LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP

Increasing the Student Voice in Education Decisionmaking
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In many circles across the country, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of including a broader range of stakeholders in the education policymaking process. While the stakes for school leaders, teachers, and students continue to rise, so too has the understanding that these groups can and should play a vital role in deliberations and decisionmaking. What follows is a look at one of these stakeholder groups—students—and some of the ways that states are working to engage them in education policymaking.

Nearly half of the state boards of education in the country currently include students in board deliberations and decisionmaking. In fifteen states, as well as the District of Columbia and Guam, students serve in an official capacity on the state board of education as members of the board. Another two states are piloting programs, and two more—Maine and Pennsylvania—have undertaken efforts to add student members within the next year. Other states, such as Illinois, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Virginia, allow for students to be involved on board committees or advisory panels, reporting to the full board periodically. Some states have both a student advisory council and student representation on the board.

In an effort to expand and enhance opportunities for students to participate in state education policymaking across the country, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) launched the Student Leadership Initiative in 2006. This report highlights the activities of five states involved in the initiative: Maine, Massachusetts, Montana, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Maine and Pennsylvania were the recipients of $15,000 grants to explore the addition of student members to the board. Massachusetts, Montana, and Tennessee—states that already have student membership—received $2,000 grants to help improve the communication between student board members and their peers, the students attending school across each of their respective states.

NASBE Statement on Student Involvement

“Student involvement in education decision-making provides students with an increased understanding of the roles and responsibilities of policymakers and administrators, gives students an increased stake in their own education, and provides adults with a fresh perspective on the education system. Therefore, state boards of education should provide opportunities for meaningful student involvement in state education policymaking and should encourage school districts and school councils to provide similar opportunities for students at the local level.”

Source: Guiding Organizational Principles for State Boards of Education, National Association of State Boards of Education
NASBE’s Student Leadership Initiative

Sponsored by MetLife Foundation, the goal of the project is to increase opportunities for students to participate in the state board of education policymaking process, and to provide tools for those students already serving on state boards to enhance their experience.

The initiative stems from a NASBE study sponsored by MetLife Foundation, *Student Leadership in Education: An Analysis of the Student Voice on State Boards of Education*, which examined the roles of student board members, the means by which they came to board service, and the impact of their service on the state board.

I. Expanding Opportunities for Student Leadership

Recommendations in *Student Leadership in Education* make a strong call for expanding the role of students in education policymaking. The survey found that a state system that encourages student participation on boards provides value at all levels of governance. State boards of education with student membership reported that membership to be important for both student and board growth and helped inform the decisionmaking process.

To address these issues, NASBE awarded two states with grants of $15,000 each to undertake the necessary steps to incorporate student representation on the state board of education, taking into account the unique governance and political environment within each state.

II. Enhancing Student Leadership Experiences

One finding from the NASBE student leadership study clearly stood out: for student board members, the greatest frustration was in transferring information back to their constituency, and in turn learning about the issues that were most important to their fellow students throughout the state. Student board members said that finding the means to engage their peers in the policy process was a challenge, and this meant their decisions were often made in isolation, without significant external input from their constituency.

To address this issue, NASBE partnered with four current student state board members to address communication with peers around their state. Working with the students and their respective state boards, NASBE awarded $2,000 to each state to institute a system of two-way communication.

A second strategy for enhancing student leadership experiences was to improve communication among student state board members across states. To address this issue, NASBE developed and hosts a web-based forum for students serving on state boards of education. The Student Leadership Network connects student board members from across the nation so they can learn from each other and share their experiences as student leaders in education.

For additional information about the Student Leadership Initiative, contact Lori Meyer, Project Director, at lorim@nasbe.org.
Pennsylvania

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Pennsylvania has a tradition of including students in state-level policy discussions, a tradition that is reflected in statutes, regulations, executive orders, and agency policies. State law requires that three students serve on the Board of Governors of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. State legislation that creates the advisory board to the governor’s Office of Citizen Service, PennSERVE, requires that the board include two student representatives, as well. These are just two of many examples that highlight the value state and local policymakers place on the student voice in decisionmaking.

What was missing in this tradition of student involvement was an opportunity for students to participate in the policy discussions of the Pennsylvania State Board of Education. Members of the state board had begun informal discussions with stakeholder groups about student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board. Yet the board was charting new territory. All of the other states with student membership are K-12 boards: Pennsylvania would be the first P-16 board in the country to add student representation on the board.

