



Govern With, Not For

A School Board Toolkit for Building Student
Partnership

The power of student partnership

This toolkit offers a way to see where your board is now on a spectrum of student partnership, guidance to design what's possible, and tools to help get there.

0	1	2	3	4
Students are not on the radar. Board governs without input from students.	Students get member attention. Their experience reaches the board but doesn't shape it.	Students' perspectives are considered. Board listens and weights student input.	Students have major influence. Their voice shapes what the board does.	Students make decisions. They vote, sit on committees, and share authority.

Adapted from the Spectrum of Youth Power, FCYO (2019).

When Boards partner with students, they experience:

- **Sharper insights.** Students can surface learning needs, safety issues, and mental health trends that formal data collection often misses.
- **Fewer costly mistakes.** Boards reshape policies, programs, and investments in ways that would miss the mark without including students.
- **A civic dividend.** Students become more active, informed citizens, and engaged community members when engaged with boards.
- **Strengthened trust.** Boards that prioritize student voice build trust between governance and school communities.

How to use this toolkit

Choose one of the following [four structures](#) for student partnership that you already have but want to improve, or a new structure to build for your board.



Student School Board Member

A formal seat on the board, voting or non-voting.



Student Advisory Council

A recurring body of students with structured, sustained access to board.



Student Convenings

Periodic, intensive sessions where students and board members work side-by-side on a specific problem.



Student Voice Mechanisms

Surveys, listening sessions, focus groups, interviews, or polls that reach students at scale.

Follow the guidance for that structure and use the checklist to strengthen not only what you do, but the conditions necessary for success.

Mindsets that matter

How adults think about students as partners in governance.

Empowering environments

How the board's structures, logistics, and norms make full student participation possible.

Supportive practices

How students are equipped to lead.

Student body representation

How the board ensures it hears from all students.

Adapted from Beyond Tokenism: Empowering Student Board Members in School- Based Democratic Decision, Webinar, April 27, 2026. School Board and Youth Engagement (SBYE) Lab, Teachers College, Columbia University.

The toolkit also includes [printable posters](#) to download and print in order to keep student partnership principles front and center.

Need help getting started?

Take the [self-assessment](#). The results will tell you whether you need to start with an honest conversation about student partnership or identify your next move.

The boards that get this right aren't the ones that just add a single student to the agenda. They're the boards that believe governance is better when students are decision-making partners.

Govern With Students. Not For Them.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the student school board members who helped shape this toolkit:

- Jacob Edward Hall
- Ian House
- Mia Nishiguchi
- Ian Ritorto



Self-Assessment

Where is your board on a spectrum of student partnership?

This assessment is built for honest, collaborative conversation. Set aside 30 minutes to complete the activities together. The questions are designed to surface what's *actually* happening and where you want to go next go — *not just what sounds good*.

Designate someone to facilitate the conversation and someone to take notes.

Step 1: Group Discussion (15 min)

1. How do students shape board decisions?

Name one decision the board made differently in the past six months because of what students told you. Be specific: what was the decision, what did students say, what changed?

2. Who sets the board's agenda?

Think about your last three board meetings. How many agenda items were issues students raised or helped frame?

3. What do students have to navigate alone?

The last time students engaged with your board, how did the board support their engagement (orientation, materials, compensation, time on the agenda)? What did students have to figure out for themselves?

4. Who does the board hear from?

Think about the last few times student input was shared with your board. What do you know about the lived experience of those students? Whose experience is missing and why?

Step 2: Rate Your Board (10 min)

Based on your conversation, check the statement that best describes your board today. Discuss the similarities and differences in your answers.

Level	Student Influence	What It Looks Like	
4	Makes decisions	Students cast votes, participate on committees, and share decision-making authority.	☐
3	Major influence	Student perspectives shape what the board does, not just what it hears.	☐
2	Taken into account	The board listens, weighs, and considers student input, even when students don't decide.	☐
1	Gets attention	Students' experience reaches the board, but doesn't yet shape its work.	☐
0	Not on the radar	The board governs without sustained input from students.	☐

Step 3: Your Next Move (5 min)

If you rated your board 0, 1, or 2:

Start by identifying the structure most likely to build momentum for your board.

