Effective Representation Toolkit for Advancing Student Leadership in Governance

nsbma

NATIONAL STUDENT BOARD MEMBER ASSOCIATION

Summary

Effective representation lies at the heart of a student board member's role. Tasked with bringing authentic student perspectives, student board members navigate the unique landscape of serving as both a voice and a bridge between the student body and district leadership. But representation is not just about occupying a seat—it's about **engaging with the constituency to understand their diverse needs** and **advocating for solutions that reflect the realities of the school community**.

This guide from the National Student Board Member Association (NSBMA) explores **practical strategies for student board members to build trust, amplify student voices, and foster inclusive, responsive leadership** that truly reflects the students they serve.

The Stakeholders

As a student board member, you will need the input of the community. In order to effectively represent students, student board members should seek to collect feedback and meet regularly with their stakeholders. There are three main groups of stakeholders: Students, school staff, and parents/guardians. Especially as a student board member, you have a unique perspective into students and an important responsibility to represent them.

1. Students

It is important to reach out to students to ensure their voices are represented in board decisions and to build trust in student leadership. Enlisting help from your Student Advisory Committee, Associated Student Body Government, or other school-related leadership organizations, if available, can shorten the timeline for gathering input. For a more direct method, talk to individuals on campus, and visit school clubs, affinity groups, and other student organizations to gather demographic-specific input (for example, visiting your Black Student Union or Latino Connections club to gather input on having BIPOC authors introduced into the curriculum).

Identifying underrepresented voices: map out student groups that are typically not heard, such as English learners and students in special education, and develop intentional strategies to reach them, such as working with school counselors, making a list of groups to outreach to, and practicing nontraditional outreach strategies such as being in places where underrepresented groups already exist. Other underrepresented groups can include student athletes or other perspectives that aren't typically considered by the student board member. To build trust, one can utilize anonymous forms, translated surveys, or small listening circles to ensure every student has a safe and accessible way to share their perspective.

2. School Administrators

Meeting with district and school site administrators is essential. School Site Offices (SSOs) serve as the administrative hubs where principals and their teams work. They manage daily operations and can provide valuable guidance on navigating school-specific structures, identifying key student groups, and connecting with staff who work directly with students. Administrators can also help coordinate access to advisory periods, student forums, or professional development days where student board members can engage with both students and staff. Building strong relationships with these leaders can help align student board members' goals with school priorities, ensuring more effective collaboration and meaningful student representation.

3. Parents

Parents are an important constituency to connect with when thinking about the possibility of having strong, widespread trust and legitimacy. This can be done by attending Parent Teacher Association or Parent Teacher Organizations (PTA/PTO) Meetings or other organization meetings to listen, engage, and share updates.

4. Board Members

While not a constituency, communicating with fellow board members can be extremely beneficial to allow them to understand the student perspective and ensure that they are aware of student priorities, both in and out of the boardroom.

Practices that Empower

In order to collect the feedback of many stakeholders, it is important to understand the different practices and when they should be utilized.

1. Classroom Visits: When gathering opinions from students, one of the most effective methods is by visiting classrooms directly, to ensure a majority of the student body is represented. Visiting grade unified subjects where every student is required to take the course, such as English and History, can ensure minimal student overlap and expose entire grades to the issue at hand. Additionally, it is beneficial to visit all school levels, and intentionally visit classes primarily made out of a certain type of student i.e. AP or IB or CTE students especially if there is a board decision coming up related to that group. When meeting with students, be sure to share your priorities but leave space to hear from students what their priorities are and engage them in the conversation about potential solutions. It is helpful to bring a list of prepared questions to maximize your time and gather meaningful information that relates to your topic.

2. Community Forums: Hosting community forums requires more preparation, however they provide a discussion environment that acts as a platform for constituents to clearly state their feedback. When first deciding to host a community forum, discuss with a district advisor or staff member to secure a location to host the event that can accommodate the expected audience size (e.g. boardroom, community center, school auditorium, etc.).

After identifying the location, be sure to allow ample time to publicize the event, utilizing social media, district emails, and school bulletins. If you do not allow enough time to publicize your event, there will be low attendance and the information gathered could be extremely biased towards the opinions of the individuals who did attend. Additionally, if you do not publicize the specific topic you are discussing at the event, fewer people will attend and you could miss your target audience of students (e.g. a student will not attend the forum unless they care about the topic, so advertise the topic.) Before the event, make a plan for the forum, including a potential short presentation reviewing the subject and guided questions.

In order for there to be an effective forum, be prepared to provide a platform for attendees to voice their opinions, verbally and via written statements, and have a system to record comments for future review. If people are unable to attend the forum, create a system that allows people to submit comments ahead of time that can be read aloud at the meeting. Depending on the size of the event, seeking guidance from school officials is extremely beneficial when planning the logistical aspects of forums since unforeseen technical problems can greatly inhibit the productiveness of a community forum. During remote learning, using virtual meeting platforms, such as zoom and google meets, can easily solve issues regarding location, but it is important to familiarize yourself with "hosting" the event and ensuring that the platform can accommodate the anticipated audience size.