An amendment to the Pennsylvania State Code would be required in order to mandate that a seat on the board be designated for a student. To assist the state in its efforts to explore adding student representation, the Pennsylvania State Board of Education was awarded a grant from NASBE in the amount of $15,000.

The first order of business was for the full board to appoint an ad hoc state board Committee on Student Representation. The committee invited key stakeholder groups from across the state to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of student representation, as well as how best to proceed given the current statutes surrounding the governance structure of the state board. The daylong meeting focused on a wide range of topics, including:

- Identifying existing student representation models in Pennsylvania;
- Identifying existing models of student representation on boards of education from other states;
- Exploring support for including student representation on the board; and

“The board’s interest in adding student participation began during a discussion at our biennial planning retreat. There was uniform support to explore the benefits and challenges that student participation provides. The chair of the state board, Karl Girton, appointed a committee to research the issue and to bring its recommendations to the board. The committee is committed to adding student participants representing both basic and higher education to the board and is now determining how best to select, train, and support them.”

— Dr. Francis J. Michelini, Chairman, Committee on Student Representation, Pennsylvania State Board of Education

Learning and Leadership: Increasing the Student Voice in Education Decisionmaking
Exploring methods for the identification and selection of student representatives to the board.

Bringing together key stakeholders enabled the board to hear a range of perspectives on the reasons for and against student representation, as well as the challenges in selecting student members. The board widened the pool of individuals contributing to the thinking about how best to develop a comprehensive program. It also provided a means for garnering support for the initiative—a key step when embarking on any new policy or program.

As a result of the stakeholder meeting, the Committee on Student Representation began to develop a model of student representation for the state board, drawing several important conclusions:

- Representation from both the secondary level and higher education is important and necessary to the success of any initiative.
- A two-year term will allow for a stronger system of student representation.
- A student representative should initially serve as the member-elect, followed by a period in which he or she will serve as the student representative. The student-elect period will allow the student to learn about his or her role on the board—and the important policy issues—and to be in a position to more effectively represent students from across the state and to provide the board with important input.
- Students should serve in a non-voting capacity.

The committee was able to narrow the possible means for selecting a student for the P-12 council, identifying the Pennsylvania Association of Student Councils as a key partner in helping craft a selection process. The landscape of higher education in the state has proved to be more challenging, however—still left was an uncertainty over how to select the student representative to represent the higher education community. The solution was to hold additional meetings to hear from a wider range of officials from higher education stakeholders to determine how to select the students in a fair and representative manner.

Convening Stakeholders

The Pennsylvania State Board of Education invited a wide range of stakeholders from across the state to discuss the possibility of adding student representation to the board. Working collaboratively with stakeholders to share opinions, advice, and support has long been a key element of the policymaking process of the board. Some of the stakeholder groups included in the discussions were:

- Pennsylvania School Boards Association
- Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators
- Pennsylvania Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals
- Pennsylvania State Education Association
- American Federation of Teachers—Pennsylvania
- Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies
- Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy (PennCORD)
- Pennsylvania Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
- Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education
- Pennsylvania Association of Student Councils
- Pennsylvania Student Newspaper Association
- Council of Commonwealth Student Governments (Penn State University)
- Board of Student Government Presidents (State System of Higher Education)
Once this additional meeting is held, the committee will present the findings from both stakeholder meetings to the full board with recommendations for consideration and action. The goals of the board are: to develop an amendment to the state board’s bylaws outlining the process for the selection, term of office, and role and responsibilities of student representatives; approval by the state board of the amendment to its bylaws; and for the board and its staff to develop the nomination and selection process.

Maine

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Maine’s history of student participation in public policy matters is strong. The Legislative Youth Advisory Council (LYAC), the Maine Youth Advisory Network (MYAN), and the Moot Court program are just a few of the many efforts to include students in state-level decisionmaking. What was missing in this wealth of student involvement was an opportunity to connect students to the Maine State Board of Education. As such, the board embarked on an effort to create a comprehensive system of student engagement that would include not only the state board, but local boards of education as well. To assist the state in its efforts to develop a system for selecting student representatives to the board, the Maine State Board of Education was awarded a grant from NASBE in the amount of $15,000.

