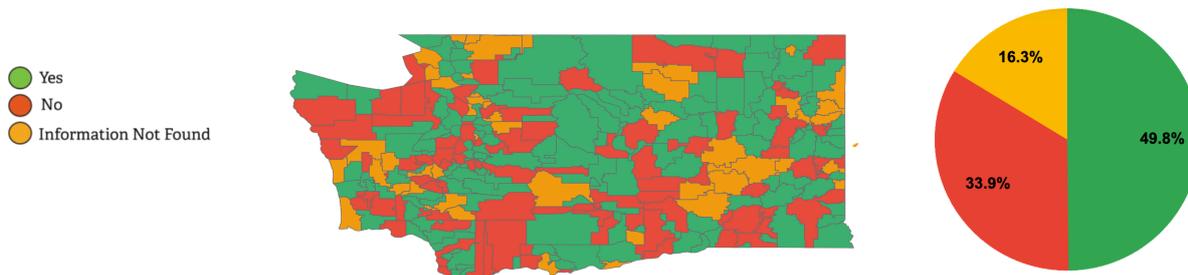


Figure 1.1 Note. This graph indicates whether or not the district allows for a student board member, even if it was not explicitly mentioned in the district’s policy manual ($n = 295$). Information was gathered from Washington school board district websites. *INF* = Information not found.

Explicit Policies Listed For Districts With SBMs

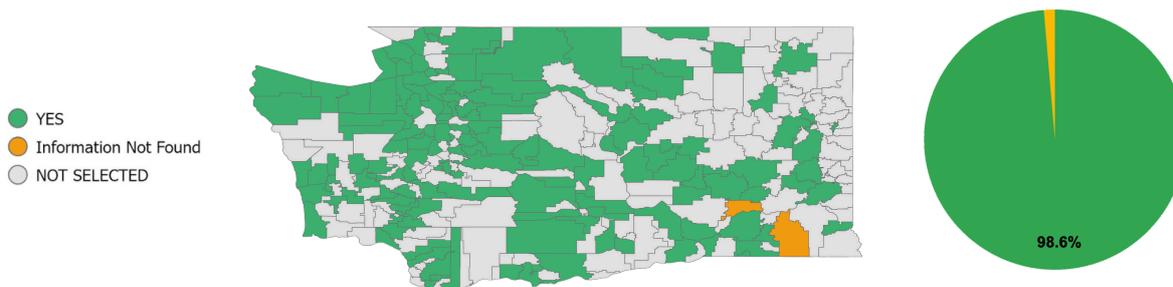


Figure 1.2 Note. This graph indicates whether or not districts that allow SBMs have an explicit policy on SBMs ($n=148$).

Districts With an Active SBM

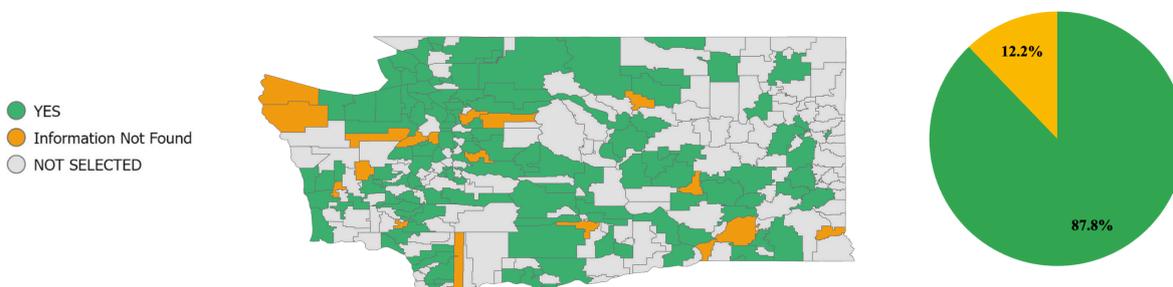


Figure 1.3 Note: This graph indicates whether or not the school districts that allow SBMs have listed the students on their website ($n=148$). Information was gathered from Washington school district websites.

SBM Term Length

Term lengths for SBMs were determined by examining districts' procedure documents. This data was derived only from school districts that had an SBM policy. If a district did not list their term limits, it was coded as INF. A semesterly term entails two SBM appointments within one school year, while an annual term means that students serve for one school year. A two-year term enables students to serve on the board in consecutive academic years, often beginning in their junior year and ending in their senior year. Start and end dates greatly varied across districts. However, for year long and two-year appointments, terms largely started in either July or September, while June was a popular end date.