3. Newsletters: This is a powerful communication tool that can bridge the gap between district decision-making and the parent and student communities. To maximize the effectiveness of newsletters, explore existing channels by speaking with district communication staff or the superintendent's office to identify where newsletters are currently being sent—such as principal updates, school site newsletters, or district-wide bulletins. In your role as the bridge between students and district leadership, it's a two way street where both the student board member and district leadership have an excellent opportunity to explain to students what the board of education is, what it does, and why it's important for their views to be represented there.

Request to include a dedicated "Student Board Corner" in a recurring newsletter, where you can share highlights from recent board meetings, pose a "Question of the Month" to collect feedback, and feature student voices, spotlight clubs, or relevant student initiatives.

4. Surveys: Since meeting with students in person is sometimes too time consuming and impractical, utilizing surveys can be extremely helpful. There are multiple types of surveys, which this document outlines below. For all forms of surveys listed below, it is important to write questions that do not yield any bias, and collect data that is relevant to your identified topic. It is helpful to clearly outline what information you are trying to collect and why you are trying to collect it before creating the survey to avoid unnecessary questions. Be sure that your survey is accessible to everyone in your district by providing multiple language options. It is also beneficial to ask teachers to promote/assign the survey to get high response levels and accurate information. Lastly, it is important to not overuse general district-wide and even school-wide surveys. Otherwise, you risk giving students "survey fatigue," a phenomenon where the more regularly surveys are sent out, the less likely students are to complete them. Stick to only using general surveys to gather input on important issues that affect the entire student population.

Survey Information

Surveys can be a powerful outreach tool for student board members to gather insights, assess needs, and ensure that student voices are genuinely reflected in board-level decisions. This can be helpful for shaping engagement strategies or gathering feedback. When creating a survey, there are a few base line components to think about. For example, it is important not to use any personal accounts for official survey collection, since this is a "tainted" data pool that will likely have responses from those outside of your school district. Even when you utilize a school affiliated account, the data gathered is still not scientific and does not allow students to demonstrate their reasoning behind their opinion, so only use these surveys to gauge the general feelings of the student body.

Keep in mind that you can also combine different types of surveys together. This can provide both measurable trends and meaningful context, helping you make more informed and representative decisions.

Steps to Create a General Survey

1. Identify who you want to gather information from - Identify which demographic you are targeting for your survey. Be sure to keep in mind grade level, class level, and applicable characteristics that would impact your survey results (school involvement with sports, clubs, etc.). Collect this information at the beginning of the survey so you can identify data trends associated with demographics.

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2. Identify what you are trying to learn - make a plan about what you are trying to gain from creating a survey and break down the information into clear categories. With these segments, you can further divide them into the basic questions for the survey.

3. Phrase the question in an unbiased way - After the initial draft, refine your questions so that the information gathered is relevant, quantitative, and unbiased so that the results will not be affected by partisan responses. Make sure your word choice does not contain any terms that have certain connotations that could influence the yield. For example, the word "shouldn't" could have a negative connotation by implying obligation or guilt, whereas asking "is it necessary to" can make it more open minded. To combat unintentional bias, have a trusted individual review your questions with this in mind.

Connotative Word or Phrase	Reason	More Neutral Language
Shouldn't	Negative connotation	Is it necessary to?
Forced to	Implies coercion	Required to or asked to

4. Provide a range of alternate answers - The options for response are equally as important as the questions asked. Typically, surveys with more multiple choice, check boxes, or scales have a higher response rate. With this in mind, limit free response questions and provide thorough options for multiple choice answers that accurately represent the potential student body responses.

5. Answers should be quantitative first, then qualitative - Within the answers, offer yes or no, positive or negative, or issue specific options when gathering input, then provide an area for students to elaborate on their opinions. Having clear data helps during the data analysis step while still providing the opportunity for students to add a personalized response.

6. Have an "outside eye" confirm the questions make sense - Partner with another student leader or trusted adult to create and review the survey while double checking for comprehension and potential errors before sending it to the public. Make sure to collaborate with an individual who understands the survey topic but could still anticipate the responses and reactions of your constituents (what makes sense to you, may not make sense to the student body.)

You may pick whether to use a survey or different feedback method based on efficiency and reliability, and some of those reasons are outlined below:

Social Media Surveys

- Social media surveys require the least amount of time to create and generate moderately high levels of participation. Asking "Yes/No" or two-option questions can increase the amount of responses. Offer constituents the opportunity to contact you after the survey if they have additional questions or feedback. Important note: social media surveys are only feasible if done from a secure account that is only followed by constituents in your district. For example, if your high school has a leadership Instagram account, a social media survey could be conducted using this account since it would only be followed by students from that high school. Social media surveys can be great for rapid communication and fast/quick reply or a temperature check.