At the time of the award, the Maine board had already taken the initial steps to bring student voice to its meetings. In 2006, the state board voted to have a bill submitted to the legislature to add two student members. The board decided to begin with a senior and a junior, with provision for the addition of a high school junior each year thereafter. The students would serve two-year terms and would be non-voting members of the board. The senate majority leader introduced legislation to the 123rd Maine Legislature to that effect. The initiative won support among legislators, as well as the backing of the commissioner of education. The state board and the commissioner worked together with legislators to ensure the passage of the bill, and on June 4th Governor John Baldacci signed the bill into law.

Student Representation on Local Boards of Education

Members of Pennsylvania’s Committee on Student Representation also heard from district officials who have had experiences with students serving on local school boards. Student representation on local school boards is often a key component of a strong program of state student representation in other state models.

Based on a survey of Pennsylvania’s 500 local school boards, 35 percent include student representatives and 55 percent provide some kind of structure for a student voice in board operations.* Students are generally selected from the student council (57 percent) or by the school principal or administrator (23 percent). Student representation practices have been in place for more than ten years in 28 percent of local school boards. Forty-seven percent of school boards have had student representation practices in place from between six to ten years. Forty-seven percent of school board presidents expressed high satisfaction and 48 percent expressed satisfaction with the value of student representation on their board.

* In comparison, a 2000 survey by the National School Boards Association found that 15 percent of local boards nationally had student representatives, although it is believed this percentage has risen in recent years.
In order to accomplish the two over-arching goals of appointing two students to the state board of education and creating systems to support youth involvement in educational policymaking in the future, the board sought out a partner organization. The Maine Youth Action Network (MYAN), a program of the People’s Regional Opportunity Program, is the organization that was hired to support this initiative. MYAN, a nonprofit organization, convenes young people around various public policy issues and holds an annual conference for as many as four hundred youths. MYAN will work with the students appointed to the board along with those from throughout the state to encourage the student voice and participation in education policy at all levels. As part of its efforts, the state board also appointed a standing committee to supervise the process and to make final recommendations to the governor for the appointment of the student member.

One of the activities of the board was to convene a daylong conference to solicit advice from students on the selection process for membership on the state board, as well as the criteria for selection. Participants included representatives from LYAC, MYAN, the Kid’s Consortium, students, and local school board student members. The forum was attended by 30 young people from across the state, and resulted in a draft application for student membership on the board. The conference addressed two basic questions:

- What should the criteria be for the selection of student members to serve on the Maine State Board of Education?
- What should the structure of student engagement look like to ensure that student voices influence public policy in Maine?

Throughout the summer, the board notified students across the state using various means, including the media, school leaders, teachers, and other student-based organizations. The board made the application available and outlined the expectation that student members will have all the responsibilities and privileges of regular board members, with the exception of a vote. The responsibilities of the position include staying abreast of current education issues, carefully preparing for regular monthly meetings, participating actively in the discussions of the board, and, if the candidate chooses, serving on one of the board committees. The privileges include a $55.00 per diem, mileage, and an extraordinary opportunity to serve the young people of Maine. As a result of this effort, the state board received nearly 50 applicants for the student membership positions. The selection committee of the board submitted recommendations to the governor for selection, and hopes to have the first student representatives in place early in 2008.

A screening committee of the state board selects six semifinalists for the student member position, and the full board then recommends three finalists for the governor’s consideration, rank ordered. At the time the term commences, the student must: be enrolled in good standing in a public high school in the state; have completed 10th grade prior to the commencement of the two-year term; have at least a B-plus average; and provide at least three references from teachers in the school that the student attends.

Another key point of the program in Maine was to make every effort to connect the work of the student members on the state board to the curriculum. The board plans to work with a teacher at the student’s school to support independent.

“We began by gaining legislative and gubernatorial support, but what was in some ways more important was to gain student enthusiasm. As a result, we engaged students in developing the criteria and application process. Thirty students worked a whole day in a lively way accomplishing this task. They did a great job as evidenced in our receiving 50 applications—every one of which would have been great on the board. We await the governor’s action as I write this, but we expect to have students participating in the winter.”

—James W. Carignan, Chairman
Maine State Board of Education
research and study around issues before the state board, with an effort to integrate state board work with the student’s curriculum.

