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# Student Participation in Santa Cruz County School Boards: Research and Recommendations

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The California School Board Association’s [fact sheet](#) on student participation on school boards notes that the presence of student school board members can “enable governance teams to incorporate student voices in their district responsibilities, elevating student perspectives on education policy decisions that they may not have otherwise considered.” In addition to making valuable contributions to policy discussions based on their experience, student members “get the opportunity to meaningfully participate in the governance process of their district, learn essential democratic skills, and represent and advocate for their peers.”

Research on young people’s participation in governance more broadly also concludes that the meaningful inclusion of young people leads to improved policies and practices, stronger communities, and greater civic engagement. However, despite good intentions, it can be quite difficult to include young people as true partners in decision-making and many participatory interventions continue to tokenize youth and/or fall short of meaningful engagement standards.

While this report notes many challenges and gaps in the current practices for student engagement on Santa Cruz County Boards of Education, such difficulties are quite common, not unexpected, and relatively easy to address through minor changes and interventions. We commend the Boards and the County Office of Education for the steps they have already taken around student engagement and for their openness to learning from this research and its assessment of progress toward meaningful student participation.

# CONTEXT

The last few years have seen a notable increase in programs and policies oriented toward youth voice and participation in Santa Cruz County, including the passage of a Children and Youth Bill of Rights in the City of Santa Cruz, United Way's re-articulated Youth Action Network, and Watsonville's new Youth Action Council. A recent survey conducted with Santa Cruz County youth found that 70.2% agree or strongly agree with the statement that "I participate in my school or community because I want my views to be heard." However, the same survey also found that less than half (48%) of respondents agreed with the statement "most community or school leaders would pay attention to me if I gave them my opinion." Youth in our county want to participate and be included in spaces of community and school governance, but they do not currently have confidence that their voices will be taken seriously in these contexts.

Education policy is one specific arena in which youth participation can be especially valuable and transformative. Specifically, student representation on local and county school boards can be an important mechanism for policy-makers to engage with and learn from students' distinctive expertise and knowledge about their schools. California Education Code defines the role of student board members in section 35012, noting that such members "shall be seated with the members of the governing board of the school district and shall be recognized as a full member of the board at the meetings, including receiving all materials presented to the board members and participating in the questioning of witnesses and the discussion of issues." Student board members may also be given the opportunity to engage in preferential voting, meaning "a formal expression of opinion that is recorded in the minutes and cast before the official vote of the governing board of the school district." According to a California School Board Association poll, 270 out of the state's 424 unified or high school districts have one or more student board members. However, there is little documentation of either best practices for student representation on school boards or the impacts of such participation on students, adult board members, or educational policy.

School boards in Santa Cruz County have included student members for several years and the County Office of Education initiated a summer training program for potential student board trustees in 2022. This report aims to complement and expand on that initiative, providing an analysis of current practices and offering concrete recommendations for how both the CoE and local school boards can further support meaningful student participation.

# METHODS

Our research aimed to assess the involvement and inclusion of students in local school boards. To do this, we analyzed over 100 hours of board meetings where student trustees were in attendance. This included 18 meetings of the Pajaro Valley Unified School District Board and 25 meetings of the Santa Cruz City Schools Board. We had originally intended to also include the San Lorenzo Valley Unified School District board meetings but learned from their staff that the student representative had not attended any meetings during this academic year. Meetings took place between December 2021 and March 2023. Some were observed in person, while others were analyzed via either video (PVUSD) or audio (SCCS) recordings.

Drawing from both our conceptual framework and an inductive analysis of emergent themes, we engaged in a systematic qualitative coding of the data, attaching conceptual codes to moments and interactions observed in the meetings. When creating our codebook, we first began with concepts that we believed would come up based on previous research, including “youth lack of interest,” “youth using genuine voice,” “jargon,” “adult active listening,” and many more. The team ultimately ended up developing more than 20 codes. These codes fit into broader categories, leading us to create five broad labels, or code families: exclusive adult behavior, inclusive adult behavior, youth participating meaningfully, youth exclusion and challenges, and “other”. Whenever there was an instance of an interaction or practice that was aligned with one of our codes, we would mark down the timestamp of the recording and label it with the code. Once all of the assigned meetings were coded, we reorganized the data so that all examples of a given code could be analyzed and interpreted as a set.

# CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

According to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, there are [nine basic requirements](#) for meaningful and ethical participation. These requirements are key in providing an environment where both young people and adults feel accepted and comfortable sharing their views, and have been [well-documented and explained](#) by many international organizations that seek to foster young people’s participation and engagement. The United States is currently the only UN member state that has not signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, the guidelines provided by the UNCRC are a widely used [framework for evaluating and improving programs](#) for young people’s participation in decision-making and governance and thus remain relevant for our own context.

## Nine Basic Requirements

- 1 **Transparent and Informative**
- 2 **Voluntary**
- 3 **Respectful**
- 4 **Relevant**
- 5 **Child Friendly**
- 6 **Inclusive**
- 7 **Supported by Training**
- 8 **Safe and Sensitive to Risk**
- 9 **Accountable**

<b>Space</b> Youth are given the opportunity to express a view.	<b>Voice</b> Youth must be facilitated to express their views.
<b>Influence</b> The view is acted upon, as appropriate.	<b>Audience</b> The view must be listened to.

The second framework we drew from was the “Lundy Model.” Taken up by many governments and agencies around the world, and developed extensively for use in [the Republic of Ireland](#), the Lundy Model identifies space, voice, audience, and influence as the four factors to consider when seeking to successfully implement children’s participation. Combined with the nine basic requirements, the Lundy model draws our attention to how to effectively involve youth in governance and ensure that other actors take their perspectives seriously.

# FINDINGS

## STUDENTS HAVE LIMITED PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

Our central finding was that youth speak during public comment and their official designated reports, however, they almost never speak beyond these two designated periods in the agenda. This is a critical finding because it indicates that youth representatives' participation – and therefore impact – is generally marginal, rather than fully integrated into all aspects of board meetings and deliberations. However, even though student representatives participate in a very limited manner, when they do participate, they do so in ways that show that they care deeply about their schools and the issues being discussed, suggesting that the barrier to their further participation is not a lack of interest.

**01** Student representatives engage meaningfully when given the opportunity.

**02** Adult trustees never asked for student opinions and sometimes spoke on their behalf.

**03** Unclear meeting procedures cause confusion among the general public.

**04** Adult responses to student voice are less meaningful than their response to adult voice.

**05** Conversations that center around adult experiences can exclude youth.

## 01

## Student representatives engage meaningfully when given the opportunity.

During the student trustee report section of board meetings, students not only report on general school events but also raise critical issues and bring in personal experiences that show that they take their role seriously and wish to engage meaningfully.

Student representatives take the initiative to speak on issues that are significant to them and the student body. An example of such an instance was when a student trustee from PVUSD addressed the board on August 24, 2022, regarding the school dress code and respectfully asked them to remove the “distract” portion of the dress code as well as implement a sexual harassment seminar for all students and staff. This was a prominent instance of youth initiative because the student trustee took it upon themselves to bring up an important student issue to the decision-making body capable of enacting change. Another such instance of youth initiative was in an October 19, 2022, SCCS meeting where a student representative suggested that besides adding more AP and Honors classes, the board should find ways to encourage more students to take them because the demographics in those classes do not reflect those of the school.

When youth do speak up in board meetings, they do so in a manner that is true for their age and self-expression. They seem very genuine and confident about the issues that concern them. Examples of this can be found in the November 11, 2022 SCCS board meeting where student representatives expressed distress at the events that transpired when Santa Cruz High came under school shooting threats. A student representative started her report by stating that she is grateful that no one was hurt in the event, but that the actions taken by school officials were questionable at best, allowing for the spreading of unconfirmed rumors. Another student representative followed up to express her shock at the events that transpired that day as well as sending her regards to those directly affected at Santa Cruz High. The interactions showcase the genuine voice of the student representatives because not only are they being vulnerable in front of the board by sharing how they felt in the moment, but they are also raising concerns about how authority figures handled the situation.