As shown in Figure 2.1, the majority of districts have annual term lengths ($n = 91$). However, there were three districts that had semesterly term lengths, where new SBMs were appointed every semester, and 37 districts that had two-year terms.⁵

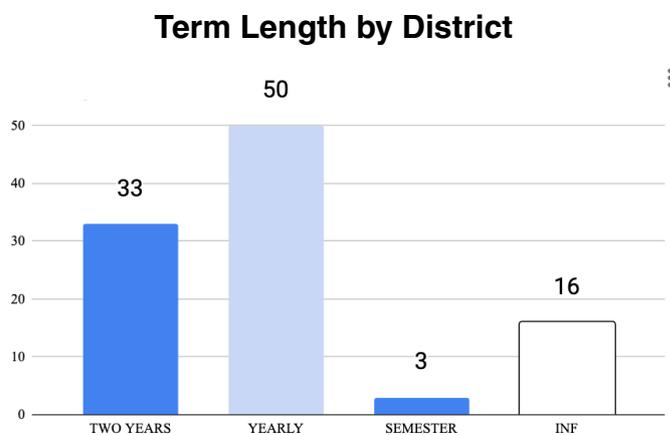


Figure 2.1 Note: This graph indicates the term length a SBM can hold by district within the state of Washington. This graph includes data only from districts that have a SBM policy ($n=148$).

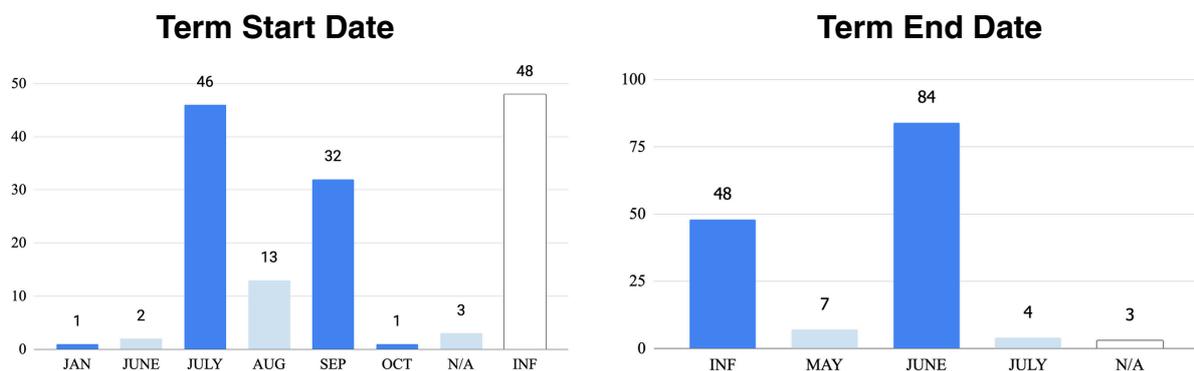


Figure 2.2 & 2.3 Note: These graphs indicate the start and end dates of the terms for SBMs. These graphs utilize data that is exclusively from districts that allow SBMs ($n=148$).

⁵ Snohomish School District had a three-year term that was an outlier to the data set and thus not cataloged.

SBM Selection

In Washington, when a school district allowed for SBMs, students were likely to be appointed, meaning that at least some adults were involved in the selection process. These adults were either school board members themselves, district or high school administrators, or a combination of these that served on committees that sometimes included student council representatives. A smaller group of SBMs were elected, meaning they were selected by their peers (either the school’s entire student body or a subset of students) (see Figure 3.1). If a policy did not state how an SBM was selected, it was coded INF. If an SBM was selected in an alternative way, this was coded as “Other”.

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Selection Process by District

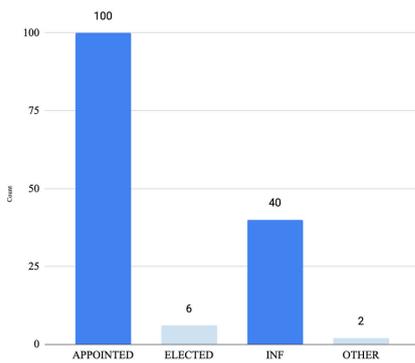


Figure 3.1 Note: This graph utilizes data that is exclusively from districts that have SBM policies.