- If your board needs to build a baseline habit of listening to students:
→ Start with [Student Voice Mechanisms](#).
- If your board needs an ongoing relationship with a group of students:
→ Start with a [Student Advisory Council](#).
- If your board has a specific decision where student knowledge is essential:
→ Start with [Student Convenings](#).
- If your board is ready to share formal governance authority:
→ Start with a [Student School Board Member](#).

If you rated your board 3 or 4:

Turn to the guides for the structure(s) you already have:

- [Student School Board Member](#)
- [Student Advisory Council](#)
- [Special Student Convenings](#)
- [Student Voice Mechanisms](#)

Review the guide and complete the [Conditions Check](#). Use the results to identify the specific practices that are strong in progress, or not yet in place.



Structure 1

Student School Board Member

A formal seat on the board, voting or non-voting, held by a student who is either elected by peers or appointed.

What is a Student School Board Member?

A student school board member holds a formal seat on the board, attends meetings, participates in discussions, and brings perspectives and opinions from their peers. On some boards, students are full voting members; on others they hold advisory or non-voting status. What distinguishes this structure from all others is its formality. The student isn't a guest, a presenter, or a consultant. They are a member.

What a Student School Board Member Makes Possible

Student board members are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between district policy and students' daily realities. A student seat on the school board brings:

- **Access to what is happening in schools right now.** Student board members can help bridge generational gaps between adults and the students they serve.
- **Shared power.** A voting student member means the board is sharing power; going further than listening.
- **A more collaborative board culture.** The presence of students often encourages a more open, honest approach to decision-making and a culture of continuous learning.

What It Takes

It is critical to attend to the four conditions that shape how a student school board member participates.

Mindsets that matter

Treat the student member as a full participant in governance, not a symbolic representative. Remember that one student seat is not a substitute for a broader student partnership strategy.

Empowering environments

Codify the student board member role in board policy with clear terms and voting status whenever possible.

Supportive practices

Pair the seat with other student partnership structures. Provide orientation, materials, and a staff liaison, and plan transitions deliberately so institutional knowledge carries forward.

Student body representation

Design selection processes with broad outreach and active recruitment across schools, grades, and backgrounds. Pair the student member role with other structures to access more than one voice.

For more of what it takes, complete the conditions check on the next page.

Student Board Member: Conditions Check

Whether you already have a student board member or are looking to begin this practice, use this assessment to evaluate what you do well and what you need.

Mindsets that matter	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
Student members participate fully in governance, not symbolically.			
The board seeks the student member's input on substantive policy, not just student-specific items.			
The student member's knowledge of student experience carries the same weight as other data sources.			
The board tells students how their input shaped decisions—or why it didn't.			

Empowering Environments	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
Board policy codifies the student member role, including terms, responsibilities, and status.			
The student member is compensated through stipend, course credit, or equivalent.			
The student member has access to committees or other spaces where board members and staff develop policy together.			
A defined transition process carries institutional knowledge across student terms.			

Supportive Practices	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
The student member receives orientation and ongoing support on how the board functions.			
A designated staff member supports the student board member.			
The student member receives agenda materials and relevant data in advance of meetings.			
The student member is connected to peer networks for support and professional development.			

Student Body Representation	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
The selection process recruits across schools and student backgrounds, rather than defaulting to existing leadership pipelines.			
The student member role is paired with additional structures that bring a broader range of student perspectives to the board.			
Membership criteria and selection process are clearly defined and publicly communicated.			
The board periodically evaluates whether the student role is working as intended and adjusts accordingly.			

Total/16	Not Yet: _____	In Progress: _____	Established: _____
----------	----------------	--------------------	--------------------

Your Next Move

Look at your results from the conditions check. Use the directions below to plan your next steps for a student school board member.