We found multiple moments of insightful engagement, yet their engagement is limited to student reports and public comment periods in board meetings. Though student representatives on these school boards are supposed to be regarded as equals to their adult counterparts, their levels of participation say otherwise. Unlike the adults on the board, they only speak during these select portions of the meetings. Their passion for speaking on issues affecting their schools shows that these students are capable and want to engage meaningfully, yet they face barriers to doing so. Based on the topics the students brought up, we can see their commitment and expertise, but it can be inferred that students do not currently feel comfortable speaking beyond the times when they’re explicitly asked or invited to participate.

## 02

## Adult trustees never asked for student opinions and sometimes spoke on their behalf.

In carefully reviewing the over 100 hours of board meetings, we encountered zero instances of adult board members directly asking student board members for their input on agenda items, even when the board was discussing issues of direct student concern. There were many missed opportunities where student board members could have been directly invited into the conversations. As just one example, at the January 18, 2023, SCCS meeting – a student had recently passed away, and board members discussed whether or not to hold an on-campus memorial, but did not ask the student representatives present for their perspective on this issue, despite their knowledge of how students might be feeling.

This is just one of the many examples of adult members not taking advantage of the opportunity to hear from the student member on items where they were directly discussing student opinions or student experience overall. Another example of adult board members not seeking students' opinions was the SCCS meeting on February 8, 2023, during a discussion on getting more students to sign up for AP classes. The board members stated that AP classes are initially intimidating for students, but that they soon feel comfortable taking them. Despite the availability of the student trustees present who could have spoken on the matter and given a situated and current student perspective, board members instead assumed they knew and understood high school students' needs and issues, rather than ask the student representatives for their insight.

In addition to never asking student representatives for their input, adult board members have also sometimes been guilty of speaking for the students. In a January 25, 2023, PVUSD meeting, a board member continuously spoke on the value of counselors from a student perspective and instead of engaging in a dialogue with the student trustee present, kept repeating "I know our student trustee knows..." Rather than acknowledge potentially different perspectives and invite room for the student trustee to speak or share their view, the adult trustee imposed his own experiences and interpretations.



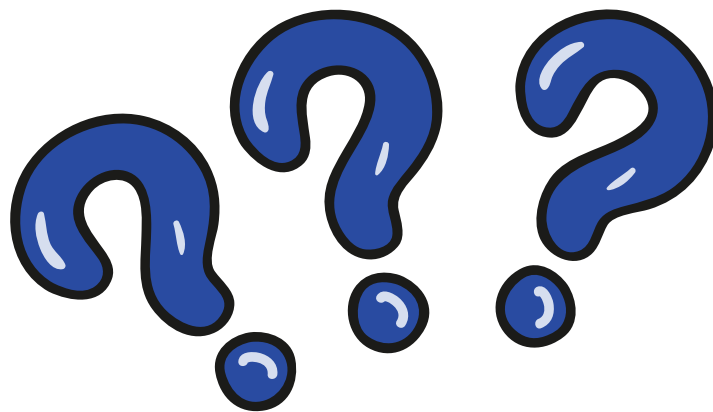
## 03

## Unclear meeting procedures cause confusion among the general public.

Though both SCCS and PVUSD board meetings adhere to parliamentary procedure derived from Robert's Rules of Order in order to establish a set of guidelines for conducting meetings in an organized and efficient manner, our observations indicate that a considerable proportion of individuals who engage in public comment are either unaware or inadequately informed about the proceedings that these school board meetings follow.

The unawareness from the public not only created confusion among attendees but also visible feelings of frustration as they experience that their voices are not being heard nor acknowledged by board members. For instance, this sentiment of dissatisfaction was seen in the PVUSD meeting on May 25th, 2022, in which board members engaged in continuous cross-talk with one another that persisted even after various students took the podium to address important issues ranging from the need to increase teachers' salaries to the school to prison pipeline, as well as the lack of accessible menstrual products.

