

Student School Board Members in California: Student Voice and Democratic Action

California is one of 35 states that include a student representative on local district school boards and one of only three states that legally require student representation when petitioned by students in the district. Beginning July 1, 2023, students may begin serving as student board members on county boards of education as well. Beyond legislative requirements, having a student board member benefits the governing board, the student representative, and the district community.

Student board members enable governance teams to incorporate student voices in their district responsibilities, elevating student perspectives on education policy decisions that they may not have otherwise considered. Students get the opportunity to meaningfully participate in the governance process of their district, learn essential democratic skills, and represent and advocate for their peers.

Who can become a student board member?

Any student who is elected to serve as a member of the governing board of a school district must be enrolled in a high school of the school district and be chosen by the pupils enrolled in the high school or high schools of the school district.

What can a student member do on a governing board?

Student board members are full members of the board and have the right to attend meetings and receive all open session materials, be appointed to subcommittees, be briefed by staff, and be invited to attend other functions of the board.

School boards may also set the roles and responsibilities of student board members within their bylaws. Examples of these duties *may* include:

- » Making motions on matters upon which the board can act
- » Questioning witnesses during open session
- » Attending trainings and conferences

Student board members, however, cannot participate in or receive closed session materials because they often include discussions of sensitive topics such as student discipline or personnel and labor issues.

Quick facts on student board members and their districts

There are 424 unified and high school districts in California. According to a CSBA poll, 270 school districts — 64 percent of those eligible — have one or more student board members. Geographically, 116 school districts designate themselves rural, 113 as suburban, and 41 as urban districts. Seventy-eight districts are considered small districts, or districts with an average daily attendance of fewer than 2,501 pupils.

Student board members can also express their opinions and perspectives through preferential voting. Preferential voting means that student members may formally express their preference on a motion before a vote by the board. Preferential votes do not count in the final numerical outcome of a motion.

School boards may also grant student board members elective course credit for service on the board based on the equivalent daily instructional minutes.

If you are unsure what activities student board members can participate in, check your district's governance handbook or bylaws.

If my local school board does not have a student member, how can it get one?

If your school district includes a high school, the student body can petition the board for student representation. Depending on the district's size, the petition must have at least 500 signatures or 10 percent of the student body (whichever number is less). Upon receiving the petition, the school board must designate a student board member or process for the board member's selection at their next meeting (or within 60 days of receiving the petition).

How many students can serve on a school board?

California law requires school districts with one or more high schools to appoint at least one student board member to their school board when petitioned by the district's high school students. Most student board members in California serve a one-year term beginning on July 1.

Can students serve on county boards of education?

Yes! Gov. Gavin Newsom recently signed a bill that allows for student representation on county boards of education. Beginning in July 2023, at least one student may serve as a full board member in counties with one or more high schools. The process to petition a county board for a student member is similar to that of a district board, requiring 500 signatures or 10 percent of students enrolled in high schools under the jurisdiction of the county board (whichever number is less). If students attending a county high school do not petition the county board to appoint a student board member, the board is authorized to select a student from a district high school in the county to serve as a student board member on the county board. Student board members on county boards will be granted all of the privileges and responsibilities of student board members serving on district boards, including preferential voting rights.

What resources does CSBA offer for student board members?

The California School Boards Association offers training and guidance to student board members, which includes:

- » Access to programming at both the in-person and virtual CSBA Annual Education Conference events in December
- » Virtual training following their appointment in July to help them understand their governance role and responsibilities, the *Brown Act*, and communication with the board to provide support at the beginning of their term.
- » An invitation to all Leadership Institute events (starting in Summer 2022).
- » Participation with the rest of their governance team at Legislative Action Day, where school governance leaders advocate for better education policy with members of the California Legislature.
- » Sample Board Bylaw (BB 9150) about student board members, which is available through the GAMUT program.