

“A student advisory member helps the board maintain a balanced posture toward educational matters that affect students. They also help the board to do a better job by getting direct input on what the students support and do not support,” says Stowell Johnstone, chairman on the Alaska State Board of Education.

One of the most important members on boards of education is the student representative. It is necessary to have teachers and administrators and public-at-large representatives on the board because of experience and knowledge in their fields that can be shared and used to influence decision making within the board. Yet the people who will be directly affected by the decisions of the board are the students. Therefore, it is necessary to include a representative from the student community, who are the people within “the system” and who know what happens day to day. It is imperative that the group being affected has a voice in the decision making.

“Student Representatives keep the board based in reality. They are very important because it has been a long time since a lot of us have been in school. The students are experiencing public school right now and their experience should influence the policy making of the board [State Board of Education],” says Dr. Shirley J. Holloway, Chief State School Officer for Alaska.

There are currently eleven states that have student representatives on their state boards of education.¹ There are a variety of styles used to select the student who will become the representative for the entire state.

In Maryland the selection process includes an application, interviews, a presentation on a given educational topic, a speech to a general assembly of one thousand other teens, and a thirty-minute question-and-answer period. After the three rounds of selection which are included in the former, two names are sent along with appropriate paperwork to the governor, who then nominates a candidate for the position.

A different method is used in Alaska, which has a selection process consisting of an application and resume, an interview process, and a final interview selection of the top three applicants by the Alaska State Board of Education.

The average length of time that a student member serves is one year. Over the course of approximately four to five meetings the student must learn the language of those involved, the manner in which matters are handled, and the reasoning behind the decisions made by the board.

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¹ Including Connecticut, which added two non-voting student representatives after this Boardsmanship Review was written.
deal with, and the issues in which their voice for the state are necessary. This is a challenging task even for a person who has been involved in education for a while. It often takes up to three meetings to completely understand the flow of the board, and by that time the student’s term is almost over. I believe that the term of the student representative should be extended to two years. There is a valid argument that this decision will shut out some of the applicants, because you would have to be a sophomore or a freshman to apply. But the opposite argument, equally as valid, is that the students need the best representation they can get. The decisions that boards all across our nation are making are extremely important, and to have a well informed and experienced voice on the board is in the students’ best interest.

The transition between students is often difficult because of the lack of experiential knowledge by the new representative. This can be overcome by providing the next representative with a handbook that will be added to as it is passed down from representative to representative. In addition to written material and explanations, a meeting with the former representative is a priority and provides very valuable knowledge to the new representative.

The student’s job is to “bring to the table” information that they have gathered from the students in their state. This is a challenging task, especially for students, though we are not incapable of the task. Some members on state boards represent districts, and it is their job to represent the people in their small selected area. How would they react if they were given the entire state to represent? I have tried to handle this situation in the state of Alaska by sending out summary letters after every state board meeting to the seven regional representatives. The representatives include my letter in their monthly regional mailings to every school in the state. In addition to written communication, I spend a portion of my time at the two general assembly meetings of the Alaska Association of Student Government’s (AASG) conference speaking to the students by region about current education issues and upcoming decisions. This verbal feedback is the most important information that I am able to receive from high schools in Alaska. I am also working on establishing an e-mail network between the executive board of AASG, which I intend to carry out across the state.

Currently Alaska, Hawaii, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, Washington, [and Connecticut] have non-voting student representatives on their state boards of education, which may mean that they are ex officio or have an advisory vote. California, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Tennessee have student representatives with full voting rights. The District of Columbia has a student member who only votes on the Student Services Committee and North Carolina has two student advisors.

The student representatives of this nation believe that it is of great importance that the state board of education in each state includes a student representative among its members. Once the students are in place it is of equal importance that they have voting rights. The students who are selected for these positions are highly qualified, knowledgeable, curious, and intelligent people. If they can handle wading through the mountains of paperwork that board members receive, I believe that they are qualified, through the knowledge they have gained, to vote on serious education matters facing the students and the government of this nation.