If most of your responses were "not yet"	Start with a conversation among board members about questions like these: • What decisions has this board made in the past year that would have looked different if we'd had a student board member? • What assumptions do we hold about students' readiness to engage in governance? • What do we need to help ensure a student advisory council is not tokenizing student voice?
If most of your responses were "in progress":	Look at your next agenda and identify one item that directly influences students' experiences. Give your student member that item to open, not to respond to after adults have already framed it.
If most of your responses were "established":	Identify two items that you marked "in progress" that, if moved to "established," would most change the role of the student board member. Make that your focus for the next quarter.

Printable posters

Student partnership practices can fade under the weight of old habits and urgent deadlines. Companion posters are designed to keep them visible in the rooms where your board works.

[See the posters](#) →



Additional Reading

[The State of Student Board Members webinar.](#) National Student Board Member Association (NSBMA) shares research findings and insights on the state of student board members and student board members share about their experiences serving on school boards.

[Data-driven School Governance Resources.](#) Resources from the School Board and Youth Engagement Lab (SBYE) at Teachers College Columbia University, including "The Missing Piece" state-by-state reports.

[Toolkit for Empowering Student Voices.](#) New York State School Boards Association toolkit for selecting and supporting student board members.

[START.](#) A three-day online conference by NSBMA to prepare incoming Student Board Members for a successful term of service.

[Prism report.](#) An article about the importance of voting power for students.

[EdSource opinion.](#) State student board member, Amy Ayyappan, describes the rigorous, multi-step process California uses for the student seat at the state board of education.



Student Advisory Council to the Board

An ongoing body of students with a sustained, structured relationship to the board, surfacing issues and shaping the agenda over time.

What is a Student Advisory Council?

A student advisory council is a formally established body of students with a recurring relationship to the board. Not a one-time presentation, not occasional public comment, but an ongoing structure through which student knowledge reaches governance.

The form varies: some councils meet monthly and include a formal board presentation; others are smaller, more conversational, and embedded in committee work. Some are organized by the board itself; others are student-coordinated through student councils or other mechanisms.

What defines a student advisory council isn't the format. It's the commitment to sustained, structured access to students.

What a Student Advisory Council Makes Possible

Students walk into a board room with expertise that no adult has: what it feels like to be a student right now. A student advisory council brings:

- **Information the board cannot get anywhere else.** Students can surface what the board doesn't know it needs to know.
- **An early warning system.** The group becomes the board's most reliable read on what is happening in schools and what's on the horizon.
- **Trust built from genuine co-ownership.** Students develop a stake in the outcome and build a bridge of credibility that extends back to their peers.

What It Takes

It is critical to attend to four conditions that shape how the council functions:

Mindsets that matter

Avoid tokenizing students. Use the advisory as a genuine input channel, rather than a rubber stamp or PR gesture. Tell students how their input was used or why it wasn't.

Empowering environments

The advisory format, norms, and focus areas should reflect student needs. Give students substantive, real work, rather than peripheral "student issues."

Supportive practices

Provide orientation, materials, and a staff coordinator to manage logistics and ensure input reaches decision-makers. Codify the council in ways that ensure continuity over time.

Student body representation

Let students lead the selection process for advisory members. Actively recruit beyond existing pipelines — across schools, grades, and backgrounds.

For more of what it takes, complete the conditions check on the next page.

Student Advisory Council: Conditions Check

Whether you already have an advisory council or are looking to start one, use this assessment to evaluate your strength and needs.

Mindsets that matter	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
Board members engage with students on substantive policy and planning topics.			
Students surface and lead inquiry on priority issues, as well as react to board priorities.			
Board members treat student input as legitimate and important.			
The board regularly explains how student input was or was not used.			

Empowering Environments	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
The advisory council is codified in official board policy or governance.			
Students are compensated through stipend, course credit, or equivalent.			
The board and students track student input and regularly evaluate council effectiveness.			
Student roles and expectations are clearly communicated before students join.			