The state board has also targeted local school boards, encouraging superintendents of districts to promote student membership on local boards. The board’s goal is to develop a strong system of student representation that permeates all levels of education policymaking in the state.

When the new student members begin their roles in 2008, they will both have an orientation day in Augusta, organized by the Student Membership Committee and the state board chair. It will include meetings with the commissioner, key leaders in the department of education, members of the legislature’s education committee, and a review of the Board Policy and Procedures Manual. In addition, each student will be assigned a mentor from among the board’s membership, who will guide the student throughout his or her two-year term.

To evaluate the student membership program, the state board has contracted with the Center for Education Policy, Applied Research, and Evaluation at the University of Southern Maine. The evaluation will include a survey of the full board to determine the value of student leadership. An effort will also be made to survey student members on local boards.

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### Maine State Board of Education Youth Member “Job Description” 2007-2008

The State Board of Education, in partnership with the Maine Youth Action Network (MYAN), is proud to be offering this new and exciting leadership position on the State Board of Education. The Maine State Board of Education will become one of many states in the U.S. that have youth on their state boards. We believe that this is an important and timely step as Maine moves forward in its commitment to youth involvement and empowerment statewide. The opportunity to apply for this appointment is open to any junior or senior in the state of Maine who fills out an application and fulfills the requirements.

**What this position expects from you:**
- To be prepared by reviewing the materials for monthly meetings.
- To attend monthly meetings.
- To participate and engage in discussions.
- To promote interest in and support for education in Maine.
- To be courteous and respectful of public suggestions and complaints and refer them to appropriate parties.
- To work harmoniously with other board members and agencies of the state.
- To become familiar with state laws, policies, and regulations as they relate to education.

- To accept the will of the majority vote in all cases and give support to the resulting policy.

**What you will gain:**
- Incredible experience and insight into educational policy in Maine.
- Familiarity with State laws, policies, and regulations as they relate to education.
- Knowledge about education issues as they relate to Maine and the nation.
- Ability to make a difference in Maine educational policy.
- Stipend for participation.
- Mentoring relationship with State Board member.
- Opportunity to gain job connections and to learn about career choices.

MYAN is an initiative of PROP’s Youth Resiliency, funded by the Bureau of Health, Maine Department of Health and Human Services, in part with money from the tobacco settlement, the Healthy Maine Partnerships, the Teen and Young Adult Health Program, and the Department of Substance Abuse. www.myan.org.

Source: The text was taken from the “job description” that was distributed statewide for the Student Board Member position.
The geographic challenges of Montana are daunting when thinking about how one student who sits on the Montana Board of Public Education would go about communicating with other students across the state. Historically, the student representative has been connected to the student body through the Montana Association of Student Councils (MASC). The student representative is chosen by the executive board of MASC and serves as a non-voting member of the executive board for the entirety of his or her term as student representative to the state board.

While the connection with the student council group provides an important link to many students in the state, it is a very narrow sample of the student population. To help the student state board member reach out to a much larger segment of the student body, NASBE awarded the Montana Board of Public Education a grant in the amount of $2,000.

The state board developed several strategies that address the unique challenges in communicating with students throughout the state, and also built upon strategies that had already been in place. The board’s efforts focused on public outreach—both to students and the general public.

One strategy was an online survey to expand board members’ awareness of student opinions in the state. The survey included questions on issues ranging from harassment and bullying to civic education in schools, and was available online on the board website and the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) website during the grant period. The survey method has long been a tool used to gather student input from across the state. Each year the survey is developed, administered, and presented by the student member of the Board of Public Education, through the Montana Association of Student Councils. However, previous surveys found the overwhelming majority of the students responding were Caucasian, from larger schools, and from higher income families—not a representative sample of Montana’s student population, which is diverse in ethnicity, school size, and income. To address this problem, personnel at OPI provided an online link to the survey, giving a wider range of schools and students access to the survey. All school districts in the state were notified of the survey by e-mail.
In addition to the survey, two waves of radio spots were broadcast through public radio explaining both the online survey and the work of the Montana Board of Public Education. E-mails were sent to all Montana high schools asking administrators to encourage student participation in the survey. E-mails were sent to all Montana high school technology administrators, as well, requesting a link to the survey on each individual school website. These e-mails included attachments for printing paper copies of the surveys for any students with limited access to technology.

