

# Why Do American Students Have So Little Power?

A group of Kentucky teens is struggling to get a modest bill passed, revealing just how difficult it is to convince adults that kids' opinions matter.



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For the past four months, a group of Kentucky teenagers has been working to make

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big ask. They want local school boards to have the option—just the option—of including a student on the committees that screen candidates for superintendent



does that. They just want to have one student sit among the half-dozen adults (including two teachers, a parent, and a principal) who help vet candidates and make recommendations to the board.

"I thought everyone would view it as a no-brainer," said Nicole Fielder, 18. She said this on Tuesday from Frankfort, the state's capital, where she was missing classes in order to advocate—for the sixth time—for [this bill](#).

Policymakers should be begging students to serve on committees and school boards, not the other way around. That's because students are their secret weapons: Kids can translate abstract policy into real life with a speed and fluency that no adult can match.

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## **Students are the most valuable and least consulted education-policy experts in America.**

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To date, Fielder and her fellow students have testified before lawmakers, written [op-eds](#), consulted attorneys, and collected piles of research. When a snowstorm threatened to keep them from traveling to appear in front of a committee last week, they asked if they could sleep on the floor of the Capitol rotunda. (The answer was no; they stayed in a nearby hotel.) As of today, the bill appeared in danger of dying a sudden death.

In the eight years I've been writing about education, my best sources have been students. An 11th grader in Washington, D.C., named Allante Rhodes told me that, while it was nice his high school offered a Microsoft Word class, only six of the campus' 14 computers worked; he often spent his computer class reading a

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Meanwhile, Andrew Brennen, a 12th-grader who had moved five times as a teenager, told me that his grades depended on his zip code. In Georgia, he was at the top of his class; in Maryland, the very next year, his grades plummeted and he had to retake Spanish altogether. In Kentucky, he did fine in science but struggled with math. And that's why he thought adopting the Common Core State Standards made sense. "Honestly," he told me, "you spend 35 hours a week in a classroom, you know what kind of things work and don't work."

Students are the most valuable and least consulted education-policy experts in America. Before they graduate, they spend roughly 2,300 days contemplating their situation, considering how their schools and neighborhoods could be better—or worse. And unlike many journalists, teachers, principals, and school-board members, most couldn't care less about politics.

Jack Jacobson, the president of Washington, D.C.'s Board of Education, serves alongside two student representatives. "They are honest brokers. They have no hidden agenda," he said. "Time after time, our student representatives ask the most intelligent questions, and they frankly have a better sense of what is happening in schools than traditional elected board members."

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## **Teens in the U.S. are looked down on. "We don't think their voices are completely valid until they are 18."**

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In fact, school systems that routinely solicit written feedback from students regarding lessons, teachers, or resources tend to be higher-performing and more equitable places, according to a 2012 [OECD analysis](#) of 65 countries. About 59 percent of U.S. high-school students are in schools where this happens, which is slightly below average for the developed world. The comparable figure in Finland, which according to some studies is one of the world's smartest countries, is 74 percent. If you ask students intelligent questions about their classrooms, as it turns out, their answers are [more reliable](#) than any other known measure—including

So why aren't more students invited to the big-kids' table in the country's school districts? Fourteen states have laws that explicitly prohibit them from serving on district school boards, [according to SoundOut](#), a nonprofit that advocates for greater student input on public policy. In 19 states, school boards do have student representatives, but many of these members aren't allowed to vote. Some school boards invite students to brief adult members on matters such as Homecoming dances and fundraisers, and then send them home to do their homework. A handful of school districts—including several in California and those in Boston and Montgomery County, Maryland—have formal, meaningful roles for students. But they are exceptions.

The reasons adults object to student input are telling. Last November, a New Jersey school-board member rejected a teenager's proposal that the body include a regular student-elected member, citing concerns such as the "possible stress of attending late night meetings," according to the coverage by [The Item of Millburn and Short Hills](#). Others have worried about students' maturity levels, somehow failing to notice that the kind of kids who run for a school-board seat are often more mature than your average 35-year-old.

The irony is that these policymaking bodies need all the help they can get. School boards in towns large and small across America have a long history of failing students. They get entrenched in petty feuds; they care more about the next football coach than how teachers are trained. In 2010, a New Orleans board member was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison for [accepting \\$140,000 in bribes](#) from a political operative who was selling a software program to schools. Last year, a New Jersey school-board member was [sentenced to probation](#) for misreporting her family's income for five years in a row so her children could qualify for subsidized lunches meant for impoverished students. A campaign manager for four school-board candidates in Donna, Texas, [pleaded guilty](#) last year to conspiring to buy votes with cash and cocaine.

The record suggests that age does not guarantee wisdom.

There are, however, signs of hope. Adam Fletcher, author of the *Guide to Student Voice* and the director of SoundOut, says he has seen progress in the past decade. Philanthropic organizations have supported research into the value of student feedback, which has helped generate attention on the issue. Meanwhile, more teachers are integrating student input into their everyday work—in order to figure out what their pupils are learning and how to improve their practice. "The momentum is building," Fletcher said.

The biggest barrier to more student involvement is not adolescent apathy or legal constraints. Rather, it's the way many adults view adolescents in general: as potential miscreants who must be protected from the real world for as long as possible. It's an attitude that helps explain the country's low academic expectations for high schoolers as well as its overbearing parenting culture. "Students are looked down on," Fletcher said. "We don't think their voices are completely valid until they are 18."

In Kentucky, the adults came up with two main arguments against the students' modest proposal. One state senator inquired about the ability of teenagers to keep superintendent searches confidential; the students brought him legal opinions that countered those concerns. A superintendent worried that the [committee work might "overwhelm" students](#), according to *The Bowling Green Daily News*.

The students listened to each opposing argument and offered evidence to the contrary. Finally, late last month, the Kentucky House of Representatives passed the measure 88 to 5; on Monday, the Senate Education Committee passed it, too. Delighted, the students went home, expecting the bill to pass the full Senate and become law within days.

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~~But on Monday evening, the adults struck again. Two Kentucky senators attacked~~

sabotage the legislation entirely. These lawmakers, Republican Senators C.B. Embry Jr. and Albert Robinson, told me they fully supported the students; they were just using the bill to pass their own controversial proposals, as politicians (especially ones over age 18) often do. (Embry's amendment would require transgender students to use bathrooms indicated by the sex on their birth certificates; Robinson's would clarify kids' religious freedoms.)

So the students went back to Frankfort this past Tuesday and spent the entire day lobbying the adults. Still, the senators didn't budge. On March 23, the Kentucky Senate reconvenes for two days before the session ends. If by then the senators have not removed their seemingly parasitic amendments, the bill will likely be dead.

Yesterday, I talked to one of the students lobbying for the bill, 17-year-old Gentry Fitch, between meetings. He sounded like he'd learned more about adult politics than he'd wanted to know. "You watch *House of Cards*, and it's great," he said. "And then all of a sudden you're like, 'Oh, this exists.'"

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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