Supportive Practices	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
Students receive ongoing support about how the board functions.			
A staff person supports the group with logistics, preparation, and follow-through.			
Participation barriers like transportation, scheduling, and language are actively addressed.			
Students are briefed on agenda items and have access to materials in advance.			

Student Body Representation	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
The group reflects the student body's demographic and experiential diversity.			
The membership selection process is clearly defined and publicly communicated.			
The selection process recruits across schools, grades, and backgrounds.			
Total/15	Not Yet: _____	In Progress: _____	Established: _____

Your Next Move

Look at your results from the conditions check. Plan your next steps with the directions below.

If most of your responses were "not yet"	Start with a conversation among board members about questions like these: • What decisions has this board made in the past year that would have looked different if we'd had a student advisory council? • What assumptions do we hold about students' readiness to engage in governance? • What do we need to help ensure a student advisory council is not tokenizing student voice?
If most of your responses were "in progress":	At your next advisory meeting, ask students to bring one thing the board should know more about. Listen to the students without redirecting the conversation and put their suggestion on the next board agenda.
If most of your responses were "established":	Identify two items that you marked "in progress" that, if moved to "established," would most change your partnership with students. Make that your focus for the next quarter.

Printable posters

Student partnership practices can fade under the weight of old habits and urgent deadlines. Companion posters are designed to keep them visible in the rooms where your board works.

[See the posters](#) →



Additional Reading

[District of Columbia Student Advisory Committee](#) is one of the largest student advisories in the country. Read their annual report, recruiting methods, and more on their website.

[Hawai'i State Student Council](#) is structured to serve as an advisory to the state school board and the state board student member is part of this council. The group receives support from a designated individual within the Department of Education.





Structure 3

Student Convenings

Periodic, intensive sessions where students and board members work side-by-side on a specific problem or decision.

What is a Student Convening?

A student convening is a structured, time-bounded session in which students and board members work together on a specific problem, question, or decision. Unlike ongoing advisory structures, convenings are periodic: a facilitated work session, a design sprint, a facilitated discussion tied to a specific agenda item. What defines this structure is not frequency but the nature of the work. Students and board members sit at the same table, thinking through the same problem, each expected to contribute and each expected to learn.

What Student Convenings Makes Possible

Student convenings allow both board members and students to engage with a problem at the same time. Convenings allow for:

- **A real exchange between people who each hold part of the picture.** Students bring what schools feel like right now. Board members bring policy context and governance responsibility.
- **Analysis boards cannot get from other sources.** Students surface considerations and insights adults likely miss with more traditional data sources.
- **A table where lived experience and governance responsibility meet.** Boards gain perspectives that shape their decisions.

Done well, convenings change what the board believes is possible the next time a hard question comes up.

What It Takes

Mindsets that matter

Collaborative authentically through openness, deep listening, and by treating student input as equal to other input.

Empowering environments

Address real governance questions — not hypotheticals or decisions already made — and provide stipends, meals, and transportation that make participation possible.

Supportive practices

Involve students in designing the convening. Provide students with governance context and provide board members with practice in deep listening.

Student body representation

Recruit students most directly affected by the decisions at hand, not only those whose voices are regularly heard.

For more of what it takes, complete the conditions check on the next page.

Student Convenings: Conditions Check

Whether you've already held convenings or are looking to hold your first one, use this assessment to evaluate your strength and needs.

Mindsets that matter	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
The board enters convenings open to students changing the direction of a decision, not just informing it.			
Board members treat student input as legitimate and important, not as an anecdotal supplement.			
After each convening, the board tells participating students what was done with what they built together.			
The board treats convenings as one part of a broader student involvement strategy, not as the only strategy.			

Empowering Environments	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
Convenings are organized around live, authentic governance questions.			
Students are compensated with stipends, meals, and transportation coverage.			
Student input meaningfully shapes the convening's structure and use of outcomes.			
The board clearly integrates convening outcomes with its formal decision-making process.			