- Example: If your school is considering a change to the start time for finals week, and you want to quickly gauge whether students prefer morning or afternoon exams, you could post a simple two-option Instagram story poll from your school's leadership account. This type of social media survey takes minimal time to create and can reach hundreds of students within hours. Since the question is straightforward and directly relevant, response rates are typically high. To ensure students with more nuanced input feel heard, include a follow-up slide inviting them to DM you or fill out a separate form if they want to elaborate. This kind of survey is ideal for rapid responses by providing a quick temperature check that helps inform further outreach or discussion with the board.

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Google Forms Survey

- Google Forms enables users to design more advanced questions and collect participant demographics, helping ensure that the data gathered is both representative and reaches your intended audience. Limiting the number of questions and using multiple choice or scales rather than free response questions can increase survey participation.

- These surveys are also easy to distribute as a link, making it a feasible option for larger districts. When writing the survey questions, follow the steps listed above: identify who you want to gather input from, identify what you are trying to learn, phrase the questions in an unbiased way, provide a range of alternate answers, make answers quantitative first, then qualitative, and have an "outside eye" confirm that the questions makes sense. It is appropriate to use Google surveys when you need to collect accurate student input from a large population while also providing students the ability to elaborate on their responses and provide context, such as through open-ended questions.

- Example: As a student board member, you might use a Google survey to gather input on a proposed change to the school dress code. Since this issue affects a broad student population, a Google Form allows you to collect a large volume of responses efficiently. By including multiple-choice questions for quick data and open-ended prompts for students to explain their perspectives, you ensure both statistical accuracy and meaningful context. This helps you advocate more effectively by presenting representative and nuanced student feedback to the board.

"Paper" Survey

- Creating short paper surveys to hand out and collect during class yields the most responses from the student body, but is more time consuming than other forms of surveys. Note that these surveys do not need to be actual "paper" and can be a Google Form, but what classifies a "paper" survey is that it is distributed during school hours and is made mandatory by teachers assigning it. For "paper" surveys, keep the questions short so that students can answer in a limited amount of time, but also provide space for students to provide additional feedback on the topic. Enlisting help from your Student Advisory Committee, Associated Student Body Government, or other school related leadership organizations can shorten the time used collecting and tabulating responses. This strategy is more feasible for smaller and mid sized districts or when you are gathering input from a specific demographic since it requires substantial personal time.

- After gathering information, categorizing common issues to simplify the process is key.

- Example: If you're collecting student feedback on the quality and accessibility of school bathrooms—something all students can speak to, but that typically gets low engagement through email or social media—you could distribute a short "paper" survey during third-period classes across all campuses. By making it a brief, mandatory in-class activity with teacher support, you significantly increase response rates. Keeping questions concise (e.g. rating cleanliness, availability, and privacy on a scale) ensures students can respond quickly, while including an optional comment box gives space for additional insights.

Social Media

A well-run social media account can be one of the most powerful tools for amplifying student voice, building trust, and gathering feedback. However, it must be used responsibly and strategically to ensure safety, credibility, and effectiveness. Here are some of the ideas to consider:

1. Pre-Work: Before launching any account, consult with your school or district administration to ensure you're following communication policies. Make sure you are authorized to represent your school, district, or student leadership body. If you're using an existing account (like ASB or student council), confirm whether you're allowed to post surveys or advocacy content. Make sure that this account is separate from your personal account to maintain professionalism and avoid mixing personal opinions with official communication. Many times it is suggested that you put something in your bio such as "Views do not reflect those of the board" to ensure that what you include is separate from the opinion of the entire school board.

2. Professionalism: Use clear, respectful language: You are representing students, and potentially the school board, in a public space. Make sure posts are accessible and inclusive (e.g. use alt text (a short, descriptive text as a written alternative for an image) to describe images, avoid jargon, and be culturally responsive). Avoid posting anything that could be seen as partisan, inflammatory, or that singles out specific individuals or groups.

3. Engage Thoughtfully: Social media is a two-way communication tool. You can engage with your audience by using polls, Q&As, and story boxes for quick input, responding politely to questions and thanking students for their feedback, and encouraging follow-up through DMs or links to more formal surveys.

4. Consistency: Post updates regularly, but don't overcommit—choose a posting schedule you can realistically maintain, use templates or recurring features (e.g., "Feedback Friday" or "Quick Poll Wednesday") to save time and build engagement habits among followers.

In closing, Effective Representation is not merely about occupying a seat at the table, it's about actively listening, amplifying the voices of those you represent, and advocating with integrity and purpose. It requires empathy, accountability, and a deep commitment to equity and inclusivity. By embracing these principles, representatives can ensure that every decision made reflects the needs and aspirations of their communities, paving the way for meaningful and lasting impact.

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