The efforts paid off: the student member saw a slight increase in the response rate of the survey, and a more representative population responded in 2007. The new student representative has agreed to continue to collect information on student opinions with special attention to previously underrepresented groups, including ethnic minorities, low income students, rural students, students in small schools, and students not affiliated with the Montana Association of Student Councils (MASC). In future years, the student representative will present the survey at a MASC conference and summarize results for the full board.

Massachusetts

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Massachusetts has strong history of facilitating communication between the student state board member and the general student body. Each year, two students are elected by their high school peers to represent them on a regional council. The Student Advisory Council network is made up of eleven regional councils, which are then incorporated into five operating councils and one statewide council. Each spring, regional councils elect their representatives to the State Student Advisory Council, which in turn elects a chair who becomes the student member on the Massachusetts Board of Education. The meetings are one avenue of communication: information is shared from the state board through the state delegates at their monthly meetings; the delegates in turn inform the regional council membership at their meetings, who finally share the information at the high schools they represent. Students at the regional and state levels gather information on education issues and share it with students via discussions at meetings, newsletters, pamphlets, and a website at www.doe.mass.edu/sac.

Ideally, this communication structure works in reverse to bring local high school concerns to the regional and state levels. Yet, the state board understood the need to reach further, beyond the state and regional members, directly to students in the classroom. To help reach out to a broader audience, NASBE awarded the Massachusetts State Board of Education a grant in the amount of $2,000.
The board developed strategies that built on initiatives that were already in place and were successful. The board’s efforts focused on outreach to a wider range of students, primarily using technology as the tool.

The state’s strategy was to develop online tools for student discussions of board topics. The student representative posts questions online regarding issues before the board and seeks student input through the use of MassOne, the Massachusetts Online Network for Education. MassONE is the Commonwealth’s set of web-based tools designed to support pre-k–12 standards-based teaching and learning. It consolidates many useful tools and resources into one statewide teaching and learning environment. The Board of Education used a single topic to test the system. During the grant period, the board was considering a recommended high school core curriculum—a key policy area in need of student input. The result: more than 1,000 responses were received from throughout the state, and more than 100 were posted to the student section of MassONE.

The board plans to continue efforts by introducing each new council to the opportunities available to communicate with other students, with the goal of building a strong foundation for future school years. Students elected to the councils receive training on using MassONE and are asked to share their new knowledge with their peers throughout the state. With strong leadership from the student board member, the state plans to proceed with online discussions and developing new ways for students to provide input and feedback on issues before the board.

### Seeking Student Input in Massachusetts

The following e-mail provides an example of how student state board member Trevor Frederick reached out to his constituency on a particular policy issue. The e-mail was sent to the roughly 450 current and incoming members of the Student Advisory Council in April 2007.

“Hello SAC members. As the voice of students in the Commonwealth, I want to encourage you to consider this opportunity and to have a say in shaping education policy.

At the March, 2007 meeting, Commissioner Driscoll presented to the Board of Education a proposed recommended high school core program of studies, called MassCore. MassCore is one component in a comprehensive plan to increase high school graduation and college-and career-readiness rates. It describes a list of subject area credits, specific courses and other learning opportunities students should complete in high school. MassCore will also serve as one criterion for the Certificate of Mastery. MassCore was developed in collaboration between the Board of Higher Education and the Department of Education.

The commissioner has asked department staff to send the survey to various organizations inviting comments. As a student leader, I encourage you to take the opportunity to complete the MassCore Survey. Some of you may have participated in an informal discussion at your RSAC meeting regarding the MassCore decision, or even completed a brief survey. Those comments were included in recommendations to the Board of Education in March. Feel free to share the link with your peers as well as the adults in your school.

The survey results will be provided to the Board of Education later this spring when they consider whether to approve this recommended program of studies. The closing date for survey responses is May 25, 2007...”

Source: E-mail correspondence from Donna Taylor, Advisor/Coordinator to the Student Advisory Council, Massachusetts Department of Education
The Tennessee State Board of Education has made a strong commitment to sharing the progress and discussion of statewide policy initiatives, advisory committees, and task force discussions with the general public. What was missing was a strong connection to students throughout the state. The board wanted to mobilize a statewide constituency of students toward greater involvement in policymaking and discussions related to the future of education in Tennessee. To help reach out to students across the state, NASBE awarded the Tennessee State Board of Education a grant in the amount of $2,000.