Supportive Practices	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
Students are trained in governance context, and board members are trained in student partnership.			
The convening closes with structured sensemaking where both groups name what they learned and what they want next.			
Outcomes are documented, including what was decided, what was learned, and what commitments were made.			
Convenings run on a predictable schedule, at minimum annually, so both groups can plan participation in advance.			

Student Body Representation	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
Students most affected by decision-making are priority recruits.			
For state-level convenings, outreach reaches rural and lower-resource communities.			
Convening evaluation invites students and board members to reflect on representation.			
Total/15	Not Yet: _____	In Progress: _____	Established: _____

Your Next Move

Look at your assessment results.

If most of your responses were "not yet"	Look at your next meeting agenda. Find one item that will directly affect students' daily experience and schedule a two-hour session with a group of students to work through that problem before the board acts on it.
If most of your responses were "in progress":	At your next convening, give students a role in setting the agenda rather than arriving at one already set. Before the session, ask students to identify the question they most want the board to work on with them. Use their question as the opening item.
If most of your responses were "established":	Identify two items that you marked "in progress" that, if moved to "established," would most change the quality and impact of student convenings. Work with students to improve those items.

Printable posters

Student partnership practices can fade under the weight of old habits and urgent deadlines. Companion posters are designed to keep them visible in the rooms where your board works.

[See the posters](#) →



Additional Reading

[SABE Conference](#). California holds a four-day conference for about 75 students from around the state. Students are divided into small groups to identify and discuss specific problems in the state's education system. On the last day, each group presents its proposal to the California State Board of Education.

[Student Summit](#). The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) holds a summit with over 125 students from across the state as a platform to share their experiences, advocate for their needs, and help shape the future of education in Illinois.





Structure 4

Student Voice Mechanisms

Surveys, listening sessions, focus groups, interviews, or polls that reach students at scale.

What are Student Voice Mechanisms?

Student voice mechanisms are the structured ways boards hear from students at scale such as surveys, listening sessions, focus groups, interviews, and polls. These mechanisms are designed to reach many students at once, often hundreds or thousands, across a district or state. While these mechanisms can be a powerful tool, too often they serve as a “checkbox” of student voice, rather than an authentic mechanism to hear from students and act on the results. The power of a student voice mechanism is how a board engages with and acts on the information.

What Student Voice Mechanisms Make Possible

Valid and reliable data that represents many student voices can inform board action, particularly when there is extended conversations with students about the results. This means:

- **Shared understanding rather than adult interpretation.** When students help make sense of findings, the result reflects what students actually mean, not what adults thought they meant.
- **Data that has impact beyond the board.** Findings can inform other educators who can also act on the information.
- **Real governance capacity for students.** Students learn how boards think, what constraints shape decisions, and the impact of questions they take time to answer.

Together, these shifts turn student voice from a data point a board collects into a partnership a board builds.

What It Takes

Mindsets that matter

Involve students in interpreting what findings mean. Be transparent with the community about how student data was used or why it wasn't.

Empowering environments

Co-design questions with students so that they reflect student realities. Share findings beyond the board with other educators who can also act on them.

Supportive practices

Use multiple methods. For example, surveys reach volume, focus groups reach depth, listening sessions reach nuance.

Student body representation

Design for reach, not convenience — the students most affected by board decisions are frequently the hardest to hear from; accepting low response rates as inevitable is not sufficient.

For more of what it takes, complete the conditions check on the next page.

Student Voice Mechanisms: Conditions Check

Use this assessment to evaluate your strength and needs related to if and how your board examines survey, interview, listening session, focus groups, or poll data.

Mindsets that matter	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
Student findings are primary source data students help to interpret before action is taken.			
Board members can point to specific decisions shaped by student input in the past year.			
The board reports back to students a summary and next steps after every voice mechanism.			
The board routes data according to those with authority to act on each category of student findings.			

Empowering Environments	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
Students co-design the questions, shaping what gets asked before data collection begins.			
Students participate in a sensemaking session between data collection and board action.			
Students know where to find results and what the board did with them.			