Even if board members can not respond to members of the public on non-agendized items, the visible inattention to student speakers communicates a lack of interest in students' perspectives.



## 04 Adult responses to student voice are less meaningful than their responses to adult voice.

Another significant finding was that adult responses to student board representatives' reports were also minimal, even though the boards are far less procedurally restrained here. They either briefly thanked the students for their comments or simply did not acknowledge them and moved on to the next agenda item. In contrast, board members ask questions and engage more meaningfully with the various reports given by fellow adults. Although student representatives' reports were not always extensive, there were some instances where their questions or concerns deserved more attention and could have generated more meaningful engagement from the adult board members. For instance during the October 19, 2022 Santa Cruz City Schools board meeting referenced above, when the student representative suggested that more students be encouraged to take honors and AP classes, the board simply replied with "thank you" and moved on without revisiting or mentioning the topic again during this meeting. It would have been more encouraging for the students and productive for the board if student input was acknowledged more meaningfully or if plans were made to address the issues raised by students in a more substantive manner as they are bringing up valid concerns regarding their schools.

An instance where almost meaningful engagement from the board was observed was on November 2, 2023, during another Santa Cruz City Schools meeting. In this meeting, both the student representatives' reports referenced the school shooter threat incident that occurred at Santa Cruz High that week and expressed their thoughts and concerns as well as gave constructive criticism on how school officials could have handled the incident better. After their reports, the Superintendent thanked the students by stating that they wanted to "underscore how valuable and rich the contributions that you are all making to our meetings, so thank you so much for your honesty and for your contributions to the district." Unlike most other meetings where they are given minimal responses, the students' concerns were acknowledged in a genuine way, perhaps because of their sensitive nature. However, just after the students' gave their accounts of what had transpired, another member of the board downplayed their concerns by stating that they knew how these types of incidents are handled and that the police handled this situation excellently. Instead of recognizing the student representatives' concerns, this member of the board minimized and dismissed their experience which might further reduce the students' already limited participation.

## 05

## Conversations that center around adult experiences can exclude youth.

Trusting relationships between students and adults are important for creating a stronger sense of community with the board trustees and youth leaders. Such relationships rely on inclusive behavior, such as active listening, eye contact, and conversations that invite youth to share their opinions and perspectives. In contrast, social behaviors such as adult board members talking entirely amongst themselves before meetings begin and sharing humorous but adult-centered jokes with each other can exclude student board members.

For instance, in a meeting for SCCS on November 2, 2022, members of the board were discussing their departures from the board as well as their plans now that they were leaving. Another board member asked “No happy hours?” In an SCCS meeting on December 14th, 2022, the superintendent joked about looking forward to seeing a departing board member at the Back Nine, a bar and restaurant in Pasatiempo. When the departing board member was invited to speak, they claimed they are not a big talker to which the rest of the adults laughed and the board member replied, “Well, not in public.”

These types of conversations surrounding adulthood and outside relationships can create a sense of distance for youth members as they cannot relate and or engage in the discussions. When student trustees cannot engage in the same conversations or interactions revolving around adult experiences, it can feel exclusionary and decrease their sense of belonging on the board. Though not intentional, these behaviors have the effect of subtly discouraging student trustees’ participation in board meeting proceedings.

# Increase Structured Opportunities for Student Trustee Participation



Student trustees must be treated as full, though non-voting, members of the board. All school boards in the county should begin by reviewing the law applicable to student board member representation and their own by-laws on the role of student trustees.

## **1A. Implement consistent use of preferential voting.**

We recommend that each board implement the student trustee's right, as described in EDC § 35012, to preferential voting as a part of every agenda item. Preferential voting is the "formal expression of opinion that is recorded in the minutes and cast before the official vote of the governing board of the school district. A preferential vote shall not serve in determining the final numerical outcome of a vote." Asking the student board member each time will serve the board by creating an environment where the student board member is encouraged to be more engaged with the proceedings of the meeting, as well as consistently informing the board of the student's perspective.