The board developed several strategies that addressed the challenges of communicating with students throughout the state, and also built upon strategies that had already been in place to communicate with the general public. The efforts focused on making use of the technology-based tools that students interact with daily, including:

- A student blog of agenda items discussed at state board strategic planning and official board meetings. This strategy built on the board’s existing blog, used primarily for communicating with the general public, but not targeted to the student population.

- A new student page within the board’s website that includes interviews and podcasts with the student board member discussing key issues before the board. The interviews provide an opportunity for the student member to communicate using a platform that students from throughout the state use daily.

- A web page for students to contribute their feedback and input related to key policy areas, including the opportunity to sign up for potential student mobilization efforts.

During the grant term a podcast of the student board member was created. A set of questions was developed beforehand to prepare the student member. Topics included an introduction and previous knowledge about the board; work as a student board member; getting your voice heard; serving as a student member; and advice for students. The board plans a podcast for the new student member that will be updated based on agenda items of particular interest to students. These periodic podcasts will allow the student member to share ideas related to issues of education policy with the student constituency.

During the grant period, the board also held a statewide essay competition for middle and high school students to share views on an education question. Approximately 100 essays from across the state were received. To promote and inform student communities about this competition, the student board member spoke at a statewide Tennessee School Boards Association conference for student leaders, which had an audience of approximately 1,000 student leaders from across the state. Exemplary essays were profiled on the board’s student web page at www.state.tn.us/sbe/students.html. The board plans to continue the competition, with a new topic each year.
Statewide Student Leadership Essay Competition

In the spring of 2007, the Tennessee State Board of Education held a student leadership essay competition in which all middle and high school students in Tennessee were encouraged to submit a 300 to 750 word essay outlining how they would help improve education in Tennessee.

 Eligible Students: All middle and high school students in Tennessee.

 Essay Topic: If you could pick a single action to improve education in Tennessee, what would it be? Who would you collaborate with to help achieve this single objective?

 Essay Rubric: Exemplary essays will demonstrate all of the following qualities:

- A compelling reason why the single identified action could improve education in Tennessee.
- An innovative adaptation of a simple idea.
- Excellent formulation of argument, supported by data and/or research.
- The specific identification of multiple stakeholders to assist in achieving the single action.
- Excellent grammar and written prose.

Exemplary students and their essays are profiled on the Tennessee State Board of Education student website. (See an example of a student essay on the opposite page.)

Conclusion

Through NASBE’s Student Leadership Initiative, the five states profiled in this report were able to expand and enhance opportunities for students to participate in state education policymaking. Maine, Massachusetts, Montana, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee all brought unique strategies for reaching out to students throughout their respective states. Each of these examples illustrates ways that other state boards can expand and enhance opportunities for students to participate in state education policymaking. While a student representative to the board is the goal for many states, other states may be in the early stages of thinking about student involvement. Regardless, these strategies can be adapted to incorporate students into deliberations and decisionmaking whatever the situation, whether it be a statewide student advisory panel, a local system of student board members, or even a statewide conference of student council representatives.

We hope that this guide will serve as a tool for you as you work to expand opportunities for students to be involved in state board of education deliberations and decisionmaking in your own state.
If I could pick a single action to improve education in Tennessee, I would like to implement critical thinking into our schools so our students would become more familiar with that kind of deeper thinking process. Not many students have been introduced to critical thinking, and others just haven’t used it very often. For that reason, not many know what critical thinking is. Critical thinking is basically taking a complex problem and breaking it down into smaller, more understandable parts. I would expect that if critical thinking had been brought into our schools and taught more heavily than it is now, then students would improve in their school work and receive better grades.

So many students struggle in school, and so I really do believe that if critical thinking was a process that they learned about and understood, those students wouldn’t have to struggle so hard to do well. Overall, it can be a fun learning process and will keep students drawn into their class work and projects. And so my first reason for wanting to implement critical thinking into our school systems is because I believe that it will help students to better understand their school subjects. It will also help students actually remember what they learn. Finally, I believe that critical thinking will help students gain potential in their school work.

