

Democracy Before the Ballot

Should students have a direct voice in school governance?

Hai Tai • North American Virtual Student Congress



Photos: MCPS; The Leavenworth Echo

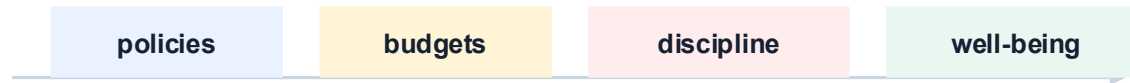


The civic gap starts early

The first government many young people encounter is not city hall. It is school.

18

minimum voting age



Students cannot vote for school board members in most elections — but they are directly impacted by the results

That gap is not just political. It shapes trust, belonging, and whether students learn democracy as practice or as a promise deferred.

Student voice

A microphone is no power unless it changes the decision-making process.



Photo: High School for Law and Public Service

Symbolic voice

Students are invited after priorities are already set.

Feedback is collected, but students never hear what changed.

Direct voice

Students help name problems, review options, and explain tradeoffs.

Adults still lead — but students become part of the decision.

Why it matters: schools teach civic habits

The process is part of the lesson.

When students practice governance, they learn:

1 Trust

decisions feel less mysterious when the process is visible

2 Belonging

students see themselves as members of a community, not consumers of a system

3 Accountability

leaders must explain tradeoffs to the people affected

4 Civic skill

students practice listening, compromise, and evidence-based advocacy

What direct voice should look like

- 1 Student board representative**
A recurring seat in governance discussion, with onboarding and clear duties.
- 2 Agenda rights**
Students can propose topics before decisions are locked.
- 3 Student impact statement**
Major policies include a short analysis of how students will experience the change.
- 4 Report-back loop**
Boards publicly answer: What did we hear? What changed? Why?



Photo: Aspire Public Schools / OUSD testimony

The strongest objections are real

Direct voice works only when adults design guardrails around it.

Concern

Students may lack context.



Safeguard

Train them on budgets, policy cycles, confidentiality, and how decisions are made.

One student cannot represent everyone.



Require outreach: listening sessions, surveys, and transparent reporting to peers.

Adults still carry legal responsibility.



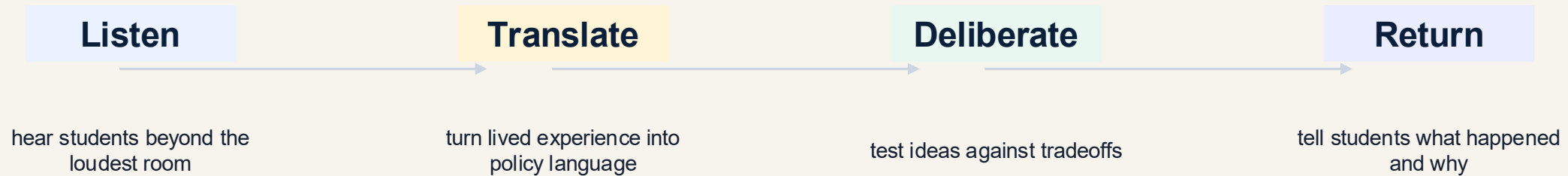
Keep final authority with elected boards while giving students defined influence.

My governance lesson: representation is a relay

A student representative should not be a single voice. They should carry many.

FROM MY STUDENT BOARD EXPERIENCE

The job is not to speak louder than adults. It is to make student experiences harder to ignore.



Direct voice only works if the voice moves both ways: from students to decision-makers, then back to students with honesty.

Democracy before the ballot is not permission. It is necessary for students.

Students should not have to wait until adulthood to learn that institutions can listen, change, and answer back.

Question for Congress:

What would make student voice real — not symbolic — in your school?

Sources & image credits

All four photos are public-source, documentary photographs credited to real school/news/public-education sources.

Image credits: Montgomery County Public Schools; The Leavenworth Echo; High School for Law and Public Service; Aspire Public Schools / Oakland Unified School District.

UN OHCHR — Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12: children have the right to express views in matters affecting them .

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