## **1B. Develop a regular practice of asking for the student trustee's input on each agenda item.**

Though we expect this may feel cumbersome at first, as it becomes routine it is likely to feel natural and should effectively encourage the youth board member's greater participation in board meetings. Importantly, this would likely also make it easier for the youth board member to speak up when they have something they want to express, as they would already be in the habit of speaking regularly during the meeting. We observed that student board members required only a little prompting to participate in meetings and that an adult board member soliciting their opinion was highly effective. It is important to remember that a board should both treat student board members as full members of the board, and that they may need a small amount of prompting and encouragement in order to fully take advantage of their position.

## Create A Youth-Friendly Culture



With the goal of fostering a school board where youth trustees can more fully participate, we recommend attempting an intentional cultural shift toward a more youth-inclusive environment.

### **2A. Open discussion of the purpose and goals of having student representation on the board.**

This can be done during a board study session or another time the board deems fit. It is imperative that each member of the board understands the purpose of student trustees serving on the board, as this will encourage adult members to be invested in the success of the student trustee and youth participation more broadly. Revisiting the value of youth voice in decision-making could be achieved through discussing a short reading on the topic, such as [this piece in Edutopia](#), or this [introduction to the academic research](#) on student voice.

### **2B. Including youth in relationships between board members.**

Research on youth participation indicates that youth participate more fully when they have trusting relationships with adults. In order to build such trust and rapport between board members, we recommend student representatives have an opportunity for a brief social check-in with an adult board member before the start of the meeting on a rotating basis. This would not necessarily be related to the board agenda, but merely an opportunity for the two board members to speak briefly about their week, get to know each other and develop trust. Relationships can also be improved via adult board members more intentionally including youth board members in their casual conversations.

### **2C. Regular feedback from youth members.**

We recommend creating an ongoing process of receiving feedback from youth board members in order to make assessing inclusion and meaningful participation a part of the boards' culture. This can be done via a survey that the youth board member fills out quarterly or as frequently as deemed appropriate. This could also be achieved through the conduit of the youth board member's adult advisor/mentor, if such a program were developed

# Training and Support for Youth Board Members



In addition to the summer training provided by the County Office of Education, student board members would benefit from additional ongoing support as they seek to navigate an environment that is mostly dominated by adults.

## **3A. Mentor relationships.**

We encourage school boards to consider implementing two types of mentoring relationships for youth board members. First, we recommend connecting new student board members with previous student members who can serve as an initial guide, sharing their own experiences with serving on the board. Second, we recommend assigning an adult mentor who can be a resource for ongoing questions about board practices and procedures, as well as serving as a stronger social connection on the board. We would suggest that the adult mentor make a habit of checking in with the student board member 10 minutes before the start of each meeting to build trust and better integrate the student into the informal social dynamics of the board.

## **3B. Support student trustees as representatives of the student population.**

Student representatives are most empowered and effective when they feel like they are speaking on behalf of and with the backing of a wider community of students. The County Student Engagement Coordinator could play a crucial role in helping student board members engage with the other students in their district, hosting student-centered events, and fostering opportunities for communication about important issues in the district.

## **3C. Connect student members to the developing [CA Student Board Member Association](#).**

This student-led organization of school-district student board members works to support student board members across the state and could be a site for further empowerment, learning, and skill-building for student board members.

## Training and Support for Adult Board Members



Not all adults have experience interacting with young people as partners in a shared endeavor. Further, there is research that indicates that [adults often underestimate](#) young people's capabilities and potential contributions in policy-making. This is due to dominant social and cultural narratives that position adults as experts and children/youth as learners. [Adultism](#), or the ideas and systems that treat adults as necessarily superior to youth, can undermine effective intergenerational relationships, even when adults are very well-meaning and intend to include youth.