Sometimes, no matter how hard I try, I just can’t seem to understand the point of a lecture or the key parts of a new lesson. I feel that there are other students who are the same way. Just taking whatever I’m trying to learn and breaking it down into simple and easy parts that I can understand is usually all I need if I’m having trouble. In my opinion, it’s so much easier to understand something if you put a little fun into it, too. For example, if you’re working on a group project, it helps to discuss the topic with the other students in your group and discuss each other’s opinions and beliefs about the subject. In some cases when a student is working alone, you might even like to find a way to compare something that may have happened in your life or someone else’s to the subject depending on what you’re learning.

Put yourself in the place of a student who has to sit in class for minutes upon minutes with the burden of having to listen to a long and tiresome lecture that would put you to sleep faster than a lullaby. Keeping students drawn in and interested is an important part of teaching something new and educational because, in fact, it’s not very educational for a student that has fallen asleep during one of their teacher’s classes. Critical thinking can be made into a fun learning process given the right attitude and determination to really learn. In my opinion, it’s always better and easier to stay focused when I get to learn things, for the most part, without having to memorize and force myself to stay awake in a boring class that could actually be fun.

I believe that if students apply critical thinking to their school work more often, they would understand every aspect that they needed to move on to the next level. Some students just don’t understand what they’re learning in class and are either shy or too afraid to simply ask a teacher for help. Most of the time, students just need to dig deeper into their subjects to really understand and feel confident whenever testing time comes around. The more students get used to understanding the key points that their teacher is trying to teach, the more potential they gain in school. Keeping great grades on report cards would most likely be easier, and always being behind in school would be a thing of the past.

These are the reasons why I would like to bring critical thinking into our schools. First, I said that critical thinking would help students understand their lessons better than what they did before. Next, I believe that students will be able to remember what they learned for a longer period of time. Finally, critical thinking would help students gain potential in their work and grade capabilities. I hope that one day students will be able to take this learning process in order to understand everything they need to know for the future that lies ahead of them that could perhaps make a difference in this world.

Caitlin Moscato
Moore County Middle School, Lynchburg, TN
Appendix: Methods of Selecting Student Representatives to State Boards of Education

As pressure continues to mount for a world-class education system, policymakers and practitioners are increasingly looking to students for input and advice. Nearly half of all state boards of education currently include students in board deliberations and decisionmaking. In fifteen states, as well as the District of Columbia and Guam, students serve in an official capacity of the state board of education. Two states are piloting programs, and two more—Maine and Pennsylvania—are set to add student members within the next year. Other states allow for students to be involved on board committees or advisory panels, reporting to the full board periodically. Some states have both a student advisory council and student representation on the board.

This interest in student representation begs an important procedural question for policymakers: from the millions of public school students nationwide, how do a handful earn a spot advising the state board of education? Based on existing practices, the answer is both simple and complex. At its simplest, the final selection generally falls into one of two categories: appointment by the governor or selection by the state student council or student advisory group. Getting to that final stage varies from state to state, however, and can be a complicated process.

**Examples of State Student Member/Advisor Selection Processes**

California has perhaps the most multifaceted system for selecting a student, but the stakes are high, as the student is a full voting member of the board, with the same responsibilities and authority as the other ten members. Each September every local school board, district superintendent, high school principal, high school student activities director, and student body president is notified that applications are being accepted for the student member position, due to the state board by October 31. A screening committee of the state board then selects 12 semi-finalists from the applicants—a process that is no small task, as more than 200 applicants vied for the most recent spot on the board.

From this group, the California Association of Student Councils then selects a smaller group of semi-finalists at its annual Student Advisory Board on Education (SABE) conference. The SABE conference is a five-day forum for students from across the state, who meet to develop proposals that address issues of concern to California students (the proposals are then presented to the state board). Using a secret ballot, SABE participants vote on the 12 semi-finalists for the student board position, with the top six vote-getters proceeding to the next round. Each of the six candidates is interviewed by the state board’s screening committee, and by the end of the year the state board recommends three finalists to the governor, rank-ordered. The governor interviews the three finalists, and selects one student to appoint to the board. The appointment requires approval by a two-thirds majority of the senate.