Supportive Practices	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
The board uses multiple data collection methods (surveys, polls, interviews, etc.) to widen student reach.			
Student voice mechanisms run on a consistent, predictable schedule.			
Student voice mechanisms consider length, language, format, and anonymity.			

Student Body Representation	Not Yet	In Progress	Established
-----------------------------	---------	-------------	-------------

Student voice mechanisms are accessible in multiple languages.			
Non-digital options are available for students without reliable device or internet access.			
Outreach targets students not connected to school leadership, including those neither highly engaged nor disengaged.			

Total/13	Not Yet: _____	In Progress: _____	Established: _____
----------	----------------	--------------------	--------------------

Your Next Move

Look at your assessment results.

If most of your responses were "not yet"	Learn more about existing student voice mechanisms. If none exist, have a conversation about the benefits of developing one. If data do exist, bring a few data points to a small group of students and ask two questions: • Why do you think these are the results? • What would you want us to do about it?
If most of your responses were "in progress":	Before your next student survey or focus group, convene a 30-minute conversation with three to five students to review the draft questions. Ask them which questions feel like things adults already know the answer to, and which ones they want to answer. Revise.
If most of your responses were "established":	Look at the items you marked "in progress." Identify one where moving to "established" would most change how students experience the mechanism. Make that your next project.

Printable posters

Student partnership practices can fade under the weight of old habits and urgent deadlines. Companion posters are designed to keep them visible in the rooms where your board works.

[See the posters](#) →



Additional Reading

[Student Voice Alliance](#) develops topic-specific surveys by students and for students. Student-created statewide surveys in Hawai'i and North Carolina give students a direct platform to share their experiences, concerns, and ideas about education. Recent topics include cell phone policies, math curriculum, environmental stewardship programs, and class time.

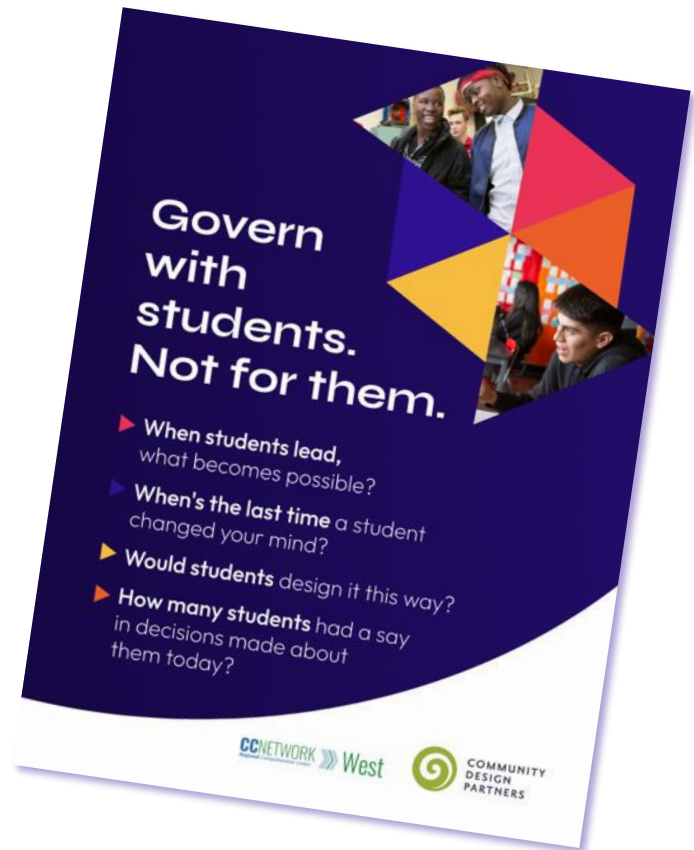


Posters

Questions worth keeping in front of your board.

The ideas in this toolkit can fade under the weight of old habits and urgent deadlines. These print-ready posters offer prompts designed to make space in the board's routine for student partnership.

[Download the poster pack \(PDF\) →](#)



Want to go further?

Check out more tools, case studies, and resources to support student partnerships at studentpoweredimprovement.com →