### **4A. Conduct training on identifying adultism and working with youth as partners.**

We recommend that the board engage in a brief training or study session that focuses on intergenerational relationships. This could be combined with the discussion on the role and purpose of the student representative, or could be done separately. Learning about adultism, stereotypes, and discrimination against young people would help board members to be more aware of their potential implicit bias against youth and the ways that they might be unintentionally limiting meaningful youth participation.

# Improving Public Comment and Non-representative Youth Engagement



While our research was primarily focused on the student board members, we noted patterns in the dynamics of youth participation in the public comment period of board meetings and thus would like to offer some recommendations about engaging with students who are not members of the board.

## **5A. Provide information**

Provide information on how issues brought forward in public comment can be added to the agenda of future board meetings. We noted that many youth who spoke during public comment appeared deeply frustrated that they did not know what would be done with their concerns after they spoke. Such frustration not only undermines young people's trust in the board but can also reduce their likelihood of active civic engagement in the future. We therefore recommend that the board produce a clear and digestible handout that is available during board meetings, explaining Robert's Rules of Order, when and how members of the public can participate in the meeting, information on the various restrictions and constraints of public comment and what they can expect from the public comment period, and how they can request further engagement with their concerns from the Board of Education.

## **5B. Practice active listening and acknowledgment.**

Within the constraints of the Brown Act, we recommend board members show greater engagement with student speakers through body language, expressing appreciation for the students' contributions, and acknowledgment of what was heard.

## **5C. Develop mechanisms for following up with student concerns.**

Numerous important topics are raised by students (and others) during public comment. In addition to informing students how they can get items onto future board agendas, the school board might consider other ways to document and follow-up on student concerns raised either via public comment or student reports. This might include holding student forums and/or inviting youth to make formal presentations for board discussion at a future meeting.



# Administrative Recommendations



The following recommendations are minor administrative changes that could help create a more youth-friendly context and enhance young people's meaningful participation.

## **6A. Ensure student board members' transportation needs are met**

either via mileage reimbursement, bus passes, or helping organize rides if needed. We observed that Zoom participation is a far less effective mode of engagement for student members.

## **6B. Include student members when introducing board to the room**

## **6C. Implement accessible, youth-friendly language**

in materials as well as in speaking/interaction, including spelling out all acronyms. Pause to ask if youth (and adults) need more information or clarification in technical discussions.

## **6D. Provide simultaneous interpretation**

between English and Spanish, and ensure that all written materials are available in both English and Spanish.

## **6E. Create and distribute a shared quick-guide for Robert's Rules of Order**

that is specific to the board that reminds all members how the process works and when/how student members can give or be asked for their input.

Our research found significant limitations in the current board practices for student participation. While student board members are present at meetings, their participation is not yet meaningful. While there is space for their participation, students’ voice remains primarily constrained to formalized reports from their schools, and they are thus not yet influencing board perspectives or educational policy. There were many missed opportunities where board members could have directly sought a student opinion on an issue under discussion, but, without the invitation to speak or a cultural norm of regular student interventions, the student trustees remain silent.

These challenges to meaningful youth participation are not unique to these boards nor are they an indicator of an ineffective school board – they are simply an area in which there can be improvement. There are a number of reasons as to why school boards struggle to include youth voices, whether it be a lack of resources, training, or not yet recognizing the unique value of youth perspectives.

However, Santa Cruz County is already ahead of other school boards by incorporating students as board members, so making some minor changes to make this participation more meaningful and effective should be quite feasible. Indeed, there are some very simple steps that can be taken to substantially enhance the opportunities for student board members to express their ideas and be included in the board as full and equal (but non-voting) members.

By actively incorporating youth voices and perspectives in board meetings, not only do youth gain more confidence, but the community at large also benefits because previously unaccounted-for experiences now help to inform decisions. By making a commitment to including youth throughout the school boards’ proceedings, Santa Cruz County can not only gain more insight into their schools and their needs, but also demonstrate their commitment to diversity, equity, and youth representation. While this may initially seem somewhat daunting, we believe the effort will lead to stronger schools, a more engaged youth population, and a more democratic and inclusive community.

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