Appointment Process by District

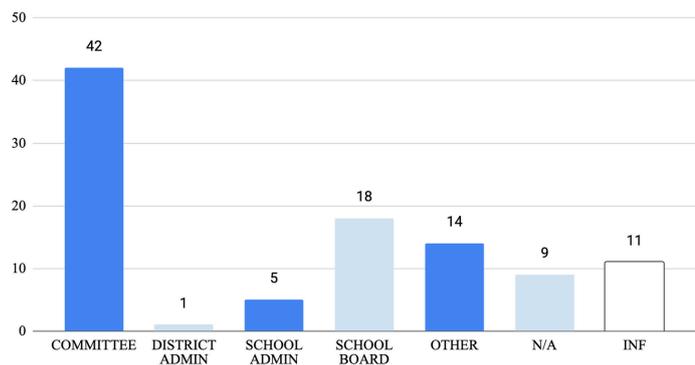


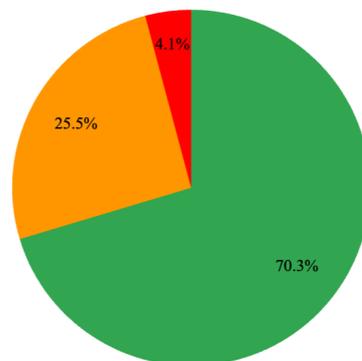
Figure 3.2 Note: This graph illustrates the groups who appointed SBMs (n=100). The graph utilizes data that is exclusively from districts that have SBM policies.

SBM Requirements

To be selected as an SBM, many districts had academic criteria for students to meet, such as student council involvement or academic excellence. Over 70% of SBM positions in Washington had such requirements (n=105). Figure 4.1 shows that only 4% of schools in Washington did not have requirements (n=6).

SBM position Requirements

Figure 4.1 Note: This graph displays whether districts had requirements for SBMs to serve (n=148). The graph only includes data from districts that have SBM policies.



SBM Powers and Responsibilities

In Washington, SBMs had varying degrees of power. As displayed in Figure 5.1 the majority of SBMs did not have voting powers at meetings ($n=63$). For districts that allowed SBMs to vote, this power was only preferential in nature. This means that SBM votes were recorded to reflect student voices and opinions, but they did not carry decisive authority, final decisions on policies were made without the inclusion of these votes. No SBMs were allowed to make motions.

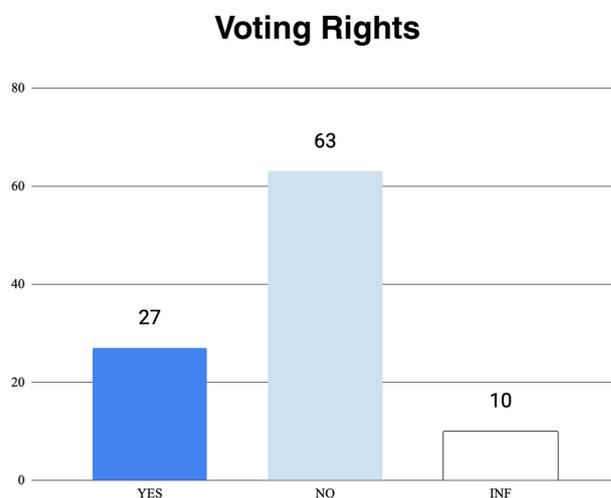


Figure 5.1 Note: This graph displays whether districts allowed SBMs to vote ($n=148$). The graph utilizes data that is exclusively from districts that have SBM policies.

Discussion

Throughout Washington, we found that 148 districts allow for SBMs. Districts in the state largely required students to hold academic qualifications in order to be considered for SBM positions. When a system built on increasing student voice and democratic participation chooses to systematically exclude certain students from the mere application process, school districts empower only those students who are already successful in their communities. Those students who do not hold such academic qualifications are barred from a valuable experience in civic engagement. Studies have shown that youth civic engagement has indelible affects, impacting the long-term educational outcomes of youth.⁷

Moreover, even when students are placed into these positions, their power is limited. Since most districts only afford SBMs preferential voting rights at best, their participation is largely symbolic, lacking tangible power. While many Washington school districts want students to be included in school boards, they simultaneously sideline their authority.

Implications for Future Research

Based on these findings, future research should examine the effects of SBMs on quantitatively verifiable metrics by tracking changes in student achievement. Such research would determine whether or not the limited powers of SBMs are actually effective or if the scope of such powers and qualifications needs to be expanded for greater inclusivity and impact.

⁷ Chan, Wing Yi et al. "Adolescent civic engagement and adult outcomes: an examination among urban racial minorities." *Journal of youth and adolescence* vol. 43,11 (2014): 1829-43. doi:10.1007/s10964-014-0136-5

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