



Kentucky Student Voice Team

Public Comments for April 7, 2021 Kentucky Board of Education Meeting

Submitted on Behalf of the Kentucky Student Voice Team

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Last year, thanks in no small part to many of the people on this very board, student and teacher seats were created on the Kentucky Board of Education. This represented a major victory in uplifting the student voice of our state. As non-voting members, students and teachers across the commonwealth finally received representation in the education system they constitute.

As many of you know, those seats were under fire during the most recent legislative session. A senate revision to House Bill 178 opposed the right of students to participate in the decision-making that directly affects them. The defeat of those revisions and the rejection of that argument was an important victory for those who recognize the value of student voice in education discourse.

Last month's legislative victory can be built on with today's regulatory ones as student voice proponents from Atherton and LaRue High Schools seek to expand student representation on their School-Based Decision Making Councils. We at the Kentucky Student Voice Team commend the two schools for taking these steps to add students to school decision making tables. However, we hope these efforts are just the beginning and that student voice will be further normalized on both the state and local levels.

In Kentucky and across the country, the presence and participation of student representatives on state boards have modeled democratic decision making, facilitating transparency in an oftentimes obscure and unseen government process. Contrary to the arguments made in committee during the most recent legislative session, students are uniquely positioned to give relevant, real-time feedback about the current state of our education system and their schools. Student representation on school governance bodies is also one of the most visible, appropriate, and relevant ways to support students to *do* democracy—rather than just learn about it in the classroom.

Fortunately in Kentucky, there seems to be a growing sentiment that students do in fact belong in school governance. In our 2016 Students as Partners Policy Report surveying high

school principals and superintendents across the state, we found that, even then, 9% of school boards had student members and a full 46% of administrators were open to considering creating new student positions.

Those kinds of numbers should certainly give us hope. But while having a voice at the table is an essential first-step, it cannot be the end of involving students in school governance. As opponents to House Bill 178 noted, non-voting members do not have much more power than their peers who can offer public comment. Currently under KAR 701.005, schools cannot add students as voting members to their SBDMs.

Site Based Decision Making councils were created by the framers of the Kentucky Education Reform Act to ensure that schools are governed collaboratively by the people closest to them. They are one of Kentucky's best expressions of democracy, but they currently do not include us, the primary stakeholders of our schools, as full decision-making partners. While we concede that there are valid concerns about giving students voting power, we also know that this Board understands what is best for our schools. **It is for these reasons we request that the Board consider a revision to KAR 701.005 specifically to allow the addition of voting student members to SBDMs.**

In the same way that democracy hinges on the idea that each stakeholder has a voice, schools should operate so that each student has one in the conversations that matter. Further, voting student members in school governance translates to greater representation of the demographic diversity of the student body and the varied perspectives within it. This is especially crucial as we exit the pandemic and as governance bodies like SBDMs are charged with making more decisions than ever before that directly impact overall school safety and our learning environments.

In order to justly amend our state's education system into one that works for every student, educator, and public education ally, we must continue to democratize the process of decision making. That means giving more—and more diverse—students a voice, as well as a vote, at the table.

And whether it be making space for students on more SBDMs, district school boards, and superintendent screening committees, it is in this Commonwealth's best interest to ensure that its young people are supported in these ways to both critically consume and co-create their own learning experiences.