California’s multi-tiered process highlights several similarities that occur among states, regardless of the students’ voting status or length of term. First, almost every state includes students in the decisionmaking process. In Hawaii,
Learning and Leadership: Increasing the Student Voice in Education Decisionmaking

for example, interested juniors and seniors submit an application to the State Student Council, which then narrows the field to two students. The next stage involves an election between the top two candidates that includes newsletter and video question and answer sessions with the candidates. Both are distributed throughout the state to all secondary students, who then vote for one of the two candidates, with the winner appointed to the state board for a one-year term in an advisory (non-voting) capacity.

Similar to Hawaii, Massachusetts has developed a process in which students select the student who will serve on the board, although the similarities end there. In Massachusetts, state law established regional councils of elected student representatives from the state’s secondary schools. The law stipulates that there must be between five and 15 of these regional councils, with each council having between 20 and 45 student representatives. Each council also elects four representatives to a state student advisory council to the Massachusetts Board of Education. The advisory council annually (by June 1) picks a chairperson, who then serves on the state board for a one-year term, with voting privileges.

Another similarity among states as they select students for state board representation is the use of an application. Ranging from basic academic and background information to extensive writing samples and references, the application process allows states to significantly narrow the field. In addition, the application provides an opportunity to get parental permission and, in some cases, school permission for a student to participate in state board activities. In Iowa, the application for the student board position has been fine-tuned over the years to streamline the process. A sub-committee of the state board reviews the applications and submits between three and five names to the governor. The governor then interviews the students and selects one for an appointment to the state board for a one-year term. If more than 20 students apply for the slot, there is another review panel that narrows the number to fewer than 20 for the board subcommittee.

Alaska has developed a selection process that varies slightly from the other models mentioned above, with the state board making the final decision about the student who will serve. The initial phase is similar to other states, with an application process and a narrowing of the field of candidates by the Alaska Association of Student Governments (AASG). The AASG submits three to five candidates to the board. The board then interviews the candidates and selects one. Another interesting aspect of Alaska’s program is that the student serves for six months as the student advisor-elect. During this period, the student attends board meetings, but does not participate. Effective July 1, the student then serves for one year as the student advisor to the board. As such, for six months of the year, there is a student advisor and student advisor-elect. The student advisor votes on all

State Boards of Education with Student Members

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Notes: Maine’s legislation was signed into law in summer 2007. However, the process for selecting students is still in development.

In Louisiana, a student member is selected annually to serve on a state board committee. However, the student does not participate in full Board activities, nor is the student included in the committee reports at the full board meeting.

Oregon and Rhode Island are piloting programs.

Several states, including Illinois, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Virginia, have student advisory panels to the state board.
Mission Statement—
Virginia Student Advisory Committee

"The Student Advisory Committee to the Board of Education will represent and serve the students of Virginia by acting as a liaison between students and the board, understanding and voicing the concerns and issues facing students, giving a fresh perspective to the board members, and using our diversity as a collective voice to provide feasible solutions."

matters before the board, although the vote does not count.

Finally, while most of this discussion has focused on the selection of student members of state boards, there are a handful of states that do not have a student member, but instead rely on an advisory panel that reports to the board. Illinois is one of these states. This year, the student advisory panel is composed of 16 sophomore, junior, and senior students who are serving one-year renewable terms. The advisory panel elects officers, selects policy issues to study, and develops recommendations that are then presented to the state board each spring. The selection process includes a one-page application, plus two letters of recommendation and three essays. Candidates are interviewed by state agency staff, who then make final selections.

As these examples highlight, each state has a unique method for selecting student representatives for the board. Yet, the states also share some important similarities, perhaps most notable being the involvement of students from throughout the state in selecting their representative.

Note: This Appendix also appears as a NASBE Policy Update, November 2007, Vol. 15, no. 13.
More NASBE Publications on Student Leadership and Civic Learning

Student Leadership in Education: An Analysis of the Student Voice on State Boards of Education is the first national research conducted on the role of students in education governance and provides the first look at the perceptions of student service from students themselves and those serving with them. In addition, the study examines the student selection process, the contributions of student members to board operations, and the challenges facing student representatives and the state boards that utilize this unique educational perspective. The research shows that students on boards of education and their adult colleagues who serve with them value their participation and contributions to the boards’ work. The report includes the full list of policy recommendations designed to facilitate student representation. (28 pp., $10.00)

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